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The *Goodness of God* and His Children as a Fundamental Theological Concept in the Book of Mormon

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THE GOODNESS OF GOD AND HIS CHILDREN AS A FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Noel B. Reynolds

Abstract: *The phrase goodness of God does occur occasionally in the Hebrew Bible but has not been considered by Old Testament scholars to be an independent principle in Israelite theology. Rather, it has been interpreted as just another way of talking about God's acts of hesed, or loving kindness for his covenant people and is usually interpreted in the context of the covenants Israel received through Abraham and Moses. The Book of Mormon clearly echoes that Old Testament pattern but also presents two additional conceptual frameworks that are explained in terms of the goodness of God. It advances an explicit divine plan of redemption or salvation that existed before Abraham — even before the creation of the earth — which had as its purpose making eternal life possible for God's human children universally — not just the descendants of Abraham. And it also teaches the gospel or doctrine of Christ that provides the path individuals must walk to take full advantage of that plan — as they become good like God and qualify to enter his presence and receive eternal life. Nephite usage radically expands the Old Testament concept by portraying this mortal probation as each person's God-given opportunity to become good like God. The goodness of God is frequently invoked by the Nephite prophets as a basic theological concept which can explain why God advanced his plan of salvation for men before the world was and why he is completely reliable in blessing and protecting those who have entered the covenant path by embracing his gospel and striving to endure to the end. The Nephites also used the phrase in the Old Testament pattern to explain the acts of God in delivering, blessing, and preserving his covenant people. Furthermore, some usages seem to invoke all three of these contexts simultaneously, demonstrating the comfortable integration of each of these perspectives in Nephite theological understanding.*

Readers of the Book of Mormon do not have to wait long to be introduced to the *goodness of God* as a foundational concept. In the second sentence of the book, Nephi refers to his “great knowledge of the goodness . . . of God” as a reason for writing it.¹ In a 2016 article,² Matthew L. Bowen shared his discovery that Nephi had demarcated his writings in the small plates as a single rhetorical unit with an inclusio by referring to the *goodness of God* at the beginning and again at the end.³ Nephi invokes different versions of the same phrase another six times in his writings. Benjamin uses it five times in his final sermon, and it occurs another twelve times in the writings of Jacob, Alma, Helaman, and Mormon.

As will be discussed below some Old Testament scholars have identified the *goodness of God* as one dimension of his *hesed*, the covenant love he displays to the Israelites when delivering them from their enemies and blessing them in their times of need. The phrase has received limited focused attention from Old Testament theologians and none I have been able to find from Book of Mormon scholars. *This paper will show that Book of Mormon prophets used the phrase in the same Old Testament way as an explanation for the blessings given to his covenant*

1. In the same sentence, Nephi has described his own parents as “goodly.” While this English term has attracted some commentary in scholarly discourse, perhaps the most obvious candidate for a Hebrew equivalent would be *tob* (to be or do good — the same root used for *goodness* in the Hebrew Bible) as applied to Moses in Exodus 2:2 where it is taken to signal “quality or nobility in human character.” See Andrew Bowling’s article on *tob*: “793 (טוֹב)” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT)*, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 346.

2. See Matthew L. Bowen, “Nephi’s Good Inclusio,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 181–95, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/nephis-good-inclusio/>; and now reprinted as the lead chapter in a collection of his related papers: Matthew L. Bowen, *Name as Key-Word* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2019), 1–15. This article expands and updates Bowen’s earlier article: “Internal textual evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22, no. 11 (2002): 1; which in turn relies on John Gee’s earlier articles “A Note on the Name Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 189–91, and “Four Suggestions on the Name *Nephi*,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, eds. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 1–5.

3. Cf. 1 Nephi 1:1 and 2 Nephi 33:14. Nephi’s familiarity with and inclination to use this common biblical rhetorical figure is on full display in Second Nephi where he used it repeatedly to demarcate the principal thirteen sections of that book that anchor its overall chiasmic structure. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” in *Chiasmus: The State of the Art*, eds. John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry (Provo, UT: BYU Studies and Book of Mormon Central, 2020), 177–92.

people but also in other ways as an explanation for his plan of salvation, the creation of the earth, the atonement performed by Jesus Christ, and the provision of a way (the gospel) for all men and women to become good like him and return to his presence.

Whatever the level of their understanding may have been previously, it is very clear that the great visions given to Lehi and Nephi in First Nephi taught them things about God that they had not known. As Lehi exclaims, “Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and *thy power and goodness and mercy* is over all the inhabitants of the Earth” (1 Nephi 1:14).⁴ Those visions had expanded their perspectives to see that the Lord loves all people equally and that Christ was coming to conquer both sin and death and to reveal his gospel through which all his creations might come unto him, becoming *good* themselves in the process, that they might receive eternal life.⁵

The Goodness of God in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon

Like Nephi’s writings in the small plates, the Book of Mormon itself also concludes with a focus on the *goodness of God*. At some point in the final decline of the Nephite nation, Mormon wrote to his son Moroni expressing his continual prayer “unto God the Father ... that he through *his infinite goodness* and his grace” would “keep [Moroni] through the endurance of faith on his name to the end” (Moroni 8:3). Moroni introduces his final statement by saying he will “write somewhat as *seemeth me good*” (Moroni 10:1). He will go on to use *good* six more times in his summary, but even more helpfully, he includes a number of new phrases which make what seems good to him even more specific and instructive for future followers of Christ.

He first identifies *all good things* as being “just and true,” which means “nothing *that is good* denieth the Christ” (Moroni 10:6). This leads to a discussion of spiritual gifts and Moroni’s exhortation to his readers to “remember that every *good gift* cometh of Christ”

4. All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from the Yale critical text: Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2009). Italics have sometimes been added for emphasis to ensure that readers will understand which words in a passage are important for the argument of the paper.

5. In another working paper, “Lehi’s Vision, Nephi’s Blueprint,” I explain why I think the second vision described briefly in the preceding verses is the tree of life vision of chapter 8.

(Moroni 10:18) — inasmuch as “all these gifts comes by the Spirit of Christ” (Moroni 10:17). Without these gifts, “there shall be none that *doeth good*,” “for if there be one among you that *doeth good*, he shall work by the power and gifts of God” (Moroni 10:25).

Moroni concludes by specifying four ways that the process of coming unto Christ by enduring to the end by laying “hold upon *every good gift*” enables his followers to become good.⁶ For if they will (1) “deny [themselves] of all ungodliness,” they will by his grace (2) become “perfect in Christ” (Moroni 10:32–33). That perfection is further defined as (3) being “sanctified in Christ ... unto the remission of [their] sins, that [they] become (4) holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:33).

The same shift from the initial focus on the *goodness of God* to the potential goodness of men is foreshadowed by Nephi in his opening chapter when he announces as his thesis that he will show his readers “that the *tender mercies* of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their faith to make them mighty, even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20). This thesis is supported throughout Nephi’s first book in the traditional Israelite way by reporting six accounts of God’s powerful intervention to save the covenant faithful from threatened destruction.⁷ His second book makes it clear that he is ultimately referring to the deliverance of all men and women from death and the covenant faithful (those who become good) from sin and the captivity of the devil.

This opening chapter provides even more clues about this theme, which will in turn guide the reader through the entire book. The story of the opening chapter focuses on Lehi, who had been deeply troubled by the prophecies of some contemporaries who were warning the people that Jerusalem and its inhabitants would soon be destroyed and taken captive because of their wickedness. After he cried to the Lord “with all his heart, in behalf of his people,” he was subsequently shown a theophany of “God sitting upon his throne” and was given to know that the calamitous prophecies he had heard would in fact be fulfilled. Lehi’s startling and even joyful response to this negative news shows

6. See Noel B. Reynolds, “How ‘Come unto Me’ Fits into the Nephite Gospel,” *Religious Educator* 18, no. 2 (2017): 15–29, for an explanation of how this phrase is usually equated with the gospel principle of enduring to the end in the teachings of Christ to the Nephites.

7. See the rhetorical analysis of First Nephi that shows the detailed and structured way in which Nephi defends his thesis in Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1980): 1–18.

that he had also been given the big picture on God’s relationship to his human creations and now understood these pending destructions in terms of God’s “goodness and mercy,” as he exclaimed:

Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy *power* and *goodness* and *mercy* is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And because thou art merciful, thou will not suffer *those who come unto thee* that they shall perish. (1 Nephi 1:5–14)

In this paper, I will also explore the possibility that *power*, *goodness*, and *mercy* are used here to describe eternal attributes of God, which in turn explain his decision to create this earth and its human population and to prepare a plan of salvation. That plan includes the atonement of Jesus Christ and his gospel as the way by which men and women can, with the benefit of his covenantal *mercy*, receive a forgiveness of their sins, come unto him, and attain goodness as well. In so doing, they may be delivered from the devil’s captivity and dwell in the presence of God eternally.

The Goodness of God in the Old Testament

While both *mercy* and *goodness* do have principal equivalent terms in the Hebrew Bible (*rahamim*, *tub*), both have also been used as translations for the more complex and theologically prominent Hebrew term *hesed*.⁸ For example, *mercy* is the most frequently used translation for *hesed* in the King James Version of the Old Testament. And most linguistic studies of God’s *goodness* (*tub*) in the Hebrew Bible have concluded that it is just one of the many dimensions of Yahweh’s *hesed* as demonstrated in his care for his covenant people as he blesses them with peace, land, or delivers them from their enemies: “For the Lord is *good* (*tub*), for his *steadfast love* (*hesed*) endures for ever” (Jeremiah 33:11, RSV).⁹ As Stachowiak points out, “all the biblical texts refer to God’s goodness,

8. See my forthcoming paper, “Biblical *Hesed* and Nephite Covenant Culture,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* (2021), for a detailed discussion of the term. Daniel Belnap first called the attention of LDS readers to Old Testament *hesed* in his essay “‘How Excellent is Thy Lovingkindness’: The Gospel Principle of *Hesed*,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, eds. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2009), 170–86.

9. Cf. Jeremiah 31:12–14. The most thorough dictionary treatment is found in Ingeborg Höver-Jorhag, “טוב *tób*; טוב *túb*; יטב *yṭb*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (TDOT)*, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 5:296–317.

either directly or by implication.” But that goodness is focused on the people of the covenant: “Yahweh is the good, kind and benign one who shows his favour and benevolence to *his people* and does this *by virtue of their election and of the covenant*”¹⁰ (emphasis added).

While “the idea of essential goodness underlies” all the different shades of meaning of *good* in the Old Testament, “the Hebrew word *hesed* expresses goodness in a more concrete form, in the sense of divine favour and God’s loyal readiness to give help, particularly in connection with the covenant made on Mount Sinai.”¹¹ The Psalms contain numerous passages praising the *goodness of God*, the proofs of which are the various examples of his fulfilling his responsibilities to bless and deliver his covenant people as part of his *hesed*. Only occasionally do these express a more universal view — as in Psalm 100:1–5, where “all the earth is called upon to praise God for his goodness.”¹²

God’s *Hesed* for His Covenant People

Scholarly opinion about the necessity of a prior relationship of obligation for *hesed* to be in effect between men and God or just between men has been mixed. When Nelson Glueck wrote his seminal work on *hesed*, he argued that the Lord’s *hesed* was always grounded in a pre-existing covenant or other relationship of obligation.¹³ It could not be equated to God’s goodness generally or with spontaneous acts of kindness or friendship that were not so grounded:

God’s goodness, which is mentioned in these passages in connection with His *hesed*, in no way influences the established meaning of *hesed* and does not lead to a meaning of *hesed* as favor, as one might expect. For the pious, it was an act of Yahweh’s grace that he had entered into a covenant

10. F. L. R. Stachowiak, s.v. “Goodness,” in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology: The Complete Sacramentum Verbi*, ed. Johannes B. Bauer (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 322.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 324.

13. American archaeologist Nelson Glueck first published his University of Jena doctoral dissertation in 1927. As it gained classic status among Bible scholars, Hebrew Union College sponsored an English translation by Alfred Gottschalk in *Hesed in the Bible*, ed. Elias L. Epstein (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), featuring an introductory essay, Gerald A. Larue, “Recent Studies in *Hesed*,” pp. 1–32. This volume is now available as a paperback: Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. Alfred Gottschalk (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); see page 102. Further citations of Glueck refer to the paperback edition.

with them and showed them *hesed* in accordance with his promise. His *hesed*-deeds were miracles to them.¹⁴ While the *hesed* relationship between Yahweh and his people was regarded as having originated through his goodness, *hesed* itself remained the mutual relationship of rights and duties which Yahweh had obligated himself to show.¹⁵ In this sense only is *hesed* to be understood The reason for Yahweh's ... demonstrating all his power for the sake of his people throughout the course of history, must not be sought in his favor, grace, or goodness He stood by the people of his covenant, faithfully executing the *hesed* to which they were entitled by virtue of that relationship *Hesed* is best translated in these stereotyped passages as "covenantal loyalty"¹⁶ or "faithful assistance."¹⁷

Glueck here makes it clear that even though God's goodness can be seen as manifest in particular acts of *hesed*, he believes the Israelites understood the origins of their covenant with the Lord as a product of his pre-existing goodness, a distinction that has not been generally acknowledged in the literature. As he clarifies further, relating to God's goodness and grace:

[H]esed is not identical with God's favor. However, since the relationship between God and His people was established by the grace of its election, *hesed* is based upon the grace of God It could be held that the origin of the God-people (man) relationship stems from God's favor; and that the structuring of these relationships emanates from His ethical will¹⁸

Eichrodt interpreted the earlier prophets differently. Rather than seeing their use of *hesed* transforming into an ethical doctrine, he saw it as "a unique exaltation of the God with whom nothing on earth can be compared," and in this way providing "an expression adequate both to the all-surpassing greatness and to the goodness of God."¹⁹

14. Psalms 138:2, 8; 25:10; 119:41, 76; 103:17–18.

15. Psalms 106:7; 107:8, 15, 21, 31; 136:4; 4:4; 17:7; 31:22.

16. Psalm 100:5.

17. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 81.

18. *Ibid.*, 87.

19. Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Santa Ana, CA: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:363.

In her first monograph on *hesed*, Katherine Sakenfeld supported the claims of scholars who did not find biblical usage of the term that restrictive, pointing to evidence from the Peshitta. “The Peshitta normally uses *twybt*’ (‘goodness, kindness; a favor or benefit’) as the translational equivalent of *hesed*.”²⁰ However, Emanuel Tov has since demonstrated that the translational evidence for this less restrictive interpretation is late, dating to the Common Era.²¹ And in his exhaustive application of modern linguistic methodologies to this question, Gordon Clark came down solidly in support of Glueck’s older view:

The methodology adopted in the present study has shown that a deep, enduring, personal commitment to each other is an essential feature of situations in which one human party extends *חסד* [*hesed*] to another. This is a mutual, bilateral commitment, unlike the unilateral commitment proposed by ... Sakenfeld.²²

Glueck was thus vindicated in his general conclusion that

[t]he *hesed* of God, while it is not to be identified with his grace, is still based upon the latter, insofar as the relationship between God and people, structured by Him as a covenantal relationship, was effected by electing Israel through an act of grace.²³

The seminal texts in Exodus 33:19 and 34:4–7, when read together, also seem to identify God’s *goodness* (*tub*) with elements of his *hesed*:

And he [the Lord] said, ‘I will make all *my goodness* pass before you ... The Lord, the Lord, a God *merciful* and *gracious*, slow to anger, and abounding in *steadfast love* (*hesed*) and *faithfulness* (*emeth*), keeping *steadfast love* (*hesed*) for thousands” (RSV).²⁴

20. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for the Harvard Semitic Museum Scholars Press, 1978), 16.

21. Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2001), 151–53.

22. Gordon R. Clark, *The Word “Hesed” in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 261. It should be noted that in her second monograph on this topic, Sakenfeld found *loyalty* to be the best translation for *hesed* and did recognize the presence of “existing commitment” while emphasizing the “situation of need” for recipients of *hesed*. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 131.

23. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 102.

24. See Robert P. Gordon’s discussion in “3201 חסד,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 2:355.

Dictionary treatments and linguistic studies of *hesed* and *tob* (to be or do good) and its derivatives tend to be consistent with one another in this approach. But they sometimes articulate some uneasiness about passages where *tob* would seem to signal that the *goodness* of the Lord may predate the establishment of his covenants with Israel. While these passages do undergird God's *hesed* toward his covenant people, they may also apply universally to his attitudes toward all mankind.²⁵ Glueck saw a similar universal ethic implicit in some of the minor prophets and wisdom literature.²⁶ As will be shown below, that distinction appears to be more pronounced and intentional in numerous Book of Mormon passages.

My Work and My Glory

Three decades ago in a festschrift honoring Hugh W. Nibley, I argued that there is strong and extensive evidence that the version of Genesis available to the Nephite prophets in the plates of brass must have been practically identical to the revised early chapters attached to Genesis in the Joseph Smith Translation.²⁷ One key passage in establishing that connection is Moses 1:39: "For this is my work and my glory to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."²⁸ This straightforward statement of God's boundless good intentions toward his human children has no parallel in the Old Testament, but does inform the teachings of the Nephite prophets repeatedly. The language describing the possibilities of eternal life for men begins in 2 Nephi 2, the chapter that reminds us most strongly of the Moses texts, and is echoed thirty times by Nephi and

25. See, e.g., the summaries of studies by Felix Asensio and Hans Joachim Stoebe in Gerald A. LaRue, "Recent Studies in *Hesed*," in Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 10–17.

26. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, 56–66.

27. "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday*, eds. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 2:136–73. That essay has been updated and reprinted in *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2019): 63–96, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-brass-plates-version-of-genesis/>. Its findings have been greatly expanded by the work of Jeff Lindsay in our co-authored paper, "Strong Like unto Moses': The Case for Ancient Roots in the Book of Moses Based on Book of Mormon Usage of Related Content Apparently from the Brass Plates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021):1-92, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/strong-like-unto-moses-the-case-for-ancient-roots-in-the-book-of-moses-based-on-book-of-mormon-usage-of-related-content-apparently-from-the-brass-plates/>.

28. In other Moses passages the same concept is restated in the same terms (Moses 5:11; 6:59; 7:45).

every major writer of the book.²⁹ The companion concept of *immortality* or *immortal glory* shows up three times in Moses, twice in conjunction with *eternal life* (Moses 1:39; 6:59, 61).³⁰

Modern scholars do find a few possible allusions in the Old Testament to Yahweh's concern for the immortality or even eternal life of all people, but these are not even noticed by most readers.³¹ But the Lord's eternal focus on these possibilities for all mankind as articulated repeatedly in the Nephite teachings testifies to his *goodness* preexisting his covenant with Abraham or others, and therefore preexisting his covenant *hesed*.

Book of Mormon Expansions of the Old Testament Discourse about the *Goodness of God*

What may have been implicit only in the Hebrew Bible as a background for the covenant God gave to Abraham is made explicit and prominent in the discourse of the Nephite prophets. While the Nephites use God's goodness to explain the faithfulness, justice, mercy, and deliverances of God in his dealings with his covenant people, the Israelites, they also invoke their visionary understanding of that goodness to explain God's love and salvation proffered to all mankind. The visions given to Lehi, Nephi, and possibly others expanded their grasp of God's goodness in two directions. They were given firstly an understanding of "the great plans of the eternal God," which preceded Abraham and even the existence of the earth and provided salvation for all peoples in all times and all places: "salvation through the atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world for all mankind which ever was, ever since the fall of Adam, or which is or which ever shall be, even unto the end of the world" (Mosiah 4:7). They refer explicitly to "the plan of salvation/redemption" by one or another of its labels thirty times and implicitly much more.³² Secondly, they also marveled at "*the great goodness of our God*" who had prepared *a way* — the gospel of Jesus Christ — by which every man or woman as an individual could repent

29. See 2 Nephi 2:27–28; 10:23; 31:18, 20; Jacob 6:11; Enos 1:3; Mosiah 5:15; 15:23–25; 18:9, 13; 26:20; 28:7; Alma 1:4; 5:28; 7:16; 11:40; 13:29; 22:15; Helaman 5:8; 3 Nephi 9:14; 15:9; Moroni 9:25. For sample New Testament parallels see John 6:54; 6:68.

30. Reynolds, "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis," (2019), 75–76.

31. One good example can be found in Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 107 and 148–49.

32. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Plan of Salvation and the Book of Mormon," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 1 (2020): 31–52.

and qualify to return to his divine presence.³³ These two key theological concepts were revealed to Lehi and Nephi in their first visions, dramatically expanding their traditional Israelite understanding of the ways in which God relates to humankind.

In a separate paper I have shown how the earliest visions given to Lehi and Nephi that launched the Nephite dispensation educated them in these two additional time frames and perspectives, equipping them with vastly expanded understandings of the goodness of God and its importance for all humankind.³⁴ They were introduced into the divine council and its eternal perspective which allowed them to grasp God's plan of redemption that was established before the creation of this world. And they were taught the gospel of Jesus Christ and *the way* it provides whereby individuals can become the Lord's children by covenant and walk the straight and narrow path that will lead them back to him — making them good in the process. Finally, they saw Israel's covenant with the Lord as a way of showing all the world how the Lord could establish a covenant relationship with people who would obey him and how he would discipline and bless them through cycles of obedience and rebellion. By teaching all three of these basic conceptions of God's relationships to humankind, the Nephite prophets clearly demonstrated their reliance on the *goodness of God* as a foundational theological concept.

The three time-frames featured in these visions include eternity, the history of humans on this earth, and the lifetimes of individuals. The visions given to Lehi and Nephi also provided a visualization for each of these. Eternity was assumed in the openings of heaven and the induction of new prophets into the divine council where God sits enthroned. God's relationship with the peoples of the earth in history and prophecy provides a salvation history that promises the possibility of covenant relationships between God and peoples of the earth, whether organized as tribes or churches. And the final reality that salvation does require making and keeping a prescribed covenant with the Lord by every individual who will be saved demonstrates how both larger time frames focus on the lives lived by individuals.

Depending on the time-frame perspective assumed in any scriptural passage, readers would be led to think in terms of the appropriate verbalization, whether it be the plan of salvation, the Abrahamic

33. Jacob repeatedly exclaims in this manner as he presents the first comprehensive account of the plan of salvation in 2 Nephi 9–10. The quote is from 9:10.

34. Reynolds, "Lehi's Vision."

covenant, or the gospel of Jesus Christ. And Lehi's great vision provided a visualization to illustrate each of those verbalizations: the divine council, the allegory of the olive tree, and the image of the straight and narrow path leading to the tree of life.³⁵ These relationships can be illustrated conveniently in the following table.

	Time Frame	Visualization	Verbalization
1.	Eternity	Divine council	Plan of salvation
2.	Salvation history	Olive tree allegory	Abrahamic covenant
3.	Individual lifetimes	Tree of life vision	Gospel of Jesus Christ

The Nephite prophets clearly believed the Lord had blessed Abraham and his descendants with a covenant relationship that would tie them to him with the expectations of *hesed* being shown on all sides. They were able to accommodate that vision to their revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the plan of redemption, which would be extended not only to the descendants of Abraham, but also to all men and women throughout the earth as the means by which they could escape the captivity of the devil and receive eternal life.

Latter-day Saint literature tends to feature a multiplicity of strategies for explaining the differences and the connections between the gospel, the plan of salvation, and the Abrahamic covenant. Lehi's vision would appear to resolve that confusion by assigning each of these to its own time frame — all of which are both real and essential aspects of the relationship between God and his human creations. The eternal perspective of the plan of salvation provides the background or context that gives meaning to the Abrahamic covenant and to the gospel. While the Abrahamic covenant makes clear that God's covenant people have responsibilities for the material welfare and spiritual support of one another, the gospel also makes clear that salvation finally depends on each individual's level of commitment to the Lord and determination to endure to the end in keeping a covenant made personally. But there is no conceptual conflict or dissonance between the three concepts. Rather they are fully integrated with one another, and the focus of any discourse is determined by the time frame that provides its context. This would explain why the Nephite prophets could shift so easily and

35. Nephi includes the allegory of the olive tree and the gospel of Jesus Christ in the list of sixteen things Lehi taught his family after receiving the great vision. See 1 Nephi 10:2–15.

even seamlessly between teaching and prophesying about the gospel, the Abrahamic covenant, and the plan of salvation.³⁶

In so doing, they expanded the explanatory power of the Old Testament concept of the *goodness of God* far beyond what is explicit anywhere in the text of the Hebrew Bible. For the Nephites, the *goodness of God* provides the explanatory background for their very existence, for the existence of the earth and its peoples, for the nature of the probationary state in which men find themselves, and for the efforts of the Lord and his servants to bring all men and women to repentance that they might become holy like him and return to his presence. As Moroni was taught by Jesus Christ directly:

- A But he *that believeth these things* which I have spoken,
 B him will I visit with the manifestations of *my Spirit*.
 C And he shall know and bear record;
 B* for because of *my Spirit*
 A* he shall *know that these things* are true,
 A for it *persuadeth men to do good*.
 B And whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do *good* is of
me,
 B* for *good* cometh of none save it be *of me*.
 A* I am the same that *leadeth men to all good*. (Ether 4:11–12)

By contrast, the Old Testament is usually understood to tell the story of Abraham and his descendants, to whom God gave a covenant that if they would obey him in all things, he would prosper and protect them, delivering them from their enemies and even provoking them to repentance when they strayed.³⁷ While it is sometimes interpreted to promise salvation universally, that is not explicit or self-evident in the text itself. The Nephites saw themselves as descendants and beneficiaries of the Abrahamic covenant, but with this major interpretive expansion derived from their founding visions in which they had learned of the

36. I have explored these connections at length in “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 39–74 and in “Covenant Language in Biblical Religions and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly*, forthcoming 2022.

37. Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Abrahamic covenant are compared with the Nephite interpretation in Noel B. Reynolds, “All Kindreds shall be Blessed: Nephite, Jewish, and Christian Interpretations of the Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Seek Ye Words of Wisdom: Studies of the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Temple in Honor of Stephen D. Ricks*, eds. Donald W. Parry, Gaye Strathearn, and Shon D. Hopkin (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2020), 115–40.

coming of Jesus Christ and his teachings as explained above.³⁸ They recognized that the salvation history based in the Abrahamic covenant (1) was itself based in God’s universal plan of salvation for all men, and (2) that it would have effect in the lives of individuals only as they embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Nephi bluntly stated:

For behold, I say unto you:

A As many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord;

B and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off.

A* For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent

Ballast and believe in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel.³⁹

Nephite Understandings of *Hesed* and the *Goodness of God*

The second half of this paper reviews the Book of Mormon passages in which the *goodness of God* occurs considering the discussion to this point.

The *Goodness of God* Experienced by Covenant Keepers

Eight of the twenty-five references to the *goodness of God* in the Book of Mormon can readily be understood as explanations for the blessings God gives to his covenant people when they are obedient — with the Nephite clarification that the covenant at issue is the gospel covenant they have made as individuals to repent and endure to the end in obedience to Jesus Christ. Benjamin refers directly to that covenant when he reminds his hearers that they “have known of *his goodness* and tasted of his love” when they received a remission of their sins, “which causeth such exceeding great joy in [their] souls” (Mosiah 4:11).

The same understanding is evoked when Mormon speaks of tasting and knowing “of *the goodness of Jesus*” (Mormon 1:15) in his youth and when he prays that “through *his infinite goodness* and grace” the Lord “will keep [his son Moroni] through the endurance of faith on his name to the end” (Moroni 8:3).⁴⁰ Mormon sounds just like an Old Testament

38. See Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant.”

39. 2 Nephi 30:2.

40. Mormon uses the same gospel understanding to explain “the sorrowing of the damned” negatively because they are not moved to repentance “because

prophet when he comments as editor: “We can see that the Lord in *his great infinite goodness* doth bless and prosper those who put their trust in him” (Helaman 12:1). In similar Old Testament style, three additional passages link the *goodness of God* to his deliverance of his faithful people from captivity or from destruction in perilous conflicts: “When they thought of *the immediate goodness of God* and his power in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites and of bondage, they did raise their voices and gave thanks to God” (Mosiah 25:10. Cf. Alma 57:25 and 36).

God’s Pre-Covenant Goodness

The other references to the *goodness of God* either explicitly or implicitly appeal to the broader perspective given to Lehi and Nephi in their early visions rather than to the Old Testament perspective as defined by the Abrahamic covenant. Lehi had responded to those first visions by declaring his new universalistic understanding that “thy power and *goodness* and mercy is over *all the inhabitants of the earth*,” all of whom are promised that if they will come unto him (through his covenants), “they shall not perish” (1 Nephi 1:14). Lehi later cites “the creation of the earth” twice as context for his understanding of God’s “*infinite goodness*” in bringing his people “into this precious land of promise” (2 Nephi 1:10). Nephi refers to that same expanded vision when he praises “*the great goodness of the Lord* in shewing me his great and marvelous works” (2 Nephi 4:17). Jacob is in the middle of his explanation of the universal plan of salvation when he exclaims, “O how great *the goodness of our God* who *prepareth a way* for our escape” (2 Nephi 9:10).⁴¹

Benjamin also saw God’s salvation applying to *all* “*the children of men*” because of “the atonement which hath been prepared from *the foundation of the world*” (Mosiah 4:6).⁴²

of the *goodness of God*” (Mormon 2:13). That basic gospel understanding is spelled out several times in the Book of Mormon by Christ in his own voice. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (2015): 218–34, revised and updated for *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 29 (2018): 65–103, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-gospel-according-to-mormon/>; and Reynolds, “How ‘Come unto Me’ Fits.”

41. *The way* is one of the principal alternative labels for the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon text and occurs in that role 82 times. See Noel B. Reynolds, “This is the Way,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013): 75.

42. When the Book of Mormon prophets date things “from the foundation of the world,” they may be getting this phrase and concept from the version of Genesis in their plates of brass. See Reynolds and Lindsay, “Strong Like Unto Moses,” 18.

I say unto you that

if ye have come to a knowledge of the *goodness of God*
 and his matchless power
 and his wisdom
 and his patience

- a and his long-suffering towards the children of men,
 and also the atonement which hath been prepared
 from the foundation of the world,
 b that thereby salvation might come to him
 c that should put his trust in the Lord
 d and should be diligent in keeping his
 commandments
 c* and continue in the faith, even unto the
 end of his life —I mean the life of the
 mortal body—

I say that

- b* this is the man that receiveth salvation
 a* through the atonement which was prepared from
 the foundation of the world
 i *for all mankind* which ever was, ever since the
 fall of Adam,
 ii or which is
 ii* or which ever shall be,
 i* even unto the end of the world.
 a And this is the means whereby salvation cometh.
 b And there is none other salvation save this
 which hath been spoken of;
 b* neither is there any conditions whereby man
 can be saved
 a* except the conditions which I have told you.
 (Mosiah 4:6–8)

Benjamin is clearly saying that the atonement was prepared from the beginning as the means by which salvation could be made available “for all mankind,” from Adam to the end of the world. The plan of salvation preceded the creation and the covenant of Abraham.

It may be that when the Nephite prophets describe the *goodness of God* as “great” or “infinite” they are often referring to its pre-covenantal reality. Benjamin refers directly to “*the infinite goodness of God*” as made manifest in the Nephite visions and “their great views of that which is to come” (Mosiah 5:3) — without any trace of a reference to the Abrahamic

covenant. Alma explained the plan of redemption to the apostate people of Ammonihah “according to *the supreme goodness of God*” (Alma 12:32). In the course of their 25 references to the *goodness of God*, the Nephite writers refer four times to his goodness as “infinite,” which also seems to signal their broader perspective.⁴³ In the same sense, it is called “great” three times. It is also described as “supreme” and “exceeding,” which would seem to have the same expansive implications as “infinite.”

The Invitation to Experience the *Goodness of God* Personally

Less explicit, but more likely based in the expanded vision of Lehi and Nephi than in the traditional perspective are prophetic appeals to recognize God’s goodness in its fullness as motivation to enter into or return to his covenant. Both Lehi and Nephi appear to be referring to those visions as the source of their “knowledge of *the goodness ... of God*” (1 Nephi 1:1, 1:14, and 5:4). In his final address to his people, Benjamin urges them to “remember and always retain in remembrance the greatness of God and your own nothingness and *his goodness and long-suffering [hesed?]* towards you unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility” (Mosiah 4:11. Cf. v. 5). After Alma was converted in a visionary experience in which he saw the same heavenly things Lehi had been shown centuries previously (cf. 1 Nephi 1:8 and Alma 36:22) , his father assembled the priests to hear Alma’s words “that the eyes of the people might be opened, to see and know of *the goodness and glory of God*” (Mosiah 27:22).⁴⁴

Drawing on the great vision of the tree of life where Lehi and Nephi had been shown how the Lord’s straight and narrow path leads people to the opportunity “to partake of the fruit” of the tree of life which is “most sweet above all,”⁴⁵ Nephi uniquely characterizes the process of accepting

43. I have already indicated above that Mormon may be an exception. He twice seems to use *infinite goodness of God* in the Old Testament covenantal pattern (Moroni 8:3 and Helaman 12:1).

44. Alma provides a condensed version of his own vision in Alma chapter 36, which he links explicitly to Lehi’s account by quoting 1 Nephi 1:8. I have previously published a detailed rhetorical analysis of Alma 36 and will not repeat any of that here. The abbreviated article can be seen in Noel B. Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” in *Give Ear To My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, eds. Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2019), 457 and the complete version published subsequently in *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 292, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/rethinking-alma-36/>.

45. See 1 Nephi 8:10–18, 24–35.

and following the gospel of Jesus Christ as “*partaking of the goodness of God*.” In preparation for his foundational presentation of the doctrine or gospel of Christ, Nephi asks rhetorically: “Hath the Lord commanded any that they should not *partake of his goodness*?” He then answers his own question by assuring his readers that the Lord “*inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness*” (2 Nephi 26:28, 31).

For he inviteth them all to come unto him and *partake of his goodness*. And he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen. And all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile. (2 Nephi 26:33)

After presenting the gospel as taught to him by the Father and the Son in vision,⁴⁶ he looks to his readers in the distant future and warns those who will not accept his message and “*partake of the goodness of God*,” that “these words shall condemn you at the last day” (2 Nephi 33:14). His brother Jacob then takes up the pen and begins his brief record by linking Nephi’s phrase to the gospel of Christ explicitly: “Wherefore we labored diligently among our people that we might persuade them to come unto Christ and *partake of the goodness of God*” (Jacob 1:7).

Alma later invokes the same image and connects it to the same gospel message: “Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be *partakers of the fruit of the tree of life*” (Alma 5:62. Cf. verses 34–35). Expanding the same image for his wayward son Corianton, Alma tells him, “I would that ye should come unto Christ, which is the Holy One of Israel, and *partake of his salvation* and the power of his redemption; whosoever will come may come and *partake of the waters of life freely*” (Alma 42:27).⁴⁷

Closely related to the metaphor of “partaking,” Nephi and Lehi also spoke of *knowing* the goodness of God (1 Nephi 1:1 and 5:4), and later prophets fashioned their own variations on this phrasing, including Mormon who spoke of his own experience at age fifteen when he “was visited of the Lord and *tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus*” (Mormon 1:15). Here Mormon may be echoing his own record of Benjamin who used the verbs of tasting, remembering, and knowing.⁴⁸

46. See 2 Nephi 31 and the analysis provided in Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Nephi: An Essay on 2 Nephi 31,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 51–75.

47. Mormon and Moroni may have modified the same image from Nephi when they spoke of “partaking of the heavenly gift.” See 4 Nephi 13, Ether 12:8–9, and 13:11.

48. Cf. Mosiah 4:5 and 6, 27:22 and 32, and Mormon 2:15–16.

And again I say unto you ... that as ye have come to the *knowledge of the glory of God* or if ye have *known of his goodness* and have *tasted of his love* and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceeding great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember and always *retain in remembrance the greatness of God* and your own nothingness *and his goodness and long-suffering* towards you unworthy creatures. (Mosiah 5:11)

One reference speaks of the *goodness of God* as being “immediate” (Mosiah 25:10). As the Oxford English Dictionary warns us, we should not assume that this reference is to time.⁴⁹ Recognizing that the modern Book of Mormon translation is in Early Modern English, we should understand *immediate* to mean “unmediated.”⁵⁰ Recipients experience and feel God’s goodness directly and without secondary intervention. This passage refers to the experience in which Alma’s people were miraculously delivered in one day from the Lamanites. Others speak of knowing, partaking of, or tasting his goodness as they experience the remission of sins. In these 25 mentions of God’s goodness, we can recognize that it is frequently characterized as personally relevant to each person — that every human being is invited to partake of his goodness by repenting and taking up the covenant path the gospel describes for them as individuals, receiving the Holy Ghost in their lives.

49. The general definition given for *immediate* as an adjective: “Said of a person or thing in its relation to another. That has no intermediary or intervening member, medium, or agent; that is in actual contact or direct personal relation.” *OED*, s.v. “Immediate.”

50. With the collaboration of Stanford Carmack, Royal Skousen has determined that the “words, phrases, expressions, grammatical forms, and syntactic patterns” of the original Book of Mormon “are archaic English” and conform well with Early Modern English (approximately 1450–1720). See Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon: Part Three, The Nature of the Original Language* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2018), 3. Carmack has kindly provided me with the following mid-seventeenth century example: “Upon a serious perpension of the irresistible pressure or weight of this plain and genuine inference, I once resolved to supersede all other Arguments of the Creation of the World out of nothing, by the sole and *immediate Goodnesse*, Wisdome, and Power of the Supreme, because most perfect Being.” Walter Charleton, *The Darknes of atheism dispelled by the light of nature: a physico-theologicall treatise* (London: 1652), 39–40.

The Power and Goodness and Mercy of God

Goodness is not the only eternal attribute of God that the Nephite prophets invoked to explain his plan of salvation. Nephi also referred to the Lord's knowledge and power: "But the Lord *knoweth all things* from the beginning. Wherefore he *prepareth a way* to accomplish all his works among the children of men. For behold, he hath *all power* unto the fulfilling of all his words" (1 Nephi 9:6). In the very earliest mention of the *goodness of God* chronologically, Lehi also cites his *power* and *mercy*. While *mercy* is one of the English terms translators invoke most frequently for *hesed*, it also is the standard translation for *rahamim* for which it seems most adequate.⁵¹ In either case, God's mercy is connected to his covenantal *hesed*. But the divine *power* that Lehi refers to is clearly needed in this and other passages to explain God's ability to make and execute his plan of salvation including the creation of the world and the defeat of death and the devil through his resurrection. The divine mercy of God enables him to forgive sins before bringing his repentant children to a final judgment with its consequent rewards of eternal life or eternal punishment.

Benjamin later echoed this same connection, citing the "wisdom and *power* and justice and mercy of him *who created all things in heaven and in earth*, who is *God above all*" (Mosiah 5:15). And God also wields his power throughout salvation history to bring new peoples such as the Gentiles into covenant relationships with him. Nephi was shown in vision how the future Gentile nations would be "delivered by *the power of God* out of the hands of all other nations" and "*lifted up by the power of God* above all other nations upon the face of the land" (1 Nephi 13:19, 30). His divine purpose would be to "bring forth unto them *in mine own power* much of my gospel" (1 Nephi 13:34). Those who would choose to receive that gospel and "seek to bring forth my Zion at that day," would be blessed with "the gift and *the power* of the Holy Ghost. And if they

51. Horacio Simian-Yofre sees *rahamim* as "a fundamental element of Yahweh's nature" and resists the tendency of translators to equate it with *hesed*, with which it sometimes occurs in a parallel structure. He sees this parallelism suggesting that the combination be treated "as a compound of complementary expressions: *hesed* expresses the fundamental goodness of God, *rh* the special favor shown by God in the situation of sin and affliction" (cf. Isa. 54:8: 'Because of [my] everlasting goodness I have had compassion on you'). See his dictionary article on mercy in the Hebrew Bible: "רחם *rh*," *TDOT* 13:437–452 at 452. This seems to contradict the view of Glueck and others who saw God's mercy as one of the chief elements or manifestations of his *hesed*, but is more in line with the Nephite view that God's mercy was also evident as one dimension of his pre-Abraham goodness.

endure unto the end, they *shall be lifted up* at the last day and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:37).

However, the vast majority of over 300 mentions of *the power of God* in the Book of Mormon occur in texts describing how God can bless, protect, or deliver his covenant people *after* they have received the gospel. God’s dependable *hesed* is clearly a function of both his goodness, his mercy, his knowledge, and his power. Nephi’s thesis as quoted above states this clearly: “But behold, I Nephi will shew unto you that the *tender mercies* of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their faith to make them mighty, even unto the *power* of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20b). While most of the references to *the power of God* do refer to his deliverance of his people from captivity and other major dangers, many others are explicitly spiritual and refer to their being rescued from the powers of the devil. In his closing sentences, Moroni makes explicit this principal blessing that comes through *the power of God*:

And if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in no wise deny *the power of God*. And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ and deny not *his power*, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father, unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot. (Moroni 10:32–33)

Knowledge of the *Goodness of God*

It should also be noted that eight of the twenty-five references to the *goodness of God* reviewed above explicitly mention it as something that is “known” or “remembered.”⁵² These recognitions of God’s infinite power and goodness motivated people repeatedly to praise God and to enter into the covenant relationship proffered by his gospel. Those who chose to do so and obeyed his commandments as they walked day by day up that covenant path could testify that they were blessed, protected, and guided from all evil by his power which was often described as “the power of the Holy Ghost.”⁵³ In every case, as Nephi explains, it is “coming

52. Cf. 1 Nephi 1:1, 5:4, Mosiah 4:5, 6, 11, 25:10, 27:22, Mormon 1:15.

53. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Language of the Spirit in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter*, 33 (2019), 209–14, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-language-of-the-spirit-in-the-book-of-mormon/>; for a detailed discussion of the ways in which the Nephites saw God using the power of the Holy Ghost to accomplish his purposes.

to the *knowledge* of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer” which is an essential first step.⁵⁴

Nephi makes this point emphatically by using some form of *know* or *knowledge* six times in the same summary statement to Laman and Lemuel — in the exchange that occurred immediately after Nephi’s reception of the great vision:

- A And at that day shall the remnant of our seed *know* that they are of the house of Israel and that they are the covenant people of the Lord.
 - B And then shall they *know* and *come to the knowledge of their forefathers*
 - C and also to *the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer*, which was ministered unto their fathers by him.
 - B* Wherefore they shall come to *the knowledge of their Redeemer* and the very points of his doctrine,
 - A* that they may *know* how to come unto him and be saved.
- (1 Nephi 15:14)

Nephi’s explanation to his brothers starts off with two elements that refer to the understanding of the Abrahamic covenant (A and B), which they already recognize, before linking and transitioning to and focusing on (C) the prophesied “gospel of their Redeemer” and (B*) “the very points of his doctrine” that will become the means by which (A*) all future peoples “may *know* how to come unto him and be saved” — the message that they will repeatedly reject.

The Goodness — and the Depravity — of the People

The Book of Mormon also repeatedly emphasizes the high contrast between the *goodness of God* and the potential goodness of men on the one hand and the wickedness of so many men on the other. Mormon’s selections of stories from Nephite history feature this theme throughout. And then Moroni emphasizes this contrast dramatically in his penultimate chapter by inserting an epistle from his father in which the unimaginable depravity of the Nephites is described.

54. 1 Nephi 10:14. The essential role of knowledge in this process for those who will enter a covenant relationship with the Lord is documented in Reynolds, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant,” 69–71.

O the depravity of my people! They are without order and without mercy. ... And they have become strong in their perversion. And they are alike brutal, sparing none, neither old nor young. And they delight in every thing *save that which is good*. And the sufferings of our women and our children upon all the face of this land doth exceed every thing. Yea, tongue cannot tell, neither can it be written. (Moroni 9:18–19)

This potential for evil was also shared by all men. Abinadi taught the Nephites that the devil had beguiled their “first parents” which was

the cause of all mankind’s becoming carnal, sensual, devilish, knowing evil from good, subjecting themselves to the devil. ... But remember that he that persists in his own carnal nature and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, he remaineth in his fallen state, and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore he is ... an enemy to God. (Mosiah 16:2–5)

And as Alma explained to his son Corianton:

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 forever to be cut off from his presence.

And now the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made. Therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect just God and a merciful God also. (Alma 42:14–15)

God’s great plan was grounded in his ability and desire to overcome all evil through his mercy, power, knowledge, and goodness.

Possible Nephite Hendiadyses Employing the *Goodness of God*

One side note that should be included in this paper is the possible occurrence of the rhetorical figure of hendiadys in connection with the *goodness of God*. Hebrew writers often conjoined two nouns in the same grammatical form to convey a more complex meaning, rather than their two separate meanings. This phenomenon has been richly documented in the Book of Mormon and may explain some of the interesting usages

of the *goodness of God* in this text.⁵⁵ Nephi leads with a reference to “the goodness and the mysteries of God” (1 Nephi 1:1). Given that he uses “mysteries of God” to refer to those truths which are only known by revelation, is he suggesting that the *goodness of God* is only to be known through that means? Benjamin twice links the *goodness of God* with his *long-suffering* (Mosiah 4:6, 11). One of these occurrences includes a linkage to God’s wisdom and to his patience. The suggestion here could be that God’s goodness is not just a moral stance or achievement, but that it is also structured by his knowledge and understanding of how human things work and the need to be patient and long-suffering with his children as they proceed through this mortal probation and up the covenant path as they return to him, one day at a time. Single occurrences of God’s “goodness and glory” (Mosiah 27:22) and “goodness and grace” (Moroni 8:3) would seem to invite a similar analysis. But when God’s power is linked three times to his goodness, both nouns seem to carry their own meaning independently, without adjustment. For example, when the narrator tells us that “they thought of the immediate goodness of God and his power in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites” (Mosiah 25:10),⁵⁶ we think of power and goodness as two separate attributes that function in concert, but that are not merged into something more complex.

Conclusions

In all their teachings, the Nephite prophets recognized the human potential for both goodness and evil. Because of his infinite goodness, God prepared a plan of salvation, including the atonement of Jesus Christ, so that in this state of probation, all humankind could choose the covenant path of his gospel by repenting and coming to him. And this path will prepare them as they follow him and endure to the end to become good like him that they might enter into his presence and into eternal life. Or they could choose to follow their own desires and be led captive by the devil, who desires “that all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Nephi 2:27).

In Nephite discourse, the *goodness of God* was a phrase that was used in two different ways — to explain God’s provision for the possibility of

55. Hendiadyses have shown up in my current studies of several basic gospel principles, but in none of these so impressively as repentance. See, Noel B. Reynolds, “The Language of Repentance in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 29 (2020): 197–213, for a discussion of rhetorical hendiadyses and how they work in the Bible and the Book of Mormon

56. Cf. 1 Nephi 1:14 and Mosiah 46.

eternal life for all men and women and to explain his miraculous support and deliverances, day by day, for those who are enduring to the end on the covenant path. While traces of that first way have been noticed by some Bible scholars, the general pattern of scholarly interpretation of the Old Testament has been to identify the *goodness of God* as one part of the covenantal *hesed* that he shows to his people as he protects, delivers, and reclaims them through their cycles of obedience and disobedience. The Book of Mormon sometimes echoes that usage, but then goes on to portray the *goodness of God* as the divine feature he desires all his human children to emulate and to incorporate into their souls. The very purpose of this mortal probation that he has provided to his children is to give them the opportunity to choose the *goodness of God* for themselves, that they may become good and qualify to be in his presence eternally. Further, from the opening page of the Book of Mormon, the Nephite prophets make it clear that this is God's purpose for all his human children and not for the descendants of Abraham alone.

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