

The Book of Mormon: Answer's to Life's Fundamental Questions

By Rich Rowland

The most beautiful system of the Sun, Planets and Comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent being. All variety of created objects which represent order and Life in the Universe could happen only by the willful reasoning of its original Creator, whom I call the Lord God. Sir Isaac Newton

For centuries, man has looked into the heavens, viewed the immensity of space and contemplated the marvels of creation. In the midst of such lofty reflection, those thoughts would ultimately turn to self. Perhaps the Psalmist David captured the spirit of their awe and wonder when he asked, "What is man that thou are mindful of him?" From the great philosophers, theologians and kings to the poor and humble shepherds, it seems that mankind has always been searching for the truth about his own existence. "Where did I come from?" "Why am I here?" "Where am I going after this life ends?" These three questions beg for answers that seem to be just beyond the grasp of the human experience. The best of man's reasoning has produced theories of his own making. Humanism, Evolutionism, Atheism and all manner of "isms" have been created in an effort to find the answers to these three fundamental questions, but each human endeavor has come up short in providing adequate answers. You see, the three questions are simple and yet so profound. The trouble is, one question cannot be completely answered without also influencing the other two. For some, the theory of evolution provides an acceptable accounting for the origin of life, but few would be comfortable with its conclusions about the purpose of life or what happens when this life ends. Humanism seeks to explain the purpose of life in purely human terms. For some, the Humanist vision of self-gratification satisfies their desire to understand the purpose in life, but it sheds little light on the other two questions. It seems to me that each of the "isms" that I have encountered fail to provide answers that fully satisfy the longing of my soul.

After all is said and done, the best of man's reasoning cannot give life and breath to concepts such as origin, purpose and eternity. Expecting the reason of man, within the confines of the human experience, to illuminate the origin, purpose and eternity of life would be like asking the same questions to a clay pot. The pot would only know that it was once clay until it was touched by the hands of the potter. It is the potter who has poured out his imagination and will, passion and skill upon the clay. It is the potter who has given life and purpose to the clay. It is the potter alone who knows the beginning and the end and all points in between. And so it is for all mankind.

It is no wonder that modern-day theologians suggest that passionately pursuing the answers to these three questions, "Where have I come from?," "Why am I here?," and "Where am I going, when this life ends?," will invariably lead a person to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. No man-made response comes close to answering the questions in a comprehensive way. Sir Isaac Newton came to the same conclusion... All variety of created objects which represent

order and Life in the Universe could happen only by the willful reasoning of its original Creator, whom I call the Lord God.

For centuries, men and women, like Isaac Newton, have turned to scripture to help them in their search for answers. The Bible provides a solid foundation for this search and has proved to be an excellent guide for those who would diligently study it. Likewise, the Book of Mormon addresses these issues and sheds additional, complementary light and truth on these fundamental questions. In this article, we will highlight just a few of the many insights provided by the Book of Mormon.

Where did I come from?

The Biblical creation narrative begins with the heavenly proclamation, “And I, God, created...” Heavens and earth, light and darkness, plants and animals were spoken into existence. As He surveyed his creation, God saw all things He had made were good. The final, and perhaps the crowning achievement of God’s creation, was man.

And I, the Lord God, formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul; (Genesis 2:8 IV)[Genesis 2:7 KJV]

From the very beginning, man was to be different than the rest of creation. Man was created in the “image” of God.

And I, God, said unto mine Only Begotten, which was with me from the beginning, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and it was so. (Genesis 1:27 IV) [Genesis 1:26 KJV]

The idea of being created in the image of God has confounded mankind from the beginning. What does the “image” of God really mean? Throughout history, it has been most commonly interpreted that man was created in the physical appearance of God. It is interesting to consider that this interpretation of “image” has, in many ways, been used to justify much of man’s inhuman treatment of other men. American slavery and the rise of Nazi Germany were, in part, justified by the understanding that “we” are created in God’s image. If “we” are created in Gods image, then anyone who, does not look like “us” must not be entirely human and must not be a part of God’s perfect creation. Following that logic leads to a place where inhuman treatment of others is perfectly justified. That particular mindset still exists in the world today and is largely responsible for much of the calamity we see around us.

What if our understanding of the “image” of God was different and did not revolve entirely around physical appearance? What if, instead, the “image” of God also included man’s ability to make conscientious moral choices? Consider that no other part of God’s creation has been endowed with the ability to make choices. The planets, stars and all the heavens move in their perfect order, not because they choose to do so, but because that is what they were created to do. The ocean’s tide does not decide for itself when to rise and fall. A seed of corn can not will itself to sprout and grow in the winter season. Likewise, cattle cannot determine for themselves that they would prefer to eat fish rather than hay. The laws of nature, instinct and

genetic programming govern most all of creation. Man is somehow different. To man alone it has been given the opportunity and responsibility of moral decision making. We in the Restoration gospel know this morality-based decision making as personal agency.

While the Book of Mormon doesn't provide a day-by-day creation narrative like the Bible, it does confirm the Biblical account. One such corroborating witness is the testimony of Lehi found in 2 Nephi. Lehi was nearing the end of his earthly days and wanted to pass along words of council to each of his sons. To his son Jacob, Lehi spoke these words:

And now, my son, I speak unto you these things, for your profit and learning: For there is a God, and he hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them is; Both things to act, and things to be acted upon; And to bring about his eternal purposes in the end of man, after he had created our first parents, and the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and in fine, all things which are created, it must needs be that there was an opposition; Even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the one being sweet and the other bitter; Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man, that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself, save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other. (2 Nephi 1:94-100 RLDS) [2 Nephi 3:29-4:2 LDS]

Notice how closely Lehi related the creation events with the agency of man. All of creation is given the responsibility to act or be acted upon, but it is man alone who is given the ability to "act for himself." This gift of agency plays an important role in answering the question, "Where did I come from?" The scriptural response to the question confirms that not only was man created by God, but he was also given a gift that was reserved only for him. Agency is the specific gift by which God made man in his own image and empowered him to grow to become like Him. The Psalmist David seemed to be inspired by this understanding when he wrote, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

Why am I here?

The Nephite prophet Alma, the son of Alma, declared with boldness and simplicity his response to the fundamental question, "Why am I here?"

Therefore this life became a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state, which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead. (Alma 9:41 RLDS) [Alma 12:24 LDS]

Alma's choice of the words "probationary state" is particularly interesting and important in our discussion. In our world today, we recognize that the term probation comes from our legal system. Understanding the concept of probation begins with recognizing that there are laws incorporated in every community. These laws are established to provide a framework by which the citizens of the community are encouraged to live together peaceably. When an

individual chooses to live outside the law, the mechanisms of the legal system are set in motion against him. Most likely, this path will lead the lawbreaker to a place before the judgment bar. In this courtroom setting, the person who has been accused of breaking the law will stand before a judge, who will hear the evidence. If the accused is found to be guilty of the charges, the judge, using his wisdom and discretion, can decide to grant some form of probation instead of a full sentencing. This probationary period then becomes a time of testing for the accused. It is during this time that the life of the accused, his conduct and character, are monitored closely. The goal of the probationary period is to determine if the accused can live in a responsible way that fits within the confines of the established laws of the land. It is up to the accused, during this period, to choose carefully how he will live. To be successful, the individual must desire to leave his corrupt way of life behind and press forward in a law-abiding fashion. At the end of the probationary period, the individual must return once again to stand before the judge. At this time, the judge will pronounce a final sentencing. If the individual has reformed his ways and chosen to live within the boundaries of the law, his sentence will be commuted, and he will be spared from the consequences his initial actions warranted. On the other hand, if the individual has not reformed his ways in a manner that satisfies the judge, he will be required to fulfill the punishment dictated by the law. Ultimately, it is the actions of the accused that will demonstrate to the judge, and to those living around him, whether or not he can become a contributing citizen of the community.

The concept of probation in this modern representation actually fits in perfectly with Alma's interpretation. The Kingdom of God is, in many ways, regulated by laws not unlike our earthly communities. The laws of God are intended to encourage the citizens of the kingdom to live peaceably with Him. As we have already discussed, mankind was given personal agency as a part of God's creative genius. This moral decision-making capability allows us to choose for ourselves how we will respond to those laws. Our personal response determines our status in the Kingdom. In reality, each of us has, at one time or another, willfully chosen to disobey the laws of the Kingdom. As in our modern society, disobedience to the law sets the wheels of justice in motion. In our modern legal system, there can be doubt raised as to whether the evidence points to our guilt or innocence. In God's courtroom, there is no doubt. The Bible tells us that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Because that is true, there can be no disputing the righteous judgment of God in handing our sentence. Alma expresses it this way:

How could he sin, if there was no law? How could there be a law, save there was a punishment? (Alma 19:99 RLDS) [Alma 42:17 LDS]

The punishment prescribed by our current-day legal system most frequently comes in the form of fines or incarceration. In the Kingdom of God, that punishment is never-ending separation from His presence. Again, we can draw from the inspired words of Alma for better understanding.

And thus we see that all mankind were fallen, and they were in the grasp of justice; yea, the justice of God, which consigned them for ever to be cut off from his presence. (Alma 19:96 RLDS) [Alma 42:4 LDS]

This eternal separation was never the end that God had in mind for his special creation. Just as an earthly judge can use his wisdom and discretion to give the reprobate another opportunity to live within the bounds of the law, so does God.

Therefore as they had been carnal, sensual and devilish, by nature, this probationary state became a state for them to prepare; it became a preparatory state. (Alma 19:91 RLDS) [Alma 42:10 LDS]

It is important to notice how Alma repeatedly emphasizes that this probationary state is really a time of preparation. It is during our time on earth that we prepare to meet God. Much can be written about how best to prepare to meet God. In fact, all scripture is aimed at helping us do just that. For the purposes of this article, perhaps we should let the simple, yet profound, words of Jesus be our guide and inspiration. In His earthly ministry in the new world, Jesus proclaimed to the people

Behold I am the light; I have set an example for you. (3 Nephi 8:49 RLDS)
[3 Nephi 18:16 LDS]

In its simplest form, that really is the answer to the question, “Why am I here?” We have been given this probationary time to learn of His ways and to choose to follow the example of Jesus. Ultimately, each of us will return to the judgment bar of God at the end of our probationary period. As we stand before Him to answer the ends of the law, it will be our choices during this time of probation that demonstrate if we have followed the example of Christ. How we have exercised our personal agency will establish whether or not we can live peaceably in the Kingdom of God.

Where am I going when this life ends?

No serious discussion of life after death can be complete without recognizing the roles that personal repentance and our Savior Jesus Christ play in what the Book of Mormon writers called the “plan of redemption.” To understand the importance of personal repentance, we can turn to the counsel given by Alma to his young son, Corianton.

But behold, ye can not hide your crimes from God; and except ye repent, they will stand as a testimony against you at the last day. Now, my son, I would that ye should repent, and forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes, but cross yourself in all these things; for except ye do this, ye can in no wise inherit the Kingdom of God. (Alma 19:12-13 RLDS) [Alma 39:8-9 LDS]

Having lived out this probationary period and done the best we can to repent and to conform our lives to the laws of God and the example of Christ, we find ourselves in a state of continuing repentance. Nonetheless, we are confronted with the reality that we have broken the law. While our behavior and choices may have changed over time, the justice the law demands still has not been completely satisfied. Alma again sheds additional light on the subject.

But there is a law given and a punishment affixed, and repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth: otherwise, justice claimeth the creature, and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God.

But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement; and the atonement bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead: and the resurrection of the dead bringeth back men into the presence of God;

And thus they are restored into his presence; to be judged according to their works; according to the law and justice; for behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none but the truly penitent are saved. (Alma 19:104-106 RLDS) [Alma 42:22-23 LDS]

The works of justice had to be satisfied, and so Jesus came to accept the punishment that was intended for us. His sacrifice became the atonement for our disobedience. Because He has taken the punishment for our sins, he can also extend to us the arm of mercy. These factors (repentance, atonement and mercy) work together to provide us with the opportunity to return into the presence of God. In the New Testament record, Jesus declares that no man can come to the Father but by Me. The Book of Mormon confirms that testimony.

Conclusion

From the beginning of time, man has sought answers to questions that seemed beyond his grasp. Looking with awe and wonder into the heavens caused him to reflect upon his own existence. Our lives are no different today. The questions we ask are questions of eternal importance. They are questions that shape and mold the very core of our lives. The Book of Mormon and all of scripture provide for us a marvelous glimpse into the creative process of God. These scriptures allow us to understand not only the mechanics of creation, but perhaps even more importantly, its divine purpose. In this article, we have just scratched the surface in our search for the fundamental truths of creation, life and eternity. My prayer is that the material presented here, while basic in its presentation, will inspire and encourage you to dig deeper.

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