Book of Moses Essays #32: Moses 1 in Its Ancient Context: The Two-Part Pattern of Heavenly and Ritual Ascent (Moses 1)

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Figure 1. Ascent of Sinai, Tours Pentateuch, ca. 600

In a previous *Essay*,[1] we discussed similarities and differences between *heavenly* ascent, an actual encounter with Deity within the *heavenly* temple,[2] and *ritual* ascent, a *figurative* journey into the presence of God such as the one experienced in *earthly* temples.

In this *Essay*, we will introduce the general two-part narrative pattern of departure and return used in ancient and modern literature. We then illustrate how narratives of heavenly and ritual ascent often conform to a similar two-part structure of descent and ascent—a down-road followed by an up-road. Recognizing this pattern can help us better identify the intended narrative structure of the Book of Moses. In particular, it allows us to see Moses 2–8 as a sequence of illustrative stories that relate to *ritual* descent and ascent in the temple, and also to see analogous elements in Moses 1, which offers an account of *literal* heavenly descent and ascent.

The Two-Part Narrative Pattern of Departure and Return

The story of Adam and Eve's departure from and return to the Garden of Eden parallels a common three-part pattern in ancient Near Eastern writings: departure from home, mission abroad, and happy homecoming.[3] The pattern is at least as old as the Egyptian story of Sinuhe from 1800 BCE[4] and can be seen again in scriptural accounts of Israel's apostasy and return[5] as well as in the lives of biblical characters such as Jacob. [6] The theme appears in modern literature as often as it did in those times.[7]

To the ancients, however, it was more than a mere storytelling convention, since it reflected a sequence of events common in widespread ritual practices for priests and kings.[8] More generally, it is the story of the plan of salvation in miniature, as seen from the personal perspective. This pattern can be found in the Savior's parables of the Prodigal Son[9] and the Good Samaritan.[10] The life of Jesus Christ Himself also followed this two-part pattern perfectly, though, unlike ordinary mortals, He was without sin: "I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father."[11]

No poem expresses the theme of mankind's mortal passage and return to a celestial home more movingly than Eliza R. Snow's *O My Father*.[12] Latter-day Saints will also find resonance in an apocryphal account that is known today as *The Hymn of the Pearl.* John W. Welch and James Garrison aptly described the *Hymn* as "an ancient counterpart to 'O My Father.'"[13] It appears as part of a larger work of New Testament Apocrypha called the *Acts of Thomas*[14] and was very popular among early Christians. Briefly, the story describes heavenly parents who send their son on a journey to recover a pearl. The pearl represents his soul. They clothe him with special clothing and give him special food. While

on his journey (which represents earth life), he forgets his mission. They send a messenger who causes him to remember his mission, and he returns to receive heavenly glory and to live again with his divine parents.

Margaret Barker describes how the thinking of early Christians applied this pattern to the story of Adam and Eve, and how it may have reflected their own hopes for a return to the original faith, the authentic priesthood, and the true temple:[15]

> The Christian vision reverses the story in Genesis 1–3, and has humans restored to Eden. … Adam was remembered as the first high priest, and Jesus was described as the new Adam. The Christians remembered and hoped for the earlier Eden—the true temple—and saw themselves returning to the place and the priesthood from which they had been driven. This was their world view.

The Two-Part Narrative Pattern of Ritual Descent and Ascent in the Temple

When seen in detail, the narrative pattern that accompanies ritual ascent is more complex than a simple, unbroken rise to glory. As it turns out, there are two main parts to the story: ritual *ascent* is preceded by ritual *descent*. For example, the Latter-day Saint temple endowment opens part one of the story with a recital of the events of Creation.[16] Notably, the pattern of beginning with the beginning—an explicit telling of the Creation—is a near universal feature of temple rites throughout the ancient Near East.[17]

After a recital of the Creation, part 1 of the endowment continues with an account of the Fall of Adam and Eve and then, in part 2, concludes with the story of their upward journey back to the presence of the Father.[18] This approach to teaching the plan of salvation emphasizes what Elder Bruce R. McConkie called the "three pillars" of eternity—the Creation, the Fall, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It appears throughout modern scripture and in the temple.[19]

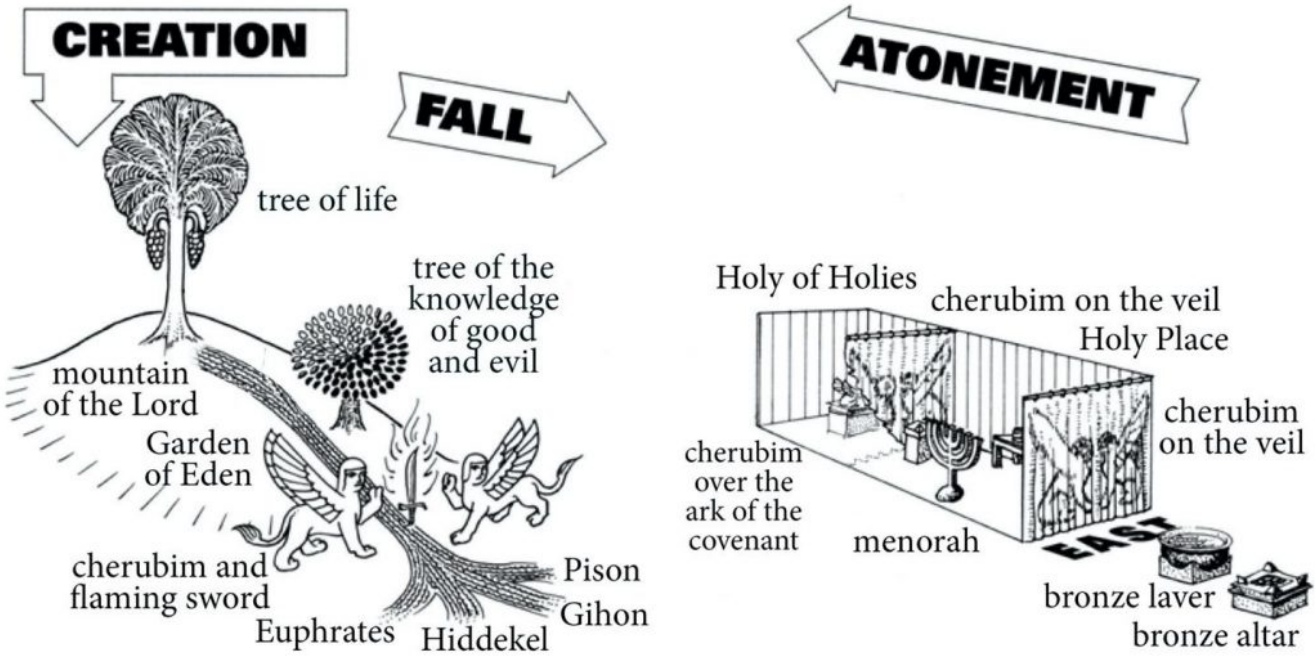

Figure 2. Adapted from Michael P. Lyon, 1952–: Sacred Topography of Eden and the Temple, 1994. The outbound journey of the Creation and the Fall at left is mirrored in the inbound journey of the temple at right.

Building on the "three pillars" outline of the plan of salvation, Latter-day Saint scholar Donald W. Parry has shown that the outbound journey of the Creation and the Fall is mirrored in the inbound journey of the temple.[20] The Garden of Eden can be seen as a natural "temple," where Adam and Eve lived in God's presence for a time. Significantly, each major feature of Eden (e.g., the river, the cherubim, the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Life) corresponds to a similar symbol in the Israelite temple (e.g., the bronze laver, the cherubim, the veil,[21] the menorah[22]).

Thus, the course taken by the Israelite high priest through the temple can be seen as symbolizing the journey of the Fall of Adam and Eve in reverse. In other words, just as the route of Adam and Eve's departure from Eden led them *eastward* past the cherubim with the flaming swords and out of the sacred garden into the mortal world, so in ancient times the high priest would return westward *from* the mortal world, past the consuming fire, the cleansing water, the woven images of cherubim on the temple veils, and, finally, back into the presence of God.[23] "Thus," according to Parry, the high priest has returned "to the original point of creation, where he pours out the atoning blood of the sacrifice, reestablishing the covenant relationship with God."[24]

About the journey made within the temple, Hugh Nibley explained:[25]

> Properly speaking, one did not go "through" the temple—in one door and out another—for one enters and leaves by the same door, but by moving in opposite directions. … The Two Ways of Light and Darkness are but one way after all, as the wise Heraclitus said: "The up-road and the down-road are one"[26]; which one depends on the way we are facing.[27]

In remarkable consistency with this pattern, both the Book of Moses and the modern temple endowment relate how the posterity of Adam and Eve trace the footsteps of their first parents—initially, as they are sent away from Eden, and later, in their subsequent journey of return and reunion.[28] Chapters 2–4 of the Book of Moses tell the story of the Creation and the "down-road" of the Fall, while chapters 5–8 follow the journey of Adam and Eve and the righteous branches of their posterity along the "up-road" enabled by the Atonement.[29] In the Book of Moses, the "up-road" is called the "way of the Tree of Life"[30]—signifying the path that leads to the presence of God and the sweet fruit held in reserve for the righteous in the day of resurrection.

Heavenly Descent and Ascent in Moses 1

Several of the individual episodes in Moses 1 are well known to students of the Book of Moses—Moses' confrontation with Satan,[31] his comprehensive vision of the earth and all its inhabitants,[32] and God's declaration about His "work and glory."[33] Yet how all these pieces join beautifully into a coherent whole has been generally underappreciated.

At first glance, some elements of the vision might appear to be repetitive. For example, at the beginning of his vision, Moses saw the "world … and all the children of men" (Moses 1:8). Then, near the end of the vision, he seems to have experienced the same thing again when he saw the "earth, and … the inhabitants thereof" (Moses 1:27–29). Why is this so?

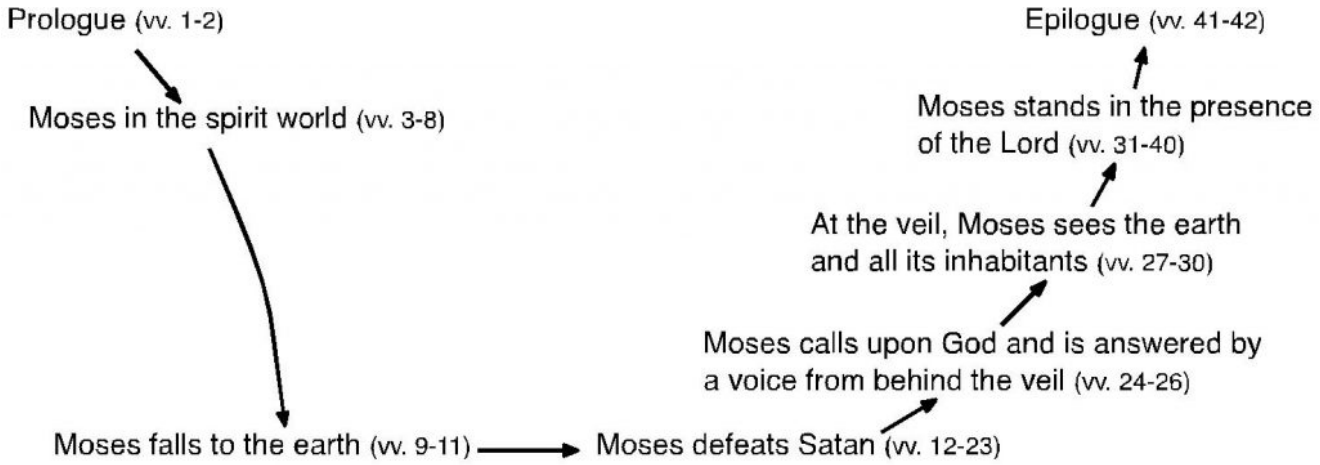

Figure 3. The Two-Part Narrative Structure of Moses 1

The answer to this question becomes apparent when one realizes that the two-part narrative pattern of *descent* followed by *ascent* is just as operative in the account of *literal* heavenly ascent in Moses 1 as it is in the account of *ritual* ascent in Moses 2–8 (see the figure above). The prophet's experience in Moses 1 was a tutorial on the plan of salvation from a personal perspective, including his departure from God's presence in the beginning and his glorious return to that presence in the end through his faithfulness. Thus, in verse

8, early on in the vision, it appears that Moses saw the *premortal* world and all the spirits that God had created (compare Abraham 3:22–23). Later, in verses 27–29, he seems to have experienced a view from heaven of the *mortal* earth and all its inhabitants.

Each element of the narrative structure of Moses 1, as informed by our understanding of the two-part structure of the narrative, is summarized below:[34]

> *Prologue (vv. 1–2).*[35] The opening verses to Moses 1 provide what Bible scholar Laurence Turner calls an "announcement of plot"[36]—a brief summary of the most important events that will take place in the rest of the story. In this case, the prologue declares that Moses will be "caught up" to "an exceedingly high mountain" where he will receive the glory of God and, after conversing with Him face to face, will enter into His presence.[37]
>
> *Moses in the spirit world (vv. 3–8).*[38] Following the prologue, Moses was given a description of God's attributes and a confirmation of Moses' own foreordained calling and status as a "son" of God "in the similitude of [the] Only Begotten."[39] He was then shown the "world upon which he was created"—which appears to refer to the preexistent spirit realm[40]—and "all the children of men which are, and which were created"[41]—which appears to correspond to the view of premortal organized intelligences given in the Book of Moses' vision of Enoch[42] and in the Book of Abraham.[43] Note that precedents for similar visions of "the children of men" in their premortal state are not confined to Latter-day Saint scripture, but are also attested in Jewish and Islamic tradition.
>
> *Moses falls to the earth (vv. 9–11).*[44] Having left the presence of God and no longer being clothed with His glory, Moses fell to the earth—meaning *literally* that he collapsed in weakness and *figuratively* that he descended again to the relative darkness of the telestial world. In this way, his experience recapitulated the journey of Adam and Eve as they left the Garden of Eden, "landing" on earth "as a natural man," as Nibley put it.[45] Moses was then left to himself to be tested in a dramatic encounter with Satan.[46]
>
> *Moses defeats Satan (vv. 12–23).*[47] Satan tempted Moses—now in a physically weakened state—to worship him. A context of priesthood ordinances is implied, as we will argue in more detail below. For example, having banished Satan by calling upon the name of the Only Begotten[48] (a motif that precedes baptism in some ancient Christian sources[49]), Moses was immediately afterward "filled with the Holy Ghost."[50]
>
> *Moses calls upon God and is answered by a voice from behind the heavenly veil (vv. 24–26).*[51] Having continued to press forward, Moses "call[ed] upon the name of God"[52] in sacred prayer. Since the moment he "fell to the earth," Moses could no longer speak face to face with the Lord, having been "shut out from his presence."[53] Following his prayer, however, Moses was answered by a voice from behind the heavenly veil enumerating specific blessings, including the promise that his commands would be obeyed "as if thou wert God."[54]

> *At the heavenly veil, Moses sees the earth and all its inhabitants (vv. 27–30).*[55] While "the [divine] voice was still speaking,"[56] Moses was permitted to pass through the heavenly veil and, from within, look downward and outward toward God's handiwork. He beheld every particle of the earth, all of its inhabitants, and "many lands; … each … called earth."[57]
>
> *Moses stands in the presence of the Lord (vv. 31–40).*[58] The culminating sequence of the ascension begins in verse 31 after Moses, having continued to inquire of the Lord,[59] came to stand in His presence. God spoke with Moses face to face, describing His purposes for this earth and its inhabitants.[60] Moses was then shown the events of the Creation, the Fall, and the manner by which the Plan of Redemption was given to Adam and Eve. From Moses 1:40, it appears that Moses was commanded to record an account something like, but arguably not identical to, what we have today as chapters 2–5 of the Book of Moses.
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> *Epilogue (vv. 41–42).*[61] The epilogue in the final verses of Moses 1 describes the loss and restoration of the story of Moses 1, followed by language that retrospectively mirrors verse 1 and warns that the words of Moses' vision should not be shown "unto any except them that believe."[62]

In subsequent *Essays,*[63] each element of the narrative structure outlined above will be discussed one by one in more detail. But first, in the next *Essay*, we will outline how Moses 1, in likeness to other ancient texts, functions as a "missing" prologue to Genesis.

This article is adapted and updated from Bradshaw, Jeffrey M. "The LDS book of Enoch as the culminating story of a temple text." *BYU Studies 53*, no. 1 (2014): 39–73. http://www.templethemes.net/publications/140224-a-Bradshaw.pdf, pp. 44-47. (accessed September 19, 2017).

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Notes on Figures

Figure 1. Public domain, http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/32/AshburnPenatuchtFolio076rMosesReceivingLaw.jpg. Bibliothèque Nationale, nouv. acq. lat., no. 2334, folio 76 recto.

Figure 2. Published in D. W. Parry, *Garden*, pp. 134–135. We have modified Lyon's original drawing by moving the Tree of Life to the top of the mountain. It was originally placed slightly downhill. For the rationale for this modification, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Tree of Knowledge*.

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Endnotes

[1] See *Essay* #31.
[2] See J. A. Parry *et al.*, Temple in Heaven.
[3] A. Gileadi, Literary, p. 12.
[4] J. B. Pritchard, ANET, pp. 18–22.
[5] J. E. Coleson, Life Cycle; J. B. Pritchard, ANET; A. Gileadi, Decoded; S. D. Ricks, Prophetic.
[6] Genesis 27–33.
[7] N. Frye, Secular Scripture.
[8] See e.g., D. E. Callender, Adam, pp. 211–218. From a ritual perspective, these three parts correspond to van Gennep's classic stages of separation (*préliminaire*), transition (*liminaire*), and reintegration (*postliminaire*) (A. van Gennep, Rites, pp. 11).
[9] Luke 15:11–32. See R. L. Millet, Lost; M. R. Linford, Parable.
[10] Luke 10:29–37. See J. W. Welch, Samaritan (1999); J. W. Welch, Samaritan (2007).
[11] John 16:28.
[12] Hymns (1985), Hymns (1985), #292.
[13] J. W. Welch *et al.*, Pearl.
[14] E. Hennecke *et al.*, Acts of Thomas. A readable summary of the account is given by Hugh Nibley (H. W. Nibley, Treasures, pp. 177–178. For his more detailed translation and summary, see H. W. Nibley, Message (2005), pp. 487–501). Nibley's summary is also reprinted in J. M. Bradshaw, Moses Temple Themes (2014), pp. 20–22.
[15] M. Barker, Temple Theology, pp. 4, 7; see also M. Barker, Revelation, pp. 20, 327.
[16] See, e.g., J. E. Talmage, House of the Lord (1971), p. 83.
[17] See, e.g., J. H. Walton, Ancient, pp. 123–127; H. W. Nibley, Meanings and Functions, pp. 1460–1461. For more on the structure and function of the story of Creation found in Genesis 1 and arguably used in Israelite temple liturgy, see, e.g., J. H. Walton, Lost World of Genesis One; M. S. Smith, Priestly Vision. W. P. Brown, Seven Pillars, provides perspectives on other biblical accounts of creation. See J. H. Walton, Genesis 1, pp. 17–22, for a useful table that highlights similarities and differences among creation accounts in the ancient Near East. Cf. W. P. Brown, Seven Pillars, pp. 21–32.
[18] See, e.g., J. E. Talmage, House of the Lord (1971), p. 83.
[19] See, e.g., 2 Nephi 2:22–26; Alma 18:36, 39; 22:13; Mormon 9:12, Doctrine and Covenants 20:17–18, 20–25; Moses 6:54–59; Articles of Faith 1:1–3. This "Christ-centered" presentation of the plan of salvation, consistent with temple patterns of teaching, is a stark contrast to the "location-centered" diagram that is used widely in classroom settings to illustrate the sequence of events that chart the journey of individuals from premortality to the resurrection. As Nathan Richardson observed (N. Richardson, Two Views; N. Richardson, Three Pillars), something essential is missing in the latter approach:

there is no mention of Jesus Christ and His role as Savior and Redeemer. This is a way of thinking about the Plan that, regrettably, leaves out its very heart. See J. M. Bradshaw, Temple Themes in the Oath, pp. 7–10.

[20] D. W. Parry, Garden, p. 135. Cf. J. M. Lundquist, Reality; J. A. Parry *et al.*, Temple in Heaven; T. Stordalen, Echoes, pp. 112–116, 308-309; T. D. Alexander, From Eden, pp. 20–23; G. K. Beale, Temple, pp. 66–80; G. J. Wenham, Sanctuary Symbolism; J. A. Parry *et al.*, Temple in Heaven; R. N. Holzapfel *et al.*, Father's House, pp. 17–19; J. Morrow, Creation; D. R. Seely *et al.*, Crown of Creation.

[21] For more on the correspondence between the symbolism of the Tree of Knowledge and the temple veil, see J. M. Bradshaw, Tree of Knowledge.

[22] In most depictions of Jewish temple architecture, the menorah is shown as being *outside* the veil—in contrast to the Tree of Life, which is at the holiest place in the Garden of Eden. However, Margaret Barker cites evidence that, in the first temple, a Tree of Life was symbolized *within* the Holy of Holies (e.g., M. Barker, Hidden, pp. 6–7; M. Barker, Christmas, pp. 85–86, 140; J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, pp. 366–367). Barker concludes that the Menorah (or perhaps a second, different, representation in arboreal form?) was both removed from the temple and diminished in stature in later Jewish literature as the result of a "very ancient feud" concerning its significance (M. Barker, Older, p. 221, see pp. 221–232). Mandaean scripture describes a Tree of Life within the *heavenly* sanctuary as follows: "They … lifted the great veil of safety upward before him, introduced him, and showed him that Vine," meaning the Tree of Life (M. Lidzbarski, Ginza, GL 1:1, p. 429:3–20; cf. E. S. Drower, Prayerbook, 49, pp. 45–46).

[23] See D. W. Parry, Garden, p. 135.

[24] Ibid., p. 135.

[25] H. W. Nibley, Message (2005), pp. 442–443. See also J. M. Bradshaw, LDS Book of Enoch, pp. 44–47; J. M. Bradshaw, Moses Temple Themes (2014), pp. 17–22. Sometimes the pattern is analyzed as a structure of three parts rather than two.

[26] ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὠυτή (Heraclitus, Fragments of Heraclitus, Fragment DK B60).

[27] For an excellent summary of the doctrine of Two Ways in the Book of Mormon as contrasted with elsewhere in the ancient world, see N. B. Reynolds, Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways. David Calabro provides an insightful comparison between the Garden of Eden and Lehi's dream of the Tree of Life (D. Calabro, Lehi's Dream). See especially pp. 275ff. for a discussion of the "strait and narrow path" that leads, in both cases, to the Tree. Cf. N. B. Reynolds, Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways, pp. 51–52.

[28] Cf. John 16:28.

[29] See J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, pp. 328–351.

[30] Moses 4:31. See ibid., p. 282.

[31] Moses 1:12–23.

[32] Moses 1:27–29.

[33] Moses 1:39.

[34] For detailed commentaries on Moses 1, see J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image 1, pp. 32–81; R. D. Draper *et al.*, Commentary.
[35] See *Essays* #34 and #42.
[36] L. Turner, Announcements, pp. 13–14.
[37] Moses 1:31. Though God speaks to Moses near the beginning of the chapter, the parallel wording regarding Moses' "face to face" experience does not appear until verse 31, strengthening the case that this is the event to which the prologue is pointing us.
[38] See *Essay* #34.
[39] Moses 1:3–7.
[40] We will outline our reasons for this conclusion in *Essay* #34.
[41] Moses 1:8.
[42] Moses 6:36. This vision of the premortal spirits, like the vision of Moses 1, preceded a second, separate vision of "all the inhabitants of the earth" (Moses 7:21).
[43] See Abraham 3:22–23.
[44] See *Essay* #35.
[45] H. W. Nibley, Assembly, p. 128.
[46] Moses 1:9–23.
[47] See *Essay* #36.
[48] Moses 1:21.
[49] See, e.g., J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified, pp. 144–146.
[50] Moses 1:24.
[51] See *Essays* #37-39.
[52] Moses 1:25.
[53] Moses 5:4. Cf. Moses 1:9.
[54] Moses 1:25–26.
[55] See *Essay* #40.
[56] Moses 1:27.
[57] Moses 1: 27–29. Cf. Moses 7:21.
[58] See *Essays* #41-42.
[59] Moses 1:30.
[60] Moses 1:35–40.
[61] See *Essay* #42.
[62] Moses 1:42.
[63] *Essays* #34-41.