

GETTING THE COSMOLOGY RIGHT

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Sporadically over the past few years I have been writing a personal document titled “What I Believe.” The reason for this is twofold. First, as I have learned more, my beliefs have shifted. This is unavoidable. As you receive more or better information, your beliefs will inevitably change. Second, I wanted to see if I could actually spell out in words a coherent belief system that made sense to me. So far, the results are not promising.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a messy religion. Because we do not have a systematic theology, and because many of our doctrines are either unsettled or have morphed over time, it is probable that there are as many Latter-day Saint theologies as there are Latter-day Saints. Since I am not an expert in the theologies of other religions, I can’t make any meaningful comparison between LDS beliefs and the beliefs of others, but that is not my project here. I am interested in exploring the LDS theological universe in an attempt to see if I can reconcile various apparent inconsistencies and bridge a few disconcerting gaps.

In many instances, we are left to our own devices to make sense of the official and unofficial doctrinal statements of Joseph Smith and his successors. Because Joseph’s theology expanded as he grew older, some of his early statements are impossible to reconcile with his later statements. He wasn’t always building line upon line. Sometimes he reversed course. And sometimes his successors revised his teachings in significant ways. Doctrinal harmonizers such as Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie have tried to create order out of the chaos of this ongoing theological project, but the results are usually unsatisfactory because

they fail to account for the chronological unfolding of certain doctrines as well as the disagreements between certain authoritative voices.

As I have approached my own theological venture, however, one thing has become clear to me. If we do not start at the beginning, we are hopelessly lost in our efforts to create a sensible belief system. And when I say “beginning,” I mean the fundamental question (or questions) upon which all others rest. I am not the deepest philosophical thinker, so what I am producing is certainly an amateur effort, but I suspect that my musings may be of value to others who are asking similar questions.

So, what is *the* fundamental question? Perhaps there are several, and I’ll bring up several questions in the course of this examination, but here I want to focus on the one that seems more basic than all the others. For some this question might be “Is there a God?” But I have had enough personal experience to feel comfortable answering that one in the affirmative.¹ So, given that foundation, what is the idea that either determines or shapes all others? In my mind, it is the ethical query “Which came first, God or the moral law?” This is another way of asking what the nature of eternity is. In other words, it is a question about cosmology. And as Latter-day Saints, we certainly do not have a firm grasp on the answer to this question. We sometimes think we do, but the fact that our leaders and our scriptures often declare ideas that conflict with Joseph Smith’s later teachings suggests that we need to return to this fundamental question and settle on an answer. Otherwise, we’re in danger of getting the cart before the horse and perpetuating a doctrinal free-for-all that produces more smoke than light. So, if we are to have a cohesive and coherent theology, we first need to get the cosmology right. Now, I am not claiming to have the answer to this conundrum. I’ve already admitted that my own attempt to express a coherent belief system has not produced the desired result.

1. See Roger Terry, “Frau Rüster and the Cure for Cognitive Dissonance,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 3 (2007): 201–10.

My project here is more to ask questions that we need answers to, and those answers may be available only by revelation, not by reasoning.

Which Came First?

So which did come first, God or the moral law? Russ Shafer-Landau, paraphrasing Socrates through Plato, asks: “Does God command us to do actions because they are morally right, or are actions morally right because God commands them?”² The first option suggests that the moral law is independent of God. God is God because he perfectly follows an eternal moral law. The second option is known as Divine Command Theory, in which God is the source and creator of everything. Therefore, he invented morality. Most religious philosophers, however, reject the Divine Command Theory, and so, apparently, did Joseph Smith, at least most of the time. Shafer-Landau points out the central flaw in this theory:

Imagine the point at which God is choosing a morality for us. God contemplates the nature of rape, torture, and treachery. What does He see? Being omniscient (all-knowing), God sees such actions for what they are. Crucially, He sees nothing wrong with them. They are, at this point, morally neutral. Nothing, as yet, is right or wrong.

But God did, at some point, make a decision. He forbade rape, theft, and most kinds of killing. If the Divine Command Theory is correct, then He didn’t forbid them because they were immoral. So why *did* God forbid them?

It may be presumptuous of us to try to answer that question. But we can ask a slightly different question: did God have reasons for His decisions, or not?

If the Divine Command Theory is true, then there is trouble either way. If God lacks reasons for His commands—if there is no solid basis supporting His decisions to prohibit certain things, and require others—then God’s decisions are arbitrary. It would be as if God were

2. Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65.

creating morality by a coin toss. But that is surely implausible. That sort of God would be arbitrary, and thus imperfect. . . . If God lacks reasons for His commands, then God's commands are arbitrary—and that renders God imperfect, undermining His moral authority.³

Some theologians have attempted to explain Divine Command Theory in a way that removes this fundamental conundrum.⁴ But in my opinion, they all ultimately fail to account for the notion that God must have some sort of rationale for declaring some actions good and others evil, otherwise his law is arbitrary.

The inevitable fruit of this arbitrary option turns up here and there in LDS scripture and thinking—for instance, in God's command for Nephi to kill Laban and in Joseph Smith's purported letter to Nancy Rigdon, attempting to persuade her that polygamy was right by insisting that some actions can be right in one circumstance but wrong in another⁵—but it is invariably problematic. So, if God must have reasons

3. Shafer-Landau, *Fundamentals of Ethics*, 66–67.

4. For a good summary of both Divine Command Theory and the arguments for and against it, see *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Divine Command Theory,” <https://www.iep.utm.edu/divine-c/#SH4d>.

5. “That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another. . . . Everything that God gives us is lawful and right, and it is proper that we should enjoy His gifts and blessings.” Quoted in Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 295–96, 307. The letter is somewhat suspect, because of its provenance. Joseph dictated it a day or two after he had proposed marriage to Nancy Rigdon, who rebuffed his proposition. She purportedly gave the letter to her suitor, Francis Higbee, who passed it on to his superior in the Nauvoo Legion, John C. Bennett. Bennett published it in his exposé on Mormonism, *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842), 241. When the *History of the Church* was being prepared in 1855, Historian's Office clerk Thomas Bullock included a copy of the letter in the history. This copy was taken from Bennett's book. An original copy of the letter no longer exists. This copy of the letter was thus published in *History of the Church*, 5:134–36, but with a disclaimer stating that the circumstance of its writing was not known.

for declaring some things right and others wrong, then some kind of moral law must precede God, and he merely recognizes its validity and commands accordingly. If this is true, are we to worship God or venerate instead the eternal law that controls or at least guides his choices? According to human logic, then, the principles of good and evil, moral and immoral, precede the existence of God, or are at least independent of him. If this is true, what need have we of God, if we do not need him to be the author of an eternal moral law?

Joseph Smith gave an answer to this question. Joseph's view of eternity, at least as it unfolded primarily in his Nauvoo sermons, is that God could not possibly be the source of everything, moral law included, because he was once as we are now, a mortal human being living on a planet somewhere in the already existing universe. He therefore had a God who guided him in his progress, and that God likewise had a God, and so on, *ad infinitum*. This may not have been spelled out explicitly by Joseph, but it is inevitable in the description of God he has given us. In Joseph's theology, then, God's "job" was to help us along a path to perfection, which must mean complete conformance to an eternal moral law. But this idea may not answer the chicken-and-egg question asked above. It's a bit more complicated than we might suppose at first glance.

What Is the Origin of the Moral Law?

Joseph's view of eternity is compelling in that it seemingly circumvents the problems inherent in the Divine Command Theory. But his explanations also seem to come up short. If God did not create the moral law, who did? His Father? His Father's Father? A distant God ten billion times removed? No, because each of them would have faced the same dilemma our God would have encountered in producing an arbitrary law. So where did it all start? Joseph's answer appears to be that it simply didn't. Eternity is, well, eternal. It has been going on forever. There was always a previous God who perfectly understood and

applied the eternal moral law and is bound by such notions as love and justice and mercy. The problem here is that the human mind cannot comprehend such a state of affairs. From our perspective, it had to start somewhere. Scientific evidence suggests a beginning, the so-called Big Bang, but cosmologists are always exploring other possibilities, including some that posit no beginning and no end. Of course, the Big Bang theory does not explain why the universe came into existence or what came before. But if there was a beginning, a point at which all things began, was the moral law created in that instant, along with the spirit intelligences who would evolve into a race of gods? Or did the law in some way precede whatever beginning there may have been? If so, then where did it come from? Is it the foundation of all eternity? Does it somehow determine the shape of our universe and how it expands and evolves?

If the moral law has existed forever—if it preceded even the existence of the first divine being—then what is it exactly? Is it a set of principles carved without hands into the bedrock of eternity, into the atoms and photons and quarks that produce light and matter? Do good and evil exist independently of any class of conscious beings? If so, how did the first conscious being ever come to recognize this eternal law and interpret it? Law is generally, well, quite general. It can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Take the commandment “thou shalt not steal.” What does this mean in millions of circumstances? It must be interpreted to define what is permitted and what is forbidden. Certainly, the millions of permutations of this law are not spelled out somewhere in an eternal criminal code book. So, how did the eternal notions of *moral* and *immoral* first get interpreted and applied? And by whom? Or are there principles that are one layer deeper than the moral law, principles that guide divine beings in interpreting the law? If so, what are these principles, and why have they not been revealed to us? Certainly, they constitute the fabric of morality.

We might ask what the difference is between moral law and the physical laws we observe in the universe (the repetition of observable

patterns in matter and energy). Are physical laws simply an inevitable part of our material universe, or are they implemented in some way and in certain spheres by intelligent beings? What about moral law? Is it also somehow a feature of our physical universe, or was it implemented by intelligent beings? Further, what is the consequence of breaking a physical law? There is always a natural physical consequence. But what is the consequence of breaking the moral law? We can break the moral law without breaking any physical laws, so there is no inevitable physical consequence. What then are the consequences of breaking the moral law? Often these consequences take the form of a disruption in the connections that bind us together as social beings. We often also impose punishments on each other for breaking the moral law, and sometimes these punishments produce physical pain. But that is not because these physical punishments are necessary. Or are they? We'll explore that question later. But for now, let's return to the issue of the moral law's origin.

Just for the sake of argument, let's assume for a moment that Joseph's view of eternity is correct. There was no beginning. There have always been divine beings and lesser intelligences, and there has always been a moral law. If so, then we are actually in the same boat as we would be in if the moral law preceded God. In essence, what we are saying is that the moral law was not created. It would then be either independent of or interdependent with the species of divine beings we recognize as gods. Either way, it is not dependent on God and did not originate with any divine being. If Joseph is right, then we can be certain that God did not create the moral law. Either it preceded the race of gods or both have always existed. We can be certain of this because the Divine Command Theory is virtually impossible to credibly defend. Morality cannot be arbitrary. If it is, then morality means nothing. It is only whatever God determined it to be, regardless of any preconceived notions of right and wrong, good and evil. So, if morality has always existed, what does that tell us about the nature of the universe we inhabit? Well, based on both Mormonism's and the broader Christianity's doctrine of punishment for sin, the universe is apparently a harsh taskmaster.

Punishment—A Violent Universe

For my purposes here, an important question is whether the moral law requires a punishment if it is violated. Lehi, in the Book of Mormon, answers in the affirmative (2 Nephi 2:10). So does Amulek (Alma 34:14–16). But does this make sense? Doctrine and Covenants 19 suggests that sin (the conscious violation of moral law) requires an excruciating physical and spiritual punishment—in other words, violence (D&C 19:16–18). But why? If no one created the moral law, does the law itself require violence if it is violated? Apparently, the scriptural answer is yes. This is a significant reason behind the proclaimed need for an infinite atonement. But why is such a drastic measure required apparently indiscriminately, regardless of the severity of the infraction?

In this life, we have myriad examples of how people can reform and improve and become more perfect without horrific punishment and without even the threat of violence. If someone steals from me, feels remorse, and returns the stolen item, I do not need to require that person to be beaten with a cudgel as a payment for the misdeed. Neither do I need someone like Jesus to be beaten with a cudgel for that person's wrong. And the person does not need to be beaten to motivate him to not steal again. I can simply forgive the person and encourage him to live a moral life. And if he does, end of story, at least as far as I'm concerned. For reform and improvement to take place, there is often no actual need for a severe punishment, inflicted either directly or vicariously. This being true, why would an eternal moral law demand violence for every sin? This I find hard to understand. But if it is God who demands the punishment, the violence, rather than the law itself, we must still ask why. What reason would he have for exacting a painful punishment even when the sinner experiences remorse and desires to reform? Why must the sinner, or his vicarious substitute, experience a painful punishment for performing an immoral act (see D&C 19:16)? What would be the purpose of such violence?

We read in the Book of Mormon that God has to be just. If he is not just, he is not God (Alma 42:13, 15, 22, 25). Note that God's need to be just is not dependent on his own arbitrary declaration that justice is a moral attribute. No, justice appears to be an independent standard that God must adhere to, otherwise he ceases to be God. He becomes something else if he is not just. Mercy is a similar attribute. "God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also" (Alma 42:15). But does being just involve always meting out a horrible punishment for every sin, either to the sinner or to some innocent substitute? Alma insists this is so: "Repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment" (Alma 42:16). Why is it impossible to repent without a punishment? What sort of eternal law requires this?

Some Latter-day Saint thinkers have interpreted this notion of punishment as merely a disruption in the relationship between God and any of his sinning children. God suffers pain from this broken relationship, and the sinner suffers also. But D&C 19 does not frame the punishment in this way. It's much more than just the feelings of separation, of a broken relationship. Let's look carefully at the Lord's words to Martin Harris: "Therefore I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not. For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; but if they would not repent they must suffer even as I" (D&C 19:15–17). The Lord is not telling Martin Harris that he will simply feel the sorrow of a broken link between him and God. He is telling Martin that he will "smite" him in his "wrath," in his "anger." This is an inflicted punishment. Other scriptural passages indicate that God is required by his inherent justice to inflict this punishment, but D&C 19 suggests it may also be personal. The Lord is displeased, is angry, and will therefore cause Martin Harris to experience exquisite pain.

An additional problem with the notion of severe and painful punishment for sin is that there are endless gradations of sin. And the idea that a person who tells a white lie that harms no one deserves the same awful punishment as a serial rapist simply does not make sense. In our mortal legal codes, we recognize the need for the punishment to fit the crime, and also for the punishment to vary—or even be expunged—according to all sorts of extenuating circumstances. Indeed, for some minor infractions of the law, particularly when much time has passed and the violator has since lived a law-abiding life, no punishment is exacted. That eternal law would not do likewise is unthinkable to me. But section 19 of the Doctrine and Covenants presents just such a scenario.

The circumstances that led to the revelation recorded now as section 19 are instructive. Martin Harris did not murder anyone. He did not rape anyone. He did not accuse Joseph Smith of being a false prophet. This was all about the printing of the Book of Mormon. Martin had agreed to mortgage his farm to pay Grandin, the printer, but he was apparently having second thoughts. This was, after all, a huge sacrifice on his part. According to Grandin's brother-in-law, "Harris became for a time in some degree staggered in his confidence; but nothing could be done in the way of printing without his aid."⁶ Yes, there was a lot riding on Martin's agreement to pay the printer, but his hesitance is easy to understand. How many of us would not have similar second thoughts? Yet for this he was threatened with an unbearable punishment. If this revelation is a recitation of the Lord's words and not a text influenced by Joseph's frustration with Martin, it indicates that each of us will be subject to that same punishment for any and all sins we do not repent of. Is this the sort of cosmos we inhabit? One that demands excruciating pain for every single sin, no matter how severe? Why? And the only way

6. Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism. Biography of Its Founders and History of Its Church. Personal Remembrances and Historical Collections Hitherto Unwritten* (New York: D. Appleton, 1867), 51.

we can avoid this pain is for someone else to suffer it for us? Again, what sort of universe would require such an arrangement? Who divined this intent in the eternal moral law? This argument relies, of course, upon a certain theory of atonement. I will address this presently, but for now we must acknowledge that LDS doctrine teaches excruciating punishment for sins, unless the sinner repents. But even then, Jesus had to endure this punishment in our stead.

Some might argue that without the threat of a punishment, there is no incentive to change or reform or improve. I do not accept this argument, not in all cases, perhaps not even in most. Many people have shown that they will improve and change because they want to become better people. There is in many people an attraction to moral behavior and a revulsion regarding what we define as immoral behavior. Whether this attraction is a product of the Spirit or is somehow inherent in the eternal spirits of God's children is unknown. But this attraction to morality is common enough that when we encounter a completely amoral person, we are troubled. We assume something is fundamentally wrong with that person. Much of this may be attributed to culture and education, but where did this compulsion for moral education come from? Certainly not from the threat of violence. Many people are also motivated to improve because of the love of others. Indeed, love often seems a far better motivator than fear. So, this is one problem I see with the LDS doctrine of sin and the law.

Another significant problem I see is Joseph's inconsistent insistence that an act in some circumstances is sinful, while that same act, in different circumstances, is not sinful. The most obvious example is Nephi's killing of Laban. But in Joseph's purported letter to Nancy Rigdon, an attempt to convince her of the appropriateness of plural marriage, he explained that whatever God commands is moral, regardless of how it might offend our moral sensibilities. But this sounds a great deal like moral relativism. It also returns us to Divine Command Theory, making the moral law arbitrary. Whatever God commands is good, no

matter how repulsive, even according to blanket commandments God has given.

So what is the correct cosmology regarding the nature and origin of moral law? We must choose among several eternal possibilities. Is there a moral law that precedes God? Or is there a moral law that God created? Or do both exist eternally with no beginning and no source? Or is the moral law just a human construct that God has nothing to do with? Or is the moral law somehow synonymous with God—God is who he is, and morality is simply doing what God would do? Whatever the case, logic strongly suggests that God is not the author of the moral law. But each of the other alternatives presents difficulties. Perhaps because of these philosophical difficulties Joseph Smith was not consistent in his teachings related to this principle. We also find modern prophets and apostles teaching doctrines that derive from inconsistent cosmologies. Let's explore some implications of these inconsistencies.

Consequences of Competing Cosmologies

In the LDS Bible Dictionary, God is referred to as “the supreme Governor of the universe.”⁷ President Gordon B. Hinckley referred to him as “the great God of the universe.”⁸ A search on churchofjesuschrist.org for the term “Creator of the universe” yields several general conference talks and Church magazine articles by members of the First Presidency, apostles, and other General Authorities in which they refer to either God the Father or Jesus Christ as the Creator of the universe. This statement assumes a particular cosmology, one in which God is separate from the universe, predates it, and brought it into existence. The obvious question regarding this cosmology (and one that has been asked throughout the ages) is, of course, where was God when he created the

7. LDS Bible Dictionary, 681, s.v. “God.”

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Bear Witness of Him,” *Ensign* 28, no. 5 (May 1990): 71.

universe? A related but less frequently asked question is, where were we? Did God just create us out of himself, or out of nothing?

This particular manifestation of LDS theology is quite in line with a mainstream Christian view of God. But it is in direct conflict with the later teachings of Joseph Smith and some of his early followers. The most concise presentation of this uniquely LDS concept of God is Lorenzo Snow's famous 1840 couplet: "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be."⁹ Although it is inconsistent with certain statements made by more recent prophets and apostles,¹⁰ this couplet found its way into the 2013 Melchizedek Priesthood/Relief Society manual *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow*.¹¹ The distinctive doctrine it propounds also appeared prominently in previous manuals containing the teachings of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith is reported to have taught: "God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!

9. In Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow: One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Desert News, 1884), 46; see also "The Grand Destiny of Man," *Deseret Evening News*, July 20, 1901, 22.

10. See, for instance, M. Russell Ballard, "Face the Future with Faith and Hope" (commencement address given at BYU-Idaho, Apr. 6, 2012), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2014/01/face-the-future-with-faith-and-hope?lang=eng> ("Always remember that Jesus Christ—the Creator of the universe, the architect of our salvation, and the head of this Church—is in control."); Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "A Matter of a Few Degrees," Apr. 5, 2008, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2008/04/a-matter-of-a-few-degrees?lang=eng> ("Of course, your greatest friend [Jesus Christ] is the all-powerful Creator of the universe."); Neal A. Maxwell, "Answer Me," Oct. 1, 1988, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1988/10/answer-me?lang=eng> ("Besides, we are all beggars anyway [see Mosiah 4:19], beggars rescued by the Creator of the universe who lived humbly as a person 'of no reputation.'").

11. See *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 83.

That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make Himself visible,—I say, if you were to see Him today, you would see Him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man.”¹²

Brigham Young was even more explicit: “The great architect, manager and superintendent, controller and dictator who guides this work is out of sight to our natural eyes. He lives on another world; he is in another state of existence; he has passed the ordeals we are now passing through; he has received an experience, has suffered and enjoyed and knows all that we know regarding the toils, sufferings, life and death of this mortality, for he has passed through the whole of it, and has received his crown and exaltation and holds the keys and the power of this Kingdom.”¹³

In this particular take on cosmology, God did not create the universe. And he certainly does not control the whole universe. Indeed, he was once as we are now, living on a mortal world, gaining experience, working out his own salvation, with, presumably, a God of his own to guide him and a savior to redeem him. I suppose if we espouse a multiverse cosmology, then it may be possible to reconcile all these ideas, but neither Joseph Smith nor any of his followers have given any credence to such a cosmology. And a multiverse cosmology would not solve the problem of where the moral law came from. It would only multiply the problem.

Both of these views of God and his place in the universe have many implications. As I have discussed in a previous article,¹⁴ if God did not

12. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 40.

13. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 30.

14. Roger Terry, “The Source of God’s Authority: One Argument for an Unambiguous Doctrine of Preexistence,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 3 (2016): 109–44.

create everything, especially us, then how does he have any authority over us? If, as Joseph Smith suggested several times, God is not capable of creating our spirits (or minds or intelligence or whatever Joseph meant by *spirit*), then he likely has authority over us only because we granted it to him. This places us in an entirely different relationship to him than we would experience if he had created us either from nothing or from himself or even from preexistent but insentient matter.

These possibilities still all flow from the initial question I asked: Which came first, God or the moral law? Or, asked another way, did God create the moral law, or does it exist independent of him? A positive answer to either question creates difficulties. If God created the moral law without basing it on anything, then morality must be arbitrary, which is problematic. How could we possibly worship an arbitrary God? What sort of faith could we possibly have in such a being? But if the law was independent of God, then why does it seemingly require violence for its violation? How can the law require God to punish either us or some substitute who is willing to suffer torment for our mistakes? What sort of cosmos does this imply? The notion of an atonement for sin flows naturally from a universe in which the violation of an eternal law somehow requires a violent punishment.

The LDS Concept of Atonement

The LDS concept of atonement comes largely from the Book of Mormon, but this presents some unique problems, partially because atonement theology in the Book of Mormon is somewhat inconsistent, but also because the predominant doctrine suggests a cosmology we may not be entirely comfortable with. Historian Matthew Bowman made the following observation: “The atonement theory of the Book of Mormon is . . . complicated; it frequently describes the atonement in terms of ransom theory (2 Nephi 2:27; [2] Nephi 9:10), for example, and contains verses consistent with a subjective, moral influence theory (Alma 7:11). The most extended Book of Mormon discussions of the atonement, however, describe it in legalistic terminology, meeting the

inexorable demands of natural law. See Alma 34 and 42.”¹⁵ If you look at the verses Bowman references for ransom and moral influence theories, however, the evidence is not very strong. For instance, 2 Nephi 2:27 does speak of “the captivity and power of the devil” and of “the great Mediator,” but there is no mention of a ransom being paid, although if there were a ransom, we must assume it would be paid to the devil, since he apparently holds us captive in some way. The preceding verse speaks of people being “redeemed from the fall” and becoming “free forever, knowing good from evil,” but again, there is no mention of a ransom. Likewise, 2 Nephi 9:10, which Bowman misidentifies as 1 Nephi 9:10, speaks of God preparing “a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell.” And the preceding verse speaks of our spirits becoming “angels to a devil” without the atonement. But there is no mention of our deliverance being made possible by God or of Christ paying a ransom to the devil for our release. The means by which we gain freedom from death and hell is not specified. Much can be read into these verses and others, but the Book of Mormon in general does not speak of the atonement as a ransom.

Bowman’s single reference to the Book of Mormon’s support for the moral influence theory of atonement is even less convincing. Alma 7:11 states, “And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.” In the next verse, Alma declares that Christ “will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know how to succor his people according to their infirmities.” According to Brigham Young University professor John Young, proponents of the moral influence theory “suggested that Christ’s ability to save mankind, to make them one with God, came chiefly through his ability to inspire moral change. . . . Through emulation, humans achieve a

15. Matthew Bowman, “The Crisis of Mormon Christology: History, Progress, and Protestantism, 1880–1930,” *Fides et Historia* 40, no. 2 (2008): 4n10.

moral character pure enough to warrant inclusion in heaven.”¹⁶ Alma 7:11 and the verses preceding and following it do not speak in these terms. Alma is claiming instead that Christ somehow took upon him our infirmities, our pains and sicknesses, so that he can know how to succor us. Nowhere in this chapter does Alma claim that Jesus saves us by the example of his moral character.

Others, particularly Eugene England, Blake Ostler, and Terryl Givens, have expounded theories of atonement based on Book of Mormon teachings that strip it of its more legalistic aspects,¹⁷ but if we look carefully at the two chapters that specifically address atonement theology, Alma 34 and 42 (both mentioned by Bowman), we must acknowledge that the Book of Mormon’s position on atonement is predominantly in harmony with satisfaction theory and, especially, penal substitution theory, which has been strongly proclaimed by modern-day apostles such as Boyd K. Packer.¹⁸

Amulek, in his sermon recorded in Alma 34, speaks of a “great and last sacrifice” that must be made and that must be “infinite and eternal” (Alma 34:10). This harks back to the notion that sin requires a violent punishment in order to be erased. Amulek relies strongly on the idea that there is a law that requires some sort of satisfaction. “The law requireth the life of him who hath murdered; therefore there can

16. John D. Young, “Long Narratives: Toward a New Mormon Understanding of Apostasy,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, edited by Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 319.

17. Eugene England, “That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement,” http://eugeneengland.org/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/1966_e_002.pdf; Blake Ostler, “Atonement in Mormon Thought,” <http://blakeostler.com/docs/AtonementInMormonThought.pdf>; Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, “How We’ve Been Misunderstanding God’s Title of ‘Savior,’” *LDS Living*, Nov. 6, 2017, <https://www.ldsliving.com/How-We-ve-Been-Misunderstanding-God-s-Title-of-Savior/s/86849>.

18. Boyd K. Packer, “The Mediator,” *Ensign* 7, no. 5 (May 1977): 54–56.

be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world” (Alma 34:12). He also emphasizes Jesus’s ability to “satisfy the demands of justice” (Alma 34:16). Christ stands “betwixt [the children of men] and justice; . . . having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice” (Mosiah 15:9). An earlier prophet, Jacob, also teaches that “the atonement satisfieth the demands of his justice upon all those who have not the law given to them” (2 Nephi 9:26).

The law is crucially important in the Book of Mormon—in Lehi’s teachings to Jacob (2 Nephi 2:5, 7, 13, 26), in Jacob’s words to the people of Nephi (2 Nephi 9: 25–27), in King Benjamin’s great sermon at the temple (Mosiah 2:33), and especially in Alma’s masterful discourse to his son Corianton (Alma 42). Alma is specifically answering his son’s question regarding “the justice of God in punishing the sinner” (Alma 42:1). Justice, of course, has everything to do with the law, and “all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice” (Alma 42:14). The redemption of humankind could be effected only through “the plan of mercy . . . ; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15). Alma emphasizes the necessity of repentance and of punishment for breaking the law. “Now, repentance could not come unto men except there were a punishment, which also was eternal as the life of the soul should be” (Alma 42:16). Alma then asks what he considers a logical sequence of questions. “Now, how could a man repent except he should sin? How could he sin if there was no law? How could there be a law save there was a punishment?” (Alma 42:17). He then attempts to explain to Corianton the necessity of the law. “If there was no law given against sin men would not be afraid to sin. . . . But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance mercy claimeth; otherwise justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:20, 22).

Alma seems to hold two contradictory ideas regarding the cosmology behind the law. He speaks as if God has given the law to us and established a punishment for violating it. But he also speaks as if God is bound by a higher moral law. He must be both just and merciful. These appear to be moral concepts that God did not invent but that he must obey in order to be God. Perhaps God abides by an eternal moral law that governs his ability to be considered deity. Based on this moral law, he then gives us various moral laws that we must follow. If we don't, we will be punished, or else we must find a substitute to suffer for us. The punishment is fixed and eternal, and someone must pay the penalty. The higher principle of justice must be satisfied. So either the sinners themselves or some acceptable substitute must suffer. Because the moral law requires God to be merciful, he suffers the penalty himself, in the person of Jesus, "to appease the demands of justice" (Alma 42:15). "What," Alma asks Corianton, "do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God" (Alma 42:25)

This assumption about God's relationship to a higher moral law is consistent with Joseph Smith's later teachings, but it also raises questions about the nature of the eternity we inhabit. And what if God were to cease being merciful or just? Would he be punished? By whom or what? What sort of violent punishment would he face? And who established this requirement? Does some society of Gods establish rules by which they police each other?

The Requirements for Resurrection

We have briefly discussed one half of the atonement: the Savior's suffering for our sins. The other half is the idea that Jesus rose from the dead and broke the bands of death, thus opening the door for all of us to pass from death to life again. According to Abinadi, Jesus was "led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, . . . and thus God breaketh the bands of death, having gained the victory

over death; giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men. . . . But behold, the bands of death shall be broken, and the Son reigneth, and hath power over the dead; therefore, he bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead” (Mosiah 15:7–8, 20). Amulek likewise taught that “Christ shall loose the bands of this temporal death, that all shall be raised from this temporal death. The spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; . . . and we shall be brought to stand before God” (Alma 11:42–43).

Paul also teaches this idea: “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:20–22). This is fairly straightforward doctrine: Because of Adam’s fall, we die; our spirits and bodies separate at death. We cannot resurrect ourselves. Somehow Christ’s death and resurrection break the bands of death for us all, and through his power our spirits and bodies reunite eternally.

So, placing this doctrine in the context of the primary question explored in this article, we must ask why. If there is some eternal law that dictates the particulars of how men and women become gods and goddesses, why must we die? And why must a deity also die, in an excruciating manner, and then take up his body again? How does this make it possible for everyone else to be resurrected? Why can’t God just exercise his power over life and death and raise us all from the dead? What eternal law makes it necessary for a sacrificial lamb to die and then rise again in order for the rest of us to do likewise? Or why can’t God simply allow us all to live eternally? What is it about death that is necessary for our progression?

In Jacob’s great sermon to the Nephites in 2 Nephi 9, he refers to death almost as if it were a creature that must be conquered: “They are delivered from that awful monster, death and hell” (2 Nephi 9:26). So, what is death? Is it an enemy that holds us captive? Certainly not. It is simply the condition of having the body and spirit separate. But why

must Christ allow his spirit and body to separate, then bring them back together for the same process to occur for the rest of God's children? Where did this requirement come from? From God? Doesn't he have power over life and death? It appears that he is bound by some eternal requirement that insists one flawless individual must suffer an excruciating death and then rise under his own power from death in order to make it possible for all others to experience the same reunion of body and spirit. Where did this requirement originate?

I'm assuming that if God had the choice, he wouldn't require his best-loved Son to experience crucifixion. If he could grant us the gift of resurrection without this horrendous price, wouldn't he certainly do so? If the conditions are arbitrary, God certainly wouldn't invent something as gruesome and horrific as death by crucifixion as the price that must be paid to open the gates of resurrection. But according to LDS doctrine, that is the price. If so, who determined it? Who said that the only way to reunite billions of bodies and spirits is for someone like Jesus to be crucified and then raise himself from death? Again, the apparent answer to this difficult question is that nobody determined this. It is required by some eternal law. It is the only way. This is apparently part of the cosmology we accept. But does it make sense?

In LDS theology, the end and the beginning are inseparably connected. We cannot understand the resurrection and our eventual assignment to a kingdom of glory or perdition without first understanding where we come from and what our relationship to God is. This, of course, lies at the heart of any cosmology. God's relationship to the cosmos and to eternal law is central. But so is our relationship to him and to eternal law. How do we fit into this picture? What is the truth about our place in the eternal scheme of things?

The Nature of Our Premortal Existence

If we are to settle upon a workable cosmology, we must deal with at least one more secondary question. Did God create our spirits? In a footnote

to my article “The Source of God’s Authority: One Argument for an Unambiguous Doctrine of Preexistence,” I present evidence of how Joseph Smith’s teachings about this question changed over the course of his prophetic career.¹⁹ The Book of Mormon has no definite doctrine of the premortality of spirits, so it does not weigh in on the question of whether God created those spirits or not. All we get are vague statements such as King Benjamin’s counsel, “Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth” (Mosiah 4:9). This statement is consistent with Christian theology of Joseph Smith’s day. Soon Joseph was expanding his cosmology, however, and in 1830 he recorded a document supposedly written by Moses in which the premortal spirits of men and women were said to be created by God (Moses 3:5; 6:36). Starting in 1839, however, Joseph Smith began teaching that God could not create our spirits. What Joseph meant, exactly, by the term *spirit* is not always clear, but from the King Follett

19. Terry, “Source of God’s Authority,” 112–113n15, reads, in part:

“It should be noted that Joseph Smith’s understanding of the premortal existence of the human race and related concepts evolved and expanded over time. To try to harmonize all of his statements and even his revelations on the subject is probably impossible. Consequently, his later statements deserve more attention than his earlier statements. For example, Moses 6:36, revealed in June 1830, speaks of ‘spirits that God had created.’ Likewise, Moses 3:5 refers to ‘the children of men’ and that ‘in heaven I created them.’ But in 1839, Joseph began teaching the doctrine of uncreated spirits: ‘The Spirit of Man is not a created being; it existed from Eternity & will exist to eternity. Anything created cannot be Eternal’ (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991], 9, quoting the Aug. 8, 1839, entry in Willard Richards Pocket Companion). In February 1840, he taught, ‘I believe that the *soul* is eternal; and had no beginning’ (Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 33, quoting Matthew Livingston Davis, a journalist who reported a speech Joseph gave on Feb. 5, 1840). It is difficult to reconcile these [early and late] statements.”

Discourse and other incomplete records, it is fairly evident that at the end of his life Joseph believed in a cosmology in which the intelligence or mind of human beings has always existed and was not created by God. In other words, the sentient part of us, our identity, was not and could not be created. Whether that identity was always connected to a spirit body is unclear.

This later cosmology places us in a far different relationship to God the Father than Joseph's earlier teachings. Rather than God being the source of everything, including our existence, we are, in a sense, equal with him in certain ways. We are, for instance, as eternal as he is. If this is true, then we are also independent in certain important ways. As I put it in my previous article, "If, as Joseph boldly declared, we are eternal beings whose minds or intelligence could not be created, and if, as the account of Abraham suggests, God came down in the beginning among a group of already existing beings, then we were, in a very real sense, self-existent and independent, and God, no matter how much more intelligent or perfect he was, would have had no right to dictate to us how we were to exist. To put it in modern capitalist terms, he did not conduct a hostile takeover of our eternal spirits or intelligences."²⁰ Instead, he offered to become our Father, a proposition we must have accepted, probably by covenant, which granted God certain authority over us, including the right to implement laws to enable our progress.

And this brings up another question. If we existed independent of God and covenanted with him at some point to become his children, to allow him to assist us along the path to the sort of life he enjoys, what was our status before we came into our Heavenly Father's family? And how did the eternal moral law that, according to LDS scripture, requires a violent punishment for anyone who violates it affect us? Who was there to enforce this law?

20. Terry, "Source of God's Authority,"135.

This is a question that a true cosmology must answer. What, indeed, is the nature of our universe? What are the parameters it imposes on us, and on God? Or did God create the universe? If he did, why did he create it the way it is? Why did he impose conditions that require physical torment—violence—for every sin, no matter how small? Why is there, according to LDS scripture, no accommodation for growth and reform without punishment, either personal or vicarious? These questions, I submit, are not idle musings. And they are not attempts to be difficult or contrarian. They strike at the heart of our theology and affect our ability to exercise faith; they also appeal to the yearnings of souls who are searching for truth.

Other Questions

This essay is already rather wide-ranging, but it is in danger of roaming even farther afield, so far, in fact, that I likely wouldn't be able rein it in and draw any sort of sensible conclusion at whatever end it might reach. Such is the nature of the questions cosmology raises, because cosmology affects everything, *everything* we believe. So, instead of pursuing other lines of inquiry that have already come to mind and threaten to lead to even more lines of inquiry, I have opted instead to merely list a number of questions. These questions (or sets of questions) will illustrate, I hope, how important it is to arrive at a correct cosmology, but they may also open the door for other inquisitive minds to explore their suggested theological implications and contradictions. So, here goes:

1. Assuming that the human spirit is in the general form of our mortal body (see Ether 3:16), how did this particular form ever come to be, especially if Joseph Smith's later teachings are correct and God did not (and could not) create them?
2. Are the expansion physicists correct? Did everything start with a Big Bang and slowly evolve into the universe as we know it. How would God (or many gods) fit into this scenario? How would we fit into

such a universe? What would be our origin story and our eventual destiny?

3. Even if the Big Bang describes, more or less, how the universe as we know it began, what preceded the Big Bang? Where did the physical material come from? What about the relatively empty space that physical material is now filling? What are its features and parameters? According to modern physics, “Experiments continue to show that there is no ‘space’ that stands apart from space-time itself, . . . no arena in which matter, energy and gravity operate which is not affected by matter, energy and gravity. General relativity tells us that what we call space is just another feature of the gravitational field of the universe, so space and space-time can and do not exist apart from the matter and energy that creates the gravitational field.”²¹ Where, then, did matter and energy come from?
4. If everything has always existed, in a raw or unrefined state, why and how does God have authority to manipulate it (create worlds and such)? Particularly if he was once as we are now? Who granted him permission to manipulate matter and energy in at least a corner of the universe?
5. Is the universe (physical matter and dark matter and energy) moral? Does it somehow respond to an authority figure who is able to shape it to some sort of moral end?
6. In what sense is gender eternal? If spirits cannot be created, are they eternally male or female? The current popular LDS belief is that spirits were born, much as we are in mortality, to heavenly parents, but that their native intelligence cannot be created. If so, where did gender begin? Is it eternal, or did our Heavenly Parents determine what gender our spirits would be, perhaps based on certain characteristics of our native intelligence? Also, if gender is eternal, is same-sex attraction also eternal?
7. What about Mother in Heaven? If she exists, why do her children have no contact with her? Why has nothing about her ever been revealed? As one woman put it, what is the postmortal destiny of women? To disappear? So it seems. Or are there simply too many of her to receive

21. Sten Odenwald, “Can Space Exist by Itself without Matter or Energy Around?” Gravity B Probe: Testing Einstein’s Universe (website), accessed Aug. 27, 2021, <https://einstein.stanford.edu/content/relativity/a11332.html>.

a place of honor in the pantheon of deity? Is polygamy on a galactic scale the order of eternity?²²

8. “The doctrine of personal eternalism,” claims Blake Ostler, “raises problems for Mormon thought. If the number of intelligences is infinite, then an infinite number of intelligences will remain without the chance to progress by further organization. If, on the other hand, the number of intelligences is finite, the eternal progression of gods resulting from begetting spirits must one day cease. Either way, the dilemma remains.”²³ If, as Joseph Smith taught toward the end of his life, the spirits of men and women cannot be created, then is there an infinite quantity of them? If so, then some, simple math tells us, will never experience even the beginning of eternal progression. They will remain forever in an unimproved and stagnant state. If there is not an infinite quantity, then at some point the work of God (and all gods) will, by definition, abruptly end. What happens then? Do they become as *Star Trek’s* Q Continuum, members of an omniscient, omnipotent, but useless race, sitting on the porch in their rocking chairs, bored to tears?
9. What does it mean to be saved? Saved not only from what, but to what? If there is an eternal law, what does it have in store for us? If God produced the moral law he apparently follows (and expects us to), what does he have in store for us, specifically?

22. Brigham Young and other early Church leaders apparently believed in eternal polygamy: “You who wish that there were no such thing in existence [as polygamy], if you have in your hearts to say: ‘We will pass along in the Church without obeying or submitting to it in our faith or believing this order, because, for aught that we know, this community may be broken up yet, and we may have lucrative offices offered to us; we will not, therefore, be polygamists lest we should fail in obtaining some earthly honor, character and office, etc.’—the man that has that in his heart, and will continue to persist in pursuing that policy, will come short of dwelling in the presence of the Father and the Son, in celestial glory. The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy.” Brigham Young, Aug. 19, 1866, *Journal of Discourses*, 11:269.

23. Blake T. Ostler, “The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (1982): 74.

10. What is the Spirit? We really have no idea. But it appears to be the key to everything. It is the medium, apparently, through which God works. It somehow connects him to all of his creations, including us, with no regard to such parameters as the speed of light, and yet, according to Joseph Smith, God did not create our spirits. Did the Spirit always exist? It is apparently not a personage. What, then, is it, and how is it connected to the eternal moral law? Is it perhaps that law? If so, what is God's relationship to the Spirit? Does it precede him? Does it proceed from him? Or does he operate within its established parameters?

Conclusion

Without a correct cosmology, we cannot have correct doctrines, because our doctrines flow from our understanding of the universe we inhabit and our place in it. Current LDS doctrines are inconsistent in certain ways because we accept at least two (and perhaps many more) cosmologies. Joseph Smith was very interested in the nature of eternity, God's place in it, and our relationship to him. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to settle all the questions that naturally arise from his sometimes-conflicting doctrines. But we need those questions answered. Otherwise, we cannot answer some very basic questions about the plan of salvation.

As you can readily see, coming up with a correct and complete cosmology is far above my pay grade. My entire purpose here is not to explicate a perfect cosmology. It is merely to raise problematic questions to illustrate the need for such a cosmology, so that those who do find themselves in positions of theological authority can perhaps see the need to get this one thing right, this foundation of all theology.

This, it seems, should be a high priority for a Church that believes in continuing revelation and claims to teach true doctrine (even if some of it is inconsistent). It is my belief that a correct cosmology can be arrived at only through revelation. But our revelations today are almost

exclusively institutional in nature. They affect programs and curricula but do not address unresolved theological matters. Until we receive a correct understanding of cosmology, however, we will have gaps and inconsistencies in our doctrines, which reduce the appeal and effectiveness of our religion.

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