

Liberation Theology in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract. In this paper, I state some prolegomena to a liberation theology of the Book of Mormon. Liberation theology puts the poor at the center of God's concern in the world. Poverty and oppression is the direct result of the sinfulness of society. Salvation is liberation from this poverty and oppression. In traditional liberation theology the poor can see themselves *in* the text. They are the oppressed people of God that will be liberated. My contention is that the Book of Mormon is the flip side of this equation. It is told from the standpoint of the oppressors. It is written for a people that are rich and prideful. It shows God's destruction of the rich and powerful if they don't voluntarily empty themselves of their pride, wealth, and privilege. I argue that we must take 4 Nephi as the cornerstone of any interpretation of the Book of Mormon. Central to this chapter is the socio-economic order that comes from living righteously, in particular the elimination of poverty. I will argue that the sin that causes the downfall of Book of Mormon society is the division of society into socio-economic classes.

Introduction

I attended Dartmouth Elementary School in Richardson, Texas. Two of my friends were Shelton and Brent. Shelton was black and Brent was white. In the Fourth Grade we talked about the history of slavery and segregation. The teacher attempted to explain to us why these institutions were wrong. Brent raised his hand and said that it would have been good if we still had slavery because then Shelton (the only black in the whole school) would be our servant. Most of the class laughed. I saw that Shelton tried to force a laugh as well. It wasn't that Brent hated Shelton: they were friends and played at recess. Brent was a child and his comment was the comment of a child: hurtful and yet an immature reflection of the institutional and cultural racism in American society in 1977. As an adult, Brent's moral conscience would probably eventually awaken an indignation at the thought of our racist past.

The next year—25 years ago—the LDS Church extended the blessing of the priesthood to all worthy males, including those of African descent. With that act, the Church began the process of coming out of its childhood—an innocent reflection of the racist history of our nation. In its adulthood the Church must let its moral conscience guide its social “comments.” The moral conscience of the Church is God’s revelation in the Book of Mormon, a document uniquely connected to this continent and its promise. That revelation is also reflected in American ideals of Freedom, Equality, Justice, Opportunity, etc.—ideals trampled on by much of current American policy.

The message of the Book of Mormon is a message of an atonement that involves the sacrifice of power and privilege. The atonement is not merely an act in which Jesus, despite his power and divine prestige, gives up his life for the lives of others. It is an atonement that is meant to be present in the community of God. It is uniquely crafted for a people of power and economic privilege, and it demands their emptying themselves, with Christ, into the oppressed. It is a message about the condescension of Christ and the condescension of the most wealthy and powerful nation in human history. If taken seriously, the Book of Mormon would be the moral conscience of the United States and would unravel its economic and political pride. It would take the United States from the playground-like “biggest-kid-on-the-block” foreign policy to the adult morality that, with King Benjamin, answers the beggar’s call with no judgment about the beggar’s worthiness (contra the IMF and World Bank).

The message of this Church’s moral conscience is a theology of liberation, not unlike the theology of liberation that was revealed to Latin American priests and bishops in the face of U.S.-backed human rights violations and economic exploitation. The

difference is that Latin American liberation theology is a theology for the poor. The poor are “the people of God.” In the Book of Mormon, the people of God become wealthy and proud. The people of God turn out to be the greater sinners. Liberation, in the Book of Mormon, is in the hands of the most powerful, just as atonement is in the hand of the almighty Son of God. And just as the almighty Son must give up that power and, in a very real sense, empty himself of his divinity, the liberation of the poor is in the hands of the prideful and wealthy. But instead of being a story of salvation in which the ideal of liberation is fulfilled, the Book of Mormon is a story of damnation in which the people of God are condemned and destroyed by the “wicked”. It is a warning to the “righteous” in today’s promised land. Those who believe that God is on their side, that they are more than the dust of the earth, and that the poor of the world deserve their destitute state, will find themselves condemned to a similar fate, unless they yield their wills to God, and like his Son, empty themselves of their pride, power, and wealth.

Material and spiritual salvation

The first and most obvious obstacle to a socio-political reading of the Book of Mormon, or any religious text for that matter, is that religious salvation is spiritual, not material. Sure, it is a good thing to help the poor, but it is an even better thing to help them obtain salvation. This is a common objection to Catholic liberation theology and it is a point that is also not uncommon in Mormon circles when someone suggests that we do something radical about poverty. However, this objection is fundamentally flawed in

its presupposition about the metaphysical dichotomy between the spiritual and the temporal.

The liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian captivity was a socio-political liberation. And yet, it is one of the most important stories of salvation in the Bible. Central to Jesus' ministry is his healing the sick. This act not only has immediate material implications for the person healed (she gets better), but it has socio-political consequences for Jesus' ministry. Indeed, one does not touch a leper and one does not heal on the Sabbath. Jesus breaks the social codes in his acts of healing. He not only heals the corporeal disease but he heals the societal diseases of self-righteousness and legalism. One of the central symbolic acts of his ministry is the last supper. Jesus breaks bread and drinks wine with his disciples. They eat. This sacrament, while most spiritual, is based on one of the most fundamental acts of an animals' material life: eating. That which is most mundane is infused with the most sacred.

So, in the Christian tradition there is adequate material to subvert the dominant view that radicalizes the separation of the spiritual from the temporal. In Mormonism, the material for this subversion is even more abundant. Indeed, it is given a metaphysical twist in the guise of the claims that all spirit is matter and that God is embodied. If the spiritual is fundamentally material, how can we claim to separate spiritual from material salvation? They are inextricably intertwined.

In Mormon theology, God and the spirit are material beings. This materialism in Mormonism is not just theoretical. It undercuts the ontological basis for a religious praxis whose *telos* is "other-worldly." On a materialist view, spiritual change would

imply material change. It would have implications for this life. Liberation will not wait for the next life.

In making this claim about Mormonism's materialism I am not equivocating on the term 'material'. Being embodied cannot be understood independently of human history and interaction. Being embodied not only means that one is a collocation of physical particles, it means that one is a body in a family, community, society, and world. This body plays societal roles. It has a history. It eats, drinks, passes waste, has sex, etc. These concrete historical circumstances that are the location of our embodiment are both material circumstances *and* spiritual circumstances. Spirituality is a way of being in the material/historical world.

Religion and political neutrality

There is another objection to a socio-political reading of the Book of Mormon. One may argue that a religion, and religious organization, must be politically neutral. Religion, on this view, has only to do with personal salvation and morality. Religious organizations should encourage its members to be politically active but should not take stances on issues that don't directly affect individual morality. However, when a political decision begins to affect an issue of "personal morality," then the organization may take a stand. This happened in the case of the Knight Amendment in California.

The view that the political can be separated from issues of personal morality is flawed. Politics deals with the way we should organize ourselves in our community. We cannot completely separate individual action from societal implications. What we do

affects our community. But then, anything that would have implications for individual morality would also have implications for social morality. Religion has implications for individual morality (at least). So, religion has implications for social morality, and this involves political decisions about how to organize society.

Another argument against the separation of the social and the individual is based on the principle that failure to act is action itself. A Church that fails to denounce slavery or the holocaust tacitly enables it. There is no space to be neutral about grave societal injustices. Failure to act/prevent can be just as bad as causing something.

Once we have established that a religion and religious organization cannot avoid playing a socio-political role in the community, whether tacitly or explicitly, the question is “*what* role should religion play?” For Christians, the answer is that the Church should unequivocally side with the “political left” in their defense of the poor, oppressed, disenfranchised, etc.

To put the differences between the left and the right in simple terms based on concrete realities in today’s political world (and not on abstract political theory) we can say the following: 1. The left emphasizes the community and the right emphasizes the individual. 2. The left favors the poor and the right favors the rich. 3. The left pushes egalitarianism as far as possible and the right favors merit-based inequality. 4. The left sees material substance as a communal good and the right sees it as potential private property. 5. The left explains societal woes as coming from structures, institutions, and “communal sins” if you will, while the right explains societal woes on the basis of a breakdown of individual morality. I argue that the Book of Mormon sides with the political left on all of these issues.

Themes in traditional liberation theology

Liberation theology is the intellectual extension of Christianity's obligation to side with the oppressed. In liberation theology, the poor see themselves in the scriptural text. The text speaks of their liberation from oppression by God's incarnation in the Son. The text is the expression of the hope for salvation. Recognizing that the poor are "the people of God," liberation theology embraces them. This is called "the preferential option for the poor."

In liberation theology, there cannot be a strong distinction between the Church and the World. The Church is *in* the World but not *of* the World. But this means that the message of the Church has implications for the World. One cannot separate Jesus' "good news" from the socio-political reality. Therefore, the Church *is* political, either tacitly supporting the oppressive institutional structures of society or subverting them. The message of the gospel demands subversion of oppressive institutional structures. There is no such thing as apolitical religion.

In liberation theology, political action is not just an attempt to reform society, but is radical in the etymological sense of the word. It attempts to get to the root cause of oppression. And this cause is not limited to bad individuals in power, but is based in the institutional structures that produce the hegemony of the powerful. Its critique of the current world order is decidedly leftist. It involves a critique of wealth, private property, an individualistic conception of society, and structural forces of coercion that go beyond mere state violence. To say that liberation theology's critique of the current world order

is leftist is not to say that it is wedded to a Marxist ideology, or any other ideology of the left. Liberation theology takes its ideological cues from scripture and not from the Communist Manifesto. However, Marxism, Social Democracy, Syndicalism, and Anarchism all give concrete analyses of the root cause of societal oppression. Liberation theology pays attention to these analyses and incorporates their insights.

Liberation theology is not theological in the traditional systematic sense of the word. Orthodoxy (correct belief) matters less than Orthopraxis (correct practice). And the latter is determined by the actual historical/material circumstances of one's local community. Theologies are ideologies and play functional roles in the religious community. They serve to uphold *or* subvert current structures.

The unique quality of liberation theology in the Book of Mormon

For most Christians in North America, the problem with traditional liberation theology is that it cannot speak to them. Not being poor, they are not the people of God. However, the Book of Mormon's theology of liberation speaks to the powerful, prideful, and privileged. It warns of their damnation. For it is clear that in the Book of Mormon, the people of God (i.e. the Nephites, the righteous, the Church, etc.) continually become evil and wicked due to their pride and wealth.¹

¹ See Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Deseret Book: 1967), pp.342ff.

The righteous' turn to pride inevitably leads to a socio-economic division, which is inherently sinful.² The wealthy of contemporary society should see their reflection in the text. The text is a warning to the people of God, describing how they will fall (have fallen) from grace.

4 Nephi as interpretative standard

In order to defend my claim that the Book of Mormon supports a unique theology of liberation in which the powerful and rich are the people of God and must divest themselves of their power and wealth, I will look at two texts: 4 Nephi and Mosiah 3-4. 4 Nephi will provide us with a standard with which we can begin our interpretation of the rest of the Book of Mormon. And King Benjamin's address in Mosiah will provide us with an example of putting this theology to work within the text.

A text must be read in terms of its purpose. The Book of Mormon is supposed to tell us how to live our lives.³ If so, then we should look at the part of the book in which the people successfully build a Christian community as a guide to an interpretation of the rest of the book: 4 Nephi. Not only is this section the paradigm of righteousness, it is a microcosm of the whole Book of Mormon. It is a story that parallels the entire history of the Nephites and Lamanites condensed into several dozen pages.

² Some, like Nibley, argue that wealth is not inherently sinful (*Since Cumorah*, p.355). It is certainly not necessarily the case that being wealthy is sinful. But when it is coupled with inequality it is always sinful in the Book of Mormon. See also *D&C 104*.

³ Indeed, the title page says that it was written so that the Gentile (among others) would not be destroyed.

At the very beginning of the book, we are reminded that Jesus has formed the Church and the people have repented and become “members.” The first thing this leads to is that

...there were no disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And they had all things in common among them; therefore there were not rich nor poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. (4 Nephi, 1: 2-3)

The lack of disputations signals the extent to which this is now a *community* and not just a bunch of people living together. *Community* involves a social cohesion that is not a necessary element in a society. Society is necessarily social but not necessarily communal. Community involves a social *cohesion* that is largely destroyed by the individualist ethic in our modern capitalist society. It is a state of *communion*, such as that found in the most ideal familial relationships. It is based on the pure love of Christ.

Sometimes it is argued that the lack of disputations indicates only the lack of any theological disputations. It is not at all clear that this refers to theological disputations. There is no mention of doctrinal disputes. Moreover, this claim is put in an explicitly political and economic context, being framed by the questions of justice and economic distribution. It is more likely that the disputations being discussed are of a social nature and not a doctrinal one.

This people also have “all things in common among them.” At the very least, this is the claim that there is an economic egalitarianism in the community. It may also involve the stronger claim that there is no private property at all. It is clear that “substance” includes *material* substance, since in verses 24 and 25 it is the accumulation of unnecessary wealth that leads to them not having “their goods and their substance” in common any longer. This also leads to the society being divided into classes—i.e., where

there are poor and rich among them. Clearly, some kind of economic communism is afoot.

Additionally, there are no bond and free. Every one is free. No one is enslaved or imprisoned. Indeed, later when the economic class division begins to occur again, among the first events is that the powerful create prisons and imprison the people of Christ (4 Nephi 1:30).

Conspicuously absent is the lack of any mention of a government or hierarchy of any other kind. To be sure, a church is formed with disciples. But no organizational structure is mentioned. No kings, prophets, or judges are mentioned. It would be an argument from ignorance to suggest that this fact alone is reason to think that there was no government or institutional hierarchy. But we may suggest that the economic communism and political freedom seems to be more important to the author than any element of church or governmental organization. It is also important that the terms “power” and “authority” are mentioned as something taken by the unrighteous to dominate the righteous (4 Nephi 1:30). These terms are not used to describe the position of the disciples in the society of Christ’s church.

It is significant that this chapter starts off with a description of the political and economic conditions of the people of Christ’s church. Where is the discussion of personal and/or individual morality? The morality that matters here is a communal morality. Here there is a focus on the moral issues that affect the community. In fact, the drama of righteousness and unrighteousness is played out on the communal stage. It is *not* an individual matter. There is no discussion of individuals’ stories, only the initially wonderful but eventually tragic story of a community of Christ. To be sure, there are

evils perpetrated by individuals, but what matters are the institutional evils that are the result of a radically evil *form of life*.

Here I am appealing to a difference between individual morality and community morality, individual sin and communal sin. It seems clear to me that these are distinct and that one cannot reduce communal morality to individual morality. For example, in the philosophy department at UVSC we know that some of our faculty should show up to commencement. However, it is not necessary that all of our faculty should do so. No one in particular is required to attend. As a department, we have an obligation that no one particular individual has.

Mormonism's soteriology is clearly committed to a notion of communal morality. The argument for this is based on the premise that exaltation is the state of being in the presence of one's family and God. However, if one's other family members choose not to be exalted then this is not possible. Obviously, one cannot fulfill this obligation alone. So, it follows that it is a communal obligation. One cannot be exalted on one's own.

It is true that personal sin is intimately connected with communal sin, and hence is present in proportional degrees with the latter in society. This explains why 4 Nephi mentions the lack of sexual sin in this communal society (4 Nephi 1:16), but does so 13 verses after mentioning the economic morality of this community of Christ. Indeed, there are sociological reasons to believe that personally destructive behavior in the form of sexual promiscuity, drug or alcohol abuse, theft, domestic violence, and the like is directly linked to economics.⁴ Capitalism is a system in which one is urged to look out for one's own needs and ignore, if not neglect, others' needs. If this attitude is taken

⁴ See, for example, C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*.

from the economic realm to other areas of behavior, then we should not be surprised if our society has an abundance of personal moral sin.

As I argued above, liberation theology emphasizes the communal or societal aspect of the sin that leads to oppression. Right-wing Christians argue that all problems in society can be traced back to individual or personal sins. Such a view is incomplete in its understanding of the nature of the human fall. In his seminal work of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez says,

[I]n the liberation approach sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior reality—asserted just enough to necessitate “spiritual” redemption which does not challenge the order in which we live. Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of fellowship and love in relationships among persons, the breach of friendship with God and with other persons, and, therefore, an interior, personal fracture. When it is considered in this way, the collective dimensions of sin are rediscovered. (*A Theology of Liberation*, (Orbis Books: 1988): 102-3)

The communitarian approach to interpreting 4 Nephi is confirmed by the fact that when the people fall, the first thing they do is abandon economic communism. Indeed, one could go so far as to identify the fall *with* the change in the economic form of life.

As Hugh Nibley puts it,

The beginning of the end for the Nephites came when they changed their pattern of life: “And from that time forth they did have their substance no more common among them” (4 Nephi 1:25). Now the interesting thing about this change was that it was economically wise, leading immediately into a long period of unparalleled prosperity, a business civilization in which “they lay up in store in abundance, and did traffic in all manner of traffic” (4 Nephi 1:46). The unfortunate thing was that the Gadianton outfit got complete control of the economic life again. *And the economic life was all that counted*. The whole society was divided into economic classes (4 Nephi 1:26)...

Such an economic order in which everyone was busy trafficking and getting rich was not, according to 4 Nephi, a free society. It was only under the old system, he tells us, that [they were] ... “partakers of the heavenly gift” (*An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, pp.398-9).

This fallen society is clearly very similar to Western European and American society. It is this economic inequality and competitiveness that is *the* fundamental social sin, and is

the downfall of the Nephite community. Similarly it will be our downfall unless we undergo a change in the form of our life.

The politics of King Benjamin's address

4 Nephi gives us a starting point for reading other texts in the Book of Mormon. It shows us that the salvation brought by Jesus is socio-political: it has direct implications for our way of life. 4 Nephi also tells us what this way of life is like. This way of life is grounded in our *economy*. It *is* our economy in the broad sense of the term—i.e., how we rule our “house.” For King Benjamin, the fundamental sin is also economic. It is the failure to take care of the poor. King Benjamin develops a theology of salvation that subverts the *meritocratic theologies*—i.e., where one gets what one deserves—that support economic inequality. To argue for this, we will look at two aspects of his address.

The first aspect of King Benjamin's address that is important for our purposes is his condemnation of those who reject the beggar's request. He says,

And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish.

Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—But I say unto you, O man, whosoever doeth this the same hath great cause to repent; and except he repenteth of that which he hath done he perisheth forever, and hath no interest in the kingdom of God.

For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind? (Mosiah 4:16–19)

In this passage, Benjamin argues that we cannot justifiably fail to help those who petition us for material help. The reason that we cannot do this is that we depend upon God for anything we have. It seems clear that he is responding to an argument of this form: *I deserve the wealth I have because I alone earned it. Those who are poor deserve their poverty because they have failed to earn wealth.* An argument of this form assumes that individuals of their own accord earn or fail to earn material wealth. I will call this doctrine “economic meritocracy.”

Many modern attempts to justify a capitalist economic system rely on economic meritocracy. We are all familiar with such justifications; so, I won't repeat them. The problems with economic meritocracy usually come down to the point that our economic status is mostly not in our power. Circumstances of our lives that are out of our control largely determine our economic class, with very few exceptions. Being raised in a white upper-middle class family, I was able to get a college education without much effort. If I had been born in south Chicago and were black I would not be where I am. Benjamin's critique is similar. If we assume that whatever is outside our control is in God's control, then it implies that we owe where we are at to God and not to any merit of our own.

Associated with the anti-meritocratic economic message of Benjamin's address is his anti-meritocratic soteriology. We cannot earn salvation on our own. We depend on God for salvation. Without God, we are “dust of the earth.” But this anti-meritocratic message seems in tension with Benjamin's imperative to help the poor. He states the latter imperative over and over again. Moreover, he links our salvation with our ability to obey this command (Mosiah 4:26). This tension is not unique to Benjamin's address; it appears in the New Testament and leads to debates about the relationships between grace

and works. These debates have led to Calvinist, Arminian, and Pelagian interpretations of their relationship.

However, what each of these latter positions assumes is that salvation is distributed individually. In the last section, we have argued that salvation is not distributed individually but at a communal level instead. Benjamin's address gives us another argument for this view. Indeed, Benjamin is speaking to the community that he governs. If we take the imperative to apply communally and not individually, then we can argue for both individual dependence and community merit. Individually, we are nothing without God or the community of God. We cannot be saved on our own and we cannot be liberated on our own. But as a community, we can liberate the poor. As community, we can become righteous and merit the salvation that is distributed to us communally. As a community, we can be "judged by our works."

Given this interpretation of Benjamin's injunction to help the beggar, we can better understand the theology presented in Mosiah 3. According to Benjamin, "Natural man is an enemy to God" (Mosiah 3:19). Usually, this is given a metaphysical reading. Arminianism is the current tendency in LDS interpretation. Arminianism asserts that we are naturally, intrinsically, and necessarily evil, although God can intervene and change us. Some LDS authors get close to this understanding insofar as they read Mosiah 3:19 as a comment about our individual *propensity* to do evil. It is not always clear whether they accept the notion that we can do no good without God doing it through us. But such a view assumes that salvation is meted out individually to those who are willing to accept it. Thus, the implication is that any salvation that happens is undeserved (it depends only on our willingness to accept it) and comes only at God's mercy. We, as individuals,

merely have to accept God's transformation of our souls in order to be saved. Thus, we must submit our wills to the will of God.

This quasi-Arminian reading of Mosiah 3:19 has a social dimension. We must submit our will to God. However, we are epistemically distant from God. We don't, as individuals, know his will. Only the Church knows the will of God. So, this entails that the choice of eternal life requires choosing submission to the Church. It implies that we become conduits for the action of the Church, whether this is the will of God or not. It implies a *de facto* infallibilism of the Church. It disallows the anarchy and chaos that comes from individuals believing that they themselves know the will of God. In this way, the Arminian reading of Benjamin's address serves to support institutional orthopraxy and conservatism.

Moreover, the tension noticed in Mosiah 4 between human depravity and the injunction to take care of the poor is present in the Arminian reading of Mosiah 3:19 as well. If humans are naturally evil, then how can they choose to accept God's will?

An additional tension is located in the fact that we are supposed to shed our natural dispositions and become like a child. This is problematic since the child should be more naturally human than the adult. The Arminian and Calvinist readings of this passage would require that children are corrupt. So, why should we become as children? Similarly, how could this view of human nature be reconciled with the Article of Faith claim that human beings should be punished for their own sins and not for the sins of another (Cf. Alma 34:11)?

Finally, the move in the direction of a theology of individual depravity is a move away from the traditional "liberal" Mormon anthropology (captured beautifully in

Truman Madsen's *Eternal Man*), which allows that human beings are essentially good and must become bad by their own individual fall. This traditional liberal Mormon view has a difficulty explaining Mosiah 3:19, however.

A liberation theological reading of Mosiah 3 preserves the optimism of traditional liberal Mormon anthropology while making sense of humanity's natural opposition to God. A liberation theological reading denies that we are either good or evil in isolation from the community. Before the fall, Adam and Eve are in perfect *communion* with God. The fall takes them out of this *communion*; the fall *is* their falling out of communion with God. Instead of being in a *community* with God, they are "thrown out" on their own. They are made responsible for themselves. The material substance that they need is no longer provided. They have to *struggle* just to survive. They are like the animals. They are "natural."

This struggle comes from the breakdown of community. And conversely, true community eliminates the need for the struggle as it does in 4 Nephi. Being a natural enemy to God is being an enemy to community. On this reading, the "natural man" is not a metaphysical state of an individual. Instead, it has a social character. It is the state of rejecting communion with God and neighbor. It is the state of rejecting our radical dependence on our community. In this way, it is a form of self-deception and will always fail. Children recognize their radical dependence on their parents. Their lives are essentially communal.

This also explains how we can take part in the fall without individually doing it. We are complicit in the institutional structures of our society. Our failure to act against them is an action in their favor. And these institutional structures, in part, cause the

breakdown of the community. Capitalism essentially rejects the utter dependence of the individual on the community and thus is the (current) economic form of the fall of humanity.

Nevertheless, humanity is in the image of God. We are *naturally* (in a metaphysical sense) communal. The institutional structures that tear apart community corrupt us and undermine our natural propensity to love each other. Traditional liberal Mormon theology is right to affirm the positive nature of humanity, but wrong to ignore the structural depravity of society. Arminian and Calvinist theologies are wrong to assert that individuals are naturally depraved. Pelagian theology is wrong to assert that the lack of individual depravity means that salvation is in the hands of the individual. Salvation is essentially communal and requires the grace of God. As I have argued elsewhere, Christ's atonement is the most fundamental act of communion insofar as it is Christ's sharing of our experiences. Community life is primarily one in which we share our experiences with others. And Christ's atonement enables this shared life.

This socio-political reading of the meaning of 'natural man' places Benjamin's talk in the context of the social criticism throughout the Book of Mormon. It gives Benjamin's talk practical implications rather than merely abstract philosophical content. We act as a community with God to rectify socio-economic injustice. God judges us by these communal works. Throughout the Book of Mormon "righteous" society repeats the cycle of the fall as their pride and wealth leads them to become enemies to each other (and thereby to God) destroying community and salvation.

Conclusion

This short essay is only intended to offer some prolegomena to a liberation theological reading of the Book of Mormon. Most of what we should say about the Book of Mormon's message remains to be said. More importantly, most of what should be done about it remains to be done. Some of what remains to be said deals with how liberation theology would understand warfare in the Book of Mormon. Moreover, liberation theology has implications for social matters other than economics. What should we say about the role of women in the Church? What should we say about the denial of the priesthood to blacks? Additionally, liberation theology has something to say about the institutional church. What are the ways in which it subverts oppressive structures? What are the ways in which it supports them? The Book of Mormon is a critique of the people of God in the times of Nephi, Alma, and Moroni; it would be very surprising if it weren't a critique of the people of God today.

For Latter-day Saints, the Book of Mormon should not be a mere historical record that could be confirmed or disconfirmed by archeological, linguistic, or genetic evidence. Nor is it an inspired fictional story. It should be a sacrament that points beyond itself to the divine. That is, God reveals himself in the book. To test it as a historical document, to treat it as mere fiction, or to read it as a proof text for a dogmatic theology is profane. We shouldn't read the book. We must live and breathe it. Only in this way will the text transform a fallen world and not merely describe its condemnation.