

The Book of Mormon, the twelve points of Pelagianism, and Protestant thought in the early 1800s

by bwv549

Summary: The Book of Mormon flatly contradicts or significantly modifies virtually every point espoused by Pelagius and does so in a manner similar to standard Protestant discourse of the time, although significant variance in justification, rationale, and presentation is certainly observed across the various works from the early 1800s.

Introduction

Pelagius was known as a heretic to the early Christian Church who believed in a strong form of free will and questioned aspects of the Fall of Adam and how it related to salvation. His thoughts act as relief for the later ideas of Arminianism and Calvinism.

Collier recorded the teachings of Pelagius in his [An Ecclesiastical History of Great Britain, Chiefly of England](#) in the early 1700s, and it was somewhat common for theologians to respond to Collier's twelve points summarizing Pelagianism.¹

Others have previously pointed out that teachings from the Book of Mormon can be seen as a response to Pelagian thought (e.g., [Are Mormons Pelagians? Autonomy, Grace, and Freedom](#)).

The Twelve Points of Pelagianism

Below are the twelve points of Pelagianism. The teachings of the the Book of Mormon (BOM) on each topic (mostly from 2 Nephi chapter 2) are followed by other point-by-point responses to Pelagianism from the early 1800s that predate the Book of Mormon: [Directions for the study of theology](#) (DST) published in London in 1827,² and [An Attempt to Illustrate those Articles of the Church of England, which the Calvinists improperly consider as Calvinistical](#) (AATI) from the Anti-Jacobian Review and Magazine published in the UK and New York City in 1807.

1. **That Adam had mortality in his nature, and that, whether he had sinned or not sinned, he would certainly have died.**

All disagree in unison: Adam would not have died had he not transgressed.

¹Religionists often responded to Collier's twelve summary points of Pelagianism. I refer to two works published in 1807 and 1827. A third is found in [Part I. of Horae Ecclesiasticae](#) published in 1819 in London.

²It is uncertain whether the "Directions for the Study of Theology", published in 1827, made it to upper New York by 1829. It is clear that [the work was well-recieved by the greater society of England](#) and that copies eventually made their way to New York (the google books copy is from a New York library, dated to 1947). It seems entirely plausible that ideas previously promulgated during his time as Bishop by the Bishop George Gleig made their way to New York *before* they were ever compiled into letters to his son.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 2:22 And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end.

[DST] That Adam had mortality in his nature, so that he could not have existed one moment if not sustained by that power which called him into being, is indisputably true, for such is the dependent state of every creature; but that he would certainly have died, though he had not sinned, is directly contrary to the implied promise of God, as recorded by Moses.

[AATI] We do indeed think with Pelagius and as we apprehend with every man capable of reflection that Adam had mortality in his nature because it seems to be a truth as self evident as any geometrical axiom that the being whether man or angel who had not life of himself cannot of himself have eternal life and because St Paul hath assured us 1 Tim vi 15 16 that he who is the blessed and only potentate the King of Kings and Lord of Lords only hath immortality But so far have we been from asserting that whether Adam had sinned or not he would infallibly have died that we have shown that by the first covenant had he observed the terms of it he would not only have been preserved from death by the means provided for that purpose but have been also translated into heaven after a sufficient probation on earth.

2. That the consequences of Adam's sin were confined to his person and that the rest of mankind received no disadvantage from them.

All disagree in unison: the posterity of Adam suffered physical and (indirectly) spiritual death (separation from God) as a result of Adam's Fall.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 2:21,23,25 For he gave commandment that all men must repent; for he showed unto all men that they were lost, because of the transgression of their parents.... And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. ... Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.

[DST] The second of these propositions is in direct contradiction to the doctrine of St. Paul

[AATI] So far are we from supposing, that the consequences of Adam's sin were confined to himself, that we have taught, in words as plain as possible, that one of those consequences has been death to the whole human race; and another the withdrawing of those graces of the Holy Spirit which were vouchsafed to Adam in Paradise to guide him in his progress to Heaven.

3. That the law qualified for the kingdom of Heaven, and was founded upon equal promises with the Gospel.

All disagree in unison: the law itself does not justify man.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 2:5–7 And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off. Yea, by the temporal law they were cut off; and also, by the spiritual law they perish from that which is good, and become miserable forever. Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered.

[DST] ... and you must have seen already, when reading the Scriptures, as a mere historical detail of doctrines, revealed at sundry times and in divers manners, that the third and fourth have no foundation whatever in either the Old or the New Testament.

[AATI] From the heresy of the third article, let those clear themselves who contend that “life and in mortality were brought to light through the *law*,” and who revile the bishops Bull and Warburton for teaching that the law of Moses, when considered as a dispensation separated from the Gospel, holds out to its votaries no prospect of a future state of rewards and punishments.

4. That before the coming of our Savior some men lived without sin.

All disagree in unison: no men lived without sin before the Savior.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 2:5 And by the law no flesh is justified; and by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off. Yea, by the temporal law they were cut off; and also, by the spiritual law they perish from that which is good, and become miserable forever.

[DST] ... and you must have seen already, when reading the Scriptures, as a mere historical detail of doctrines, revealed at sundry times and in divers manners, that the third and fourth have no foundation whatever in either the Old or the New Testament.

[AATI] We are acquainted with no sect, whose principles harmonize with the fourth and fifth articles.

5. That new-born infants are in the same condition with Adam before his fall.

All mildly disagree in unison (or take no position)

[BOM] 2 Nephi 2:22,25 And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen ... Adam fell that men might be ...

[DST] Whether, in respect of innocence, new-born infants are in the same condition with Adam before his fall, is the main question at issue between the Calvinists and their opponents, and a question which you must decide for yourself, after the most diligent study of the Sacred Scriptures, and of the most able divines who have written on the subject.

[AATI] We are acquainted with no sect, whose principles harmonize with the fourth and fifth articles. New born infants, we believe, indeed, to be free from guilt in the proper sense of the word; because our Saviour hath assured us, that “of such as little children is the kingdom of heaven;” but new-born infants are liable to death, from which Adam before his fall was by the grace of God exempted.

6. **That the death and disobedience of Adam is not the necessary cause of death to all mankind, neither doth the general resurrection of the dead follow in virtue of our Saviour’s resurrection.**

All disagree in unison: Adam’s Fall brought upon mankind death and Christ the imminent resurrection.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 2:8,10,22 ... that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise... And because of the intercession for all, all men come unto God; wherefore, they stand in the presence of him, to be judged of him according to the truth and holiness which is in him. ... if Adam had not transgressed he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the garden of Eden.

[DST] The sixth proposition is very inaccurately expressed; for though, philosophically speaking, it may be true that the death and disobedience of Adam is not the necessary cause of the death of all mankind, it is equally true, that if Adam had not disobeyed the command of his God, all mankind would not have died; and that the general resurrection of the dead follows, in virtue of our Saviour’s resurrection, we are expressly taught by St. Paul, and even by our Saviour himself.

[AATI] So far are we from agreeing with Pelagius, in the opinions expressed in the sixth article, that we have asserted the very reverse of both. We do not, indeed, approve of the phrase *necessary cause*, because all *second* causes depend upon the *will of the first*; but we believe, that the disobedience of Adam, by the will of God, brought upon himself and all his posterity the very same kind of death which is undergone by the beasts that perish, and that from this death we are redeemed by Christ, who is *the life of the soul*, as well as *the resurrection of the body*; and in whom *all shall be made alive who have died in Adam*.

7. **That if a man will make the most of himself, he may keep the commands of God without difficulty, and preserve himself in a perfect state of innocence.**

All disagree in unison: man is liable to sin.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 2:5 And men are instructed sufficiently that they know good from evil. And the law is given unto men. And by the law no flesh is justified; or, by the law men are cut off. Yea, by the temporal law they were cut off; and also, by the spiritual law they perish from that which is good, and become miserable forever.

[DST] The falsehood of the seventh proposition needs no other proof than what will be furnished by an appeal to every man's own conscience and experience...

[AATI] Let those answer to the seventh article, who talk of *a covenant of works* as distinguished from *the covenant of grace*; and who seem to believe that, under the first covenant eternal life was the reward due *by right* to unsinning obedience. We know of no revealed covenant *of works*, under which the whole human race were ever placed; we believe that under the first, as well as under the second covenant, man was placed in a state of probation and discipline, and therefore liable to error and to sin; and we believe, that the most exalted being of creation cannot claim *eternal life* as the reward due *by right* to his most perfect obedience.

8. **That to rich men, notwithstanding the advantage of their baptism, unless they parted with all their estate, all other instances of virtue would be insignificant, neither could they be qualified for the kingdom of Heaven.**

One source disagrees in unison with the BOM, the other is neutral on the question.

[BOM] Jacob 2:19 And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted.

[DST] the eighth proposition is ridiculously absurd.

[AATI] With the eighth article, no question that has been agitated between the *true-churchmen* and us has any concern ...

9. **That the grace and assistance of God is not granted for the performance of every moral act; the liberty of the will, and information in the points of duty, being sufficient for this purpose.**

All disagree in unison: the grace of Christ aids men in doing good.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 8–10,27 Wherefore, how great the importance to make these things known unto the inhabitants of the earth, that they may know that there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise. Wherefore, he is the firstfruits unto God, inasmuch as he shall make intercession for all the children of men; and they that believe in him shall be saved. And because of the intercession for all, all men come unto God; wherefore, they stand in the presence of him, to be judged of him according to the truth and holiness which is in him. Wherefore, the ends of the law which the Holy One hath given, unto the inflicting of the punishment which is affixed, which punishment that is affixed is in opposition to that of the happiness which is affixed, to answer

the ends of the atonement... Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

[DST] The ninth is extremely vague and ambiguous. If it be meant that the grace of God, promised to every sincere believer under the Christian dispensation, is not granted for the performance of every act of honesty between man and man in their intercourse with each other in the affairs of this world, the truth of the proposition may be granted; for such acts are performed in hordes of savages, who never heard, and would not understand, one sentence of the Gospel; but if the meaning be, that the grace and assistance of God is not necessary to enable Christians to perform those acts and acquire those dispositions, without which they cannot be “meet to be partakers of the inheritance with the saints in light,” it is indisputably false.

[AATI] ... and with the ninth we seem to symbolize less than that *true-churchman*, who says, that “nobody denies that man, without the grace of God by Christ preventing him, may perform *natural good works, civilem justitium, et diligendas res rationi subjectas.*” (*The True-Churchmen ascertained*, p. 149.) We confess, that we have our doubts, whether the mere natural man be able to perform all this; but we are not called upon at present to state the grounds of those doubts.

10. **That the grace of God is given in proportion to our merits.**

All are somewhat vague on this point.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 25:23 For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.

[DST] The tenth proposition is likewise ambiguous. In the first place, it is absurd to talk of the merits of man, in the proper sense of the words, for man can merit nothing from his Maker; but if it be meant that larger and larger effusions of grace (if I may use such an expression) are bestowed on us, in proportion to the use that we have made of those which we have already received, the truth of the proposition might be easily proved from Scripture.

[AATI] The tenth article contains the doctrine of the schoolmen which we have concurred with Dr. Laurence in censuring ...

11. **That none can be called the sons of God unless they are perfectly without sin.**

All disagree in unison: men can be called the sons of God through Christ.

[BOM] 3 Nephi 9:17 (see also Moroni 7:26 and Moroni 7:48) And as many as have received me, to them have I given to **become the sons of God**; and even

so will I to as many as shall believe on my name, for behold, by me redemption cometh, and in me is the law of Moses fulfilled.

[DST] The eleventh and twelfth propositions are both indisputably false

[AATI] to the eleventh, let those answer, who talk of the necessity that there is for the righteousness of Christ being *imputed* to the elect, in order that they may become the sons of God.

12. **That our victory over temptation is not gained by God's assistance, but by the liberty of the will.**

All disagree in unison: the victory over temptation is mediated through God.

[BOM] 2 Nephi 2:27 Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

[AATI] Of the twelfth article, it is sufficient to say, that nothing can be more inconsistent than it is with the opinions of those who believe that even in Paradise man could not have maintained his innocence, or been trained for the kingdom of heaven, but “by the grace of God preventing him, that he might have a good will, and working with him, when he had that good will.”

[DST] The eleventh and twelfth propositions are both indisputably false