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Latter-day Saint Theology and the Problem of Evil

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Latter-day Saint Theology and the Problem of Evil

Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright

Abstract: *The classical formulation of God as the sole, self-existent Being and ground of all that exists poses a philosophical problem. If God is omniscient and omnipotent, why does evil exist? Why does he not save humankind from moral and natural evil? If we embrace the full set of classical assumptions of creedal Christianity, these questions have no satisfactory answer and God cannot be absolved of responsibility for evil. This paper reviews and rejects several classical and modern philosophical formulations that try to solve the problem of evil. It then argues that the problem of evil dissolves if we accept Restoration theology in its most compelling form. Pluralism replaces monism, law is largely natural rather than legislated, and the necessity of atonement is located in humanity rather than in God, though God graciously provides the Atonement of Jesus Christ, which makes human exaltation possible.*

The problem of evil — the seeming logical incompatibility of the existence of ubiquitous evil in the world and the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God — is often the principal argument atheists deploy to discredit theism. This argument gains force from the undeniable existence of malicious acts that no one can credibly deny are grossly evil.[1] The existence of this evil is fully documented in the very

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1. While no one can credibly deny that gross evil exists, as C. S. Lewis and other theists have cogently argued, given atheists' premises, it is hard to get from "is" to "ought," hard to establish that any act is objectively evil. An atheist can say he does not want something to happen, but he cannot authoritatively say it "should not happen." So, the existence of evil *qua* evil is a problem for atheists. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960). In particular, see chapter

books that most powerfully testify that God exists — the Bible and the Book of Mormon. In all the traditions rooted in the Bible — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — this evil is held to be real, not illusory, and must be accounted for.

For mainstream, orthodox, creedal Christian theology, this problem is unsolvable. There is, ultimately, no way to satisfactorily reconcile the standard conception of God as an eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent Being who is outside of time and space and who creates all other existing things *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), with the obvious, persistent reality that many of the beings God has created are evil and are allowed to enact their monstrously evil desires. In creedal Christian theology, God is the only being who fundamentally exists, who self-exists. God, the *Creator* is *the BEING*. All other things that exist are created by him and all other persons are *creatures*, *contingent beings*.[2] They utterly depend upon God for both their initial and continuing existence. God had the option of not creating them and he has the option of ceasing to sustain their existence. The moment he does, they cease to exist. The total dependence of all contingent beings and things on God's ongoing desire that they exist makes evil a serious problem.

In this article we review arguments that some Christian theologians have proposed for dealing with the problem of evil. While the existence of evil in the world is inexplicable for mainstream Christian theology, it can be understood if we adopt distinctive premises of Latter-day Saint Christian theology.[3]

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two, "Some Objections," archive.org/details/merechristianity0000unse_x4r5 /page/8/mode/2up.

2. Keith E. Norman, "Deification, Early Christian," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 369–70, eom.byu.edu/index.php /Deification,_Early_Christian.

3. There are many excellent Latter-day Saint articles about the problem of evil. See, for example, B. H. Roberts, "The Problem of Evil," in *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1996), 331–39, archive.bookofmormoncentral.org /sites/default/files/B.H.%20Roberts%2C%20TWL%2C%201996_0.pdf; David L. Paulsen, "Evil," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 477–78, eom.byu.edu/index.php/Evil; John Cobb Jr. and Truman G. Madsen, "Theodicy," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1473–74, eom.byu.edu/index.php/Theodicy; Val Larsen, "A Mormon Theodicy: Jacob and the Problem of Evil," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 15 (2015): 239–66, journal.interpreterfoundation .org/a-mormon-theodicy-jacob-and-the-problem-of-evil/; David L. Paulsen, "Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2000):

Broadly stated, the key difference between the two theologies discussed in this article is this: creedal Christian theology is monistic, while Latter-day Saint theology is pluralistic.[4] For monistic creedal Christians, there is only one *BEING* who self-exists. For pluralistic Latter-day Saints, there are many self-existent *beings*. For creedal Christians, God, the one *BEING*, is a completely different species, so to speak, from human beings. For Latter-day Saints, God and human beings are the same species, though at greatly different levels of development and maturity. Kathleen Flake highlights this monist/pluralist difference between Latter-day Saint and creedal Christian theology by focusing on the opening narrative in each tradition. Creedal Christian theology begins, she says, when God declares:

> "Let there be light" . . . over a perfect creation, into which evil has yet to appear. In contrast, Joseph Smith's addition of the Council in Heaven to the traditional Genesis narrative teaches that the option of evil existed, as did we, primordially — prior to earthly creation.

During the council, Flake notes, Satan says, "Behold, here am I, send me." He then proposes a plan that would have destroyed human agency. Flake adds,

> Beginning history with the events of the Council of Heaven establishes in [Latter-day Saint] theology that evil no more originates than good originates; they are always potential to the . . . choice . . . of the uncreated person.[5]

These different conceptions of God and of humanity yield different conceptions of *law*. For creedal Christians, all law is ultimately

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53–65, byustudies.byu.edu/article/joseph-smith-and-the-problem-of-evil; and Blake T. Ostler, "Evil: A Real Problem for Evangelicals," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 15, no. 1 (2003): 201–13, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr /vol15/iss1/13.

4. An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper notes that if we focus on ontology, *being*, Restoration theology is monistic, because it views all existing things as being material, there thus being just one kind of reality. By contrast, creedal Christianity is pluralistic because it views spirit and matter as being fundamentally different, and views human beings and God as fundamentally different in their ontology. We focus in the text on the number of presumed self-existent, uncreated beings and other entities. Given this focus, creedal Christianity is monistic, Restoration theology pluralistic.

5. Kathleen Flake, "Evil's Origins and Evil's End in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis," *Sunstone* (August 1998): 25.

legislated by the one self-existent God. For Latter-day Saints, all law is ultimately natural law that merely describes the properties of self-existing entities.[6] For creedal Christians, any coherent chain of reasoning must begin with God, because God is the only Being/Thing that fundamentally exists, the only self-existent Being. For Latter-day Saints, coherent chains of reasoning may begin with either God or humanity because both fundamentally exist. Both are self-existent.[7]

Since our ability to take human *being* as a first principle is distinctive, we begin our brief discussion of Restoration theology with humanity. Speaking of the self-existence of human beings, the Lord revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith that "man was also in the beginning with God," and that intelligence "was not created or made, neither indeed can be" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:29). In a more extended comment, Joseph Smith said:

> Where did [the soul — the immortal spirit — the mind of man] come from? All doctors of divinity say that God created it in the beginning, but it is not so. . . . We say that God Himself is a self-existent God. . . . The mind of man — the intelligent part — is as immortal as, and is coequal with, God Himself. . . . God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. . . . The first principles of man are self-existent with God.[8]

What God cannot create, he cannot fundamentally change. Thus, the essence of each human being is a brute fact.[9] So is the essence of all other matter, which is likewise co-eternal with God.[10] Implicit in

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6. Here, we make a normative claim about Latter-day Saint theology that we justify with various arguments developed in the course of this paper. It must be conceded, however, that there have been and still are Latter-day Saints who believe all law is legislated by God. James McLachlan discusses the history of this controversy. James M. McLachlan, "Is God Subject to or the Creator of Eternal Law?" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 57–58, byustudies.byu.edu/article/is-god-subject-to-or-the-creator-of-eternal-law.

7. Paulsen, "Evil," 477–78.

8. The quotations from Joseph Smith are taken, not always in the order they occur in the speech, from Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 193–208, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1894&context=byusq.

9. "According to a common definition, a brute fact is a fact that is unexplained, i.e. a fact of which there is no explanation." Kevin Mulligan and Fabrice Correia, "Facts," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021), ed. Edward N. Zalta, plato.stanford.edu/entries/facts/#BrutFact.

10. Alonzo L. Gaskill and Richard G. Moore, *The Revised and Expanded Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith Compared with the Earliest Known*

these uncreated entities, these brute facts, is a set of natural laws that constrain the Latter-day Saint God. Natural laws do not exist independent of the entities in which they are inherent; they merely describe the inherent causal relationships that constitute the natural object. The agency of intelligences is one of these inherent natural properties. God's respect for human agency is, thus, just a particular instance of his respect for natural law, a respect that is not discretionary. Were he to attempt to violate natural laws that are inherent in the being of other persons and things, he would cease to be God (see Alma 42:13, 22, 25; Mormon 9:19).

But he will never cease to be God because he is a perfect realist. His power is grounded in his unconditioned respect for reality. He is all-powerful in the sense that he can do everything that can be done. He is all-knowing in the sense that he knows everything that can be known. He is all-wise in the sense that — unlike his adversary, Satan — he never kicks against the pricks; he never refuses to acknowledge reality and adapt his will to it. So, though Latter-day Saints often use the word *omnipotent*, the word does not, or at least should not, have the same meaning for them that it has for creedal Christians. Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, B. H. Roberts, Truman Madsen, Blake Ostler, and Terryl Givens all understand how eternal, natural law circumscribes the power of God. Later in this paper, we cite these thinkers and some of the ideas they have discussed.

While God cannot change the uncreated essence of any human being, he can help other intelligences attain their telos, which means the fullest development of potential that is inherent within them. He does this by providing fellow intelligences with a spiritual body and a physical body, and by then placing them sequentially in circumstances where, if they choose to do so, they can eventually become like him. The magnitude of the help God gives human beings in attaining their telos is beyond the scope of this article. The essential point here is this: what God can do to assist human beings in the attainment of their telos is delimited not by his will but by the self-existent will of his fellow intelligences.

Manuscripts (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2024), 462–63. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton," pg. 11, Joseph Smith Papers, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported -by-william-clayton/1.

Alma and the Problem of Evil

To further explain the Latter-day Saint position and to provide concrete examples of evil, we will discuss three episodes in the life of Alma.[11] We begin with Alma's "visit to hell," because his account of that visit and reflections upon it help illustrate distinctive elements of Latter-day Saint theology. We will then discuss two experiences Alma had in the city of Ammonihah. Conventional statements of the problem of evil focus on the obviously unmerited suffering of innocents, and the story of Alma in Ammonihah provides an excellent example of that kind of evil. But, as we shall see, the conventional account may not be the strongest statement of the problem, and the story of Alma in Ammonihah also provides an excellent example of the problem of evil in its starkest form. After discussing these examples of evil that Alma encountered, we will describe and discuss an oft-mentioned putative evil that is not clearly exemplified in the Book of Mormon.

As a sinner, Alma could not abide the presence of God but instead experienced the pains of hell. In the first part of his life, he was "a very wicked and idolatrous man" (Mosiah 27:8), not a rebellious youth.[12] He later described what he had done as "having murdered many of [God's] children, or rather led them away unto destruction" (Alma 36:14). After the angel admonished him for his actions, Alma fell to the earth in a stupor and experienced "the pains of a damned soul" (Alma 36:16). For three days he experienced "everlasting burning" in the "darkest abyss" where his "soul was racked with eternal torment" (Mosiah 27:28–29). As Kevin Christensen has explained, Alma could experience eternal damnation in a finite time because "the endlessness of this state does not consist in an extreme extension of linear time, but in its transcendence."[13] Fully immersed in his misery, Alma experienced damnation as bottomless and horizonless, as having no discernible beginning or end. Based on his first-hand experience, he later described damnation as follows:

> For our words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us; we shall not be found spotless; and our thoughts

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11. All references to *Alma* in this paper refer to Alma$_2$, son of Alma$_1$.

12. See Kylie Nielson Turley, *Alma 1–29: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University [BYU], 2020): 13–15.

13. Kevin Christensen, "'Nigh unto Death': NDE Research and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 6, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss1/2/. (Cf. Doctrine and Covenants 19:1–21).

> will also condemn us; and in this awful state we ... would fain
> be glad if we could command the rocks and the mountains
> to fall upon us to hide us from [God's] presence. (Alma 12:14)

Still later, Alma tells his reprobate son, Corianton, that we are our own judges, in multiple senses (see Alma 41:7 and 12:14).

What is striking and theologically important about Alma's descriptions of hell is that it was Alma himself, not God, who inflicted the pain. He was punished by his own words and thoughts and deeds, not by God. This implies that Alma is more than just the sinful self that was eagerly engaging in soul-murder up to the point when he was accosted by the angel. He had a second self—a premortal self—whose moral viewpoint was aligned with that of God. This second self snapped into place once the angel confronted him. Suffice it to say that serious sinners, like Alma, are in hell not because God cannot stand to be in the presence of a sinner but because sinners cannot stand to be in the presence of God.

After he confronted the evil in himself, Alma called upon the Savior and was redeemed from hell. He then had a second encounter with the angel whose first visit precipitated his visit to hell. In some respects, this second visit of the angel again sent Alma to hell. Alma had visited the city of Ammonihah, had been unequivocally rejected, and then "weighed down with sorrow ... because of the wickedness of the people," he had given up his effort to convert the very hard-hearted inhabitants of that city (see Alma 8:14). But, as he was leaving Ammonihah, the angel again appeared before Alma and commanded him to return to the city. There, he would have experiences that were, but for his literal visit to hell, perhaps the most painful, the most hellish of his life.

Alma's second visit to Ammonihah began pleasantly enough. He encountered Amulek and had success preaching to him and his family. He then again undertook the conversion of the Ammonihahites. Alma and Amulek delivered a powerful exposition of the gospel, including a warning that the unrepentant wicked, when they depart this life, will find themselves suffering as if they were cast into a lake of fire and brimstone (Alma 12:17).[14] From personal experience, Alma knew this danger was real. He no doubt delivered the warning with great feeling.

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14. Turley notes the importance of the phrase "lake of fire and brimstone" and its subsequent use by the chief judge to traumatize Alma and Amulek. See Turley, *Alma 1–29*, 88–93.

Having heard and rejected this second message, the people of Ammonihah drove from the city all those who showed any sign of accepting what Alma and Amulek had taught. Then, providing a paradigmatic example of the obviously unmerited suffering of innocents, the leaders of Ammonihah seized the wives and children of the men who believed and cast them (and the scriptures) into fires, which they mockingly likened to the fires of hell (Alma 14:14). They forced Alma and Amulek to watch the women and children die a horrible death. Amulek movingly describes the horror of this holocaust and affirms God's power to prevent it. He says to Alma, "How can we witness this awful scene? Therefore let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God which is in us, and save them from the flames" (Alma 14:10). Alma replies,

> The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day. (Alma 14:11)

Like Amulek, Alma fully feels the suffering of these women and children. What happened to them reverberates, Kiley Neilsen Turley has noted, not only throughout the remainder of Alma's life but throughout the lives of eight generations of Alma's descendants:

> [Alma] preaches of fiery punishment (Alma 12:17), watches his words become horrifyingly real (Alma 14:8–11), and then is told that he is to blame for the deaths he witnesses — or, at least, that his words sparked the idea (Alma 14:14). . . . Hearing that his words ignited the atrocity silences Alma for days. . . . There is at least one phrase he will never say again in the Book of Mormon: lake of fire and brimstone. These events redefine his vocabulary. Moreover, they redefine the vocabulary of the entire Book of Mormon. The extent of the shock and distress caused by Ammonihah's fires is encapsulated in the fact that this well-used metaphor of hell disappears from the Nephite records. Many spoke of this hell previously . . . but after people burn women and children alive in a lake of fire and brimstone, the words *lake of fire and*

> *brimstone* are never spoken again by anyone in the Book of Mormon.[15]

If God has the power to prevent suffering of innocents so salient that it traumatized not just the women and children, and not just Alma and Amulek, but eight generations of Alma's descendants, why does he not prevent it?

Alma provides two reasons: First, the suffering of the women and children, though real, is momentary. Like Abinadi, in minutes they pass through painful fire into the joy of eternal heavenly glory. Second, the wicked must be permitted to enact their evil will so that the blood of the innocents may witness against them as they stand at the threshold of the hellish suffering that Alma had personally experienced. Both of these rationales suggest that sometimes the eternal needs of the wicked take priority over the needs of the righteous.[16] Thus, the first rationale minimizes the importance of the innocents' suffering by focusing not on their suffering, but on their passage into glory. Then the lengthier, second rationale emphasizes the importance of the wicked being assessed and punished by a just process, a process that the wicked themselves will recognize matches their behavior with fitting punishment.

Whatever value the first rationale (brief suffering, eternal glory) may have for theodicy—for explaining the problem of evil and defending the goodness of God in the face of evil and suffering—the second rationale (making judgment just), merely deepens the problem of evil. The Ammonihahite judges subjected the women and children who they cast into the fire, at most, to a few minutes of terrifying, agonizing pain. "The judgments which [God] shall exercise upon [the men of Ammonihah] in his wrath" will subject the Ammonihahite judges to eternal pains at least as intense as those suffered by the women and children. The cruelty of causing someone to suffer eternal pains is

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15. See Turley, *Alma 1–29*, 87–92.

16. Process theologians suggest that God cannot perform miracles that could save the victims of evil holocausts. Latter-day Saint theologians affirm that he can. What may explain his lack of intervention is the fact that the needs of his beloved wicked children exceed those of his beloved righteous children. For the sake of helping the wicked know themselves and see the justice of their judgments, God may need to withhold some protections he would otherwise wish to extend to the righteous. Brian D. Birch, "Mormonism and the Challenge of an Adequate Theodicy: A Response to David Paulsen, et. al.," *Element: The Journal for the Society of Mormon Philosophy and Theology* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 66–69.

infinitely greater than the cruelty of causing someone to suffer a few minutes of pain. How could a good God do this?

As Alma's own visit to hell illustrates, part of the answer in the Book of Mormon is this: it is not God who makes the men of Ammonihah into demons who suffer the misery of their damnation. As we will show more fully below, they do that to themselves.[17] The demonization and suffering are the natural consequence of their own actions. Their self-demonization is apparent in the Book of Mormon account. As they are gnashing their teeth, spitting, and hatefully smiting others, the judges and lawyers and priests of Ammonihah mockingly ask: "How shall we look when we are damned?" (Alma 14:21). The answer is, "pretty much as you look now." There is irony in the chief judge's statement: "Know ye not that I have power to deliver you up unto the flames?" (Alma 14:19). If we make an appropriate change in that statement, it might more accurately read: "Know I not that I have power to deliver myself up unto the flames?" He does not know it, but that is what the judge is doing. The natural law we call *justice* dictates that what we do unto others, we more profoundly do unto ourselves. As Alma had tried to warn him, the judge will soon be immersed in flames more intense than those into which he has cast the women and children.

The Book of Mormon text does say that God "in his wrath" visited this judgment on the wicked men of Ammonihah. At many points in all the standard works, there are statements indicating that God, motivated by "anger," actively punishes or otherwise exacts vengeance on the wicked when they do evil (for example, see Ezekiel 25:12–14). Such statements are not consistent with other, more theologically sophisticated accounts of justice being a manifestation of self-judgment and natural law, nor are they consistent with the behavior of good earthly parents who are motivated by love, not anger, when disciplining their

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17. "The concept of judgment in LDS theology also reflects this sense of man's significance. Human beings will be judged on the basis of what they have made themselves. They will inherit the final states for which they have made themselves fit. Human beings are not only the ultimate determiners of their choices and character, but of their eternal destiny as well. What we will become does not depend on some preordained plan of God, but on what we make ourselves by our own independently produced choices." Mark Hausam, "It's All in Arminius: Mormonism as a Form of Hyper-Arminianism" (paper delivered at the 2005 Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City), 18. Audio of the presentation is available at sunstone.org/its-all-in-arminius-mormonism-as-a-form-of-hyper-arminianism/. A transcript of this session is available at lehislibrary.wordpress.com/2010/09/15/its-all-in-arminius-mormonism-as-a-form-of-hyper-arminianism/.

children. We believe the more sophisticated accounts are also the more accurate description of our loving Heavenly Parents. The attribution of wrath and vengeance is an instance of anthropopathism, the ascription of fallen human emotions to God.[18]

Accounts of a powerful being lashing out in anger when we act contrary to his will are easier to understand than the natural law account of what happens when we sin. All children anger a powerful adult at some point in their lives and are punished for such behavior. Virtually all adults, too, have had the experience of angering some powerful person, then reaping a negative consequence for evoking that anger. So, accounts of sin evoking anger in God and an angry God punishing the sinner are easier to understand. Such accounts leave no doubt that, according to scripture, sin ultimately produces bad consequences for the sinner. But rather than being the most accurate account of what happens when people sin, anthropopathic statements that describe God as angrily smiting the wicked are merely the most understandable accounts of what happens when we sin. Though they get the causal mechanism wrong, they make it unmistakably clear that in the long run, wickedness never was and never will be happiness (Alma 41:10).

The negative consequences of sin and another dimension of the problem of evil now become more apparent in the Ammonihah story. God does not permit the self-demonization of the Ammonihahites to continue. Their *moral evil* (evil perpetrated by human beings) is terminated by *natural evil* (evil visited on human beings by nature).[19] The text, beginning ominously with the precise date — "on the twelfth day, in the tenth month, in the tenth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi" — tells us that the leadership of Ammonihah came again to the prison where Alma and Amulek languished, naked, hungry, and thirsty. Each man smote Alma and Amulek and said, "If ye have the power of God deliver yourselves from these bands, and then we will believe that the Lord will destroy this people according to your words." The wicked men get what they ask for. Alma and Amulek rose and broke the cords that bound them. The Ammonihahite leaders "began

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18. Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. "anthropopathism (*n.*)," merriam-webster.com /dictionary/anthropopathism.

19. The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines natural evil as "evil or suffering that results from the operations of nature or nature gone awry." James R. Beebe, "Logical Problem of Evil," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, iep.utm .edu/evil-log/#H6.

to flee . . . [but] so great was their fear that they fell to the earth. . . . The earth shook mightily, and the walls of the prison were rent in twain, so that they fell. . . . [All] who smote upon Alma and Amulek, were slain by the fall thereof" (Alma 14:23–27).

This natural occurrence, presumably an earthquake, bears on several important problem-of-evil issues. First, it illustrates one function of natural evil: it constrains moral evil. In this case, it put an end to the atrocities committed by the leaders of Ammonihah. More broadly, it makes all human life precarious. No matter how powerful and wealthy and young and strong a person may be, anyone may be struck down at any time by natural diseases and disasters. All those with a modicum of wisdom live in the shadow of their own impending death and of the moral accountability that may follow. This fact at least partially justifies the existence of natural evil. It is possible that the existence of natural evil reduces the sum of evil in the world. If the awareness of mortality caused by random natural evils reduces the magnitude of moral evil by an amount greater than the magnitude of random natural evils, then natural evil has, on balance, a positive effect on the sum of all evil in the world. Paulson and Ostler clearly state the logic of trade-offs. For example, a doctor may morally inflict the pain of a shot or even the amputation of a limb if the benefits will outweigh the cost. Thus, a morally perfect being does not necessarily prevent all evil and pain; rather, he maximizes the good by permitting those evils that bring about a greater good.[20]

This function of natural evil — reminding people of their mortality and moral accountability — is illustrated over and over again in the Book of Mormon. It is so common and obvious that this evil and its effects have a well-known name: the pride cycle.[21] As the Nephites prosper, they forget God and become wicked. When they become wicked, they are struck by various natural disasters or are attacked by the Lamanites and suffer battle losses.[22] The attacks and battle losses,

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20. David L. Paulsen and Blake T. Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil," scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent .cgi?filename=10&article=1066&context=mi&type=additional. This essay was an expansion of Paulsen, "Problem of Evil."

21. The term *pride cycle* is ubiquitous in Latter-day Saint culture. Elder Neal A. Maxwell may have coined the phrase. He used it frequently in his teachings.

22. The Lamanite attacks are, strictly speaking, a moral evil (a sin of the Lamanites that causes the Nephites to suffer and thus be moved toward repentance; see 1 Nephi 2:20–24), but in the text, the attacks are mostly

like famines and earthquakes, are generally attributed to Nephite wickedness. The battle losses and natural disasters typically compel the Nephites to humble themselves and call upon God, at which point they again begin to prosper both militarily and economically. The salutary effects of natural evils (and of moral evils that function like natural evils) are thus well-illustrated throughout the Book of Mormon.

While in a complete analysis, eternal damnation is the most powerful manifestation of the problem of evil, the moral culpability of the damned makes their suffering less salient for many people than the suffering of innocents. The randomness of innocent suffering magnifies the problem. The timing of the earthquake that freed Alma and Amulek is an example of that randomness. If the earthquake had occurred earlier, it could have saved the innocent women and children. If the moral accountability Alma mentions as a rationale for not stopping the murder of innocents was valid, why were the Ammonihahites not permitted to murder Alma and Amulek, thus further compounding their guilt? God sometimes intervenes to stop evil, and sometimes he does not. From the point of view of those who are not rescued, God's decisions to intervene or not intervene may seem capricious.[23]

While it contains many diverse manifestations of evil, including eternal damnation (which should be but is not normally cited as the most horrific evil of all), the Book of Mormon provides no emphatic examples of righteous, innocent people suffering natural evils. We must infer that, in the Book of Mormon, innocents were sometimes destroyed by

indistinguishable from natural evils. Except when attacks are led by apostate Nephites, the reasons for the attack and Lamanite moral culpability receive little attention.

23. Concerning 1 Nephi 3:28–31, Fatiman Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming assert:

These are some of the most disturbing verses in Nephi's record. The bold description of abuse, the way Laman and Lemuel turn so rapidly to rage, and the limited help from the angel are all difficult to read and digest. The angel's delay in not appearing until after Laman and Lemuel beat Nephi and Sam with a rod leaves the reader struggling with the Problem of Evil—the question of why an omnipotent and loving God allows terrible things to happen. . . . Readers are left with the unanswered question of what it means for us when God seems to refrain from stopping terrible pain in the world. The text doesn't provide us with an easy answer.

Fatimah Salleh with Margaret Olsen Hemming, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, vol. 1, *1 Nephi–Words of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2020), 9.

natural evil since this kind of innocent suffering is never dramatized. We can infer it when the city of Moroni sunk into the depths of the sea shortly before Christ's coming (3 Nephi 8:9), for the children in that city presumably drowned with the guilty adults. In Ammonihah, though the cause was moral evil functioning like a natural evil (not natural evil *per se*), children analogously died with the wicked adults when Lamanites attacked and killed all the inhabitants of the city (see Alma 16:9–10).

While tragic, these deaths of innocents do not starkly frame the problem of evil. They might be explained by various plausible considerations. One consideration is that a local culture can have immense power to constrain the set of possible life choices and their outcomes. A city like Ammonihah or Moroni could become so wicked as to make "evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20). Similarly, like Sodom and Gomorrah, such cities could produce social norms so perverse that no child born into that culture would have any real opportunity to live a righteous life. The destruction of a thoroughly corrupt community or civilization (think of Noah and the Ark) might be justified because that civilization can no longer fulfill the function of mortal life, which is to provide souls an opportunity to exercise agency and choose between good and evil. Another consideration is that, even if the children could somehow be spared when all the wicked adults were killed, there would be no adult care or supervision leaving most to suffer and die from natural causes. Sparing them would only delay the inevitable.

So, the Book of Mormon provides no clear examples of righteous persons both suffering from natural evils and then grappling with unmerited misery.[24] We can provide a modern example: While liv-

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24. There are times in the Book of Mormon when innocent people suffer. But unlike Job, they do not grapple with the problem of innocent suffering. The destruction in Bountiful when Christ came is one good example. Instead of reporting on innocent victims wondering why they had to suffer through the calamities, Mormon reports the thoughts of those who were spared as follows:

> Great were the groanings of the people, because of the darkness and the great destruction which had come upon them. And in one place they were heard to cry, saying: O that we had repented before this great and terrible day, and then would our brethren have been spared, and they would not have been burned in that great city Zarahemla. And in another place they were heard to cry and mourn, saying: O that we had repented before this great and terrible day, and had not killed and stoned the prophets, and cast them out; then would our mothers and our fair daughters, and our children have been spared, and not have been buried up in that great city Moronihah. And thus were the howlings of the people great and terrible. (3 Nephi 8:23–25)

ing a righteous life may reduce the incidence of sickness and other forms of suffering that fall upon the wicked as a consequence of their actions, living righteously as a devoted follower of Christ does not guarantee that one will avoid accidents and sickness and thus live a long, full life, then die painlessly in one's sleep. Many adults who are by all accounts exceptionally devoted and righteous followers of Christ, including young parents whose children urgently need them in their lives, have suffered debilitating disease and untimely deaths. While it is less common today than it was in the past, the children of devoutly righteous followers of Christ still die from accidents and diseases. The parents of these children understandably agonize over their deaths. Additionally, miracles that occasionally save some while not saving many others can compound the suffering of the righteous people who are not blessed with such miracles. The suffering and the agonizing questions that trouble the minds of such people are real. If deep pain and suffering are evil, their unmerited suffering is evil, or at least must be addressed in any adequate theodicy.

Creedal Christian Theology and the Problem of Evil

We turn now to a discussion of the ways in which different Christian traditions deal with the various manifestations of the problem of evil. In this discussion, we draw upon and cite a modern Calvinist theologian, Mark Hausam. In his insightful account of the issues in his article "It's All in Arminius: Mormonism as a Form of Hyper-Arminianism."[25] Hausam is unusual in that he combines a deep understanding of the various strands of creedal Christianity with a deep understanding of the Latter-day Saint theological tradition.

Again, for creedal Christians, Muslims, and Jews, the problem of evil is intractable. To understand why this is so, let us recall that the god of creedal Christianity, Judaism, and Islam is thought to be the

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Unlike Job, the people frame themselves not as innocent and undeserving but as guilty and deserving of the suffering they are experiencing.

25. Though a Calvinist, Hausam for the most part gives an accurate, even charitable account of competing Arminian and Latter-day Saint theologies. His account goes seriously off-track in just one respect. He suggests that Latter-day Saints and Arminians believe God owes humanity grace. Thus, salvation is purely a function of works. This framing is false. Grace would not be grace if God owed it to us; it would be justice. Within both Restoration and Arminian theologies, God extends to all humanity an unmerited offer of salvation. Everyone would be eternally damned if the unmerited gift had not been offered by Jesus Christ. See Hausam, "It's All in Arminius."

sole possessor of BEING, that he is outside of space and time, that he creates all other beings *ex nihilo*, and that the continued existence of those other beings is contingent on his willing their continuation. If these concepts are true, created beings cannot act contrary to this god's will. If they do the monstrous evil that many have done, they must so act because their god created them so to act. To take the specific examples of evil we have been discussing, this god must have created the women and children of Ammonihah to be burned to death and the leadership of Ammonihah to burn them, to torture Alma and Amulek, to turn themselves into demons, and then to suffer eternity in hell. This god must specifically have created the world such that it would cause accidents or disease to strike down righteous people and their children, because no person or anything else in nature exists or acts apart from the force and motive imparted to them by their god. A solitary sovereign who alone fundamentally exists, who exists outside of space and time, who creates all other things *ex nihilo* is, by implacable logic, morally responsible for every action and event in the universe he creates. Philosopher Antony Flew has summarized the logic that, given these premises, makes the creedal-Christian god morally responsible for evil:

> We cannot say that [God] would like to help but cannot: God is omnipotent. We cannot say that he would help if he only knew: God is omniscient. We cannot say that he is not responsible for the wickedness of others: God creates those others. Indeed an omnipotent, omniscient God must be an accessory before (and during) the fact to every human misdeed; as well as being responsible for every non-moral defect in the universe.[26]

We will now very briefly summarize how some branches of conventional Christianity respond to this formulation of the problem of evil. If we better understand the degree to which conventional Christianity has struggled to deal with this problem, we can better appreciate the distinctive superiority of the Latter-day Saint account of why evil exists in the world.

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26. Antony Flew, section D of "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 107. David L. Paulsen cites and discusses this statement in "Problem of Evil."

Calvinism

Calvinists are the most rigorously logical of the conventional Christians.[27] They fully embrace the implications of God's solitary sovereignty and of creation *ex nihilo*. Hausam rightly asserts that "creation *ex nihilo* logically leads directly to Calvinistic determinism."[28] If God is the sole ground and sustainer of all being, it follows that all being is precisely what God created it to be. The worlds to come, both heaven and hell, will be populated with people God predestined to inhabit them, with people he specifically created to be there. In the words of Calvin:

> God . . . determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.[29]

The number of beings created to burn eternally in hell is much larger than the number created to sing God's praises eternally in heaven.

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27. James McLachlan notes that Calvin exceeds even Augustine in his rigorous adherence to God's absolute sovereignty.

   > The Calvinist God is the epitome of the all-powerful ex-nihilo artist of the universe. Even more powerfully than Augustine, Calvin argued that humanity was under the predestinating power of God. Augustine had written, "If it were not good that evil things exist, they would certainly not be allowed to exist by the omnipotent God." Calvin goes further clarifying the position. "Those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them for the inheritance which he predestines for his own children." God literally decreed all events to take place. God "foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed they take place." "Whence does it happen that Adam's fall irremediably involved so many peoples, together with their infant offspring in eternal death because it so pleased God?" Calvin replied, "The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess." But he concludes that "God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous."

   McLachlan, "Is God Subject," 56.
28. Hausam, "It's All in Arminius," 21.
29. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.21.5. Quote available online at gentlereformation.com/2018/04/30/john-calvin-and-the-awful-doctrine-of-predestination/.

This understanding of God and humanity is crystallized in Jonathan Edwards's well-known, nightmare-inducing sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." A great deal of spiritual angst — possibly including the angst that sent Joseph Smith to the Sacred Grove — has been created by the stern, clear-eyed, implacable logic of Calvinism.

While it is fully consistent with (indeed, probably necessarily follows from) the classical Christian formulation of the doctrine of God, this conception of God is ethically troubling. Within no human ethical system — least of all the ethical system implied by the life of Christ — would it be acceptable, at one's sole discretion, to create a circumstance that will assuredly cause another human being to suffer eternally the pains of hell. To hold both that God is good and that God does this, one must believe that God's ethics have little or nothing in common with the ethics of humanity.[30] It is, to say the least, a trial of faith to believe that an action that would be monstrously cruel and evil if a human being did it — condemning millions or billions of people to exquisite, eternal suffering — is a manifestation of perfect goodness if God does it. To be sure, God has declared, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). Most theists understand that human knowledge and belief is fallible, that God understands and could justify things that appear malign or just incomprehensible to us. But an ethics that combines divine determinism of all outcomes, including billions of souls burning in hell, would seem to entail a complete transvaluation of any recognizably good human ethical system.[31] It is not compatible with the loving, giving God whom billions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims have known. So, the phenom-

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30. Friedrich Nietzsche is perhaps the best-known philosopher to have argued that God is beyond good and evil as humans conceive of the terms. In his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche proposes that traditional morality, often tied to religious concepts of good and evil, is a human construct and not a divine truth. He suggests that God, if he exists—and Nietzsche denies his existence—would transcend such human-imposed limitations.

31. Terryl and Fiona Givens have compellingly argued that the moral code of God cannot be completely different from our human moral codes:

> In actual fact, it makes little sense to recognize in our conscience a reliable guide to what is virtuous, lovely, and praiseworthy in the world where God has placed us, while suggesting He inhabits a different moral universe. It makes little sense to insist He endowed us with an intuitive grammar of right and wrong, while He himself speaks a different moral language . . . The biblical story of the Fall indicates, on the contrary, that we are absolutely enmeshed in the same moral order as our God.

enology of our personal experience of the Divine fits poorly with the unquestionably rigorous logic of Calvinist theology.

Nonetheless, the logical rigor of Calvinism should not be lightly dismissed. Hausam plausibly argues that there is a fundamental theological divide between Calvinist theology on the one hand and Arminian/Restoration theology on the other:

> I will show that the most important theological dividing line is not between Arminianism and Calvinism on the one side and Mormonism on the other, but between Calvinism/Augustinianism on the one side and the doctrines of Arminianism and Mormonism on the other.[32]

We will next review both Arminianism and Latter-day Saint theology. But let us here state that, while Hausam is largely correct, a better formulation would be this: there are two logically consistent theological positions one might occupy, the thoroughgoing divine determinism of Calvinism and the throughgoing self-determinism of the Latter-day Saints. The Arminians who attempt to occupy the middle ground fall between the two logical stools. Let us now review their position.

Arminian Protestants

Arminianism, a major school of thought in Protestantism, takes its name from Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), a Dutch Reformed minister who broke with Calvin to affirm the existence of human free will and "prevenient grace."[33] It includes an atonement that is unlimited in its offer of salvation. In adopting these views in opposition to their Calvinist

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Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012), 19, archive.org/details /godwhoweepshowmo0000give/page/18/mode/2up.

32. Hausam, "It's all in Arminius," 5.

33. "*Prevenient grace* is a phrase used to describe the grace given by God that precedes the act of a sinner exercising saving faith in Jesus Christ. The term *prevenient* comes from a Latin word that meant 'to come before, to anticipate.' By definition, every theological system that affirms the necessity of God's grace prior to a sinner's conversion teaches a type of prevenient grace. The Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace is a type of prevenient grace, as is common grace. However, when the phrase 'prevenient grace' is used in theological discussions, it is used in a specific way. In the context of the on-going Calvinism vs. Arminianism debate, prevenient grace is referred to in order to object to the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace. This is the reason why, in both modern and historic times, it has also been called 'resistible grace' or 'pre-regenerating grace.'" "What is Prevenient Grace?" *Got Questions* (website), gotquestions. org/prevenient-grace.html.

brethren, Arminian Protestants (including Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists, many Baptists and Episcopalians, and a number of other Protestant denominations) affirm what Latter-day Saints also regard as important truths. This includes the beliefs that God wants all his children to be saved and that he creates none with the intent that they be damned. Also, Christ suffered for all in the hope that all will receive the gift he freely offers them and be saved. Thus, the Atonement is the universal gift of God to all humanity.

Calvinism has millions of adherents, but most creedal Christians tend to have broadly Arminian views. Thus, though there are many differences between Arminian Protestantism on the one hand and Catholicism and the various Eastern Orthodox denominations on the other, the differences are mostly inconsequential with respect to their views on how universal prevenient grace and human free will can eliminate the problem of evil. Since these faiths share the relevant doctrines, most of the critique of Arminianism given below would also apply to Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.[34] Arminianism is the dominant strand in mainstream Christianity.

In connection with their affirmation of the important truths mentioned above, Arminians commit themselves to what philosophers call *incompatibilist*[35] or *libertarian*[36] conceptions of free will, positions that

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34. Like Arminians, Catholics affirm the reality of free will. From Saint Augustine onward, they have mostly insisted that human beings have the power to act contrary to God's will and must have that power for God's judgments to be just. See Montague Brown, "Augustine on Freedom and God," *The Saint Anselm Journal* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2005), anselm.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Institute%20of%20SA%20Studies/4.5.3.2h_22Brown.pdf. After he presented this paper at a Sunstone Symposium, he was asked which denominations he would characterize as Arminian, and Hausam mentioned both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

35. "Incompatibilists hold that free will and determinism are mutually exclusive and, consequently, that we act freely (i.e., with free will) only if determinism is false . . .. One question that divides them concerns which type of indeterminism—uncaused events, nondeterministically caused events, or agent caused events—is required. Another concerns where in the processes leading to action indeterminism must be located in order for an action to be free. Different answers to these questions yield different incompatibilist theories of free will." Randolph Clarke, Justin Capes, and Philip Swenson, "Incompatibilist (Nondeterministic) Theories of Free Will", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta, plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/incompatibilism-theories.

36. The idea that one's life can be determined and controlled by another agent is fallacious. Libertarians believe "that one's action not be causally determined

are problematic in various ways we discuss below and positions that, in any case, ultimately do not resolve the problem of evil. Compatibilists argue that a choice can be entirely determined by an antecedent set of conditions, and yet be free. Incompatibilists insist that a choice cannot be both determined and free. Libertarian free will is an incompatibilist idea. It floats above and is unconstrained by any internal or external causal factors. Consistent with their incompatibilist libertarianism — and unlike Calvinists — Arminians believe that God has the power to create beings whose will is completely autonomous from his own, beings able to make life choices that contravene his will. By exercising this creative power and extending this gift of freedom, God surrounds himself with other beings who share his capacity for moral agency. The freedom these other beings enjoy does not include the power to determine or control all the consequences of their choices. If they act contrary to God's will, bad things happen. If they act in harmony with God's will, good things happen. But like God, they are capable of choosing for themselves what path they will tread, albeit within a narrower set of possible outcomes than those available to God. Since *ex hypothesis*, he is unable to (or at least does not) control the choices of these moral agents, God is not responsible for any sins they commit. The rationale discussed above for the existence of natural evil is available to Arminians — the natural evil that must fall wholly to God's account may keep us conscious of our mortality and moral accountability. It may sufficiently inhibit moral evil that, on balance, the natural evil reduces the sum of all evil in the world.

For Arminians to use these ideas to absolve God of responsibility for evil, they must argue that some entities exist that are independent of God, and that, in some fundamental sense, are not created by God. Ultimately, they must posit the existence of other gods who exist with God. Hausam summarizes these views as follows:

> God wishes that reality were different than it is. He wishes there was a way to attain all his desires. But there isn't. He has to live with reality as it comes to him. It is a given he must submit to. And here we see the connection with my previous comments about LDS theology. In the Arminian view, reality is not what a perfectly good being wishes it was. There is a

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by factors beyond one's control." Timothy O'Connor and Christopher Franklin, "Free Will," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill/#LibeAccoSour.

conflict between the nature and will of God, who is perfectly good, and the nature of reality, and the former must submit to the latter. But if there is a fundamental conflict between God, and everything that he is, and the basic nature of reality, then the laws that govern and give structure to that reality can no longer be thought of as being grounded in God or identical with God, but must be thought of as independent variables, structural principles of a universe which is independent of God and in the context of which God exists, and which limit and thwart him from accomplishing all that he desires to accomplish. Ultimate reality in this view, as in the LDS view, is thus not identical with God nor derived from him and his will. God must submit to the laws of reality, which are as much a given to him as they are to us. God is no longer the ultimate answer to all questions of existence or questions of "Why?" As in Mormonism, Arminianism makes God a finite being, limited by "lawlike structures or principles" which are not identical with him and which he did not create and cannot destroy.[37]

As for human beings, the Arminian analysis makes "gods" of them. Hausam persuasively argues this point as follows:

There is a conflict between *ex nihilo* creation and some of the central features of the Arminian universe. The concept of "free will" allows the force of creation *ex nihilo* to be effectually negated so that the independence Arminianism requires can exist. It does this by creating a "causal gap" between God's creative activity and the actual essence of our will and choices. Whatever God did in creating humans and their free agency, in the Arminian view, he did not create an unbroken causal chain from himself . . . to the actual choices made by his creatures. Those choices are undetermined by God. The reason for their existence, since they are undetermined and first-causal, cannot be anything God has done. They are not traceable to any creative action of God, but are wholly self-originated in their nature . . . Whatever God created *ex nihilo* when he created human beings, he thus did not create that which constitutes the real essence of our being and character. . . . In Arminian theology, the main

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37. Hausam, "It's All in Arminius," 13.

implications of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* are negated and the doctrine itself is thus, in effect, relegated to practical unimportance, since the most important part of who we are, that which defines our primary essence, is not created by God, but is self-existent or self-created. In Arminianism, we are uncreated, self-existent entities, just as Joseph Smith stated in the King Follett discourse. And just as the term "Gods" is the appropriate metaphysical term for such entities in Mormonism, so it is appropriate for such entities in Arminianism, although Arminians, being less consistent and developed in their theology, usually do not clearly see this and avoid the term because of its obvious clash with more classical theistic aspects of their thinking that they do not want to wholly or explicitly jettison.[38]

Hausam sufficiently demonstrates that implicit in Arminian theology are ideas that find their full expression in teachings of Joseph Smith and Restoration doctrines grounded in those teachings.

While Hausam's critique of the Arminian position is telling, it is not complete. Even if they successfully add libertarian freedom to their theology by rejecting *ex nihilo* creation and making "gods" of men, the Arminian theology does not reconcile God's goodness with the existence of evil in the world. Remaining aspects of their beliefs regarding divine ontology make the problem of evil still intractable. Following this line of reasoning, being a BEING outside of time, their omniscient creedal God would never be surprised by anything his creatures do. So even if it were possible for him to create contingent beings who freely act contrary to his will, all their freely chosen actions would be foreknown to him. He would have the option of not creating or not sustaining the existence of those who grossly defy his will.[39] He could

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38. Hausam, "It's All in Arminius," 22–23.

39. Paulsen and Ostler make this point as follows:

> Christian theologians also affirm that God . . . has absolute foreknowledge of all the outcomes of his creative choices. Given this view of God, even if God endows his human creatures with contra-causal freedom, he still remains an accessory before the fact and is ultimately at least jointly responsible for everything that happens in the world, including the evil choices of those creatures. Additionally, God is responsible for every evil inasmuch as he knowingly chose to bring them all into existence when he created the world *ex nihilo*.

> Paulsen and Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making," 6.

have created only that subset of free beings who he foreknew would freely choose to act much or entirely as he wanted them to act.[40] There is no logical necessity for the creation of free beings to involve the creation of grossly evil beings.[41] God was not surprised when Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and others murdered millions. When he created them, he knew what they would do and he was not obligated to create them or to sustain their existence once created. It follows that all their evil deeds are traceable to him. Had it not been for his fully informed act of creating these moral monsters, they and their evil deeds would not have existed. Thus, in the end, their acts and all other human actions are fully traceable back to him. He willed them into being and, in every moment, sustains their continuing existence. It follows that the problem of evil is not resolved by attributing to God the power to create beings who have libertarian free will. Or more precisely, it follows for any Arminians who retain other aspects of the classical conception of who God is, that is, the idea that he exists outside of time and foreknows all that any of his creations will freely choose to do.

Open Theists

There is a movement grounded in creedal Christianity that obviates the objection just raised that God is responsible for evil even if he is

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40. J. L. Mackie argued,

> If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion.

An omnipotent God should, therefore, have the ability to create beings who would always freely choose to do what is right. "Key Thinkers: J. L. Mackie," *Philosophy Dungeon* (blog), philosophydungeon.weebly.com/scholar-mackie.html.

41. Hausam summarizes the faulty argument of the Arminians well:

> Arminian theologians have often attempted to solve the problem of evil by affirming that, due to the laws of logic, God is unable to make a world of free creatures without incurring the possibility of sin. But not to create the world would be a worse situation, so God has gone ahead and created. If God could remove sin and suffering from the creation without abandoning his fundamental plan for the universe, he would be evil not to do so; but, as it turns out, he cannot, so he is off the hook. Probably the most famous advocate of this response to the problem of evil was C. S. Lewis.

Hausam, "It's all in Arminius," 11. This argument is clearly faulty if God is outside of time and both foreknows the effects of all his creative acts and also sustains the existence of all beings, including those who are grossly evil.

able to create creatures separated from him by libertarian free will. Hausam briefly discusses this group, whom he designates (and they themselves designate) *open theists*.[42] Open theists tend to be found in all the various branches of creedal Christianity, except Calvinism. Thus, along with other denominations, there are open theists who are Catholic (W. Norris Clarke),[43] Eastern Orthodox (Richard Swinburne),[44] Seventh-day Adventist (Richard Rice),[45] Mennonite (Thomas Finger),[46] and Pentecostal (Kenneth Archer).[47] Broadly, open theists view the full classical formulation of who God is as incoherent. According to this view, it is not possible for God to be omnipotent, omnibenevolent, the *ex nihilo* Creator of all things, and, at the same time, omniscient in the sense of being fully outside of time and having all events, past, present, and future laid before him as a theologically determined fixed trajectory. The other pillars of the classical formulation of God's being — in particular omnipotence and omnibenevolence — can be logically reconciled only if his omniscience is compromised.

Thus, open theists embrace what is for most creedal Christians the heterodox view that God's knowledge of the future is incomplete. At a minimum, the future — as God knows it — branches down different lines, contingent on the not yet-known choices that human agents will

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42. "Open Theism is the thesis that, because God loves us and desires that we freely choose to reciprocate His love, He has made His knowledge of, and plans for, the future conditional upon our actions. Though omniscient, God does not know what we will freely do in the future. Though omnipotent, He has chosen to invite us to freely collaborate with Him in governing and developing His creation, thereby also allowing us the freedom to thwart His hopes for us. God desires that each of us freely enter into a loving and dynamic personal relationship with Him, and He has therefore left it open to us to choose for or against His will." James Rissler, "Open Theism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, iep.utm.edu/o-theism/.

43. W. Norris Clarke, "A New Look at the Immutability of God," in *God Knowable and Unknowable*, ed. Robert J. Roth (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), 43–72.

44. Terence Penelhum, "Review: The Coherence of Theism by Richard Swinburne," *Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 8 (1980): 502–8, jstor.org/stable /2025467.

45. Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

46. Thomas Finger, "How My Mind Has Changed," *Mennonite Life*, 60, no. 4 (December 2005), mla.bethelks.edu/ml-archive/2005Dec/finger.php.

47. Martin W. Mittelstadt, Review of Kenneth J. Archer, *The Gospel Revisited: Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Worship and Witness*, *Theology Today* 71, no. 3 (2014), doi.org/10.1177/0040573614542200e.

make in the moment that the choice arises. In this view, because God cannot know what other moral agents will choose until they choose it, he is not responsible both before and after the fact for the choices they make. By sacrificing the classical formulation of divine omniscience, open theists largely solve the problem of evil. If God does not foreknow what those he creates *ex nihilo* will choose to do, he cannot solely create that subset of beings who will freely choose to do good. His only option is to create/not create free moral agents and allow/not allow them to enact their will. It is certainly arguable that it is better for God to create other moral agents, even with the inherent risk that some of those agents will choose to enact monstrous evil, than for him to live for eternity as the only extant moral agent. Having others around him — even if some of those others are evil — may be the best option available to God and to the other moral agents he creates.

As noted, open theists largely solve the problem of evil, with the exception of one remaining issue. From the Latter-day Saint point of view, they rightly argue that the classical formulation of God's being is incoherent.[48] So, as noted above, open theists reject one of the key elements of the classical formulation — the idea that God is omniscient. But they continue to believe that God creates all existing things *ex nihilo*. Like other Arminians, they thus rely upon incompatibilism and libertarian free will to break the causal linkage between God's act of creation and the evil acts of those he creates. The remaining problem is that, like the classical formulation of God's being, incompatibilism and the associated idea of libertarian free will seem to be logically incoherent. They are, at a minimum, inconsistent with moral accountability. If they are not logically incoherent — and the topic is, admittedly, extraordinarily complex when philosophers sink their teeth into it and parse every possibility and nuance — these concepts are, at least, less immediately intelligible than determinism and self-determinism.

In philosophy, determinism is the idea that all events have a cause and that the causes make the event inevitable. It is a fairly simple idea. As indicated above, compatibilism is the idea that a choice may be both determined and free. (We discuss how that can be true in the section below on Latter-day Saint theology.) Incompatibilism is the idea that free will can exist only if choices are not determined by anything other than the free floating will itself. Libertarian free will is an

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48. A discussion of the incoherence of the classical formulation of God's being used to be part of the Latter-day Saint temple ceremony. The formulation was described as "a mass of confusion."

incompatibilist conception of free will, a will that is entirely independent, even from its creator, God. To be free of all antecedent causes, this type of free will must lack a fixed essence or disposition that would explain why one choice is made rather than another. But though libertarian free will helps absolve God of responsibility for evil, disconnecting the seat and source of choice from disposition or character, thus severing its connection with the past, leads to numerous problems for moral accountability.

Here are some of the problems: When we make a choice, we either have a reason for making the choice or we do not. If we have a reason, the reason causes or at least influences us to make the choice. If we don't have any reason for doing one thing rather than another, the choice is random. For a reason to influence us, we need to have a disposition that makes us responsive to that reason. If we have such a disposition, then past choices are predictive of what we will do in the future. Those past choices reveal who we are, so it makes sense for us to be rewarded or punished, based on what we have chosen to do. The choices reflect our essential being, and there are causal connections between who we are and the outcomes we experience. We deserve good outcomes if we are disposed to do good and we deserve bad outcomes if we are disposed to do bad.

If we have no fixed essence, disposition, or character—nothing for reasons to be based on, our choices become indistinguishable from random events. If our choices are random and not caused by anything essential and enduring in our being and therefore do not manifest who we essentially are, were, and will be, then it makes no sense to reward or punish us based on those choices.[49] Our past choices would then have no relationship to any future choice. They would be in no way predictive of what we might do in the future. Good choices that yield good results would become indistinguishable from good luck, while bad choices and bad results would be indistinguishable from bad luck. One deserves no admiration or praise for being lucky, no disapprobation or censure for being unlucky. Rewards and punishments, especially eternal rewards and punishments, make sense only if our behav-

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49. "Even proponents of libertarian freedom will admit, although paradoxically, that the choices we make are the results of the motivations, desires, loves, values, priorities, beliefs, etc., that constitute who we are, that make up the real essence of our actual being. That is why our choices reveal who we are. If our choices were not produced from the essence of our being, they would not be our choices fundamentally and would not reveal anything about who we are." Hausam, "It's all in Arminius," 22.

ior manifests who we are and will continue to be. They make sense only if our behavior is a function of some stable, enduring essence, some character or disposition that defines us.

But this is precisely what God cannot create without being morally responsible for the choices we make, which fully revives the problem of evil. In short, libertarian free will accomplishes too much, for it relieves the *ex nihilo* creator, God, of responsibility for evils committed by his creations, but it does so by completely breaking the linkage between the past and present of moral agents. If there is no linkage between a moral agent at this moment and that same moral agent in the past, then rewards and punishments for past actions make no sense. So, even though open theists resolve some problems by jettisoning divine omniscience, they introduce other problems of logical incoherence or fiendish complexity that remain unresolved when they posit the existence of libertarian free will.

Latter-day Saint Theology and the Problem of Evil

In their theological reflections and efforts to address the problem of evil, Latter-day Saints have one colossal advantage over their fellow Christians: on the authority of multiple revelations of Joseph Smith, Latter-day Saints reject the doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation. As previously mentioned, Joseph taught that "man also was in the beginning with God," that "the mind of man — the intelligent part — is as immortal as, and is coequal with, God Himself, [and that] the spirit of man [is] self-existent with God."[50]

One implication of these statements, discussed above, is the fact that God is constrained by natural law. If God does not have power to create or destroy an intelligence, it follows that the intelligence has properties that define what it is, and the properties possessed by the intelligence limit what God or any other external entity can do with it. Inherent in the uncreated *intelligence* is a network of causes and effects, a natural law that determines what kinds of interactions are possible between it and other existing things. As previously noted, that natural law constrains God not only with respect to humanity but also with respect to all material entities, for all material reality is, Joseph tells us, in its fundaments, uncreated.[51] God may expand the scope of intelligences to act and develop. He may organize and reorganize pre-

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50. Larson, "King Follett Discourse," 203–4.
51. Gaskill and Moore, *Revised and Expanded Teachings,* 462–63.

existing matter into rivers, oceans, planets, solar systems, galaxies, and universes. He may shower many blessings, including miracles, on his children and other existing things. But he has this power only because he loves and respects all other self-existent things and always acts in harmony with their essential, unchangeable nature. Like modern medicine — but on a much grander scale — he performs miracles through, not in defiance of, natural processes. His work and glory is to help other entities fully manifest their own latent glory. He helps them attain the highest form of being, the greatest glory they are capable of and are willing to embrace. Since his beneficent efforts to assist them are a given, any moral agent who, in the long run, is not glorious and beautiful, will lack those attributes because he or she chooses not to have them. If someone is evil, it is because that person chooses to be evil.

Self-determination

The self-existence of intelligences means there is no causal link between the moral choices of human beings and the creative acts of God. Given self-existence, this causal linkage is broken, without severing the connection between the agency of the self and its past. An intelligence has an essential being, which is an inherent disposition or character that is stable across time and that persistently determines the agent's choices. It thus makes sense for intelligences to reap the consequences, good or ill, of their choices. Indeed, most of the consequences, both good and ill, may be effects wholly encoded into the being of the intelligence. The most important parts of God's moral law are descriptive. God commands us to do things that (through networks of causes and effects encoded in our being) make us happy and avoid things that (through that same internal causation) make us miserable.

Like Calvinism, Restoration theology is compatible with determinism. But unlike Calvinism, that determinism does not make God responsible for every human moral choice, because God did not create the choosing entity out of nothing nor did he impose misery on beings who, but for his intervention, would be happy. Indeed, he does the exact opposite: he makes it possible for us to escape self-imposed misery that we could not have escaped without his intervention.

The fact that intelligences provide the ground for an enduring character does not mean that the behavior of a moral agent will be entirely consistent across time. Many factors — including past experiences of the consequences of one's actions — may interact with one's baseline character to determine what one chooses to do as

new circumstances arise. Alma demonstrates that the ultimate preferences of an intelligence may not be immediately apparent. In some cases, people may need to suffer consequences up to and including a "visit to hell" before they understand that God has clearly marked the only path to optimal happiness. The fact that *moral* choices are wholly attributable to the will of the individual does not mean that there is no causal link between *any* choice humans make and God's creative acts. The spirit bodies God created to house intelligences may have — and the physical bodies he created do have — specific needs and desires that influence human choices. Choices which are fully a function of the physical body God gave us are not moral choices. For example, people are not culpable for bad behavior that is entirely caused by dementia, by a physical deformity in the brain, or by various other forms of physically grounded mental illness. We are commanded to "judge not" (Matthew 7:1; see also 3 Nephi 14:1) in part because no human being can be fully informed about all the factors that influence another person's choices. Many apparently immoral choices may be a function of circumstances over which the agent had no control and, therefore, has no moral responsibility. That said, most human beings are moral agents who determine much of what happens to them when they make moral choices that are a function of their inherent character, which character is grounded in their uncreated, self-existent, persistent *intelligence*. When they make that kind of choice, it is they, not God, who are responsible for any evil acts they commit and any negative consequences they suffer.

Tradeoffs

Self-existence and self-determinism fully account for the problem of *moral* evil.[52] Similarly, as noted above, the need to constrain moral evil in part accounts for the existence of natural evil. To reiterate, since they help make us conscious of our mortality, natural evils may inhibit moral evil and, on balance, reduce total evil in the world.[53] Natural evils

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52. Hausam, "It's all in Arminius," 9–10, provides a nice summary of Latter-day Saint ontology and acknowledges that Latter-day Saint ontology addresses the problem of evil.

53. The degree to which natural evil inhibits moral evil would seem to be testable. If so, then the degree of moral evil should be lower in less wealthy and less developed societies where life is less comfortable and less secure, than it is in more developed and wealthy societies with, for example, excellent health care systems. As life becomes more secure, at least with respect to natural evils—as it has for most people during the last 100 years—then wickedness

sometimes strike in places like Ammonihah, where the inhibition of moral evil might well justify the death and destruction that occur. But, as we also noted above, even if that is true, the timing of the natural evil has no obvious explanation. The earthquake in Ammonihah struck in time to save the lives of Alma and Amulek, but not those of the innocent women and children.

To address issues like these, we need to acknowledge the constraints God faces and the complexity of the many interacting interests he must take into account. We have suggested that God is the perfect realist who understands and wisely accepts all the natural laws encoded into the self-existent entities around him. As Thomas Sowell has sagely observed, realists recognize that most big problems confront us with tradeoffs, not solutions.[54] Satan falsely promised a perfect but impossible solution: "not one soul shall be lost" (Moses 4:1). Though God organized and knows intimately all parts of the immense universe he has created for us and though his knowledge and power greatly exceed what we can even imagine, God nevertheless confronts tradeoffs because he lives among entities that he did not create and does not control. He embraces and acts within the unimaginably complex real world where the needs of one can often conflict with the needs or interests of another.[55] A world such as ours in which fallen beings live side by side and exercise agency is inherently tragic. Some degree of innocent suffering, suffering like Alma and Amulek witnessed, is thus unavoidable in our world.

That kind of complexity, conflict, and innocent suffering all exist in the Ammonihah story. Let us consider just a few of the competing interests in play, beginning with the interests of the wicked leaders of Ammonihah since they, too, are beloved children of God whom he seeks to serve and save. As self-existent moral agents they have the need and right to make choices. They thereby determine their own destiny, subject to constraints reality imposes on them and everyone else, including God. To the maximum extent possible, they must be

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should increase. Certainly, many would conclude that it has increased and that our prosperous society is on the downward swing of the pride cycle.

54. Thomas Sowell, *A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 17.

55. Sowell distinguishes between an "unconstrained vision" and a "constrained vision." That distinction is germane to the competing world views of Satan (who acts as if reality placed no constraints on the enactment of his will) and God (who happily lives with the constraints placed on him by the self-existence of other entities whom he respects and whose agency he honors).

permitted to act and to experience the consequences of their actions. Only thus may they justly come to know who they are. Given the hardness of their hearts, the only hope of salvation they may have is to thrust themselves into hell and fully experience the consequences of their actions. Perhaps the pains of hell may help some of them to recognize their need for a Savior and for redemption from the hell they have created for themselves, a redemption which only Christ can offer.

The interests of the Ammonihahite leaders obviously conflicted with those of the innocent women and children whom they cast into the fire. The leaders need to act, then have the veil be lifted and thus experience what it is to be both those who cast innocents into the fire and to be the innocent victims. If, once the veil is lifted, they are sufficiently touched by the experience of their evil as both perpetrators and victims, if that experience motivates them to call upon Christ as Alma did, then they can be redeemed. Christ has, voluntarily, fully inhabited their sin, and having done so, provides a path for them to repent and escape the full measure of suffering that would otherwise be the natural and just consequence of their actions. In some cases, entering the hell that one has self-created seems to be, as it was for Alma, the necessary catalyst for one to become repentant. We can only hope that it proved so for some or all of the leaders in Ammonihah.

The specific form of the deaths of the innocent women and children marks a connection between them and Christ. In the narrative, like the unspotted lamb that is burnt in a holocaust offering on the temple altar, they have the honor of symbolically representing the Savior. Thus, the suffering of these innocents has the potential to play a role in redeeming those who victimized them. In the next life, any of their victimizers who have been saved by their suffering and that of the Savior will come to them as penitents to express profound sorrow for what they did and profound gratitude for the role their victims played in helping to save them. What is certain is that the Savior will suffer all the terror and pain of the fires with the innocent victims and, in the eternities, he will lift from them the burden of that experience.

Tradition suggests that the Apostle Peter was crucified like Christ and counted it an honor to suffer a fate similar to that suffered by his Savior.[56] While we should never specifically seek such suffering in the

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56. Peter's crucifixion was just an extreme instance of him being honored by suffering for Christ's sake. In addition to tradition, Acts 5:17–42 says Peter and other apostles were beaten for preaching, yet rejoiced "that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name."

name of Christ, it is an honor to be counted worthy to be a martyr who joins Christ in his redeeming work (Matthew 5:11–12; Mark 10:29–30). These women and children receive that honor and its reward. The text notes their recompense: "the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory" (Alma 14:11). While from an earthly perspective, the suffering of these and other innocent martyrs seems unbearable, in the eternities the suffering is less than a nanosecond in comparison with the eternal glory the Father and Son grant to those who suffer because of their faith in Christ. Having received their reward of eternal glory, no martyr will count the cost of their exaltation as excessive. From an earthly perspective, the suffering of the ultimate innocent, Jesus Christ, seems the most unbearable of all. Yet, having borne it, Christ eternally demonstrated why he is the most glorified and beloved of all God's spirit children. The earthly perspective that causes us to reprehend all innocent suffering is demonstrably short-sighted in the eternities.

As previously noted, the problem of evil, properly viewed, is centered on the suffering of the wicked who are eternally damned, not on that of their redeemed and exalted innocent victims. It should not surprise us that affairs on the earth are sometimes arranged, as in Ammonihah, to prioritize the needs of our Heavenly Parents' children who have gone astray over the needs of their children who are firmly on the path to glory. It is common for earthly parents to devote the most time and resources to enhancing the wellbeing of their least fortunate or least wise child. The children who are lucky, righteous, and prosperous often receive less, because they need less.

Because our Heavenly Parents love all of their spirit children, they too might be expected to arrange matters to accommodate the needs of their wicked children who are the least prepared to enter eternity. They might have an analog to the Catholic *preferential option for the poor*; perhaps a *preferential option for the wicked*. Catholic teaching rightly suggests that, in public policy-making, it makes sense to favor policies that benefit the poor more than the rich. A prudent balance must be struck that preferentially meets the needs of the poor while preserving sufficient incentives to keep the rich engaged in wealth creation. Like the poor, the wicked are especially needy. Provided that sufficient earthly rewards for righteousness exist to encourage the righteous to persist in righteousness, it makes sense to organize affairs on earth such that the greater spiritual needs of the wicked are given priority when interests clash. As Alma's life story indicates, the wicked often need to enact their will and come to know themselves

as they will be, if they remain unredeemed. They need to know themselves *qua* themselves alone, even if that knowledge never causes them to repent. For the most part, affairs on earth seem to be arranged for them to acquire that self-knowledge.

Given the importance of permitting moral agents to act and discover who they are by experiencing the natural consequences of their actions, God's intervening to prevent the ongoing torture and death of Alma and Amulek is harder to explain than is his choice to not intervene and thereby save the women and children from their momentary misery. The intervention in behalf of Alma and Amulek prevented the wicked Ammonihahites from experiencing, when the veil was lifted, the full measure of natural consequences that are inherent in being themselves; it prevented them from fully discovering who they authentically are. That was the downside of the earthquake intervention, but it also had an upside. If it is viewed clearly, the earthquake that destroyed the sinful Ammonihahites was an act of grace for them even more than it was for Alma and Amulek. It saved the sinners from the suffering to which they would otherwise have subjected themselves. Every intervention by God that destroys wicked people and prevents them from committing additional acts of evil is, we posit, ultimately an act of grace.

A common theme of near-death experiences is a life review in which individuals relive their lives as both the one acting and the one being acted upon. So, when the veil is lifted, the suffering of perpetrators is much more than double the suffering of their victims. The wicked suffer both as the victim (which is painful) and as the victimizer who causes the victim's pain (which is exponentially more painful).[57] It is true that what we do unto others, we do unto ourselves. When reading scripture, our view is misplaced and myopic when we focus on the innocents saved from suffering by divine intervention that destroys the destroyers. It may be the destroyers, not their victims, who are most saved from suffering when God intervenes.

Since God's interventions appear to terminate the self-revelation and self-discovery of moral agents, which is among the most important purposes of this life, how do we account for them? Part of the answer is Sowell's tradeoffs-not-solutions aphorism. Reality does not often offer the option of optimizing outcomes on every dimension. Achieving one necessary end will sometimes require suboptimization

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57. For example, see Christensen, "Nigh unto Death," 6, 8–9.

in attaining some other incompatible end. In this specific case, viciously murdering innocent women and children and brutally torturing Alma and Amulek, even if not to death, may have sufficiently demonstrated the wickedness of the Ammonihahites, and, if they do not repent, the justness of their eternal damnation. They probably fully comprehend that they were capable of committing and would have committed other atrocities if permitted to live. The marginal benefit of letting them fully enact their wicked will and fully discover who they are may have been (indeed, almost certainly was) small in comparison to the benefit of having Alma live. And not only live, but continue his ministry among the Zoramites, deliver powerful sermons to his sons, lament that he could not speak with the voice of an angel such that he would be heard by all the earth, then write many things incorporated in the Book of Mormon that, ironically, are heard in hundreds of languages in all parts of the earth as if they were spoken by the voice of an angel.

We have ample reason to trust God's judgment on how competing moral claims may be most justly balanced. He understands all the interacting variables as no mere human being ever could. He understands which souls are most in need of help and which tradeoffs will best optimize joint outcomes. As we observe his interventions and his choices not to intervene, we should repose in full confidence that he has in each case made the right call, given the constraints he and all of us face. We should trust that he has acted in the way calculated to maximize the overall well-being of his children.

Before moving on to the manifestation of natural evil that is not treated in the Book of Mormon, let us discuss one further issue that might be raised in connection with the Ammonihah story. If intelligences are uncreated, if they have a stable character and dispositions that persist across time, if God fully understands all the interacting variables and the outcomes they will yield in the future, then God may know precisely how each intelligence will act if it is clothed in a spirit and a corporeal body.[58] Perhaps more likely, God may have an extra

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58. Laplace made the following claim:

> We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past could be present before its eyes.

dimensional point of view that lets him foreknow events in our four-dimensional space/time, because events are static from his point of view, though dynamic from ours.[59] If God somehow foreknows what we will do before we do it, why would it not be sufficient for God to show us what we would do and cause us to suffer the consequences of the actions we would have taken if permitted to act, while preventing us from actually doing the evil deeds we would do? Why can't the perpetrators of the holocaust in Ammonihah be told what they will do and be caused to experience the effect of those actions while sparing the women and children from actually being burned in the fire?

The answer is that any intervention which severs the connection between acts and consequences is unjust. If the act occurs without consequence, as Satan unrealistically proposed in the premortal world, then justice is abrogated. In like manner, if the consequence occurs without the act, as here proposed, then again, justice is abrogated. Such an arrangement is, on its face, unjust. Any being committed to justice — a commitment inherent in the being of God and fully encoded in the being of all who kept their first estate — would rebel against an arrangement in which people were punished for what they would do if permitted to act, rather than for what they actually did do. It would not be the men of Ammonihah only who would regard such an arrangement as illegitimate, it would be all of us. Were God to do such a thing — which he never would — he would abrogate justice and cease to be God (Alma 42:22–23). While he quite often gives us blessings that we have not fully earned, including the mercy that saves

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Pierre Simon Laplace, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*, trans. F. W. Truscott and F. L. Emory (New York: Dover, 1951), 4.

59. A more plausible source of God's foreknowledge is the existence of other dimensions of reality beyond our three-dimensional space plus time. The Big Bang suggests that other dimensions of reality exist, that this universe was organized elsewhere and then flared into existence. That "elsewhere" need not be entangled in the time that unfolds in this universe. If God exists in a time/space location external to this universe, which he created in the Big Bang, he may have instantaneous access to all moments of our time while himself being enmeshed in some other time and space. He might relate to our world as we relate to film on a reel. We have access to the whole film. From our point of view, it is complete and static. But for the characters in the film, the action must unfold one frame at a time. We may, at will, jump instantaneously to any frame in the film. They cannot. For an exploration of dimensionality implications, see Edwin A. Abbot, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Seely & Co., 1884), archive.org/details/gri_33125012922544/mode/2up.

those who repent, he never visits on us punishments unmerited by our actions. We may have full confidence in his justice. We would not have accepted him and his premortal plan for us if we had not known him to be a completely reliable, completely just, God.

Random effects

That said, the righteous have no guarantee that they will not suffer natural evil. Let us now consider the kind of natural evil that is not exemplified in the Book of Mormon. In some cases, it is quite evident that natural evils do not reduce moral evil. If anything, they increase it. The death of a righteous young mother who leaves behind five children who urgently need her is very unlikely to reduce the incidence of moral evil in the world. On the contrary, the loss of her loving nurture for those children may increase moral evil. When two parents, both devoted followers of Christ, lose a child to disease or accident, while the child of other parents who are less devoted to the Savior is miraculously cured of the same illness, it is not immediately obvious how the quantum of moral evil in the world is reduced.

What is evident, however, is that a somewhat random distribution of natural evils is essential for the preservation of agency and growth. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Savior noted that the Father "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). This metaphor reveals a profound truth. Where there is nothing but sun, where there is no rain, life does not thrive. Tribulation, like rain, has beneficent properties. It increases growth and helps us become resilient. Just as some mixture of sun and rain is required for the flourishing of biological life, even so a mixture of good and bad fortune is required for the flourishing of spiritual life.

An equally or more important consideration is the fact that moral agency cannot be manifested and developed where good acts are always immediately rewarded and bad acts immediately punished. Those of us who kept our first estate had to leave God's presence and have our memory of it obscured by a veil, in part because while we were still with him, any sin would have subjected us to immediate, excruciating pain, while compliance with his will filled us with immediate joy.[60] In that circumstance, our ability to be and know ourselves and

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60. The inability of those who kept their first estate to sin while still in God's presence is apparent in the story of Adam and Eve. Alma states that Adam and Eve had to be separated "both temporally and spiritually from the presence

to grow spiritually was compromised. Earth life would have been no better for our growth than premortal life if the linkages here between acts and consequences were instantaneous. So, in this life there is typically a time lag between when we act and when we experience the consequences of an act. Alma gives that time-lagged condition a name: he calls it a "probationary state" (Alma 24:7). Without that lag, we would become the human equivalent of rats in a Skinner box.[61] Our behavior would be controlled by a system of immediate and certain physical rewards and punishments. We would not be proper moral agents.

The Gods weep

Our Heavenly Father, Mother, and Savior's work and glory is to help each human being attain the kind of life that they, themselves, have.[62] Their mode of living is our telos, our highest hope in eternity, but not because their existence is one of endless bliss. The life of our Heavenly Parents is not devoid of tragedy and pain. As Terryl and Fiona Givens have observed, one of the distinctive qualities of the Latter-day Saint God is his capacity to experience profound sorrow as well as profound

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of the Lord . . . to follow after their own will" (Alma 42:7). They had agency, but their ability to enact their will was constrained by their love for and fear of God. Were God at her side, Eve would not have looked him in the eye and defiantly partaken of the forbidden fruit. Having partaken while not with him, Adam and Eve were ashamed; they tried to hide from God. Their pain drove them from the Garden and his presence. The pain sinners feel while under the gaze of God's "all-searching eye" is redundantly documented in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 27:31; 2 Nephi 9:14, 44; Alma 12:14; Mormon 9:3–5). This pain of post-mortal sinners reveals what pre-mortal sinners would have immediately felt had they sinned while still with God.

61. "A Skinner box is an enclosed apparatus that contains a bar or key that an animal subject can manipulate in order to obtain reinforcement. Developed by B. F. Skinner and also known as an operant conditioning chamber, this box also has a device that records each response provided by the animal as well as the unique schedule of reinforcement that the animal was assigned." Kendra Cherry, "The Behavioral Psychology Theory that Explains Learned Behavior," *Verywell Mind* (website), verywellmind.com/what-is-a-skinner-box-2795875.

62. This idea is explored more fully in Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright, "Theosis in the Book of Mormon: The Work and Glory of the Father, Mother and Son, and Holy Ghost," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 56 (2023): 275–326, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/theosis -in-the-book-of-mormon-the-work-and-glory-of-the-father-mother-and-son -and-holy-ghost/.

joy.[63] The sorrow side of that capacity was memorably witnessed by Enoch:

> Angels descend[ed] out of heaven . . . saying: Wo, wo be unto the inhabitants of the earth. . . . Satan . . . had a great chain in his hand, and it veiled the whole face of the earth with darkness; and he looked up and laughed, and his angels rejoiced. . . . [T]he God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept . . . and shed forth . . . tears as the rain upon the mountains. . . . And Enoch said unto the Lord: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? . . .The Lord said unto Enoch: Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency; And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood (Moses 7:25–26, 28–29, 32–33).

The realism of our Heavenly Parents and their respect for both agency and justice subject them to unavoidable tragedy and sorrow. They experience this pain directly as they observe the foolishness and cruelty of their children. Though they understand the glory that awaits the women and children sacrificed in Ammonihah, our Heavenly Parents surely felt the pains of those holocaust victims even more than Alma and Amulek felt them. Father and Mother in Heaven also experience our pains indirectly as their First-Born Son suffers the agonies inherent in every sin. The suffering of the Divine Mother with her Son may be marked in the passion narrative by the nails that pierce the body of Christ. As they are driven into his body, they also pierce the cross, a symbolic tree that, among other things, may symbolize Heavenly Mother.[64]

As a consequence, among the things we human beings must embrace, if we wish to have the life our Heavenly Parents have, is the tragedy inherent in agency. Loving parents sometimes use the

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63. Givens and Givens, *The God Who Weeps*.
64. See Larsen and Wright, "Theosis," 301–3 for a complete discussion of this idea.

expression "no empty chairs"[65] to communicate their hope, or even expectation, that none of their children or grandchildren will fail to join them in celestial glory. While we should always maintain hope and pray that our wayward children will return,[66] we should keep in mind that it was Satan who falsely promised no empty chairs. Although we cannot help but desire the exaltation of our family and friends, we must, like our Heavenly Parents, respect the agency of our progeny and those we love. We must respect their right to determine their own just destiny—a destiny that can include exaltation if they choose it. Their right to choose for themselves is the essential consideration and we must affirm it to be in harmony with God.

It is not the autonomy of human moral agents only that we must affirm and respect. All uncreated material entities have self-existent properties. They are subject to natural law that is encoded in the being of that entity. Physical decline and death are intrinsic properties of our mortal bodies. Earthquakes and storms, illness and accidents, are all manifestations of properties inherent in the materials that compose us and the world we live in. As we better understand the essence of, and the laws implicit in, physical materials that compose us and this world, we are able to ameliorate some outcomes negative from our point of view. God commands us to respect and care for the natural world (Genesis 1:26–29)[67] and that respect and care will sometimes entail submitting to realities outside ourselves. To be God is to recognize, respect, and live in harmony with the nature and interests of all existing things.[68] Rebelling against or otherwise rejecting what is real is sin. To

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65. For example, see Janice Kapp Perry, who wrote a song called, "No Empty Chairs," *The Mother's Day Collection*, vol. 5, 2017, youtube.com/watch?v=fU1Vbum9mGQ.

66. Elder David A. Bednar, "Faithful Parents and Wayward Children," *Ensign*, March 2014, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2014/03/faithful-parents-and -wayward-children-sustaining-hope-while-overcoming-misunderstanding.

67. Many Latter-day Saints have commented on respecting and caring for the natural world, in books, General Conference talks, and various addresses to the Saints. See, for example, *Stewardship and the Creation: LDS Perspectives on the Environment*, ed. George B. Handley, Terry B. Ball, and Steven L. Peck (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 2006); Elder Steven E. Snow, "The Moral Imperative of Environmental Stewardship," Newsroom, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 10 October 2018, newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/the-moral-imperative-of-environ mental-stewardship-elder-steven-e-snow; and Bishop Gérard Caussé, "Our Earthly Stewardship," October 2022 General Conference, churchofjesus christ.org/study/general-conference/2022/10/31causse.

68. Paulsen and Ostler express this idea beautifully. See "Sin, Suffering, and

be like God instead of like Satan,[69] we must live in, not rebel against, reality, even when that reality may produce outcomes that induce in us extreme pain. Thus, in some important respects, God himself is subject to natural evil and to the operation of natural law inherent in other real entities that he must respect though it gives him pain. To be like him, we must likewise respect the operation of those natural laws.

The combination of random effects and the operation of laws implicit in physical reality will sometimes yield things like the death of a young mother or of a beloved child. Were parents empowered to eliminate all suffering and death for their children, most might do so. But to do so consistently, to do so as Heavenly Parents would probably have to do, these mortal parents would need to follow Kant's categorical imperative, a rule that suggests an act is moral only if we would apply it not only to ourselves but to everyone else as well.[70] Thus, parents would need to make what is true for their one child true for all children. Would a wise parent eliminate death and suffering for that one child if the cost were to destroy the ability for their other children and all children to choose their own destiny? Would they destroy agency to end the suffering or preserve the life of a single child? If all choices yield the same beneficent consequences, then moral agency no longer exists. The world would potentially be ordered as Satan proposed in the premortal councils rather than as God proposed. The pain and grief we experience when bad things happen to us and our children can sometimes seem unbearable. Even so, upon reflection we may feel compelled to acknowledge that agency cannot exist without tragedy and that the greatest tragedy of all is the loss of agency.

According to Latter-day Saint theology, we become more like our Heavenly Parents as we humbly accept the necessity of some painfully real losses. We must learn to live with pain as well as with joy.

Soul-Making," 13.

69. Satan's unwillingness to face reality is clearly demonstrated in the doctrine of Nehor, which Satan certainly inspired:

> And it came to pass that . . . [Nehor was] brought before [Alma$_2$] to be judged . . . And he also testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life. (Alma 1:2–4)

70. See Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton, "Kant's Moral Philosophy" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2024 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta, plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/.

We must learn to accept and respect realities inherent in other self-existent things. But while the weeping of our Heavenly Parents and the suffering of our Savior demonstrate that the life, even of exalted beings, is not entirely free from pain, we can have faith, and eventually a perfect knowledge, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39). They will also not separate us from those we love, who also love God and the Savior. There will be passing defeats and sorrows. The drama of both mortal and eternal life has an element of tragedy. But for the faithful who are redeemed and return to live eternally with our Heavenly Parents and Christ, the drama is ultimately a comedy that has an overwhelmingly happy ending.

While Latter-day Saint theology can account for the problem of evil more effectively than any other theology within the Judeo-Christian tradition, there are caveats. Its ability to do so is contingent on embracing specific versions of the theology. There are certain formulations of Restoration theology that forfeit most of its advantages in dealing with the problem of evil. We will discuss two of these theological contingencies: first, alternative formulations of free will, and second, alternative formulations of what intelligences are.

Caveat 1: Alternative formulations of free will

Hausam succinctly describes the main alternative positions of Latter-day Saints on the nature of free will:

> Most Mormons frame this doctrine of free agency by means of the concept of "libertarian" free will, the idea that for a choice to be free it must be possible to do the opposite, all circumstances involved in the choice being equal. Some LDS theologians, however, have adopted a version of "compatibilist" free will, which states that our choices are rooted in our character, or who we are, and are determined by our character, and it is not possible to do the opposite. Both camps would agree, however, that the important point here is that our choices are caused, ultimately, only by us, and are not rooted in the determination of God.[71]

If most Latter-day Saints, as Hausam suggests, adopt an

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71. Hausam, "It's all in Arminius," 17.

incompatibilist, libertarian conception of free agency, then most largely forfeit the theological advantages discussed above that are grounded in the rejection of *ex nihilo* creation. Since the libertarian conception of free will breaks all linkages between the past and the present, how a being was created becomes irrelevant. The distinction between *ex nihilo* creation and eternal self-existence becomes irrelevant when assigning moral responsibility for evil deeds. It remains relevant only to the existence of divine omniscience. Given libertarian free will, as previously discussed, an omniscient God would be morally responsible for the actions of creatures he created. So creedal theologians must discard omniscience, as open theists do, to fully address the problem of evil.

Latter-day Saint theologians who have an incompatibilist, libertarian conception of free will would not need to jettison divine omniscience. Even if God foreknows that an intelligence will commit gross evil if clothed in a spiritual and physical body, God's only options are to leave the self-existent intelligence undeveloped, or to help it enlarge its scope for action and, thereafter, confront its own inherent malevolence. It may be better for an intelligence — even an intelligence disposed to do evil — to have the opportunity to act and know itself rather than remain inactive and therefore unknowing. God would be justified in providing the opportunity for that entity to gain both a spirit body and a physical body, so that it might advance to a higher, though suboptimal, state of being.

While losing relative advantage in accounting for the problem of evil might provide weak grounds for rejecting libertarian free will and embracing self-determinism, there are stronger grounds for preferring self-determinism. Libertarian free will would seem to be incompatible with faith in God, final judgment, and enduring exaltation — core principles of the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ. To reiterate, libertarian free will breaks the linkage between past and present. For all options to be open in any moment, the past cannot be fully indicative or even necessarily predictive of what the present and future will be. A person who has consistently chosen to do evil in the past may, like Alma or Paul, choose to do good now and in the future. One who has chosen to do good in the past may, suddenly choose to do evil.

In Latter-day Saint theology, human beings are ultimately the same species as God, being his children who have the potential to become like him. But if human beings were to have libertarian free will, as some Latter-day Saints believe, then God would likewise have libertarian

free will. If he does, even he could not be relied upon to be tomorrow the perfectly righteous and just being that he is today. As Joseph Smith taught, were God changeable, and thus unreliable, we could not exercise saving faith in him.[72] Nor could there be a last judgment, a final judgment with assignment to eternal degrees of glory. Those exalted to the celestial kingdom might decide tomorrow that they no longer wish to be there or might act in ways that would make heaven cease to be heaven if they remained there. Conversely, those consigned to the telestial kingdom might change tomorrow and suddenly merit an "upgrade" to the celestial kingdom. All this instability inherent in libertarian free will is very much out of harmony with the Gospel that is taught in the scriptures. There, God is described as being unchanging (Mormon 9:19; Moroni 8:18), and judgment as being final (Alma 12:5; Doctrine and Covenants 43:25). Since all the core principles of the Gospel are consistent with self-determinism and inconsistent with libertarian free will, we may reasonably conclude that our choices reflect our uncreated, self-existent, enduring, eternal being. God has taken up the task of helping each of us attain the highest form of existence that is compatible with who we intrinsically are, and may become.

Self-determinism might seem to warrant a complaint that, being self-determined and self-destined to choose a path that reflects our ultimately fixed character, we do not have the power to choose our destiny. Those who do evil might complain that they would like to be righteous but are unable to do so because righteousness was not encoded in their uncreated, eternal being. The obvious counterargument is this: if people truly wish to be righteous, they merely need to act in harmony with their own sincere wishes and they will be righteous. To be sure, all of us must sometimes say with Paul, "the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Romans 7:19). An essential component of any true desire to be righteous is a willingness to come unto Christ and eventually be made sinless, as Alma was, by the grace of God manifest in Jesus Christ. In another paper, we discuss the natural-law dynamics that make Christ's righteousness become our righteousness. But with the caveat that we must come unto Christ to fully attain our telos, each person will spend eternity in the place and in the condition that he or she has chosen.

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72. "The Character of God: Lecture Third," verses 15–19, *Lectures on Faith*, lecturesonfaith.com/3/.

Caveat 2: Alternative conceptions of intelligence(s)

Restoration theologians have articulated two main theories about intelligence(s). One group views *intelligences* as individuated, as what might be called existential *monads* or *atoms* (in the original Greek sense of a thing that cannot be divided into parts and that is, therefore, a fundamental unit of reality). A monad of this kind would have its own view on the world outside it and would be distinct from other monadic beings. Another group thinks of *intelligence* as a substance, a kind of ocean of intelligence, from which individuals may be created. In this view, intelligence is a stuff-noun, like water. Like seawater in an ocean, it is unindividuated from the surrounding mass of liquid. God must intervene to organize that substance into individuated beings. For the first group, *intelligences* (note the plural) is a count noun. For the second group, *intelligence* (note the singular) is a mass noun. Kenneth Godfrey reviews the positions taken by various theologically inclined Restoration thinkers such as B. H. Roberts, John A. Widsoe, Nels Nelson, and Truman Madsen who all viewed *intelligences* as being monadic. Conversely, Charles W. Penrose, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Bruce R. McConkie all viewed *intelligence* as being a mass substance.[73]

The difference between these views is theologically consequential. Both can locate the roots of evil in something outside of God. But only the first view, the idea that intelligences are monadic, fully exonerates God from any responsibility for individual sin. If *intelligences* are, in their essence, already individuated, God has no influence or responsibility for the character and choices of these co-eternal monadic entities. Their character is in no way influenced by any act of God. To reiterate what was said above, God's only option with respect to them is to expand or not expand their scope for action and ability to act.

If, on the other hand, *intelligence* is not individuated, if God creates individual beings by organizing a portion of the substance, *intelligence*, to form each individual, God may be responsible for the differences that exist between individuals who choose good and those who choose evil. For the good or evil to be grounded in the intelligence, that substance must be differentiated in some way, some of it

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73. Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The History of Intelligence in Latter-day Saint Thought," in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1989), 213–36, rsc.byu.edu/pearl-great-price-revelations-god/history-intelligence-latter-day-saint-thought.

having inherent within it the seeds of evil, and some of it having within it the seeds of good. A being organized wholly of the inferior intelligence material might be disposed to entirely hate God. A being composed wholly of the superior intelligence material might be disposed to entirely love God. A being composed of a mixture of good and bad intelligence material might do evil because of the bad elements that compose it. But because of the good elements that also compose it, it might lament or even resent the fact that God has yoked it with evil material and, thus, condemned it to suffer rather than rejoice, as it might have done if differently composed.

The theological advantages of the monadic view of intelligences are considerable. In addition to better obviating the problem of evil, the monadic view is more consistent with the concept of eternal identity and being. Our Father and Mother in Heaven obviously now exist as individuals. The *Proclamation on the Family* suggests that not only their individual existence, but also their gender and ours are eternal attributes: "Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose."[74] For gender or character or any other attribute to be an eternal property of a person, intelligences would probably need to be monadic. In Christianity and, more broadly in the West, the autonomous nature of the individual is generally affirmed. Theologically, the monadic view of *intelligences* is more consistent with this Western (and scriptural) conception of differentiated, individuated souls. The ocean of *intelligence* view is more consistent with the Eastern conceptions of Hinduism and Buddhism, in which many attributes, if not most, that we associate with being an individual are illusory and something to be transcended. Given the scriptural emphasis on individual identity and moral responsibility, Latter-day Saints should probably embrace the belief that intelligences exist as intrinsically differentiated spiritual monads.

Summary and Conclusions

In this article, we have attempted to demonstrate for those who embrace the classical formulation of the concept of God (the set of beliefs about God promulgated since ancient times by Judaism, creedal Christianity, and Islam), that the necessity for an atonement

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74. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," 23 September 1995, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world.

must be located in God, because he is the only self-existent being, the *ex nihilo* Creator of all other things. As the sole self-existent Being and source of all that exists, there is no other place to locate the Atonement. Given that classical formulation regarding who God and humanity are, the problem of evil is intractable. If we embrace the full set of classical assumptions, God cannot be absolved of responsibility for evil. While libertarian free will has some potential to attenuate God's responsibility for evil by breaking the causal link between God, the *ex nihilo* Creator, and humanity, the *ex nihilo* creation, even that promising move helps only if one of God's classical attributes — omniscience — is rejected. Even that open-theist modification of the classic conception of God does not resolve the problem, because it accomplishes too much, because it breaks the linkage between the past and the present, making evil a free-floating, random occurrence for which no being can reasonably be held accountable.

These problems disappear if we accept Latter-day Saint theology in its most compelling form. *Ex nihilo* creation is rejected; there are many billions of self-existent beings instead of only one; and law changes from being exclusively legislated to being largely natural. Additionally, the necessity for atonement is located in self-existent human beings, not in God, though it falls to God graciously to provide it and thus make exaltation possible. The linkage between past and present is restored, along with moral accountability. Responsibility for evil is clearly assignable to human beings rather than to God, which solves the classical problem of evil.

Having demonstrated in this article that God is not responsible for evil, what remains is to explain how beings who are self-existent and unchangeable can be saved from the evil that is justly attributable to them and from the hell that they will inevitably thrust themselves into. We will address this topic in a forthcoming atonement-theory article.

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