

# Book of Moses Essays #62: Moses Witnesses the Fall: (Moses 4) What Was the Nature of Satan's Premortal Proposal? (Moses 4:1–4)

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Figure 1. Pieter Bruegel, the Elder, ca. 1525–1569: *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 1562.

In [Essay #60](#), an overview was given of the proposals put forth in the council of heaven for the salvation of mankind. In the present essay, we attempt to attempt to answer related questions in more detail:

- What was the nature of Satan’s proposal to “redeem all mankind”?<sup>[1]</sup>
- How did he intend to “destroy the agency of man”?<sup>[2]</sup>
- Was his failed proposal ultimately feasible?
- Why was it essential that premortal spirits be given the opportunity to receive a body?

## Thinking Twice About Common Assumptions

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Because we know so little about the details of the “war in heaven,”<sup>[3]</sup> it is not surprising that Church members have gradually filled in details of the story as best they can on their own. In doing so, a set of basic assumptions about Satan’s premortal plans and doings have become widely accepted. For example, it is often assumed that the gist of Satan’s premortal proposal was that he would “‘save’ all of the Father’s children by forcing each to obey the Father’s law in all things.”<sup>[4]</sup> However, in light of what the Book of Mormon teaches and Joseph Smith’s statements on the subject, these assumptions should not be taken for granted. As we will see below, closer study offers a more likely alternative: namely that Satan put forth a proposal to “save ... people in their sins,”<sup>[5]</sup> notably including the sons of perdition.

In addition, a careful reading of the Book of Mormon reveals that Satan’s proposal to “destroy the agency of man”<sup>[6]</sup> is not described as an impossible attempt to force people to obey but rather as a scheme to prevent humankind from experiencing a mortal probation after the Fall.

## “I Will Redeem All Mankind.”

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The best-known version of a commentary by Joseph Smith on Satan’s premortal intentions comes from a discourse recorded in rough notes within William Clayton’s official diary and later smoothed out by Church historians:<sup>[7]</sup>

The contention in Heaven was — Jesus said there would be certain souls that would not be saved; and the Devil said he could save them all, and laid his plans before the grand council, who gave their vote in favor of Jesus Christ. So the Devil rose up in rebellion against God, and was cast down, with all who put up their heads for him.

The most common understanding of this statement is that it implies a difference in the consequences of the two plans for mankind in general. In other words, it is generally supposed by Latter-day Saints that, according to the plan advocated by Jesus, only the righteous would be saved, whereas in the Devil’s plan, “all generations of man... would be returned into the presence of God.”<sup>[8]</sup>

A correct understanding of this passage depends on how we interpret the term “certain souls” when it mentions that “certain souls ... would not be saved.” By comparing William Clayton’s journal entry with the notes of others who heard Joseph Smith’s discourse it becomes clear that the “contention in Heaven” was *not* about whether ordinary souls would make it to heaven if no one forced them to be obedient in all things. Rather, the contention

had to do with Satan's deceptive claim that he was capable of saving even those relatively few individuals who would commit the unpardonable sin — in response to the premortal Jesus Christ's previous statement He could *not* save such souls.<sup>[9]</sup> According to the notes in George Laub's journal, Joseph Smith said that Satan "boasted of himself saying, 'Send me, I can save all, even those who sinned against the Holy Ghost.'"<sup>[10]</sup>

Contradicting Satan's boast, Wilford Woodruff recorded that Joseph Smith taught: "Jesus Christ will save all *except the sons of perdition*."<sup>[11]</sup> In other words, the Atonement of Jesus Christ would guarantee that all except the sons of perdition would be "resurrected to [at least] a telestial glory, escaping the second, i.e., spiritual, death."<sup>[12]</sup>

Apparently, the Prophet taught that when Satan proposed to "save all," he was not thinking broadly, as Jesus did, about how to help the mass of humanity achieve salvation, but rather was focused on concocting a narrow, selfish, and farfetched proposal whose stated objective was to "save" the sons of perdition. Seemingly trying to do away with the need for an Atonement, Satan "sought... to redeem... all in their sins."<sup>[13]</sup> Following the logic of Laub's account, this option presumably would have been most appealing to those spirits who would stand to benefit most from it; namely, those who had already manifested a proclivity toward the unpardonable sin—and, preeminently, Satan himself.

We will return to this subject after we take a look at the second question.

## **"Satan ... Sought to Destroy the Agency of Man."**

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The Book of Moses states that Satan "sought to destroy the agency of man."<sup>[14]</sup> The means by which this would have been accomplished have not been authoritatively explained. However, a common Latter-day Saint assumption is that, as part of the Devil's premortal proposal, an element of compulsion was required—the idea that Satan advocated "the assertion of raw power to coerce moral sanctity from humanity."<sup>[15]</sup> For example, in an article in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Chauncey Riddle writes: "Lucifer's plan proposed to 'save' all of the Father's children by forcing each to obey the Father's law in all things."<sup>[16]</sup> Similarly, Victor Ludlow states that: "Lucifer... wanted to modify our agency so that there would be no opportunity at all to sin, thus enabling all God's children to return to their celestial existence."<sup>[17]</sup>

Yet, at least insofar as an analogy can be drawn between what was contemplated in this proposal and life on earth today, Latter-day Saint theology seems to preclude the possibility that such a plan could have succeeded. Drawing a distinction between "agency (the power of choice)" and "freedom, the right to act upon our choices,"<sup>[18]</sup> Elder Dallin H. Oaks, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, argued that though it is possible for our freedom to be curtailed, "no person or organization can take away our free agency in mortality"<sup>[19]</sup> The principle of agency is part of humankind's eternal nature,<sup>[20]</sup> and continues to operate even in the most coercive situations imaginable.<sup>[21]</sup>

Moreover, even if there *were* a way that people could be continually compelled to “do the right things,” Elder Oaks argues that they could not qualify to enter God’s presence without a concomitant transformation of their natures.<sup>[22]</sup> It is evident that salvation cannot be obtained through mere abstinence from sin, nor from the completion of some number of outwardly benevolent actions. As C. S. Lewis wrote: “We might think that God wanted simply obedience to a set of rules; whereas He really wants people of a particular sort.”<sup>[23]</sup> Thus, as James McLachlan insightfully summarizes: “There is a strong sense in Latter-day Saint doctrine that Satan’s coercive plan is a lie from the beginning because it is a rejection of reality itself which is based on the agency, creativity, and co-eternality of intelligences.”<sup>[24]</sup>

In light of these considerations, should the element of compulsion as the central feature of Satan’s premortal proposal to destroy agency be assumed without question? It is difficult to imagine that the Devil could have won so many followers in the premortal world on the basis of a supposed plan that seems, on the face of it, to be so thoroughly unworkable, if not impossible.

Is there a more plausible alternative than forced obedience by which Satan might have sought to destroy agency and thus “save” God’s children “in unrighteousness and corruption”?<sup>[25]</sup>

Our best clues to such an alternative probably can be found in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Since the story of the Garden is deliberately placed right after the story of Satan’s rebellion in heaven, it seems safe to assume that we are meant to see a connection between the two stories. We might presume that Satan’s deception of Adam and Eve in the Garden is an attempt to continue on earth, insofar as possible, the same kind of strategies he proposed in heaven.

Satan’s efforts to destroy the agency of man and to “save” him in his sins seem to have been briefly put into motion through his efforts to get Adam and Eve to take of the fruit of the Tree of Life immediately after taking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. As Alma explains: “For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately, and partaken of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, having no space for repentance; yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated.”<sup>[26]</sup> There would have been “no probationary time”<sup>[27]</sup> — hence no opportunity to exercise agency — before the spirits of Adam and Eve would be forever united with an immortal body.<sup>[28]</sup>

If Adam and Eve had taken the fruit of the Tree of Life immediately after having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, they would have been “forever miserable,”<sup>[29]</sup> having become “immortal in their fallen state.”<sup>[30]</sup> Satan’s objectives to “save” Adam and Eve “in their sins” and to “destroy their agency” would have been achieved.

Happily, God’s “wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil.”<sup>[31]</sup>

## Why Was It Essential That Premortal Spirits Be Given the Opportunity to Receive a Body?

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Latter-day Saints believe that God has a glorified resurrected body, and that man was created in His literal image and likeness. Despite its imperfect and provisional nature, they regard the human body as a divine gift, provided to enable an essential next step in their eternal progression. Joseph Smith taught: “We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the celestial kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body. The devil has no body, and herein is his punishment.”<sup>[32]</sup>

In Latter-day Saint discussions of the purpose of the body in mortality, the necessity of being able “to experience the pleasures and pains of being alive” and to seek “perfection and discipline of the spirit along with training and health of the body”<sup>[33]</sup> are the kinds of reasons most often mentioned. However, as important as these reasons are, the teachings of Joseph Smith also include the idea that the clothing of spirits with bodies would provide power and protection for them. As Matthew Brown succinctly summarizes these teachings:<sup>[34]</sup>

“All beings who have bodies have power over those who have not,” said the Prophet Joseph Smith.<sup>[35]</sup> The “spirits of the eternal world” are as diverse from each other in their dispositions as mortals are on the earth. Some of them are aspiring, ambitious, and even desire to bring other spirits into subjection to them. “As man is liable to [have] enemies [in the spirit world] as well as [on the earth] it is necessary for him to be placed beyond their power in order to be saved. This is done by our taking bodies ([having kept] our first estate) and having the power of the resurrection pass upon us whereby we are enabled to gain the ascendancy over the disembodied spirits.”<sup>[36]</sup> It might be said, therefore, that “the express purpose of God in giving [His spirit children] a tabernacle was to arm [them] against the power of darkness.”<sup>[37]</sup>

The reasons for the importance of a body that Joseph Smith most often emphasized are frequently forgotten in Latter-day Saint discussions of the purpose of earth life, yet they seem vital to a correct understanding of Satan’s efforts to undermine God’s plan.

## Conclusions

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In recap, we have presented three issues that bring into question core features of popular assumptions about Satan’s premortal role and objectives. It is difficult to achieve theological precision in these matters, but closer examination of the writings of Joseph Smith and his successors has led us to consider the following as tentative possibilities for a more faithful representation of these teachings:

1. Satan’s claim that he would “redeem all mankind” may have been of primary interest only for the most wicked minority of God’s spirit children;
2. Satan’s ploy “to destroy the agency of man” was something other than the exercise of coercive power to force mortals to do right; and

3. The acquisition of a body in mortality was to enable not only the new experiences of pleasure, pain, and parenthood, but also to provide a protective power from the influences of Satan.

After a discussion of the circumstances of the Fall, we will argue further in following *Essays* that the significance of these possibilities goes beyond their potential value in revealing questionable assumptions about what the Prophet taught, providing, in addition, a cogent rationale for Satan's actions in the Garden of Eden.

Briefly, it seems that in the Garden of Eden, Satan acted in direct defiance of God's instructions, as he had in the premortal councils. Satan's objective was not simply to tempt Adam and Eve; rather it was to provide a Luciferian form of universal "redemption" which would have in fact have severely limited the potential of humankind for progression, cut off their opportunities for the exercise of agency, and precluded the possibility for spirits to be embodied and saved from his dominating influence. The exercise of agency, the continuation of seed, and the worthy partaking of eternal life are fundamental to God's plan. By opposing these objectives, the "son of the morning"<sup>[38]</sup> became the enemy of God.

This essay is adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Ronan J. Head. "Mormonism's Satan and the Tree of Life (Longer version of an invited presentation originally given at the 2009 Conference of the European Mormon Studies Association, Turin, Italy, 30-31 July 2009)." *Element: A Journal of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 4, no. 2 (2010): 1-54. <http://www.templethemes.net/publications/1%20-%20Bradshaw%20Head%20-%20Mormonisms%20Satan%20and%20the%20Tree%20of%20Life.pdf>. (accessed June 30, 2021), pp. 7–11.

## Notes on Figures

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**Figure 1.** Public Domain, [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ec/Pieter\\_Bruegel\\_the\\_Elder\\_-\\_The\\_Fall\\_of\\_the\\_Rebel\\_Angels.JPG](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ec/Pieter_Bruegel_the_Elder_-_The_Fall_of_the_Rebel_Angels.JPG).

## Further Reading

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J. M. Bradshaw, et al., Mormonism's Satan.

J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image* 1, pp. 215-234, 243-246, 577-581.

For a scripture roundtable video from The Interpreter Foundation on the subject, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmcP6FOWTt8>.

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## Endnotes

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[1] Moses 4:1.

[2] Moses 4:3.

[3] Revelation 12:7.

[4] C. C. Riddle, Devils, p. 379.

[5] See Alma 11:34-37.

[6] Moses 4:3.

[7] J. Smith, Jr., Teachings, 7 April 1844, p. 357. The four *Words of Joseph Smith* accounts of the discourse are given below. The first three were used to create the amalgamated statement in TPJS. In considering the additional detail given in Laub's account, it is significant that the statement about the premortal rebellion was given in the context of a discussion of the unpardonable sin.

- *Report of Wilford Woodruff*: "All will suffer until they obey Christ himself. Even the devil said, I am a savior and can save all. He rose up in rebellion against God and was cast down. Jesus Christ will save all except the sons of perdition. What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin? They must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto them, and know God, and then sin against him. This is the case with many apostates in this Church: they never cease to try to hurt me, they have got the same spirit the devil had, [and] you cannot save them. They make open war like the devil" (J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Words, 7 April 1844, p. 347, spelling and punctuation standardized).
- *Report of Thomas Bullock*: "No man can commit the unpardonable sin after the dissolution of the body, but they must do it in this world. Hence the salvation of Jesus Christ was wrought out for all men to triumph over the devil. For he stood up for a Savior. Jesus contended that there would be certain souls that would be condemned and the devil said he could save them all. As the Grand Council gave in for Jesus Christ, so the devil fell, and all who put up their heads for him. All sin shall be forgiven except the sin against the Holy Ghost" (*ibid.*, p. 353).

- *Report of William Clayton*: “I said no man could commit the unpardonable sin after the dissolution of the body. Hence the salvation that the Savior wrought out for the salvation of man—if it did not [indecipherable, TPJS says “catch”] him in one place it would another. The contention in heaven was Jesus said there were certain men [who] would not be saved [i.e., because they would sin against the Holy Ghost], [and] the devil said he could save them. He rebelled against God and was thrust down” (ibid., p. 361).
- *Report of George Laub*: “Jesus Christ, being the greater light or of more intelligence, for he loved righteousness and hated iniquity, He being the elder brother, presented himself for to come and redeem this world as it was his right by inheritance. He stated [that] He could save all those who did not sin against the Holy Ghost and they would obey the code of laws that was given. But their circumstances were that all who would sin against the Holy Ghost should have no forgiveness neither in the world nor in the world to come. For they strove against light and knowledge after they had tasted of the good things of the world to come. They should not have any pardon in the world to come because they had a knowledge of the world to come and were not willing to abide the law. Therefore they can have no forgiveness there but must be most miserable of all and never can be renewed again [see Hebrews 6:4-8]. But Satan or Lucifer, being the next heir..., had allotted to him great power and authority, even Prince of the air. He spake immediately and boasted of himself saying, ‘Send me, I can save all, even those who sinned against the Holy Ghost.’ And he accused his brethren [see Revelation 12:10] and was hurled from the Council for striving to break the law immediately. And there was a warfare with Satan and the Gods. And they hurled Satan out of his place and all them that would not keep the law of the Council. But he himself being one of the council would not keep his or their first estate, for he was one of the sons of perdition and consequently all the sons of perdition became devils, etc.” (E. England, Laub, p. 22).

Note that Laub’s report, taken from his journal, is a retrospective summary. The value of Laub’s summary is in that it contains details not recorded elsewhere—the kinds of details that would have been implausible for him to construct on his own—however, it is certainly less reliable overall than the three contemporaneous accounts (J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Words, pp. xvi-xvii.), having probably been reconstructed in 1845 “from notes of actual speeches heard but not accurately dated and from memory of those speeches and other teachings he had heard” (E. England, Laub, p. 32 n. 24).

[8] D. Williams, *Idiot’s Guide*, p. 24.

[9] George Laub’s notes from a talk by Joseph Smith records the Prophet as saying that Jesus, in the premortal council, declared he “could save all those who did not sin against the Holy Ghost and they would obey the code of laws that was given” (E. England, Laub, p. 22).

[10] Ibid., p. 22.

[11] J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Words, 7 April 1844, p. 347, emphasis added, spelling and punctuation standardized.

- [12] B. R. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, pp. 271-275. Compare *Doctrine and Covenants* 76:43-44, J. F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, June 1918, p. 434; J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 10 March 1844, p. 339; 7 April 1844, p. 358.
- [13] O. Pratt, 18 July 1880, p. 288. Compare S. J. Condie, *Agency*, p. 6, *Helaman* 5:10-11. President Brigham Young said, “if you undertake to save all, you must save them in unrighteousness and corruption” (B. Young, 30 October 1870, p. 282).
- [14] *Moses* 4:3.
- [15] J. McLachlan, *Modernism Controversy*, p. 62.
- [16] C. C. Riddle, *Devils*, p. 379. That the slightest notion of compulsion is favored by God is explicitly repudiated in the stories of *Genesis* 1-11, which, as Gelandar observes, “indicate that God preferred freedom of choice as the highest virtue, even above His own absolute goodness. The implication is that God’s morality is inherent in the idea that goodness which is compelled is neither good nor moral” (S. Gelandar, *Creator*, pp. 9-10).
- [17] V. L. Ludlow, *Principles*, p. 148.
- [18] See *Doctrine and Covenants* 101:78.
- [19] D. H. Oaks, *Free Agency*. See also B. T. Ostler, *Theism*, pp. 7-8. In this sense, agency can be primarily conceived as “free independence of mind” (J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 22 January 1834, p. 49).
- [20] D. H. Oaks, *Free Agency*.
- [21] V. Frankl, *Meaning*, p. 86.
- [22] D. H. Oaks, *To Become*, p. 32; see also J. E. Faulconer, *Self-Image*; *1 Corinthians* 13:1-3, *Moroni* 7:47.
- [23] C. S. Lewis, *Mere*, 3:2, p. 77. Compare D. H. Oaks, *To Become*, p. 32; H. W. Nibley, *Meaning of Temple*, p. 26; J. E. Faulconer, *Self-Image*. Malcolm Muggeridge ironically observes that the commandments “are, after all, relatively easy to keep, especially if, as an Anglican bishop once suggested, they are regarded as an examination paper, with eight only to be attempted” (M. Muggeridge, *Jesus*, p. 114).
- [24] J. J. McLachlan, *Modernism Controversy*, p. 62.
- [25] B. Young, 30 October 1870, p. 282.
- [26] *Alma* 42:5; cf. *Alma* 12:26.
- [27] *Alma* 42:4.
- [28] See also *Alma* 12:21-27; *Doctrine and Covenants* 132:19; W. C. Skousen, *First 2,000*, pp. 42-44, 66-68; R. J. Matthews, *Probationary Nature*.
- [29] *Alma* 12:26.
- [30] W. C. Skousen, *First 2,000*, p. 68.
- [31] *Doctrine and Covenants* 10:43. Compare *3 Nephi* 21:10.
- [32] J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 5 January 1841, p. 181. The Prophet continues: “He is pleased when he can obtain the tabernacle of man, and when cast out by the Savior he asked to go into the herd of swine, showing that he would prefer a swine’s body to having none.”
- [33] K. M. Van de Graaff, *Body*, p. 1080.
- [34] M. B. Brown, *Plan*, p. 33.

[35] J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Words, 5 January 1841, p. 60. In the case of the exercise of this power by the righteous, Madsen clarifies that this is not “a dominating, exploiting, enslaving power. ‘Power over’ means more advanced, more Christ-like” (T. G. Madsen, LDS View, p. 101).

[36] J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, Words, 21 May 1843, p. 208.

[37] *Ibid.*, 19 January 1841, p. 62; cf. 2 Nephi 9:8-9. See additional quotations in M. B. Brown, Plan, p. 47n. See also Alma 34:35 regarding the fate of the wicked in the resurrection.

[38] Isaiah 14:12. Compare 2 Nephi 24:12; Doctrine and Covenants 76:26-27.