

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO . . .

G. St. John Stott

DOES GOD UNDERSTAND
OUR FEARS?

1. THE PROBLEM

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!*

WE SING JOSEPH M. SCRIVEN'S "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"—or one of countless hymns that carry the same message of God's nearness in prayer—and are happy that we know Jesus' love. And then there comes a tragedy. A child dies, perhaps. Somewhere in the world, a child dies every three seconds (one has died since you began reading this sentence), but this time it is *our* child, and the pain is unavoidably, bitterly ours. We feel guilt. We feel fear, for the old certainties about life no longer apply. We sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"—and we wonder. Real friends know what it is to suffer, to grieve; they know what it is to fear. *Does God?* We know about the agonies in Gethsemane and at Calvary; we know that on the cross, Jesus shared humanity's deepest sense of godforsakenness.¹ But what about everyday suffering, everyday fear? Does God really understand?

Most Christians assume that God does, but there is room to wonder—for God is not just Abba, the Father to whom we relate in trust and love, but the Creator as well. That should give us pause, for the idea that the Creator understands his creation in the way that we are asking God to understand us cannot be taken for granted. "[O]ne attribute of God is absolutely fundamental in the Bible," it has been argued,

one attribute is absolutely necessary in order to render intelligible all the rest. That attribute is the

awful transcendence of God. From beginning to end the Bible is concerned to set forth the awful gulf that separates the creature from the Creator.²

Even if we question whether the gulf is as great as this author supposed, *some* gulf would be presumed in most theologies—and that being so, we might wonder whether God really can bridge the gulf and understand our griefs and fears.³ After all, if we assume that understanding fear, frustration, and despair fully entails having experienced the associated mental states,⁴ we might be unwilling to attribute such understanding to God. Fear, frustration, and despair are states that follow from incomplete knowledge or power, and such incompleteness is not what most of us normally associate with deity.

Faced with this objection, we might retreat from a position which expects God to experience fear, to one that assumes he knows about fear because he knows us. As Wesley put it, looking from heaven God "sees all [our] sufferings, with every circumstance of them." In his omniscience, "He knows all the hearts of the sons of men, and understands all their thoughts . . . and all they feel."⁵ But this, too, is an answer that leads us into controversy, for the implication that God is learning from us is itself problematic. The idea that God is subject to change was anathematized in the Nicene Creed, and though that objection might not carry much weight with most SUNSTONE readers, most of us would nevertheless be uncomfortable with the thought of a God whose knowledge of his creation is entirely contingent.

Given such problems, it is hardly surprising that St. Augustine tried to dismiss the whole question of God's understanding our suffering as misconceived—God's pity, he ex-

plained "is not the wretched heart of a fellow-sufferer . . . the pity of God is the goodness of his help."⁶ Nor is it surprising that traditionally Christianity would affirm a doctrine of divine impassibility, whereby God was unmoved by human suffering. However uncomfortable that idea might have felt, there seemed little alternative to it if one was to maintain the doctrine of immutability. After all, to be moved was to change, and to change was to be part of a temporal, and therefore bounded, universe. As Nicholas P. Wolterstorff has noted of this perspective, "If God responds, then God is not metaphysically immutable; and if not metaphysically immutable, then not eternal."⁷

However, we do not have to follow Augustine's lead here. We do not have to accept that God is impassible. There are other ways of answering the question as to whether God understands, and one is found in the thinking of Joseph Smith, Jr. Smith's answer allows for a God who suffers and yet is unchanging: a God who understands our fears and yet is still Lord. Ironically, it was not an answer that Smith thought meaningful to explore. The question of God's passibility, once raised, only served to direct us away from reflections on God's awareness of suffering to considerations of our own discipleship. It is almost as if, for Smith, there was a point beyond which talk of God becomes unprofitable for those who seek to be followers of Christ. Nevertheless, in reaching this point—in coming to focus less on the goodness of God's help than on the way in which the divine response to suffering should be a model for our own—Smith managed to reconcile the traditional attributes of God and the claim that God knows for himself what it is we suffer.

2. THE DOCTRINE

*Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in prayer.*

THOSE familiar with Smith's teachings might think that they know where this is heading. On 7 April 1844, addressing a general conference of the Church, Smith reflected on the recent death of the fifty-five-year-old King Follett, a convert to Mormonism of thirteen years standing. In doing so, Smith announced what is possibly his most controversial doctrine—that "God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!" Starting from John 5:19, ("The Son



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can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do”), Smith argued that this text referred to Christ’s death and resurrection.

The scriptures inform us that Jesus said, as the Father hath power in himself, even so hath the Son power—to do what? Why, what the Father did. The answer is obvious—in a manner to lay down his body and take it up again.⁸

Smith was not concerned to address the link between experience and knowledge in this discourse, but it is not hard to see what his answer to our question would be. Does God understand our human fears? Yes, of course—for once he was human like us.

This is, to say the least, a challenging answer; but as it happens, it is not the only answer that we can find in Smith’s thought, and it is not the one that concerns me here. Some fourteen years before the prophet took the stand in Nauvoo, he had offered in the Book of Mormon another response, one that was very different although no less radical. Preaching in Gideon, Alma II prophesies of Christ, and in doing so tells of the circumstances of Christ’s incarnation. Alma II describes how as a man “he shall go forth, suffering pains, and afflictions, and temptations of every kind.” Christ will take upon himself, Alma explains, “the pains and the sicknesses of his people” as well as their weaknesses, so that he might know mercy “according to the flesh” so that “he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.”⁹

This is a most remarkable claim (indeed, for me, far more remarkable than anything in the King Follett discourse). Sensing its radical quality, Alma almost apologizes for what he has said. “[T]he Spirit knoweth all things,” he immediately concedes. By virtue of his omniscience, that is to say, Christ did not need to learn of human suffering by suffering himself in the flesh. But Christ chose to suffer nevertheless, as an act of love—and that gives us a basis for trusting that he truly is “God with us”—that in every way, he understands.¹⁰

This might be thought unremarkable, as offering nothing more than what we learn in the Bible, but Alma’s words take us beyond the resources of the biblical narrative. There is nothing in the New Testament that yields precisely this insight. Although Alma’s words are reminiscent of the boast of the author of Hebrews that Christ “is able to succour them . . . that are tempted” because he too “hath suffered and been tempted,” the text of the epistle is primarily concerned with Christ’s suffering temptation.¹¹ In contrast, Alma’s

testimony focuses on God’s compassion and his wanting to share the vicissitudes of our life.

We might, of course, question how well-considered a testimony this is, for there are two ways in which Alma’s words seem to contradict other teachings in the Book of Mormon. First, it is generally reported that Jesus goes forth among men and women “working mighty miracles”—“healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, . . . curing all manner of diseases,” and casting out devils¹²—and inasmuch as this is not a life like ours, it is hard to believe that his experience really matches that of humanity.¹³ Second, linking God’s knowledge of suffering with the ministry of Jesus¹⁴ implies that God changed in becoming incarnate. This might not seem unreasonable to those who accept a later Mormonism’s concept of eternal progression, but the idea of divine mutability is hard to reconcile with the witness of the Book of Mormon that God is “unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity,” and if he did change, “he would cease to be God.”¹⁵

Both objections can be met, however. First, even though the Book of Mormon unhesitatingly proclaims Christ’s power,¹⁶ it also presumes that there is parity between Christ and humanity in openness to suffering. When Alma insists that Christ will “suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue” (and that his sufferings were not just those of Calvary and Gethsemane), we are meant to take him seriously. It is a property of bodies conceived “after the flesh” to suffer, and in choosing incarnation, Christ chose the pains of humanity. Besides, although Jesus ministered with power, his power was to be used only in serving others. There was no respite from the sufferings of the flesh for himself,¹⁷ for (as we learn again and again in the Book of Mormon) the power of the Spirit is given to allow us to be of benefit to our fellow beings, not to ensure our own painless ride through mortality.¹⁸

Joseph Smith would famously elaborate on this insight in Liberty Jail. “[T]he powers of

heaven,” he would write to the Saints, can be exercised only “upon principles of righteousness.” When we use the powers in self-interest, “the heavens withdraw themselves; the spirit of the Lord is grieved; and . . . amen to

the priesthood or the authority of that man.”¹⁹ Such thoughts had no doubt gained fresh—even bitter—relevance from the church’s experience in Missouri, where the Saints had slipped into self-righteous arrogance; but these thoughts were not the product of any new discovery. Rather they were the fruit of what, a decade before, had been the Book of Mormon’s witness to Jesus’ ministry.

Again, the idea of God’s learning from his creation is not as problematic as it might seem, even though Alma seems to compound the problem by making no attempt to reconcile constancy and change. Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, God’s unchangeability is located in his moral qualities, as when Mormon reflects that “God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being.”²⁰ But while such a stance would allow us to argue that God might learn from experience without changing in his essential nature, Alma is silent on the question of

God’s moral attributes.²¹ What interests him instead is the way in which God’s timelessness embraces both changelessness and mutability²²—and by following his lead, we can see how the problem we seem to face is in fact a false dilemma. Time is known only by God’s creation, not by God himself: as Alma explains to Corianton, time is “only . . . measured unto men.”²³ Furthermore with timelessness, comes a knowledge of an all-embracing present.²⁴ From God’s perspective, that is to say, all of creation’s history can be contained within a single moment of timeless apprehension.²⁵

Although the implications of this idea are not formally explored in the Book of Mormon, divine timelessness is taken for granted in at least two passages, both belonging to the same period in Nephite his-

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tory. One is Alma's own argument that those called to the priesthood are "called and prepared from the foundation of the world, according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works." This foreknowledge would not have followed from any valiance in a pre-mortal life (a reading unduly influenced by later Mormonism), but from the way that, to quote Joseph Bellamy, God "knows himself, and all things possible, and beholds all things past, present and to come, in one all-comprehensive view."²⁶ The other passage is in Mosiah, where the marked tense of Abinadi's testimony that "the redemption which [Christ] hath made for his people . . . was prepared from the foundation of the world," logically follows from the belief that, from a timeless perspective, the atonement was already complete and available in the second century BCE.²⁷ If this is granted, God's timeless knowledge would include an apprehension of Christ's experience in mortality, and Alma's testimony would indeed fit within a coherent system of doctrine.²⁸

3. THE APPLICATION

*Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield thee;
thou wilt find a solace there.*

THUS far we have seen how Alma's words provide an answer to our question. Jesus knew fear and suffering. To both anticipate and deny the logic of the King Follett discourse: as a man, he suffered and feared as we do. However, as noted, Alma's words at Gideon force us to go beyond the delight of doctrinal discovery to the sobering recognition that such questions are ultimately unimportant. Alma's focus is pastoral rather than theological, on *this* world rather than the next, and in this context, our questions concerning God's foreknowledge and his impassibility can be unfruitful.²⁹ To read Alma in this way might seem surprising, for there is no explicitly ethical dimension to his words, and in telling of Christ's suffering Alma seems to have purely doctrinal concerns. He looks back to Second Isaiah's prophesy of a suffering servant³⁰ and moves from there to the good news that Christ will take upon himself both death, "that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people," and the sins of his people, "that he might blot out their transgressions."³¹ But there is more to Alma's testimony than this— as we should realize from his silences.

Those familiar with the Book of Mormon

will know that Alma's words imply a plan of redemption. Created that they might know joy, human beings choose sin over faithfulness, and God responds to this rebellion with three-fold grace. First, he provides death as an act of mercy. Because of death, men and women need not live forever as his enemies: repentance becomes a meaningful option, and a return to his presence, a possibility. Then, because moral perfection is impossible in mortality, and yet only those free from sin can enter the kingdom, God forgives our sins. He cannot do so automatically; that would imply a divine indifference to transgression. There must be a payment for the offense of human sinfulness, so that God might be just as well as merciful. Smith would eventually formalize God's three-fold providential concern for his creation—for all men and women, for those who were

nominal believers, and for the elect—in a soteriology that entails salvation in one of three kingdoms of glory. In the Book of Mormon, however, there is an undifferentiated offer of salvation. Christ atones for sin, providing unconditional pardon for the sins of those "who have fallen by the transgression of Adam, who have died, not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have ignorantly sinned" and forgiveness conditioned on faith and repentance for those sins committed against the promptings of his Spirit.³² Third, and finally, because a fullness of joy comes only when body and soul have been reunited, God joins them in the resurrection so that the righteous will not linger in Paradise but "shine forth in the kingdom of God."³³

However, despite all the centrality of this plan to the Book of Mormon message, it is not elaborated on in the text of Alma 5. Although Alma tells his hearers of Jesus' birth to Mary and of his ministry before going up to Jerusalem a final time, he says nothing of the crucifixion nor the resurrection. To be sure, as noted, Alma foretells that Christ "will loose the bands of death" and "take upon him the sins of his people," but he does not tell of Calvary or the empty tomb. His rhetorical focus is elsewhere.

These are not the only silences we can find in the Book of Mormon, where even angels—within the book, the primary source of information about the plan of redemption—

give only partial accounts of the good news they bring. Jacob learns nothing of Jesus' ministry before the final ascent to Jerusalem. Benjamin is not told of a universal resurrection. Only Benjamin and Alma II learn specific details of Jesus' birth. Samuel's summary of what he was told makes no mention of any event between Jesus' birth and death. But these silences should not surprise us, for the prophecies and preaching of the Book of Mormon are not primarily intended to be doctrinal expositions. Rather, they are stories told to make a difference in the lives of those who hear or read. As Kevin Vanhoozer has observed of the Bible: in the narratives of scripture, "meaning is a three-dimensional communicative action" involving content, energy, and "teleology or final purpose"—and their

teleology affects their content.³⁴

Book of Mormon prophecies of the atonement are made in order to bring their hearers to repentance and are primarily concerned with our reconciliation to God, not the details of how reconciliation is possible.³⁵ The book's witness to the resurrection is both more and less than a testimony to the empty tomb (or, for that matter, the ministry in Bountiful). It is a message of accountability, in which the manner of Christ's rising from the dead—the means by which we are brought to account—is less important than the fact that we will stand before him to be judged.³⁶ And when, as in the present case, the focus of its prophecy is Jesus' ministry, his suffering is not just evidence of the condescension of God: it is a model for discipleship in that our response is supposed to be ministry of our own. Jesus learns from his suffering how to "succor his people," and we should do the same.

That too might sound like a statement of the obvious, but it should be remembered that the New Testament church usually saw Christ's suffering as redemptive rather than exemplary, and that the same perspective is also held within the Book of Mormon. Thus Nephi affirms that Christ would suffer the spiritual pain of all "that the resurrection might pass upon all men, that all might stand before him at the great and judgment day."³⁷ Furthermore, when Christ was taken as an

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example, what was held up for imitation in the New Testament and echoed in centuries of preaching was a mute acceptance of suffering that had usually been seen as a justification for accepting the political status quo. Smith's contemporary, Nathanael Emmons, noting how Christ "suffered weariness and pain" yet he did not "murmur at his unhappy situation," was only following tradition in seeing in such forbearance an example that all Christians should follow.³⁸ In the Book of Mormon, however, although evil is something to be accepted as the price of human agency and the saints are encouraged to be submissive and longsuffering in the face of persecution,³⁹ within the community of faith suffering is to be eased, burdens are to be borne—and Christ is the pattern to be followed.

It is here that we must finally part company with Scriven. Yes, when friends "despise, forsake [us]," we can have recourse to prayer. Yes, God is faithful in a way that human beings are not. But the inevitability of abandonment and contempt by friends is something we need to challenge; we should not view it with the kind of complacency we find in Scriven's hymn. As Christians, we are called to faithfulness; and, among other things, faithfulness means mourning with those who mourn. Needless to say, this calling is not an optional extra in God's plan. Sometimes God's answer to our prayers is silence. ("Of Course—I prayed—" Emily Dickinson bitterly writes; "And did God Care?")⁴⁰ If God's love is to be known when he is silent, those who suffer need fellow sojourners to be faithful to their call.

Such faithfulness is hardly easy. Human pride gets in the way of mutual concern. Justifying themselves by the "false, and vain, and foolish doctrines" of consumerism and greed, people neglect the physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of others. But that is why, for Alma II, the suffering of Jesus is not just an act of atonement, and therefore a means to our salvation; it is also an act of solidarity—an expression of compassionate concern for humanity's pain. As such, it models the covenant lifestyle that the saints in Gideon are urged to embrace. Although Alma testifies of redemption in Christ, his underlying concern is not—I suggest—to elaborate upon it, but to bring his hearers to the covenant that his father had introduced at the Waters of Mormon.⁴¹ In that context, the implication of Alma's words is clear. Christ chose to suffer as we suffer so that he might understand and reach out to us with healing—and so that we might know that he did, and do the same. ☪

NOTES

NOTE ON SCRIPTURAL CITATIONS. *In this article, the Book of Mormon references given are from the Community of Christ, "Authorized Version," as first published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Independence, MO: 1908). References to the editions published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City, Utah) are given in brackets following. For an example, see note 9. The same system of double citation is used for references to the Book of Doctrine and Covenants.*

1. Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 4–5.

2. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 62–63.

3. The problem is expressed in non-theological terms in Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 439.

4. One might argue otherwise: as David Papineau has noted, although experience creates memory traces—and therefore the ability to recreate an experience imaginatively—it does not necessarily add to an individual's understanding of the experience itself. *Thinking About Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 53, 56–57; cf. William J. Mander, "Does God Know What It Is Like to Be Me?" *Heythrop Journal* 43 (2002): 438–42. However, I find telling Kendall Walton's argument that fear, without its motivational force, "is not fear at all." See his *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representative Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). 201–02. See also Michael Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 169.

5. John Wesley, "On Divine Providence," *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. T. Jackson, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 6:317.

6. *Contra adversarium legis et prophetarium*, qtd. Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 17.

7. "Does God Suffer?" *Modern Reformation*, September–October 1999, 45.

8. *Times and Seasons* 5 (15 August 1844), 614.

9. Alma 5:21–22 [7:12]. References to Book of Mormon history should not be seen as presuming the work's historicity; but that disclaimer should not be taken to mean that I am interested in proving it to be a nineteenth-century work. In what follows, I set the question of origins to one side.

10. Matthew 1:23. Jesus would know only his own experience of suffering, not that of others, but this is enough for us to count him as being with us—those who suffer—rather than with those who are spared the vicissitudes of the flesh. It is this that I see as important in Alma's witness, not the idea that Jesus might have gained in mortality a particular and contingent knowledge of suffering.

11. Hebrews 2:18; 4:15, NRSV.

12. 1 Nephi 3:75 [11:28].

13. This is not a problem unique to the Book of Mormon. It is easy enough to accept that "the Son of man . . . came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45; cf. Mark 9:35), but the idea that in the incarnation he gave up some part of himself—that "though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9)—is more problematic. When we read that Christ willingly made himself nothing, and emptied himself for the sake of the

world, we might remember also reading that when Caesar "dedicated himself" to the world, he "robbed himself of himself" so that he could never again "do anything for himself" (Seneca, "To Polybus, On Consolation," *Moral Essays*, trans. John W. Basone, 3 vols. [London: Heinemann, 1928–35], 2:375)—and we know full well that we must allow for exaggeration in such a text. Caesar was not on the same plane as those whom he served, and neither, scripture suggests, was Christ.

14. Of course, locating God's knowledge in Jesus' experience brings with it the need to presume a continuity of knowledge between the son of Mary and the risen Lord, but this follows naturally from the Book of Mormon affirmation that memory is preserved in resurrection (2 Nephi 6:32–35 [9:13–14], cf. Alma 19:58 [40:23]). Needless to say, considering just how that might be possible, given current neurobiological understandings of memory, would be a separate project; here it should just be noted that Smith would himself have taken it for granted (a) that individual identity was linked to memory, and (b) that memory would be perfect at the day of judgment. See Orson Pratt, "On Language or the Medium of Communication in the Future State, and on the Increased Powers of Locomotion," *Deseret News*, 28 December 1854.

15. Mormon 4:82 [9:19]; Moroni 8:19 [8:18], cf. Mosiah 1:97 [3:5].

16. 1 Nephi 3:75 [11:28].

17. Alma and Amulek's self-liberation from prison in Ammonihah is problematic in this context, but it should be noted that their deliverance is presented as evidence that God is a God of power (Alma 12:151–52 [19:17]); arguably it is necessary for signs of power to be given sometimes lest God's actions be "resolved into natural causes"—as New Divinity theologians feared that they might. See Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated and Distinguished From All Counterfeits* (1750; Ames, Iowa: International Outreach, 1997), 33n; cf. Mark Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 42–47.

18. Even political shortcuts are eschewed (as when Ammon declines a place in Lamoni's household: Alma 12:35–36 [17:24–25]). Power is solely used in ministry (Alma 12:43 [17:29], cf. Alma 14:114–15 [26:29–30]).

19. To the Church at Quincy, Illinois, 20 March 1839, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 440. Spelling normalized.

20. Moroni 8:19 [14:4]; cf. *The Lectures on Faith: On the Doctrine of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio: The Church of Christ, 1835), 3:15, 21.

21. Although Alma argues that if "the work of justice" (the plan of redemption) were destroyed, "God would cease to be God" (19:95 [42:13]), the issue here is God's power, not his moral qualities. In the *Lectures on Faith*, 1:13–17, God's power is identified with his faith, and faith is considered to be an attribute of deity—but I do not think that this is implied in Alma's words.

22. Of course, the very idea of divine timelessness would be challenged in a later Mormonism by the idea that God, too, has his temporal context—the implication of "The Book of Abraham," paragraph 16, *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 March 1842), 719 [Abraham 3:3 in *The Pearl of Great Price*].

23. Alma 19:38 [40:8]. Blake T. Ostler, noting

that Alma also states that “All is as one day with God,” protests that we cannot see him as really affirming God’s timelessness “as such a reading empties the word ‘day’ of all temporal meaning.” See his *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 152. However, Ostler’s argument relies on our taking “day” as a reference to a period of fixed duration, even though that is not the most obvious interpretation to be made. “Day” can also refer to an “appointed or fixed time.” See Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828; San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967), s.v. *day*, def. 7. This seems to be the case here. Alma is discussing the chronology of the resurrection, and explaining that though there are many “days” (or times) of resurrection for men and women, there is only one “day” (time) for God—for all times are one for him.

24. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. W. V. Cooper (London: J. M. Dent, 1902), 163.

25. There is a hint of this in the report that Moses “beheld the earth, . . . and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the Spirit of God.” See “A Revelation, Given to Joseph the Seer, June, A.D. 1830,” v. 19, *Holy Scriptures, Containing the Old and New Testaments: An Inspired Revision of the Authorized Version*, New Corrected Edition (Independence, Missouri: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1944) [Moses 1:27]; cf. Orson Pratt, Discourse of 28 December 1873, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 16:337. If we take this

to mean that all creation—at any one moment in its history—could be apprehended by the grace of God, it would not have been difficult to presume that God might see all history together in a single act of perception. After all, although the reality known to human beings is sequenced, knowing is not itself a process that takes time, “or an activity which entails the existence of earlier and later stages in the mental life of the knowing agent.” See William Mann, “Simplicity and Immutability,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (1983): 270.

26. Alma 9:65 [13:3]; Charles R. Harrell, “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844,” *BYU Studies* 28:2 (1988): 75–96; Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated*, 26.

27. Mosiah 8:53 [15:19], cf. 2:10–11 [4:6–7]. The subject is too complex to be fully treated here, but one might note that the report that Jesus broke and shared bread “in memory” of himself (Luke 22:19) invokes a future (“my body . . . given for you”) as yet unimagined by the disciples. “Think of me, Jesus says to his friends while burdening their arms, in advance, with a bloody corpse. Prepare the shrouds, the bandages, the oily substances”—Jaques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John Leavey and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 66a. The reporting of the future as the past is not a problem unique to the Book of Mormon.

28. As it happens, both God’s timelessness and his foreknowledge have been questioned in the years since the publication of the Book of Mormon. However, although a full treatment of these themes

would need to take this into account, here I am just concerned to note the coherence of Book of Mormon theology.

29. This is not to suggest that such questions do not need to be asked. It is by asking them—and not resting content with easy answers—that we come to an understanding of God’s “character, perfections and attributes” (*Lectures on Faith*, 2:4). Our faith as a church (here I speak as a member of the Community of Christ) is the poorer if we do not pursue the theological task. But faith must ultimately inform action.

30. Albeit at second remove: Alma 5:21 [7:12] paraphrases Matthew 8:17, which references Isaiah 53:4.

31. Alma 5:21, 23 [7:12, 13].

32. Mosiah 1:107 [3:11].

33. Alma 19:59 [40:25]; cf. Matthew 13:43. The fall itself is thus ultimately fortunate; as Lehi explains, “Adam fell, that men might be” (2 Nephi 1:115 [2:25]).

34. Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 218. Anthony C. Thiselton has similarly suggested that the words of biblical writers “are not for information transfer but have performative force.” See his *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 2000), 52.

35. 3 Nephi 5:34 [12:7].

36. 3 Nephi 12:26–27 [27:14].

37. 2 Nephi 6:47 [9:22].

38. 1 Peter 4:1, cf. Colossians 1:24; “The Humanity of Christ,” *The Works of Nathanael Emmons* (1842), ed. Bruce Kucklich, 6 vols. (New York, 1987), 2:757, 761.

39. Alma 3:20, 5:39, 10:28 [5:10, 7:23, 13:29]; for a particularly difficult application, see Alma 9:50–52 [12:30–32], where Alma feels constrained by the Spirit “not [to] stretch forth [his] hand” and save the families of converts who are being burned alive. Alma’s argument has a logic to it—it presumes that the guilty have not yet passed the point when repentance is impossible. For this, see Mormon 1:16–19 [1:15–18]; D&C 1:5g [1:33]; cf. Asahel Nettleton, “The Destruction of Hardened Sinners,” in Asahel Nettleton, *Sermons From the Second Great Awakening* (Ames, Iowa: International Outreach, Inc., 1995), 30–39. It is troubling, nonetheless.

40. Poem 581, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin, reading edition (Boston: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1999).

41. Mosiah 9:38–48 [18:8–16]; for the call to covenant in Gideon, see Alma 5:27 [7:15]. As Alma was ministering to an established church (Alma 4:9 [6:8]) this would presumably entail rebaptism as a sign of (renewed) willingness to keep God’s commandments (cf. 2 Nephi 13:38 [29:27]). The idea would not have seemed strange to Smith’s contemporaries. As the Rev. John Alonzo Clark noted in a sermon preached in Palmyra, 14 September 1828, the ordinances of the gospel were “both means of grace and badges of discipleship” (“God will not accept of a poor or partial offering,” 19, Rev. John Alonzo Clark Sermons, Special Collections, University of Delaware)—and though grace would not need to be renewed, discipleship could be appropriately reaffirmed. One could be “rebaptized into a different Spirit,” George Q. Cannon observed in his discourse of 8 October 1875. See *Journal of Discourses*, 18:107.



“Do you really believe in a higher power that has a hand in our lives?”