

# The Book of Mormon, the Early Nineteenth-Century Debates over Universalism, and the Development of the Novel Mormon Doctrines of Ultimate Rewards and Punishments

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In their study *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell observe that a characteristic of modern American religions, including Mormonism, is the belief that those of other faiths may be eligible for salvation.<sup>1</sup> However, Putnam and Campbell fail to point out that this Mormon inclusivism is not recent, but rather extends back to the very formative period of Mormon theological development. The early evolution of these beliefs has not been extensively studied and is not without controversy. For example, modern scholars have pointed to the apparent tension between the positions of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's subsequent revelations over the acceptance of Universalism, the teaching that all will be saved. While the Book of Mormon consigns wicked humans to an eternal torment, the later revelations endorse what Michael Quinn has described as "a theology of nearly universal salvation."<sup>2</sup> Richard Bushman finds the revelations to be a "perplexing reversal . . . [that] contradicted the book's firm stand."<sup>3</sup> This conclusion is obviously problematic, as it implies that the early Church repudiated teachings from the Book of Mormon immediately following its publication. Thus there is a need for a reassessment of the relation between early nineteenth-century Universalism and the teachings of the Book of Mormon and subsequent revelations.

The principal American opponents of the early nineteenth-cen-

ture Universalists were the mainline Protestant denominations (e.g., Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, and Episcopalians). Although disagreeing among themselves on various issues, these had all inherited from the Reformers the teaching that all humans would be awarded an eternal future stay either in heaven or in hell (a “two-outcome” theology). For this paper I will refer to this group as the “anti-Universalists.” Likewise, early nineteenth-century Universalists, while agreeing on the ultimate salvation of all humans (a “one-outcome” theology), disagreed on other issues with the great majority being classified as either “modern” or “restorationist” Universalists. A central dispute between the two was whether there would (restorationists) or would not (moderns) be punishment for unresolved sin in the future life.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, both the Universalists and their critics held that their own beliefs were the only reasonable interpretation of scripture and echoed the teachings of the early Christian Church.

In this paper I shall review the spectrum of early nineteenth-century American Universalism at the time of the publishing of the Book of Mormon, the responses of some contemporary Christian theologians who opposed Universalism, the early Mormon positions in these disputes as contained in the Book of Mormon, and some contributions of Joseph Smith’s subsequent revelations. I shall argue that (1) the Book of Mormon refutes “modern” Universalism, (2) the Book of Mormon’s treatment of the restorationist doctrines of salvation is ambiguous, and (3) reflections and discussions between Joseph Smith and other early Church members over the issues disputed between Universalists and their opponents resulted in several revelations that progressively defined an official Mormon interpretation of the Book of Mormon and resulted in a novel and complex schema of human salvation that incorporates theological elements of both traditional Protestant Christianity and restorationism.

### **The Early Nineteenth-Century Picture**

A number of important disputes dominated the American theological landscape in the first third of the nineteenth century. From its publication in 1830, knowledgeable readers noticed that the Book of Mormon seemed to take sides on these issues. For example, in his 1832 critical book review, Mormon opponent Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) noted that the Book of Mormon reproduced “every er-

ror and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years” and “decides all the great controversies.”<sup>5</sup> So what had been discussed in New York during the preceding decade? One of Campbell’s “great controversies,” that of “eternal punishment,” was the chief battle-ground between Universalists and their opponents.

In 1833, the Boston historian of Universalism Thomas Whittemore (1800–1861) observed that Universalism had been in America “about fifty years” and was rapidly increasing in adherents. In New York during the 1820s there were an estimated 150 Universalist societies, several Universalist periodicals, and a large number of additional individuals with Universalist leanings; and it was asserted that Universalism had become the fourth or fifth largest “among the denominations of the land.”<sup>6</sup> Thus New York Presbyterian Pastor Joel Parker (1799–1873) lamented in 1830 that “there is a numerous class of people who hold the doctrine of Universal Salvation” and additional “multitudes who feel powerfully inclined to reject a doctrine of . . . future and eternal punishment.”<sup>7</sup>

Whittemore identified the three principal founders of American Universalism as John Murray (1741–1815), Elhanan Winchester (1751–1797), and Hosea Ballou (1771–1852),<sup>8</sup> each of whom gave rise to distinct movements. Murray was a traditional Calvinist who found the doctrine of Universalism to be the antidote for the apparent injustice of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, which included the teaching that most people will be condemned to never-ending future punishment through no fault of their own. Conversely, Winchester held that humans will be subject to future punishment precisely because of their own unresolved sins but likewise found never-ending torment to be unjustly harsh. A similar view would subsequently be adopted by the restorationist Universalists, who at the time of the Book of Mormon included Paul Dean (d. 1860) and Charles Hudson (1795–1881).

Although Murray and Winchester agreed with the anti-Universalists on beliefs such as the Trinity, substitutionary atonement, and future punishment, Ballou had radically departed,

denying the traditional Christian doctrines of the full deity of Jesus, the substitutionary atonement, the impurity of the sinful soul after death, and future punishment for sin.

Those who adhered to a similar schema were termed “modern” or

“ultra-” Universalists by their opponents. Among the influential modern Universalists in 1830 were Ballou, Walter Balfour (1776–1852), and Whittemore. Shortly before publishing his results in 1830, Whittemore surveyed “the principal Universalist clergy” in America and found that the great majority agreed with Ballou on future punishment and the deity of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, Universalist opponents were particularly alarmed at the modern Universalists’ teachings and influence. For example, New York Methodist minister Timothy Merritt (1775–1845) charged that “the modern doctrine of universal salvation . . . lays another foundation [than traditional Christianity]” and constitutes “*another gospel*” altogether.<sup>10</sup>

Historian Ann Lee Bressler has pointed out that, in the early nineteenth century, Universalists “were most openly and consistently engaged in battle with other religious groups, [and this] was also the period of the denomination’s most rapid growth and greatest overall vitality.”<sup>11</sup> The advances of Universalism were accompanied by a proliferation of publications both supporting and opposing Universalist teachings. These peaked in number about the time the Book of Mormon appeared.<sup>12</sup>

The Universalist Paul Dean identified the two major American Christian theological persuasions that had become Universalism’s principal opponents. Those in the first group held that salvation and the effects of the atonement were available only to the “elect” whom “God . . . determined of his own good pleasure to select . . . for eternal glory . . . without the least reference to works done, or to be done.” This group was the Calvinists. By the early nineteenth century, American Calvinism had splintered into a spectrum of theological points of view (traditional “Old Calvinists,” New Divinity, New Haven theologians, and others) and denominations (Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Reformed). Dean’s second group believed that “salvation is truly and freely offered to all, upon such conditions as they can readily accept or reject . . . and that during . . . the day of probation many will continue willfully to reject the terms of grace and . . . come forever short of [salvation].”<sup>13</sup> These were the Arminians, the most numerous and influential of which were the American Methodists.<sup>14</sup>

Given this tumult, what did the Book of Mormon bring to the American discussion of Universalism? Recent scholars have concluded that the Book of Mormon “decides” the controversies over

Universalism by uniformly siding with Universalism's opponents. For example, Mark Thomas observed that the Book of Mormon "attacks" Universalism,<sup>15</sup> Dan Vogel that "the Book of Mormon . . . explicitly attacked the notion of universal salvation,"<sup>16</sup> Terryl Givens that "the Book of Mormon refuted universal salvation,"<sup>17</sup> Grant Palmer that "there appears to be a specific denouncement" of Universalism,<sup>18</sup> and Richard Bushman that "the *Book of Mormon* argued against universal salvation."<sup>19</sup>

In addition, Catholic sociologist of religion Thomas F. O'Dea (1915–1974), who resided in Utah for several years, concluded that "The doctrine of the book [Book of Mormon] is wholeheartedly and completely Arminian."<sup>20</sup> This observation is important in interpreting the Book of Mormon's responses to the debates over Universalism. Both the Calvinists and the Methodists produced early nineteenth-century works opposing Universalism, but each chose the arguments that supported their own theological views. Thus, in instances where the two groups differed in approach, examining the specific Methodist/Universalist disagreements is likely to be more productive in elucidating Book of Mormon teachings.

**The Early Nineteenth-Century Calvinists, Methodists,  
and Universalists Debate the Big Question:  
Who Will Be Saved? And the Book of Mormon Weighs In**

Like the anti-Universalists, the Book of Mormon teaches a two-outcome theology of ultimate reward or punishment: "eternal life" vs. "everlasting death," "heaven" vs. "hell." Traditional Calvinists believed that God himself had already made the decisions as to who went where, totally independent of human endeavor, so the division of souls in the future life needed no additional theological considerations. But problems presented themselves for the Methodists (and believers in the Book of Mormon and even some progressive Calvinists) who held that, in addition to divine grace, humans must voluntarily choose to accept Jesus during mortality in order to be saved. These had to address such difficult questions as how a just God would handle humans who were seemingly denied the opportunity to choose, e.g., those who died in infancy, or were mentally impaired, or were heathens who had never heard of the Bible.

To deal with such issues both the Methodists and the authors of Book of Mormon divided humans into the same five groups, each

of which required placement into one of the two outcomes. Both agreed that those dying in early childhood (“little children” in the Book of Mormon) are not accountable for personal sin, would be saved from the effects of the fall through the atonement, and would be awarded “eternal life”;<sup>21</sup> we will not deal further with them here.

The four remaining groups are accountable for their future rewards and punishments. The first of these is those who have faith in Jesus during their mortal life as manifested by a “change of heart,” repentance, living moral lives, and remaining committed to the end of mortal life (2 Nephi 31:18; 3 Nephi 15:9). Likewise for Methodism’s founder John Wesley (1703–1791) the “condition of final salvation” is “faith” followed by “holiness.”<sup>22</sup> This group we will term “the faithful.”

The second group is those, including the “Heathens,” who do not have an opportunity to learn about Jesus. These are “the untaught” (2 Nephi 9:26; Mosiah 3:11, 15:24). Wesley observed that “enlightened Heathens in the ancient world” and “the most intelligent Heathens that are now on the face of the earth” are “totally ignorant . . . [of] those [things] which relate to the eternal Son of God.”<sup>23</sup>

The third group is those who are taught but then reject the gospel message throughout the remainder of their mortal lives, thus failing to show the requisite faith in Jesus and to conform their lives accordingly (Mosiah 3:12; Alma 12:16, 32). Wesley taught that “God did from the beginning decree to reprobate all who should obstinately and finally continue in unbelief” but condemned the Calvinist doctrine of the “absolute, unconditional” reprobation.<sup>24</sup> We will term these “the unrepentant.”

Lastly are those who are truly converted by the Holy Ghost and then knowingly seek to undermine Christian progress by teaching falsehoods. These have committed the “unpardonable” sin and, unlike the unrepentant, cannot repent and be freed from liability for future punishment during the remainder of their mortal lifetimes (Jacob 7:19; Alma 39:6). These are “the unpardonable.” Referring to Matthew 12:31–32, Wesley noted that “it is plain, if we have been guilty of this [unpardonable] sin, there is no room for mercy.”<sup>25</sup> In the early nineteenth-century Methodist *Book of Discipline* the unrepentant and the unpardonable were clearly distinguished: “Not every sin willingly committed after justification, is the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore, the grant of repentance

is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after justification . . . [providing they] truly repent.”<sup>26</sup>

The authors of the Book of Mormon agreed with the Methodists and Universalists on the salvation of the faithful who, according to the Book of Mormon, will be awarded “eternal life” (3 Nephi 15:9; Mosiah 15:25). However, they sided with the Methodists against the Universalists in affirming the everlasting punishment of the unrepentant and the unpardonable. As New York Methodist Timothy Merritt explained, those who give in “to the will of the devil, are condemned by the law of God . . . and heirs of everlasting punishment.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the Book of Mormon states that the unrepentant who “die in their sins” and the unpardonable are respectively destined for “everlasting destruction” and “eternal punishment” (Alma 12:16–17; Jacob 7:18–19).

Conversely, the Book of Mormon and the Universalists agreed against the Methodists in affirming the universal salvation of the untaught. For the Methodists, the untaught will be accountable for their conduct and justly subject to future eternal punishment. Thus, referring to Paul’s teaching (Romans 2:14–15), Methodist theologian Richard Watson (1781–1833) concluded that although the heathen had “received no revealed law,” they had the law “written in their hearts” and “consciences,” and, thus, “we are bound to admit the accountability of all.”<sup>28</sup> Since the untaught were accountable and had not fulfilled the conditions for salvation during mortal life, they were not eligible for salvation. As Methodist Timothy Merritt insisted: “Salvation is offered to sinners upon conditions [faith, repentance, etc.] . . . [if] those conditions . . . are not performed by man during the present life, he cannot be saved, but must suffer a future, everlasting punishment.” And Methodist Luther Lee (1800–1883) agreed: “all who do not repent and obtain salvation, within the limits of this probationary state, must be forever lost.”<sup>29</sup> But the seeming injustice of consigning even the more morally upright untaught to eternal damnation weighed on the minds of some Methodists. For example, Wesley argued that “nor do I conceive that any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan [sic] world to damnation” and Richard Watson left open the possibility of salvation for a minority of heathens who obeyed the law as they knew it.<sup>30</sup>

To the contrary, the Universalists argued that all the untaught

will be saved. To condemn the heathen, as the Methodists had done, seemed to Universalist Paul Dean both irrational and unjust:

The limitation of all means and methods of grace to the narrow span of this life . . . is opposed to reason and equity. . . . Think what vast numbers of the heathen have lived and passed off the stage of life, without ever hearing so much as the name of Jesus. . . . Shall we at once turn all these to destruction without even the possibility of escape? How much more reasonable is it for us to believe that Christ . . . will continue to use with all his creatures, in all conditions, the most appropriate means for their reformation.”<sup>31</sup>

The authors of the Book of Mormon agree with the Universalists that all of the untaught will be saved. Thus, all humans who die “in their ignorance, not having salvation declared unto them” will “have eternal life, being redeemed by the Lord” (Mosiah 15:24).

Thus, Book of Mormon teaching agrees fully with neither the Universalists nor the Methodists but puts forward a novel and complex schema that includes some features of each.

### **The Book of Mormon and the Early Nineteenth-Century Debates over Universalism**

*The authors of the Book of Mormon side with the opponents of the modern Universalists*

As already noted above, at the time the Book of Mormon appeared, a number of mainline Christian clergy, including those in New York, were publishing works critical of modern Universalism. For example, New York Anglican rector Adam Empie (1785–1860) noted that “Universalists of the present day . . . [reject] what the *Christian Church* has *always* received and revered as the *peculiar, distinguishing, and most essential doctrines* of the Gospel.”<sup>32</sup> New York Presbyterian pastor Edwin F. Hatfield (1807–1883) listed the doctrines in which modern Universalists were heterodox. Hatfield included among these the rejection of the full deity of Jesus, human depravity, and vicarious atonement.<sup>33</sup> In these three disagreements the authors of the Book of Mormon clearly support the opponents of modern Universalism (for examples, see Book of Mormon Title Page, Ether 3:2, and Helaman 5:9, respectively). But there is a caution to this conclusion because similar positions to the modern Universalists on these issues were also held by the early nineteenth-century liberal New England Unitarians.



Thus, from an examination of these issues alone we cannot be sure that the Book of Mormon objections were specifically aimed at the modern Universalists. To show this we must look more closely at some disputes between the modern Universalists and the Unitarians.

Although agreeing on some issues, the early nineteenth-century modern Universalists and Unitarians were quite distinct even though the Universalists would see themselves “in a grand liberal alliance” with the Unitarians later in the century.<sup>34</sup> As Ann Lee Bressler has emphasized, the two descended from different theological pedigrees, and the better-educated Unitarians were (like the writers of the Book of Mormon) much more Arminian in outlook.<sup>35</sup> To show that the Book of Mormon was aimed at modern Universalism, I will examine the Book of Mormon positions on two issues on which the Unitarians and the anti-Universalists agreed against the modern Universalists. For the contemporary Unitarian positions, I turn to William E. Channing (1780–1842), Unitarianism’s most influential early nineteenth-century spokesman.

*Issue 1. Is there punishment for sin in the future life?*

Modern Universalists held that all punishment for sin is confined to mortal life. In the celebrated 1817 exchange between Ballou and his friend, restorationist Edward Turner (1776–1853), Ballou argued that there is no need for punishment in the future life because sin is confined to the physical body and, therefore, “death, by dissolving the body of sin, fits the soul for the kingdom of heaven”<sup>36</sup> Walter Balfour felt that the doctrine was not only rational but scriptural: “limited punishment after death, could no more be defended from the Bible, than endless punishment.”<sup>37</sup> Congregational pastor Joel Hawes (1789–1867) was critical of such Universalist belief noting that “by far the greater part of them deny all punishment in the future world, and suppose that every man receives the due reward of his offences in the present life.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise referring to modern Universalists, Channing noted, “It is maintained by some among us that punishment is confined to the present state. . . . To my mind, a more irrational doctrine was never broached.”<sup>39</sup> The Book of Mormon clearly teaches a doctrine of future punishment for the wicked. Thus a human who “dieth in his sins, the same drinketh damnation to his own soul; for he receiveth for his wages an everlasting punishment” (Mosiah 2:33).

Another pertinent passage is the conversation between the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi and his two disobedient older brothers. After Nephi discourses on “that awful hell which . . . was prepared for the wicked,” his brothers ask, “Doth this thing mean the torment of the body in the days of probation, or doth it mean the final state of the soul after the death of the temporal body?” Nephi then explains the consignment of the unrepentant to “that awful hell” as the “final state of the souls of men” (1 Nephi 15:26–36), clearly siding with the opponents of modern Universalism.

*Issue 2. Is the human soul freed from sin and moral evil after death?*

Hosea Ballou had concluded that all “sin and evil” are caused by and limited to “flesh and blood,” and cannot “extend beyond these.”<sup>40</sup> Methodist Luther Lee disagreed: “The scriptures teach that men will possess the same moral character in a future state, with which they leave this. . . . If sin attached itself to the body only, it might be contended that it dies with the body; but having its seat in the soul, it will live with it when the body dies. Death cannot destroy sin.”<sup>41</sup> Channing leveled a similar criticism: “It is maintained by some among us . . . that in changing worlds we shall change our characters; that moral evil is to be buried with the body in the grave. . . .”<sup>42</sup> Rather Channing insisted that “one and only one evil can be carried from this world to the next and that is . . . moral evil . . . ungoverned passion, the depraved mind.”<sup>43</sup>

The Book of Mormon also refutes the modern Universalist doctrine that at death the soul is freed from the effects of sin. For example, the prophet Amulek held that those who are taught the gospel but “procrastinate” their repentance until death will face an “awful crisis” because “that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life . . . will have power to possess your body in that eternal world” (Alma 34:33–34).

### **The Book of Mormon Sides with the Restorationist Universalists in Their Disputes with Modern Universalists**

Between 1827 and 1829, restorationist Charles Hudson and modern Universalist Walter Balfour published a series of works detailing the areas of dispute between the two.<sup>44</sup> Balfour noted that the two disagreed over three interrelated “principle questions:” “Is the soul immortal? Is there an intermediate state of existence? And

is the immortal soul to be punished in this state?”<sup>45</sup> To each question Balfour answered in the negative and Hudson in the affirmative. It should be noted that many but not all modern Universalists of the time agreed with Balfour on the question of the soul’s immortality. Regarding this issue, Balfour held that “the Bible does not teach the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, or its existence in a disembodied state, but [these ideas] are relics of heathenism.” Hudson disagreed: “It appears both from scripture and reason, that men will retain their consciousness after death; they will be the same individuals there they were here.”<sup>46</sup>

In each of these questions the Book of Mormon agrees with the restorationists against Balfour. As examples, the Book of Mormon prophet Alma pointed out that “the soul could never die,” and “concerning the state of the soul between death and the resurrection . . . as soon as they are departed from this mortal body . . . the spirits of the wicked . . . [are received into a] state of misery” which lasts “until the time of their resurrection” (Alma 42:9, 40:11–15). The anti-Universalists also agreed with the restorationists on these issues.<sup>47</sup>

**In the Disputes between the Anti-Universalists and Restorationists,  
the Book of Mormon Consistently Sides with Neither**

We have already seen evidence for this conclusion in the Book of Mormon handling of the outcomes of the five groups. Below are two additional examples.

*Example 1. Is hell a place?*

Dean noted that “It has been a question whether the punishment of the wicked . . . will be produced by the place occupied by the sufferer . . . [or] from his character.”<sup>48</sup> For early nineteenth-century anti-Universalists, as with their Reformer predecessors, hell is a place in which the inmates, who are forced there involuntarily, experience everlasting torment. Thus Presbyterian Pastor Joel Parker (1799–1873) observed that hell is “a place for the punishment of the wicked in a future state” and Methodist Richard Watson that hell is “the place of torment reserved for the punishment of the wicked in a future state.”<sup>49</sup> Conversely, restorationists held that hell is nothing more than a state of mind. For example, Charles Hudson pointed out that “We do not believe that men will be consigned to any particular place of punishment, *as such*; but that the punish-

ment will arise from their own unholy feelings and disturbed minds. The remorse of conscience will be the punishment, and hell will be found within them.” Similarly, Dean believed that “hell is a state or condition of sinners in a future world, rather than a place . . . [T]he punishment of sinners will consist . . . in a sense of shame, regret, remorse, and fear, inflicted by the righteous Judge of all, upon the awakened conscience.”<sup>50</sup>

The Book of Mormon seems to endorse both alternatives. Thus the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi echoes Revelation 14:10, 19:20, and 20:15 and the anti-Universalists when he states that the wicked “must go into the place prepared for them, even a lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment” (2 Nephi 28:22–23). Conversely, King Benjamin observed that in the future life the wicked would be “consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment.” (Mosiah 3:24–27). And if hell is a state of mind, then it might also be experienced in mortality and not necessarily for an eternal duration. Thus during his conversion Alma recalled that “my soul was racked with eternal torment” (Mosiah 27:29).

*Example 2. Will the unrepentant have a second chance in the future life?*

In this question the anti-Universalists were united in the negative and the restorationists in the affirmative. Methodist Luther Lee argued that “nothing can be more clear than that the gospel offers salvation in the present tense.”<sup>51</sup> Conversely, restorationist Charles Hudson insisted that: “Those who die impenitent will, after death, enter into a state of misery, consisting of anxiety, guilt, and remorse, which will continue until repentance [and salvation].”<sup>52</sup>

The Book of Mormon does not contain a doctrine of repentance and salvation in the future life for the unrepentant, but rather seems to lean toward the anti-Universalist position:

This life is the time for men to prepare to meet God . . . the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors . . . after this day of life . . . if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will repent, that I will return to my God . . . for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will

have power to possess your body in that eternal world . . . [T]he devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked (Alma 34:32–35).

However, it is worth noting in this passage that the reason the unrepentant cannot be redeemed is not the irreversible justice of God, as many anti-Universalists maintained, but that the soul of the unrepentant is incapable of change. But are all the unrepentant the same? Could those who had not repented because they had been deceived still be capable of change in the future life with the right education? As we shall see below, this issue would arise again and be addressed in the 1832 revelation known as “the Vision.”

### **Subsequent Revelations Address Problems of Justice the Book of Mormon Leaves Unresolved**

Yale theologian George Lindbeck (1923– ) has pointed out that “for the most part, only when disputes arise about what it is permissible to teach or practice does a community make up its collective mind and formally make a doctrinal decision.”<sup>53</sup> In the following I propose that such disputes arose in the early Church over the issues of divine justice and Book of Mormon interpretation in the background context of the debates over Universalism. Early nineteenth-century theologians all agreed that there is divine justice and sought to show that their systems were most compatible with this tenet. As Presbyterian Joel Parker noted: “We receive it as an axiom in religion, that God is just.”<sup>54</sup> Very early Church members had come to the new faith from a variety of previous theological persuasions including Calvinism (the Whitmers, Hyrum Smith), Methodism (Joseph Smith, Emma Smith), and restorationist Universalism (Martin Harris, Joseph Knight). Thus, it would not be surprising if differences of opinion arose. Some of these issues were brought to Joseph Smith for divine resolution, initiating seminal revelations that clarified and expanded the doctrines of the Book of Mormon. We may discern three major steps in this process.

*Step 1: “Eternal torment” does not necessarily mean never-ending punishment*

The idea that future punishment may be limited in duration extends at least as far back as the great church father Origen (184–253) and was found in the late medieval church as the doctrine of Pur-

gatory. Subsequently such doctrines were rejected by the Reformers but resurrected by the restorationists. In approximately March of 1830, the same month the Book of Mormon appeared in print, it appears that a group of individuals approached Joseph Smith with the question of whether the biblical phrase “eternal damnation” (Mark 3:29) and the Book of Mormon phrase “endless torment” imply a never-ending duration. In the resulting revelation<sup>55</sup> the Lord answered: “Nevertheless, it is not written that there shall be no end to this torment, but it is written *endless torment*. Again, it is written *eternal damnation*. . . . Endless punishment is God’s punishment . . . for Endless is my [God’s] name.” (D&C 19:6–7, 10–12).

This restorationist-sounding interpretation of the Bible and Book of Mormon was accompanied by additional arguments addressing other criticisms of early nineteenth-century opponents of restorationist Universalism. For example, the anti-Universalists had reasoned that God would not have allowed such words as “eternal” and “everlasting” to be used in scripture if they did not mean never-ending. Dean had responded that the purpose of such radical phrases was simply to scare humans into obedience by producing “an apprehension of being judged.”<sup>56</sup> The revelation adopts a similar position: “Wherefore it is more express than other scriptures, that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men” (verse 7). Also, the anti-Universalists had charged that a doctrine of limited punishment encourages sin. Dean had countered that limited punishment could provide the necessary deterrence, but only if it was sufficiently severe.<sup>57</sup> The revelation notes: “But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain” (verses 17–18; note that Jesus’s suffering was both limited and severe).

Although the revelation remained ambiguous on the question of whether some wicked humans might still suffer a never-ending punishment, some of Smith’s followers apparently were stressing a thoroughly restorationist interpretation. This error necessitated a strong statement to the contrary in a revelation the following September: “Never at any time have I declared from mine own mouth that they should return, for where I am they cannot come. . . . But remember that all my judgments are not given unto men.”<sup>58</sup> By now it was becoming apparent that the Mormon solution to these problems was going to be complex, and more revelation would be needed.

*Step 2: Subdividing the Book of Mormon outcomes of “eternal life” and “everlasting destruction”: A solution to the four accountable groups/two-outcomes problem of divine justice.*

The idea that everyone destined for eternal life (heaven) will receive an equal outcome has long been questioned in Christian history. Multiple levels of heaven were described by late medieval poets and visionary mystics. Such views were generally rejected by the Reformers, who regarded the question as secondary, although they did not completely reject the idea of different rewards.<sup>59</sup> Later, the renowned Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (1623–1687), whose comprehensive *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* was used in early nineteenth-century American Calvinist seminaries, traced the dispute at least as far back as Jerome (c. 347–420) who asserted “an inequality of glory from the inequality of merit.” Being a good Calvinist, Turretin did not agree with Jerome regarding a contribution of human merit to salvation but did agree that there must be “degrees of glory” in heaven based on 1 Corinthians 15:41–42.<sup>60</sup>

In early 1831 Joseph Smith and Sydney Rigdon were engaged in revising the New Testament. It appears that as they came to certain key passages needing correction they received revelations clarifying and expanding on the passage in question. Several of these revelations were combined into “The Vision.”<sup>61</sup> One was received during the revision of 1 Corinthians 15:40–41, a passage on the resurrection that differentiates between celestial and terrestrial bodies and between the “glory” of the sun, moon, and stars.

The Book of Mormon had created an apparent problem of divine justice by awarding “eternal life” to both the faithful and untaught. This outcome for the latter seems in obvious tension with its own textual (and anti-Universalist) assertion that only those truly believing in Jesus and being baptized during mortal life will be eligible for salvation (2 Nephi 31:18, 33:4), suggesting that the two groups do not justly deserve the same outcome. The Vision addresses this problem by interpreting 1 Corinthians 15:40 as describing two subdivisions of the Book of Mormon outcome of “eternal life”: a superior world composed of individuals with “bodies celestial” (the faithful) and an inferior world of “bodies terrestrial” for the untaught, i.e., “[those] who died without law” (verse 72).<sup>62</sup>

Analogous to the history of arguments about heaven, the idea

that the heterogeneous subgroups of humans consigned to hell will receive the same punishment has long been challenged. Christian works, apocryphal and otherwise, extending to at least the second century C. E. speculated on the subject. A famous example is Dante's fourteenth-century *Inferno*, which describes nine levels of hell, the outer portion of which is inhabited by virtuous unbaptized individuals who, unlike the others, receive no punishment.<sup>63</sup> The Book of Mormon again created an apparent problem of divine justice by assigning both the unrepentant and the unpardonable to the same outcome of eternal torment. The Vision addressed this not by consigning to differing subdivisions of hell but to different durations in hell. Thus, in the Book of Mormon, "eternal torment" of the unpardonable is a never-ending stay in hell as the anti-Universalists had proclaimed (verses 32–38), but that of the unrepentant is a limited duration as the restorationists taught (verses 83–85). It should be noted that this clarified the ambiguity of the March 1830 revelation.

However, this unique treatment of the unrepentant created another problem. Where are the unrepentant to go after they had concluded their limited punishment? Certainly they are no longer required to reside in hell, but neither do they seem to qualify for eternal life. The Vision solved this problem by interpreting the three glories (1 Cor. 15:41) as three "worlds" in the future life: the glory of the sun (celestial world) for the faithful who have bodies celestial, the glory of the moon (terrestrial world) for the untaught who have bodies terrestrial, and the glory of the stars. In order to make the two types of bodies mentioned in verse 40 correspond to the three glories mentioned in verse 41, Joseph Smith modified verse 40 by adding "bodies telestial," a neologism. According to the Vision, those with bodies telestial correspond with the glory of the stars and reside in the telestial world, which was between those of eternal life and hell. Although technically residing in the kingdom of God, these were not allowed to see His face, as the revelation of September 1830 had stated.

*Step 3: Heterogeneity within the Book of Mormon groups: Addressing additional problems of divine justice*

### **Subdividing the Unrepentant**

Expanding the number of outcomes to four to eliminate the



difficulty of consigning heterogeneous groups to the same outcome did not solve all the problems of divine justice. Additional questions arose regarding heterogeneity within the four accountable groups discussed above. The first group addressed was the unrepentant. These were divided into those who knowingly chose and preferred sinning during mortal life and those who were unknowingly deceived, the “honorable men of the earth, who were blinded by the craftiness of men” (verse 75). Divine justice would reasonably require different outcomes. As we have seen, the restorationists had taught that all of the unrepentant would have a second chance to accept the gospel in the future life and all would accept. The Methodists restricted acceptance to mortal life but emphasized the voluntary nature of salvation, meaning that only some would accept. This issue was resolved in the Vision by including portions of each view into a unique synthesis. All unrepentant would be given a second chance to gain “the testimony of Jesus” in the future life but acceptance would be voluntary. Those who would accept would be those who had been deceived, the only subgroup capable of change, and these would be promoted to the terrestrial world (verses 73–75). This subgroup was a new development not considered in the Book of Mormon. Those knowingly preferring sin would, as the Book of Mormon had proclaimed, retain the same spirit, not accept, and remain in the telestial world (verse 82).

### **Subdividing the Untaught**

Some time subsequent to the Vision, the question of the just treatment of subsets of the untaught would also arise. As we have seen, Methodist theologian Richard Watson struggled with this issue, ultimately hypothesizing that perhaps those heathens who lived honorable lives might somehow be considered for salvation. But for Watson, who believed that faith and holiness in mortality were necessary for salvation, and who lacked the restorationist concept of rescue in the future life, it was problematic “by what means repentance, and faith, and righteousness, would be . . . wrought in them, as that they shall become acceptable to God.”<sup>64</sup>

The Vision created a somewhat similar problem by consigning, without exception, the untaught to an inferior portion of “eternal life.” Again, the solution included elements of the Methodists, who taught that people must voluntarily accept the gospel in mortal life

in order to be saved, and the restorationists, who insisted that the untaught would be saved in the future life. In January 1836, Joseph Smith recorded another vision in his journal. Smith was surprised to see his untaught brother Alvin, who had died before conversion to Mormonism and baptism, in the celestial world—seemingly against the schema of the Vision. He then learned that “all who have died with[out]<sup>65</sup> a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it, if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial Kingdom of God.” That this change was meant to resolve a problem of divine justice is evident from the statement that follows: “for I the Lord judge all men according to their works according to the desires of their hearts.”<sup>66</sup> The importance of this unique synthesis for subsequent Mormon teaching and practice cannot be overemphasized. For if some of the untaught can merit the same ultimate outcome as the faithful, then Mormonism was left with the same problem as Watson: what of the scriptural requirements for faith, baptism, etc.? This new doctrine would form the theological foundation for the subsequent Mormon practices of work for the dead.

### **Subdividing the Faithful? Maybe**

There may also have been subsets of the faithful defined in the Vision, although this is less clear. The Vision stated that those “who are not valiant in the testimony of Jesus” are consigned to the terrestrial world and forfeit “the crown over the kingdom of our God” (D&C 76:79). Given the state of doctrinal development at the time the Vision was published, this passage could conceivably have referred to (1) the initially faithful who forfeit the crown by failing to endure to the end of mortal life but do not qualify as unpardonable or (2) the unrepentant who forfeit the crown by not accepting the gospel in mortal life but do accept it in the future life. Although some commentators have suggested the latter option,<sup>67</sup> the former interpretation seems to be the more popular, undoubtedly in part because of its utility in Mormon preaching to Church members.<sup>68</sup> Such a teaching would have been pertinent for a number of early members who, through persecution and other problems, were no longer actively supporting and/or had abandoned the fledgling Church.

### **Conclusions**

The Book of Mormon’s relation to Universalism is complex.

From one perspective, the book could be placed alongside a number of works critical of the modern Universalists that appeared in the 1820s and '30s before modern Universalism went into decline. But the Book of Mormon and the revelations Joseph Smith received are more than this since their authors also seem interested in resolving the early nineteenth-century anti-Universalism/Universalism controversies, especially those between the Methodists (Arminians) and the restorationist Universalists. In this regard, the Book of Mormon is best seen as the initial step of an ongoing process of attempting to solve a number of problems of divine fairness. Contrary to the idea that the Book of Mormon is pure Arminianism (Methodism), this work had already moved in the direction of the restorationists, as the teachings on the untaught, hell, and others demonstrate. The subsequent revelations continued the process, consistent with an ongoing dialogue with contemporaries and the Mormon claim to continuing revelation. Thus, the subsequent revelations are probably best interpreted as carrying the Book of Mormon innovations to their logical conclusions rather than abrupt reversals of doctrine.

### Notes

1. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 534–40.

2. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 173.

3. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 200.

4. The dispute between modern and restorationist Universalists (the “restorationist controversy”) was at its height at the time the Book of Mormon was published; for a history of the major participants and issues, see Richard Eddy, *Universalism in America, A History*, 2 vols. (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1894), 2:260–342.

5. Alexander Campbell, “The Mormonites,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2 (January 1831): 93.

6. Thomas Whittemore, “State of the Doctrine and Denomination of Universalists,” *The Expositor and Universalist Review* 1 (January 1833): 61; L. S. Everett, *The Life of Rev. John Murray, Late Minister of the Reconciliation, and Senior Pastor of the Universalists, Congregated in Boston* (Boston: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1837), 272.

7. Joel Parker, *Lectures on Universalism* (Rochester, N.Y.: Elisha Loomis, 1830), 8.

8. Thomas Whittemore, *The Modern History of Universalism from the Era of the Reformation to the Present Time* (Boston: 1830), 431–33.

9. Whittemore, *History of Universalism*, 439–41.

10. Timothy Merritt, *A Discussion on Universal Salvation in Three Lectures and Five Answers Against That Doctrine* (New York: B. Wauch and T. Mason, 1832), 11.

11. Ann Lee Bressler, *The Universalist Movement in America, 1770–1880* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 54.

12. *Ibid.*, 55.

13. Paul Dean, *Course of Lectures in Defence of the Final Restoration* (Boston: Edwin M. Stone, 1832), 30, 43.

14. For a discussion of some of the early nineteenth-century Calvinist/Arminian disputes and the Book of Mormon see Clyde D. Ford, “Lehi on the Great Issues: Book of Mormon Theology in Early Nineteenth-Century Perspective,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38 (Winter 2005): 75–96. In 1830 the rapidly growing American Methodist churches were estimated to have a half-million members. See David Hampton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University, 2005), 212.

15. Mark Thomas, “Revival Language in the Book of Mormon,” *Sunstone* 8 (May-June 1983): 20.

16. Dan Vogel, “Anti-Universalist Rhetoric in the Book of Mormon” in Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 47.

17. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), 187.

18. Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 128.

19. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 199.

20. Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 28.

21. Mosiah 15:25; Moroni 8:8–22. For the Methodist view, see Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes: or, a View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity* (1823–1829). Reprinted in 2 vols. (New York: Lane & Scott, 1850), 2:344–5.

22. John Wesley, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 8:68.

23. Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *Works*, 6:506.

24. Wesley, “A Dialogue between a Predestinarian and His Friend,” in *Works*, 10:266.

25. Wesley, “A Call to Backsliders,” in *Works*, 6:523.

26. *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 2:12.

27. Merritt, *Universal Salvation*, 38.
28. Watson, *Institutes*, 2:446.
29. Merritt, *Universal Salvation*, 36; Luther Lee, *Universalism Examined and Refuted* (Watertown, N.Y.: Knowlton & Rice, 1836), 230.
30. Wesley, "On Living without God," in *Works*, 7:353; Watson, *Institutes*, 2:445.
31. Dean, *Lectures*, 51.
32. Adam Empie, *Remarks on the Distinguishing Doctrine of Modern Universalism* (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1825), 14.
33. Edwin F. Hatfield, *Universalism as It Is or Textbook of Modern Universalism in America* (New York: J. A. Hoisington, 1841).
34. Bressler, *Universalist Movement*, 146.
35. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
36. Hosea Ballou, *The Gospel Visitant* 2 (no. 1) (April 1817): 187.
37. Walter Balfour, *Three Essays on the Intermediate State of the Dead, the Resurrection from the Dead, and the Greek Terms Rendered Judge, Judgment, Condemned, Condemnation, Damned, Damnation, &c. in the New Testament with Remarks on Mr. Hudson's Letters in Vindication of a Future Retribution, Addressed to Mr. Hosea Ballou, of Boston* (Charlestown, Mass.: G. Davidson, 1828), ix.
38. Joel Hawes, *Reasons for Not Embracing the Doctrine of Universal Salvation* (New York: American Tract Society, 1833), 76.
39. William E. Channing, "The Evil of Sin," in *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1882), 350.
40. Hosea Ballou, "Lecture Sermon on Hebrews 2:14–15" in *Lecture Sermons* (Boston: Henry Bowen, 1818), 237.
41. Lee, *Universalism Examined*, 157–58.
42. Channing, "The Evil of Sin," 350.
43. *Ibid.*, 353.
44. Charles Hudson, *A Series of Letters Addressed to Rev. Hosea Ballou, of Boston, Being a Vindication of the Doctrine of a Future Retribution, against the Principal Arguments Used by Him, Mr. Balfour, and Others* (Woodstock, Vt.: David Watson, 1827); Walter Balfour, *Three Essays*; Charles Hudson, *A Reply to Mr. Balfour's Essays: Touching the State of the Dead and a Future Retribution* (Woodstock, Vt.: David Watson, 1829); Walter Balfour, *Letters on the Immortality of the Soul, the Intermediate State of the Dead and a Future Retribution in Reply to Mr. Charles Hudson* (Charlestown, Mass.: G. Davidson, 1829).
45. Balfour, *Letters on the Immortality of the Soul*, 1.
46. Balfour, *Three Essays*, 109; Hudson, *Series of Letters*, 93.
47. For example, see Watson, *Institutes*, 2:458–59.
48. Dean, *Lectures*, 61.

49. Joel Parker, *Lectures on Universalism* (Rochester, N.Y.: Elisha Loomis, 1830), 18; Richard Watson, *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1837), 446.

50. Hudson, *Letters*, 94; Dean, *Lectures*, 62.

51. Lee, *Universalism Examined*, 251.

52. Hudson, *Letters*, 91.

53. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1984), 75.

54. Parker, *Lectures*, 88.

55. Section 19 in the current edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Like several other revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, section 19 appears to be a combination of two originally separate communications placed back to back, comprising verses 1–24 and 25–41. The first, which is of primary concern here, was directed to a group of individuals (see verse 9); the second to Martin Harris.

56. Dean, *Lectures*, 65–66.

57. *Ibid.*, 101.

58. Doctrine and Covenants 29:27–29.

59. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988), 69–156.

60. Turretin discusses the questions “Will there be degrees of glory? And will the glory in heaven be equal or unequal and unlike?” in Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 1997), 3:621–30.

61. The earliest surviving versions of The Vision were recorded in the “Kirtland Revelation Book” by Frederick G. Williams in early 1832 and in the “Book of Commandments and Revelations of the Lord” in Missouri by John Whitmer. The originals may be viewed in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations, Manuscript Revelation Books* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 243–55, 415–33. An edited version appears as Doctrine and Covenants Section 76. A more detailed discussion of the literary history of The Vision is beyond the scope of this article but will be the subject of a subsequent study.

62. Further evidence of this division of “eternal life” into two ultimate outcomes can be seen in the need to clarify the future status of infants who die. The Book of Mormon consigns these to “eternal life,” but would they join the faithful or the untaught in the future life? In 1836 it was revealed to Joseph that these would go to the celestial world. See Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 168 and Doctrine and Covenants 137:10.

63. See Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 83–88, 133–44.

64. Watson, *Institutes*, 2:445.

65. This vision was recorded in Joseph's journal by Warren Parrish (1803–77) on January 21, 1836. Parrish wrote "with," undoubtedly a scribal error for "without." The original may be viewed at [josephsmithpapers.org](http://josephsmithpapers.org), accessed March 8, 2014.

66. See Jessee, Ashurst-McGee, and Jensen, *Journals Volume 1*, 168. This revelation was added to the Doctrine and Covenants in edited form in 1976 as Section 137.

67. Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People* (New York: Random House, 2012), 33; Stephen E. Robinson and H. Dean Garrett, *A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 2:318. The latter suggests both interpretations as legitimate possibilities.

68. For examples see Sidney B. Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 353; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 820; and Roy W. Doxey, *The Doctrine & Covenants Speaks*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 2:26.