

What Was the Nature of Satan’s Premortal Proposal?

Supplement for Personal Study of Gospel Doctrine Lesson 2:
“Thou Wast Chosen Before Thou Wast Born” (Abraham 3; Moses 4:1-4)



Figure 1. William Blake, 1757-1827: *Satan in His Original Glory*, ca. 1805. To highlight Lucifer’s perversity, Blake has conspicuously reversed the hands in which the emblems of monarchy are normally held. For example, in British coronation ceremonies, the sword is meant to be held in the right hand so that it may be used “to stop the growth of iniquity, protect the Holy Church of God and defend widows and orphans.”¹ The Orb — a late substitute for the original symbolism of the incense offering of temple priests in Israel² — is to be held in the left hand in order to signify “the domination of Christ over the whole world.”³ The reversing of Satan’s hands in this image is a symbol of his intent to reverse the order of heaven.

Question: What was the nature of Satan’s proposal to “redeem all mankind”?⁴ How did he intend to “destroy the agency of man”?⁵ Was his proposal feasible?

Summary: It is often assumed that the gist of Satan’s premortal proposal was that he would “‘save’ all of the Father’s children by forcing each to obey the Father’s law in all things.”⁶ In light of what the Book of Mormon teaches and Joseph Smith’s statements on the subject, these assumptions should not be taken for granted. Closer study offers a more likely alternative: namely that Satan put forth a proposal to “save ... people in their sins,”⁷ notably including the sons of perdition. Moreover, in the Book of Mormon, Satan’s proposal to “destroy the agency of man”⁸ is not described as an impossible attempt to force people to obey but rather as a scheme to prevent humankind from experiencing a mortal probation after the Fall.

Know

Questioning our assumptions. Because we know so little about the details of the “war in heaven,”⁹ it is not surprising that Church members have gradually filled in details of the story as best they can on their own. In doing so, a set of basic assumptions about Satan’s premortal plans and doings have become widely accepted. We will examine two questions relating to these commonly held assumptions:

1. What was Satan trying to do when he proposed to “redeem all mankind”?¹⁰
2. By what means did Satan seek to “destroy the agency of man”?¹¹

“I will redeem all mankind.” The best-known version of a commentary by Joseph Smith on Satan’s premortal intentions comes from a discourse recorded in rough notes within William Clayton’s official diary and later smoothed out by Church historians:¹²

The contention in Heaven was — Jesus said there would be certain souls that would not be saved; and the Devil said he could save them all, and laid his plans before the grand council, who gave their vote in favor of Jesus Christ. So the Devil rose up in rebellion against God, and was cast down, with all who put up their heads for him.

A correct understanding of this passage depends on how the term “certain souls” is interpreted when it mentions that “certain souls ... would not be saved.” By comparing William Clayton’s journal entry with the notes of others who heard Joseph Smith’s discourse it becomes clear that the “contention in Heaven” was *not* about whether ordinary souls would make it to heaven if no one forced them to be obedient in all things. Rather, it was about Satan’s claim that he could save even those who committed the unpardonable sin — in other words, those who the the premortal Jesus Christ Himself had said He could *not* save. According to the notes in George Laub’s journal, Joseph Smith said that Satan “boasted of himself saying, ‘Send me, I can save all, even those who sinned against the Holy Ghost.’”¹³

Contradicting Satan’s boast, Wilford Woodruff recorded that Joseph Smith taught: “Jesus Christ will save all except the sons of perdition.”¹⁴ In other words, the

Atonement of Jesus Christ would guarantee that all except the sons of perdition would be “resurrected to [at least] a celestial glory, escaping the second, i.e., spiritual, death.”¹⁵

Apparently, the Prophet taught that when Satan proposed to “save all,” he was not thinking broadly, as Jesus did, about how to help the mass of humanity achieve salvation, but rather was focused on concocting a narrow, selfish, and farfetched proposal whose stated objective was to “save” the sons of perdition. Seemingly trying to do away with the need for an Atonement, Satan “sought... to redeem... all in their sins.”¹⁶

We will return to this subject after we take a look at the second question.



Figure 2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, ca. 1525-1569: Fall of Rebel Angels, 1562

“Satan ... sought to destroy the agency of man.” It is often taught that the means by which Satan’s proposal would “‘save’ all of the Father’s children” was “by forcing each to obey the Father’s law in all things.”¹⁷

Yet, there are at least two reasons why the idea that Satan intended to destroy agency through forced obedience seems unlikely. For one thing, the principle of agency is part of humankind’s eternal nature,¹⁸ and continues to operate even in the most coercive situations imaginable.¹⁹

For another thing, it is evident that salvation cannot be obtained through mere abstinence from sin, nor from the completion of some number of outwardly benevolent actions. As C. S. Lewis wrote: “We might think that God wanted simply obedience to a set of rules; whereas He really wants people of a particular sort.”²⁰

A more likely alternative. Is there a more plausible alternative than forced obedience by which Satan might have sought to destroy agency and thus “save” God’s children “in unrighteousness and corruption”?²¹

Our best clues to such an alternative probably can be found in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Since the story of the Garden is deliberately placed right after the story of Satan’s rebellion in heaven, it seems safe to assume that we are meant to see a connection between the two stories. We might presume that Satan’s deception of Adam and Eve in the Garden is an attempt to continue on earth, insofar as possible, the same kind of strategies he proposed in heaven.

Satan’s efforts to destroy the agency of man and to “save” him in his sins seem to have been briefly put into motion through his efforts to get Adam and Eve to take of the fruit of the Tree of Life immediately after taking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. As Alma explains: “For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately, and partaken of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, having no space for repentance; yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated.”²² There would have been “no probationary time”²³ — hence no opportunity to exercise agency — before the spirits of Adam and Eve would be forever united with an immortal body.²⁴

If Adam and Eve had taken the fruit of the Tree of Life immediately after having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, they would have been “forever miserable,”²⁵ having become “immortal in their fallen state.”²⁶ Satan’s objectives to “save” Adam and Eve “in their sins” and to “destroy their agency” would have been achieved.

Happily, God’s “wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil.”²⁷

Why

In the Garden of Eden, Satan acted in direct defiance of God’s instructions, as he had in the premortal councils. His objective was not simply to tempt Adam and Eve; rather it was to provide a Luciferian form of universal “redemption” which would have in fact have severely limited the potential of humankind for progression, cut off their opportunities for the exercise of agency, and precluded the possibility for spirits to be embodied and saved from his dominating influence. Mormons see the goal of humankind’s eternal progression through the exercise of agency, the continuation of seed, and the worthy partaking of eternal life as fundamental to God’s plan. By opposing these objectives, the “son of the morning”²⁸ became the enemy of God.

Further Study

For more detailed analysis relating to Satan's strategy in the premortal world and the Garden of Eden, see J. M. Bradshaw, *et al.*, *Mormonism's Satan*. The article is available as a free pdf download at www.TempleThemes.net.

For a verse-by-verse commentary on Moses 4:1-4 and related topics, see J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image 1*, pp. 215-234, 243-246, 577-581. The book is available for purchase in print at Amazon.com and as a free pdf download at www.TempleThemes.net.

For a scripture roundtable video from The Interpreter Foundation on the subject of Gospel Doctrine lesson 2, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmcP6FOwTt8>.

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Endnotes

1 B. Nichols, *Coronation*, p. 15.

2 L. M. Hilton, Hand. The garments and emblems of European kings resembled those of the Israelite high priest until the fashion of military dress eventually became the preferred style (E. Tóth et al., *Holy Crown*, p. 63). Though kings are often pictured with an orb in their cupped hand, "no such ensign as an orb existed until the 11th century," previous depictions having been entirely "symbolic" (*ibid.*, p. 57).

3 B. Nichols, *Coronation*, p. 15. In another part of the coronation ceremony, the new monarch will hold the Scepter with the Cross in the right hand as an "ensign of power

and justice” and the Rod with the Dove in the left as a “symbol of equity and mercy” (ibid., p. 18). Prior to all these ceremonies, the monarch is “divested of... robes” and “screen[ed]... from the general view” in order to be “imbued with grace” through the Archbishop’s anointing with holy oil “on hand, breast and forehead” (ibid., p. 14). About ablutions and anointing of kings in other cultures, see S. D. Ricks et al., *King*, pp. 241-244, 254-255. See also J. M. Bradshaw, *God’s Image 1*, pp. 661-662.

4 Moses 4:1.

5 Moses 4:3.

6 C. C. Riddle, *Devils*, p. 379.

7 See Alma 11:34-37.

8 Moses 4:3.

9 Revelation 12:7.

10 Moses 4:1.

11 Moses 4:3.

12 J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 7 April 1844, p. 357.

13 E. England, *Laub*, p. 22.

14 J. Smith, Jr., *Words*, 7 April 1844, p. 347, spelling and punctuation standardized. Likewise, George Laub records Jesus as saying that “He could save all those who did not sin against the Holy Ghost and they would obey the code of laws that was given” (E. England, *Laub*, p. 22).

15 B. R. McConkie, *Promised Messiah*, pp. 271-275. Compare D&C 76:43-44, J. F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, June 1918, p. 434; J. Smith, Jr., *Teachings*, 10 March 1844, p. 339; 7 April 1844, p. 358.

16 O. Pratt, 18 July 1880, p. 288. Compare S. J. Condie, *Agency*, p. 6, Helaman 5:10-11. President Brigham Young said, “if you undertake to save all, you must save them in unrighteousness and corruption” (B. Young, 30 October 1870, p. 282).

17 C. C. Riddle, *Devils*, p. 379.

18 D. H. Oaks, *Free Agency*.

19 V. Frankl, *Meaning*, p. 86.

20 C. S. Lewis, *Mere*, 3:2, p. 77. Compare D. H. Oaks, *To Become*, p. 32; H. W. Nibley, *Meaning of Temple*, p. 26; J. E. Faulconer, *Self-Image*. Malcolm Muggeridge ironically observes that the commandments “are, after all, relatively easy to keep, especially if, as an Anglican bishop once suggested, they are regarded as an examination paper, with eight only to be attempted” (M. Muggeridge, *Jesus*, p. 114).

21 B. Young, 30 October 1870, p. 282.

22 Alma 42:5; cf. Alma 12:26.

23 Alma 42:4.

24 See also Alma 12:21-27; D&C 132:19; W. C. Skousen, *First 2,000*, pp. 42-44, 66-68; R. J. Matthews, Probationary Nature.

25 Alma 12:26.

26 W. C. Skousen, *First 2,000*, p. 68.

27 D&C 10:43. Compare 3 Nephi 21:10.

28 Isaiah 14:12. Compare 2 Nephi 24:12; D&C 76:26-27.