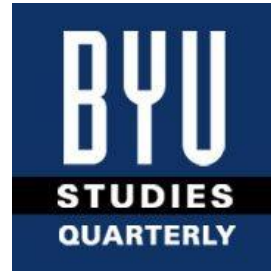




BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>



BYU Studies

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

---

## The Israelite Roots of Atonement Terminology

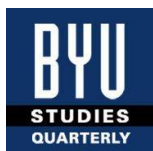
Author(s): T. Benjamin Spackman

Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (2016), pp. 39–64.

Published by: BYU Studies

---

**Abstract:** This article focuses on three common English terms—atonement, salvation, and redemption; their usual Hebrew equivalents as rendered in the King James Version of the Bible (KJV); and their associated conceptions found within the Hebrew Bible. In general, ancient Israelites understood redeem primarily in terms of kinship and family law and secondarily as a covenantal term. Salvation was found more often in political or martial contexts. And atonement was primarily a priestly term, dealing with ritual purity and pollution. The semantic lines between these Hebrew terms have been blurred in modern English usage, if not erased entirely; they have also become highly theological, eschatological, and heavenly, whereas their conceptual Israelite linguistic origins are often grounded in the concrete, this-worldly, and practical. The article suggests that recovering the Hebrew sources of the three terms yields more clarity about the theology of atonement.



BYU Studies is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to BYU Studies and to scholarly research on The Book of Mormon. Archived by permission of BYU Studies.

<http://byustudies.byu.edu/>

# The Israelite Roots of Atonement Terminology

*T. Benjamin Spackman*

When Latter-day Saints speak of atonement, they use vocabulary drawn from the scriptures, including common verbs like *atone*, *save*, and *redeem*, and the corresponding nouns *atonement*, *savior*, *salvation*, *redeemer*, and *redemption*. There are other, perhaps more vivid, words for salvific acts, such as the Book of Mormon references to being “snatched” (Mosiah 27:28–29; Alma 26:17).<sup>1</sup> Such rare terms in scripture have not found place in LDS discourse, which tends to use the most common terms related to atonement interchangeably. While they are indeed at some level synonymous, their distinctive meanings gesture toward the possibility of a wider range of conceptions and nuances.

In this paper, after some necessary methodological cautions, I focus on three common English terms—*atonement*, *salvation*, and *redemption*; their usual Hebrew equivalents as rendered in the King James Version

---

1. From 1981 to 1994, Mosiah 27:29 carried a footnote reading “Heb. *natzal*, to snatch away from danger, to save; e.g. 2 Sam. 19:9.” Given the absence of an original language manuscript of the Book of Mormon, any such connection must remain speculative, likely the reason for its removal. In the KJV, “snatch” appears only once, at Isaiah 9:20 (9:19 in Hebrew numbering), where it means something like “to cut, slaughter, tear, prey (upon).” See the discussion under “gāzar II” in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997), 1:848 (hereafter cited as *NIDOTTE*). The most relevant definition of “snatch” in Webster’s 1828 edition of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* reads, “to seize hastily or abruptly.” My thanks to Royal Skousen and anonymous BYU and Church employees for assistance.

## T. Benjamin Spackman

Sometime in 2008 or 2009, I was auditing a class by the wonderful Hebrew Bible scholar Mark S. Smith at New York University. A casual remark of his that “salvation began as a military term” led me to examine the variety of related Hebrew terms and English equivalents, as well as usage in LDS scripture. Surprisingly, it turned out to dovetail fairly well with some earlier research and to



resolve some puzzles about Hebrew names, made explicit in the article. When the Society of Mormon Philosophy and Theology announced its 2013 theme of “Atonement,” I gathered my notes from that research and proposed and presented the paper that became this article. The idea of divine kinship struck me in particular as something that Mormons would find meaningful and significant. I feel that there is still much to be gleaned from the scriptures about Atonement and offer this article as an initial foray.

of the Bible (KJV); and their associated conceptions found within the Hebrew Bible. In general, Israelites<sup>2</sup> understood *redeem* primarily in terms of kinship and “family law” and secondarily as a covenantal term. Similarly, *save* and *salvation* are often found in political or martial contexts, where “victory” or even “success” is a more direct translation. *Atonement* is primarily priestly, having to do with ritual purity and pollution. Not surprisingly, current LDS usage of these English terms represents a shift (or several) from their meaning in the sources from which they were drawn. The semantic lines between these Hebrew terms have been blurred in modern English usage, if not erased entirely; they have also become highly theological, eschatological, and heavenly,

---

2. I use this term in the broadest possible way to mean the covenant people of the Old Testament, whether before or after Jacob/Israel, or north/south geographically.

whereas their conceptual Israelite linguistic origins are often grounded in the concrete, this-worldly, and practical. After discussing these Israelite concepts, I look at the significance of these ideas for LDS scripture and doctrine. I will suggest that recovering the Hebrew sources of the three terms yields both more theoretical clarity about the theology of atonement and helpful practical understanding of how atonement, repentance, and grace are realized in lived application.

## METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

First, we must acknowledge several necessary overlapping cautions about general semantic issues, diachronic shift, and translation issues.

### General Semantic Issues

When dealing with words, concepts, semantics, and translation, we must tread carefully. In his book *Exegetical Fallacies*,<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson lists eighteen common ways to go wrong when talking about lexical semantics. To paraphrase King Benjamin, *I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit lexical sin; for there are divers ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them* (see Mosiah 4:29). Even those with specialized training make these mistakes, so it behooves everyone to be aware of them.

As a means of communication, language encodes meaning into arbitrary sounds or symbols. Any single word in isolation has a semantic range (compare the entry lengths in a dictionary for two different words), nuances and variations, denotations as well as connotations. For the encoder's intended message to be successfully decoded, the receiver must understand a critical minimum amount of the encoder's language and culture. The receiver is able to disambiguate each word and narrow its semantic range because simultaneous overlapping contexts limit it. For example, "bear" by itself may be a verb or a noun, with a variety of meanings. But within the context of "I saw a bear at the zoo," a fluent English speaker intuitively understands that "bear" is a noun, not a verb; a concrete, not metaphorical referent; and that this declaration takes place within some kind of narrative, whether real or unreal. Meanings are determined by usages in various contexts.

Even when speakers share a native language, geography, and culture, misunderstandings can occur. One afternoon in our Chicago ward, a

---

3. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1996).

law student in front of us became very confused after overhearing my wife and me quietly discussing our Sunday afternoon plans for a *tourte*. In our French culinary context, a tart is an open-face pie/pastry and a *tourte* is a pie with a crust on top, as most Americans conceptualize “pie.” The law student who overheard did not share that cultural knowledge and naturally wondered what kind of tort (or “civil wrong resulting in liability”) could possibly involve apples. Although this example is oral, similar things can happen in written language when cultural information is not shared.

Semantic issues multiply when translating across languages and cultures, because of the rareness of one-to-one equivalents, or corresponding words with identical semantic range. Moreover, a *translational equivalent* is not necessarily the *meaning* of the word. For example, the KJV renders the forms of the Hebrew word *paqad* a confusing multitude of ways: “to visit” (Gen. 21:1); “to appoint” (Gen. 41:34); “to muster (troops)” (Num. 1:3); “to be numbered” (Ex. 30:13); “to punish” (Isa. 10:12); and yet others. No other common word has given translators so much trouble.<sup>4</sup> “Visit,” “appoint,” “muster troops,” and so forth are the translational equivalents, but *paqad* does not necessarily mean each of those very different things. It “has a single meaning . . . [and] has this meaning in every context in which it is used.”<sup>5</sup> The single meaning of *paqad* that gives rise to all these translations is “to assign a person or thing to what the subject believes is its proper or appropriate status or position in an organizational order.”<sup>6</sup> Since English lacks a verb with the same semantic range as *paqad*, it must be translated with different words based on the dictates of context.

Cross-language communication, then, is a case of encoding meaning into a word in context and finding a word in the target language that best matches the contextually limited meaning intended by the encoder, ideally a translational equivalent with close semantic range. To summarize, words and concepts are separate things with complex interplay, even more so when we are comparing and contrasting across two languages and cultures.

---

4. See the examples and discussion in Stuart Creason, “PQD Revisited,” in *Studies in Semitic and Afroasiatic Linguistics Presented to Gene B. Gragg*, ed. Cynthia L. Miller, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization vol. 60 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2007), 27–42, available at <https://oi.uchicago.edu/pdf/saoc60.pdf>.

5. Creason, “PQD Revisited,” 41.

6. Creason, “PQD Revisited,” 41.

## Diachronic Shift

We should not expect that a given concept would remain static over the more than thousand years of Old Testament history. For comparison, note the changes in contours of LDS conceptualizations and expressions of doctrine in less than two hundred years.<sup>7</sup> In such a short time, even English has shifted enough that we can misread revelation given in Joseph Smith's dialect of upstate New York.<sup>8</sup>

For one thousand years or more of Israelite history, conceptions shifted with the natural flow of time as well as due to clashing encounters with other cultures: Egyptian, Assyrian/Babylonian, Persian, and Greco-Roman, to name the major ones. The geographic scattering of Israelites into different places (Babylon, Persia, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, and so forth) also contributed to the process. Even different Jewish groups in the same time and place often had differing conceptions and ideas (compare the Pharisees with the Sadducees with the Essenes). Early Christianity, in its own way, can be seen as one of these Jewish splinter groups, with its own distinct understandings and interpretations of the past. While the purpose of this paper is not to trace diachronic changes throughout the Bible, we can easily recognize that it happened. What I present below is, therefore, a generalization.

---

7. For example, early millennial focus has become much less central or urgent in current LDS thought. See Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). For a different kind of example, note how the apparent import and usage of Joseph Smith's First Vision has shifted. See James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Religious Thought," *Journal of Mormon History* 7 (1980): 43–61.

8. I knew the English of D&C 121:43 well enough as a missionary to be surprised at an apparent extra phrase in my French triple combination, "Réprimandant avec sévérité avant qu'il ne soit trop tard," or "rebuking sharply before it is too late." In my ignorance, I had simply assumed "betimes" to generically indicate "at times" and wondered why it had been translated otherwise. After my mission, I consulted Webster's 1828 edition of the *American Dictionary of the English Language*, which defines "betimes" as "seasonably; in good season or time; before it is too late." For another example with LDS terminology, see J. Spencer Fluhman, "Authority, Power, and the 'Government of the Church of Christ,'" in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 195–232.



## Translation Issues

At least two issues of translation confront us.<sup>9</sup> The first is that we access the Bible indirectly, either in translation or by struggling to learn to read it in a second language that no longer has any native speakers.<sup>10</sup> Both of these processes involve some risk and pitfalls. The probability of misunderstanding increases with greater cultural and linguistic difference between the original language of a text and the target language of a translation. For example, native Portuguese and Spanish speakers residing five miles apart share cognate languages, live in the same time period, and have a good bit of cultural overlap. Translating between them does not provide major difficulties. By contrast, given the chronological and cultural gulf between us and the various stages of the Bible's production, understanding it in the terms of its authors requires far more than simply translating the words. Every translation will fail to convey the full meaning because so little is shared between the encoder and decoder.<sup>11</sup>

The second issue is that mediated access through translation is not a modern problem. The two primary preservation and transmission routes of the Israelite concepts under discussion were, first, oral transmission of fluid cultural traditions and, second, written records, which became accessible only through the “mirror, darkly,” of translation. After the Babylonian exile (ca. 586–530 BC), Aramaic and not Hebrew became the dominant language of the Israelites, necessitating scribes

---

9. Although generally many words and phrases can be translated from one language to another without much difficulty or lack of clarity, the challenges of translating technical, idiomatic, or abstract expressions can be challenging, if not bewildering. See, for example, Daryl R. Hague, “Pandemonium: A Review Essay of Douglas J. Robinson, *Who Translates? Translator Subjectivities beyond Reason*,” *BYU Studies* 46, no. 1 (2007): 123–42. For a classic rumination about the phenomenology of literary translation, see Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

10. Koiné, the language of the New Testament, was a dialect of Greek, and while the dialects and language have changed, Greek has been spoken continuously for over two thousand years. By contrast, Hebrew died out as a living language and is the sole example of a dead language being revived. Modern Hebrew differs significantly in multiple respects from the Hebrew of the Bible. Consequently, speakers of modern Greek and Hebrew are not naturally experts on the Biblical languages and must study and reconstruct them as others do.

11. A popular treatment of this is Joel M. Hoffman, *And God Said: How Translations Conceal the Bible's Original Meaning* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010).

who could translate Hebrew scriptures into Aramaic. This may have begun immediately, depending on how we understand Nehemiah 8:8, where the scribes “read from the scroll, from the Torah of God, interpreting [translating?] and giving insight so that [the people] understood the reading.”<sup>12</sup>

Like modern readers, people of the Second Temple period (some of whom authored books of the Bible) gained their understanding of previous scripture through the veil of translation. The written translation of scripture into Aramaic (known as a *targum*) had begun by the New Testament period, and Targums were likely read out loud along with the Hebrew in the synagogue. Textual evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Bar-Kokhba find (a second-century cache of Jewish letters and contracts), and the Mishnah suggests that Hebrew was not entirely replaced by Aramaic, but the evidence does not allow definitive explication of the sociolinguistic situation on the ground in the New Testament period.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, it appears that for most early Christians and many Jews, the Old Testament was not accessible in its original language but in Greek translation. Indeed, for many early Christians and Jews, the Greek Septuagint was “the Bible.”<sup>14</sup> In the same way that such influential Old Testament interpreters as Jesus, Paul, and Peter received and worked with it at one remove, through the veil of translation into Greek (or oral Aramaic in the synagogue readings), so readers today labor under the burden of English translation (and English-only language in the case of the Book of Mormon); this cannot but affect how they understood, interpreted, transmuted, and passed on the received tradition, or how we do so today.

The practical consequences of these three points for interpretation are multiple. First, translations of a given passage may vary widely.<sup>15</sup> Second, we cannot make the common assumption that we can determine the meaning of a word in scripture by looking it up in a modern English dictionary. Third, we cannot safely assume that the same English word carries

---

12. My translation.

13. See, for example, “Aramaic,” in Edward Cook, *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), 360–62.

14. See Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000).

15. See Ben Spackman, “Why Bible Translations Differ: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 1 (2014): 31–66.



the same meaning in every scriptural context. The concept of “love” in the Old Testament, for example, differs considerably from “love” in the New Testament, even though both are translated simply as “love” in English. Even in the New Testament, “love” may be the gloss for several different Greek words with partially overlapping semantic ranges of meaning. The inverse is also possible, as seen in the various translations of *paqad* above. We must also be careful not to “read in” modern, quasi-technical LDS definitions to places in the scriptures where they may not hold.<sup>16</sup> This is an irresolvable problem, and that is all right, as long as we bear it in mind. For example, when we say “redeem” over an LDS pulpit, there is no necessity that we do or should intend the same meaning as the Israelites once did, nor is it necessary for us to read “redeem” with that Israelite conception everywhere it appears in our English scriptures. As long as we are conscious of what we are doing, we can and may deploy varied hermeneutic strategies in our approach to scripture. In short, while we must approach carefully and cautiously, this should not prevent us from proposing and contemplating various readings.

## ISRAELITE TERMINOLOGY

### Atonement

Since meaning and usage change over time, dictionaries have to be updated to keep up with current usage. Consequently, the “original” meaning, etymology, or the meanings of a word’s individual units are usually less than fully useful in telling us what a word means in current language. One could not guess at the nature of a *butterfly* from its two parts, and *nice* has taken on very different semantics than its Latin root of *nescius* or “ignorant.” Etymology, then, while historically useful, is neither the first nor last word in semantics.<sup>17</sup>

*Atonement* is the exception that proves the rule. Unlike many other theological words that have come from Latin or Greek, *atonement* was coined as an etymological neologism, built from the meaning of its

---

16. This was a point of interpretive debate between President J. Reuben Clark and Elder Joseph Fielding Smith. Clark wrote that “much of [Smith’s particular] argument loses significance when we cease to give highly technical meaning to general terms.” As quoted in D. Michael Quinn, *Elder Statesman: A Biography of J. Reuben Clark* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 214. The chapter containing this quote is available online at <http://signaturebooks.com/excerpts-elder-statesman/>.

17. See Carson’s section “Word-Study Fallacy,” in *Exegetical Fallacies*, 28–33.

English parts, literally “at-one-ment,” the resulting state or condition (suffix *-ment*) of being or becoming “at one” or (re)united, reconciled. The verb *atone* represents a later backformation from the noun, and would indicate the process or action which brings about this state of oneness. Note that this verb does not exist in the KJV; when required, the translators used the circumlocution “to make atonement” (for example, Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35). Creation of the word *atonement* is frequently attributed to William Tyndale, the first to use Greek and Hebrew instead of Latin as the basis for an English translation of the Bible (ca. 1526). However, the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* shows *atonement* to have existed in print prior to Tyndale’s usage.<sup>18</sup> While not common in his New Testament translation, *atone(ment)* appears in several passages where other translations read differently; in 2 Corinthians 5:18–20, the KJV and Bishop’s Bible (1595) as well as nearly every mainstream modern translation read (using a Latin term) “be reconciled to God,” while Tyndale wrote “be atone with God.”<sup>19</sup>

In the KJV, *atonement* is primarily an Old Testament word. With the exception of Romans 5:11 (“we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement”), all the occurrences of *atonement* in the Bible are found in the Old Testament. Furthermore, examination of the Old Testament distribution of *atone-ment* reveals a high concentration in chapters pertaining to priests and ritual matters, with fully 60 percent of the appearances found in Leviticus. The book of Numbers accounts for another 20 percent. Leviticus chapter 16 alone accounts for nearly 20 percent of all occurrences, which is no surprise when we realize the chapter concerns *yōm kippur*, the Day of Atonement. This concentration suggests that the Hebrew *kippēr* was a technical, priestly term, relating to ritual purity, pollution, and purification. Indeed, its usage is very rare outside of priestly texts and authors.

---

18. See discussion by David Rolph Seely, “William Tyndale and the Language of At-one-ment,” in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 25–42, available at <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/king-james-bible-and-restoration/3-william-tyndale-and-language-one-ment>.

19. Those translations that opt for something other than “ministry of reconciliation” tend to be either simplified or periphrastic. Compare *The Bible in Basic English* (1965), “the work of making peace”; *God’s Word Translation* (1995), “ministry of restoring relationships”; *New International Reader’s Version* (1995), “the task of bringing others back to him through Christ.”

Linguistically, *kippēr* began with very concrete meaning, something like “to rub, wipe,” which in a ritual setting led to “purge, purify,” as well as spinning off an entirely different meaning of “ransom,” in which “innocent life [is] spared by substituting for it the guilty parties or their ransom.”<sup>20</sup> Comparison has often been made with the Akkadian cognate that figures prominently in Babylonian purification rites, although no firm conclusions have been drawn.

What can we learn about the conception of *kippēr* from its priestly status? Jacob Milgrom’s lengthy study of Leviticus represents a deep but accessible source among the many studies that have investigated *kippēr*. According to Milgrom, *kippēr* underwent a gradual shift in meaning. Only in the final stage did it yield “the abstract figurative notion ‘atone’ or ‘expiate.’ . . . Having begun as an action that eliminates dangerous impurity by absorbing it through direct contact (rubbing off) or indirectly (as a ransom/substitute), *kippēr* develops into the process of expiation in general . . . [in which] the offerer is cleansed of his impurities/sins and becomes reconciled, ‘at one’ with God.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus the *JPS Torah Commentary* can write that the

ancient view of Yom Kippur is somewhat different from that which came to predominate in later Judaism, especially in the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Atonement for the sins of the people eventually replaced the purification of the sanctuary per se as the central theme of Yom Kippur. This shift of emphasis is already suggested in verse 30: “For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord.” The purification of the sanctuary was understood to extend to the people—to relieve them of their transgressions as well. However, no ritual of purification was actually performed over the people, as was the case on other occasions.<sup>22</sup>

---

20. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1082. Milgrom has also written about this generally in an LDS context, “The Temple in Biblical Israel: Kinships of Meaning,” in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 57–65. Compare *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* (CAD), *kapāru* meaning “to wipe off,” “to smear on,” and in a related form, *kuppuru*, “to wipe off, to clean objects, to rub, to purify magically.” The entire CAD is available freely from the publisher at <http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/publications/assyrian-dictionary-oriental-institute-university-chicago-cad>.

21. Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 1083.

22. Baruch Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 99.

At the earliest stage, then, Yom Kippur and *kippēr* were narrowly concerned with cleansing of ritual impurity and pollution and, secondarily, removal of sin from the sanctuary. Since the buildup of sin and pollution eventually resulted in the catastrophic departure of the temple's deity,<sup>23</sup> purging it of that sin and pollution had the effect of repairing or maintaining the deity's presence and blessing. In a sense, then, while the term was more limited, the roots of *atonement* as bringing two back together, healing a rift, were already present. "On one level [English at-one-ment] is, in fact, a good definition of the basic effect that to atone, make atonement (the vb. [*kapar*]) had in the relationship between God and human beings within the Israelite cultic sacrificial system."<sup>24</sup>

### Salvation

While *salvation* continues to be used with some ambiguity,<sup>25</sup> LDS usage of the verb *save* in the sense of "being saved" is relatively rare. Elder Dallin H. Oaks points out that such language "can be puzzling to members of [the LDS Church] because it is not our usual way of speaking."<sup>26</sup> This perhaps is a reaction to perceptions of Protestant "cheap grace" or to avoid importing any Protestant connotations culturally attached to the term. Robert Millet's story about preparing for his mission illustrates such a kind of "theological cooties":

After spending several days browsing through some of the great doctrinal chapters in the Book of Mormon, I approached my father with a question. (I need to add at this point that my father had grown up

---

23. Ezekiel 10 records the vision of Yahweh abandoning the Israelite temple. Verse 18 records the "glory [presence] of Yahweh" physically leaving. In 11:22, Yahweh leaves the city as well.

24. See *NIDOTTE*, s.v. "[*kapar*]," 2:689–709. Hugh Nibley provides an expansive interpretation of *kippēr* in "The Meaning of the Atonement," in *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 554–614.

25. Compare Bruce R. McConkie's usage and definition under "Salvation" and "Exaltation" in *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966). McConkie writes under the latter topic, "Although salvation may be defined in many ways to mean many things, in its most pure and perfect definition it is a synonym for exaltation" (257). Regarding the former, he distinguishes between "general or unconditional salvation" and "conditional or individual salvation" (669). Elder Oaks also points out that "as Latter-day Saints use the words *saved* and *salvation*, there are at least six different meanings." Dallin H. Oaks, "Have You Been Saved?" *Ensign* 28, no. 5 (1998): 55.

26. Oaks, "Have You Been Saved?" 55.

in Louisiana as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, taught seminary to the youth for many years, and knew the principles and doctrines of the gospel well.) I asked, “Dad, what does it mean to be saved by grace?” He stared at me for a moment and then said firmly, “We don’t believe in that!” I responded with, “We don’t believe in it? Why not?” He promptly added, “Because the Baptists do!”<sup>27</sup>

In the KJV of the Old Testament, *salvation* and *save* represent forms of *yasha'*.<sup>28</sup> This verb happens to be familiar to English speakers from “hosanna” (Heb. *hoshiya' na*), meaning “save please!” and later becoming an acclamation of praise (Matt. 21:9).<sup>29</sup> In the Old Testament, this salvation primarily represents a very practical need of the here-and-now, not a future promise of wiping away the effects of death or sin. (Sin, with its accompanying ritual pollution, would have likely fallen under “atonement.”) The book of Psalms, for example, contains the heaviest concentration, accounting for 30 percent of the usage of *yasha'* in the Bible. Scot McKnight writes, “The focus of the various images for salvation and deliverance in the psalms is on personal deliverance from enemies and life’s real troubles rather than, as is often the case in Christian theology, on images of salvation in the afterlife for the individual. . . . It is this focus on real-life problems, such as being surrounded by enemies intent on killing the psalmist, that gives to the psalms a potent vision not only of salvation but also of a life of faith, a life of prayer, and a life of petitioning God for deliverance from physical dangers.”<sup>30</sup>

While *yasha'* had the general meaning of “save, help,” this salvation often had martial contexts. When the Psalmist repeatedly pleads for “salvation,” it is not a prayer for atonement and afterlife, but a plea for national victory in war or deliverance from other nations. In Psalm 21, for example, “The salvation which God gives the king is primarily the conquest of his

---

27. Robert L. Millet, “Joseph Smith’s Christology: After Two Hundred Years,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 233.

28. With three exceptions found in poetry (Job 5:4, 11, and Ps. 12:5), forms of *yasha'* are always translated as *save*, *salvation*, or *saviour* in the KJV. Similarly, all forms of *save* are translated from forms of *yasha'* except Gen. 19:19, Eccl. 5:11, and Amos 9:8. In the latter two, *saving* means “except, but for.”

29. The phrase does not actually appear in the Hebrew Bible.

30. Scot McKnight, “Salvation and Deliverance, Imagery,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008).



enemies.”<sup>31</sup> The book of Judges accounts for another 10 percent of the usages of *yasha*ʿ, the highest concentration in the historical books. Several judges there are called *moshia*ʿ<sup>32</sup> or “savior” (*moshia*ʿ is a present participle of *yasha*ʿ), but that salvation is military or political. “In all these cases [in Judges] the salvation in question clearly is political—that is, military victory. The terms *saved* and *savior*, understood in this sense, are at least as important for understanding the roles of Israel’s judges as *judged* and *judge*.”<sup>33</sup> Consequently, what the KJV translates as “salvation” and “save” is rendered as “victory” or “give victory” in other translations—for example, Psalm 20:6, 9 (JPS Tanakh); 44:6–7 (NAB);<sup>34</sup> 118:15 (NRS);<sup>35</sup> and particularly clearly, 144:10 (NRS, NIV, JPS).

This martial usage extends beyond Psalms and Judges into most other books of the Hebrew Bible. Israel’s founding emancipation from Egypt is repeatedly referred to using forms of *yasha*ʿ. For example, Exodus 14:13 looks forward to “the deliverance [*yəshūʿah*] Yahweh will bring” and after the drowning of the pursuing Egyptian army, it is said “thus Yahweh saved [*yasha*ʿ] Israel that day from the power of the Egyptians” (Ex. 14:30). While other uses in the legal and prophetic realm echo this imminent kind of “salvation,” it is God’s deliverance from slavery and the power of Egypt that will later be spiritualized, providing a model of divine aid in saving from foes far too great for mortals, namely, sin and death. Thus was Jesus named *yēshūa*ʿ, because he would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). This spiritualized usage then became dominant in Christian theology and thought.

## Redemption

Let me introduce this third term with an observation, then an anecdote. Outside of theological settings, Americans find *redeem* most often at the grocery store, where coupons are redeemed. The store distributes coupons and then buys them back, or redeems them, and, indeed,

---

31. John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 373.

32. For an LDS exploration of this term, see John W. Welch, “What Was a ‘Mosiah?’” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 105–7.

33. P. E. Satterthwaite, “Judges,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 581.

34. New American Bible, Revised Edition (2010).

35. New Revised Standard Version.



buying something back is one of the oldest English meanings of *redeem*.<sup>36</sup> Some other languages make this meaning clear—for example, French *racheter*.<sup>37</sup> Made of the common prefix *re-* “again, back” and *acheter* “to buy, purchase,” *racheter* literally means “to buy back, repurchase.” However our relatively modern North American usage<sup>38</sup> of redeeming coupons came about, it accurately reflects one of the functions of redemption in Israel, which was not theological but monetary. In “the Bible [redemption] retains its literal, commercial sense, as in reclaiming a pawned item or mortgaged property.”<sup>39</sup>

My interest in redemption in Israel began with the seemingly unrelated topic of Hebrew proper names. Most names in American English today are not natively English; while they may have meaning in some other language, they are usually chosen because of trends, associations, pleasing sounds, or family traditions. When I first started studying Hebrew, I learned that many Hebrew proper names had Hebrew meaning, often with some significance.<sup>40</sup> Naomi originally meant “pleasant” and Mara “bitter,” for example; and the meaning of names often can have some significance for the narrative in which they are found.

While still an undergraduate, I came across the name “God is (my) father,” Abijah/Joab/Eliab.<sup>41</sup> A recently returned missionary, I naturally

36. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) lists examples as far back as AD 1425.

37. English *redeem* apparently comes from Latin through French *redimer*, which current French replaced with *racheter*.

38. The OED connects the specific usage of “redeem” with coupons to the U.S. in 1897, though the general idea goes back much further.

39. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 271, note to Leviticus 25:24.

40. For an easily accessible list, see Jay A. Parry and Donald W. Parry, “Israelite Names: Witnesses of Deity,” *Ensign* 20, no. 12 (1990): 52–54, available at <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1990/12/israelite-names-witnesses-of-deity?lang=eng>.

41. While it is a complicated subject, the Hebrew Bible rarely distinguishes between *ʾel/ʾelohim* (KJV “God”) and *yahweh* (KJV “LORD” or “Jehovah”), and I do not distinguish here between their respective theophoric elements *ʾel* and *yah*, translating both simply as “God.” The LDS adoption of Elohim and Jehovah to designate (respectively) the Father and the Son represents a conventional adaptation of these Hebrew terms and does not reflect either Old Testament usage or early LDS usage. Doctrine and Covenants 109 likely uses “Jehovah” as a reference to the Father, and as late as 1961 President McKay was known to (accidentally?) speak of “Jehovah and his son, Jesus Christ.” For this and other examples, see Barry R. Bickmore, “Of Simplicity, Oversimplification, and Monotheism,” *FARMS Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 215–58; Ryan Conrad Davis and Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Usage of the Title *Elohim*,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 1

characterized this as a doctrinal reflection of the fatherhood of God. Sometime later, I encountered Ahijah/Joah, “God is (my) brother.” Although a little surprised, I decided this name represented an allusion to the premortal Jesus’s status as our elder brother.<sup>42</sup> One last name really threw me for a loop and broke my simplistic paradigm: “God is (my) uncle,” Ammiel/Eliam.<sup>43</sup> I could not easily integrate this expression of Israelite worldview into my own LDS conception.<sup>44</sup> In what possible sense could God be one’s uncle?

Several years later, after encountering some of the scholarship cited here, I realized that “father,” “brother,” and “uncle” were all “kinship” terms.<sup>45</sup> Far from reflecting various LDS doctrines, each of these names expressed one very important Israelite concept: divine kinship, or kinship with God. Without explanation, the force of this concept is generally lost upon our very different culture. What did kinship mean, how was it that Israel could claim God as a kinsman, and what did that relationship entail?

Kinship was the fundamental structure governing societal interaction and functionality, and kin had particular duties to each other within that structure, including mutual love, loyalty, and support (Lev. 19:17–18); avenging wrongful death (Num. 35:6–34);<sup>46</sup> and, notably, for

---

(2013): 109–27; and Brian W. Ricks, “James E. Talmage and the Doctrine of the Godhead,” *Religious Educator* 13, no. 2 (2012): 185–209. Compare Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

42. This is neither a scriptural phrase nor found among Joseph Smith’s teachings. See Corbin Volluz, “Jesus Christ as Elder Brother,” *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 141–58. Volluz traces the earliest identification of Jesus as “our Brother” to Orson Pratt in 1844.

43. The typical translation of *‘am* as “people” represents the endpoint of a three-stage process of semantic broadening. It first meant “paternal uncle” (and still does in modern Arabic) > “kin/kinsman” > “people.”

44. Certainly part of the problem was my erroneous and presentist assumption that there were few differences between Israelite and LDS doctrinal thought.

45. Outside of Israel, these and other terms such as “father-in-law” and “mother” were used to similar ends. Had I encountered something like *ḥami’el*, “God is my father-in-law,” I might have figured out sooner that my narrow paradigm was not properly calibrated.

46. Note that this is not revenge. The concept of *eye for an eye* served to set an upper limit on justice and prevent escalation. If you accidentally killed my cow, I could not escalate and kill your child in response. Furthermore, Numbers 35 distinguishes between accidental killing (or involuntary manslaughter) and murder. In the first case, the culprit could appeal to the community, which

present purposes, in buying back (that is, redeeming) family land that had been sold due to poverty (Lev. 25:25–34) or family members who had been sold into slavery (Lev. 25:47–50). The Levirate law of marrying a brother’s childless widow to raise children in his name may also have been a duty of kinship.<sup>47</sup>

The advantages and duties of biological kinship described above could be extended to those outside the tribe, clan, or family through covenant, which included legal and ethical aspects, cultic aspects, and juridical aspects. “The covenant bears all these aspects because it is an extension of familial relationship, and the extended family, the *bet ’ab* [or ‘father’s house’], was the central framework for the legal, religious, and political aspects of ancient Semitic society.”<sup>48</sup> Since kinship-through-covenant extended familial relationships, the respective kinship terms that we think of as strictly biological took on broader meaning. “The interaction between kinship and covenant creates differences between the meanings of terms like ‘father,’ ‘mother,’ ‘son,’ ‘daughter,’ ‘brother,’ ‘sister,’ ‘uncle,’ or ‘nephew’ in the Bible, and the way we use these titles in everyday speech. In the Bible, their connotations are often more legal than biological. They identify a variety of people besides blood relatives.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, they often identify people who are kin through covenant.

---

rendered judgment on culpability, and temporarily retreat to a city of refuge for safety; in the second case, the murderer was put to death by the kinsman upon the evidence of witnesses.

47. This is not explicit in extant Israelite law but is implied in the book of Ruth, which thoroughly integrates themes of redemption. Indeed, “the subject of redemption is more prominent in Ruth than in any other biblical book. . . . Boaz announces his marriage to Ruth. Such an extension of the notion of redemption to include marriage exceeds expectations and provides utmost security for an otherwise marginalized person, by integrating her fully into the household in the most respectable fashion. Although marriage is not elsewhere demanded in the Bible in conjunction with redemption, marriage as a metaphor for God’s redemptive actions on Israel’s behalf is integral to some prophetic writings, expressed, for example, in Isa. 54:5, where God is husband and redeemer.” Tamara Cohen Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kremsky, *The JPS Bible Commentary—Ruth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), liv–lv. Compare the language of Ruth 4:10 with Deut. 25:6.

48. Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to a Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 3.

49. Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel, 1250–587 BCE* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), 8.

Frank Moore Cross broke new ground on this long-studied topic. “Often it has been asserted that the language of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘fatherhood,’ ‘love,’ and ‘loyalty’ is ‘covenant terminology.’ This is to turn things upside down. *The language of covenant, kinship-in-law, is taken from the language of kinship, kinship-in-flesh.*”<sup>50</sup> Through covenant, those Outside could be brought Inside, as if they were and had been family all along, with all the blessings and duties implied.

Along with their eastern neighbors the Amorites and the Moabites,<sup>51</sup> Israelites held that covenant could extend the bonds of kinship not just to biologically unrelated humans but also to deity. Although he had already graciously acted as de facto kinsman in freeing Israel from slavery in Egypt (Ex. 6:6), Yahweh formally becomes Israel’s divine kinsman through covenant in Exodus 24.<sup>52</sup> Various metaphors express this relationship throughout the Old Testament, including the marriage<sup>53</sup>

---

50. Frank Moore Cross, “Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel,” in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 11; italics added. Hershel Shanks provides an accessible summary and discussion of Cross in “God as Divine Kinsman: What Covenant Meant in Ancient Israel,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 25 (July/August 1999): 32–33, 60.

51. Cross, “Kinship and Covenant,” 12.

52. The simile-curse aspects of the covenant-ratification ritual in Exodus 24 have long been noted. The throats of animals were cut, the blood collected (called “the blood of the covenant”), and half splashed on the altar and half on the people who had just agreed to the covenant. This was a “symbolic action in which the people were identified with the sacrificed animal, so that the fate of the latter is presented as the fate to be expected by the people if they violated their sacred promise (i.e., it is a form of self-curse). Thus the ratification ceremony was, in effect, the pledging of their lives as a guarantee of obedience to the divine will.” David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 1:1185 s.v. “Covenant.” Scott Hahn connects this with kinship: “The sprinkling of blood is a ritualized oath-curse—in technical terminology, a *Drohitus*. The sprinkled blood of the slain animals represents the curse of death that both parties invoke upon themselves should they prove unfaithful to their covenantal obligations. The mutual sprinkling of blood may also convey the idea that both parties now share one blood—that is, they have become kin.” Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 47.

53. Marriage was covenant-based and established kinship. Cross thinks the statement in Gen 2:24 (“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh”) “is not a reference to sex, as many assume, but an assertion of the new kinship relationship between husband and wife.” See his response to a letter, under “Queries & Comments—Potpourri,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 25, no. 6 (1999): 67.

metaphor familiar from the prophets as well as Israel being God's "son" or the "kin of Yahweh" (Heb. *'am yahweh*, traditionally "people of Yahweh").

Regardless of the familial metaphor chosen in any given passage (and there can be many), it is the duty implied by the kinship metaphor that is important. Cross elaborates: "The Divine Kinsman, it is assumed, fulfilled the mutual obligations and receives the privileges of kinship. He leads in battle, redeems from slavery, loves his family, shares the land of his heritage, provides and protects. He blesses those who bless his kindred, curses those who curse his kindred. The family of the deity rallies to his call to holy war, 'the wars of Yahweh,' keeps his cultus, obeys his patriarchal commands, maintains familial loyalty, loves him with all their soul, calls on his name."<sup>54</sup>

Israelites and their neighbors may have viewed this covenantal kinship as the primary relationship by which they approached deity. When in need of help, they called on God and expected him to respond because they were kin. "Since Israel is God's near kinsman, when Israel is in distress it is God's veritable obligation to come to its aid and make whatever efforts are necessary in order to extricate it from its predicament."<sup>55</sup> As a relatively small and weak nation, Israel's collective problems were often political or martial. God as Israel's divine kinsman implied not only eventual redemption from slavery or oppression but also divine violence on their behalf.

To summarize the relevant points, the duty of a kinsman, whether human or divine, kin-by-flesh or kin-by-law, included redeeming or buying back family land and family members who had fallen into trouble. One word—*ga'al*—and its derivatives appear repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, which "primarily represent technical legal terminology of Israelite family law."<sup>56</sup> Hebrew *ga'al* may well mean something like "to act as kinsman" or "to carry out the duty of a kinsman," though it will never appear that way in translation. Because English lacks a parallel term, translation varies based on the context of the situation and which duty is being carried out. When *ga'al* appears without such context, its various forms are simply translated as "redeem" or "redeemer." To indicate some of the cultural background, a few translations have opted for the neologism of "kinsman-redeemer" or "redeeming-kinsman." Thus,

---

54. Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," 7.

55. Berlin and Brettler, *Jewish Study Bible*, 271, note to Leviticus 25:24.

56. See *NIDOTTE*, s.v. "[*ga'al*]," 1:789–94.



to claim God as “redeemer,” or to call upon him for redemption, was to claim kinship through a covenant relationship with him.<sup>57</sup>

## BROADER LDS IMPLICATIONS

### How Much Did Book of Mormon Culture Retain These Israelite Conceptions?

Because of its emphasis on the plan of redemption and salvation, the Book of Mormon presents several interesting variants of these interpretive problems.

First, given the complex authorship issues of the Hebrew Bible, it is difficult to know the prevalence and form of these concepts in the immediate environment of the two Israelite groups who would form the Israelite substrate of the Book of Mormon—the Nephites and the people of Zarahemla, often today called Mulekites.<sup>58</sup>

Second, regardless of the initial extent of Israelite cultural/linguistic base of the Book of Mormon peoples, once separated from its parent culture, these cultural break-offs would diverge and differentiate themselves over time, to say nothing of potential cultural influence of others

---

57. Note, however, that not every unnamed redeemer in the text is divine. The unnamed kinsman whom Boaz consults in Ruth 4:1–2 is one obvious example. More controversial would be the well-known passage enshrined in Handel’s *Messiah*, Job 19:25–26: “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” Michael Austin examines it as part of a larger analysis, concluding that the redeemer in question is a human defender of Job. See chapter 8 of his *Re-reading Job: Understanding the Ancient World’s Greatest Poem* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 103–18.

58. The term “Mulekite” is never used in the Book of Mormon text, and their putative Israelite ancestry is uncritically accepted hundreds of years later by Mormon the editor. Orson Scott Card makes the reasonable argument that this genealogy was a fraudulent claim aimed at retaining kingship, a claim which Mosiah trumped by producing written records. This explains how a much smaller immigrant group on the run peacefully takes over the kingship of an established and much larger group. See Orson Scott Card, “The Book of Mormon—Artifact or Artifice?” in *A Storyteller in Zion: Essays and Speeches* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995), available at <http://www.nauvoo.com/library/card-bookofmormon.html>. As for Mormon’s knowledge of this, Elder John A. Widtsoe’s dictum applies. “When inspired writers deal with historical incidents they relate that which they have seen or that which may have been told them, unless indeed the past is opened to them by revelation.” John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1943), 127.



they may have encountered.<sup>59</sup> The strongest moderating force to cultural change would have been written records, but their impact would be largely limited by the low rates of literacy and the rareness of records. In other words, barring unusual circumstances, we should expect any Book of Mormon parallels to the Hebrew Bible to be strongest early after the separation from Jerusalem and weakest after a thousand years of cultural and linguistic change.

Third, the nature of the Book of Mormon text prevents us from making strong language claims. That is, we have no original-language text or any firm idea of the *kind* of translation the English represents, that is, the relationship between the English text and the underlying original.<sup>60</sup> We have a string of translational equivalents that, as pointed out in the introduction, often conceal or distort the underlying text in some way. But such is the nature of translation.

Such factors make it difficult to pin down the meaning of terms in the Book of Mormon. Consequently, the strongest possible examples of these Israelite concepts in the Book of Mormon would necessarily consist of (a) one of the three KJV words under examination, (b) coming early in the Book of Mormon, (c) with contextual clues that point us to the Israelite concept. While many instances can be found and examined with these interpretative concepts in mind, here are a couple of examples tentatively advanced to illustrate the task that lies ahead.

From the outset, the term *Redeemer* was frequently used by Lehi (see, for example, 1 Ne. 10:5, 6, 14; 2 Ne. 1:10; 2:3) and Nephi (see, for example, 1 Ne. 11:27; 15:14; 17:30; 19:18, 23; 22:12), perhaps reflecting the keen sense of loss they had suffered in leaving their nation, people, temple, and lands of inheritance in Israel. Hence, they hoped that the sins of the people in Jerusalem that had led to their destruction could someday be wiped away and their promised lands would someday be recovered.

---

59. Beyond the potential “others” in the promised land, S. Kent Brown has argued that at least part of the eight years in the wilderness (1 Ne. 17:4) was spent in bondage or servitude to non-Israelites. See “Sojourn, Dwell, and Stay: Terms of Servitude,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 55–74, available online at <https://rsc.byu.edu/out-print/jerusalem-zarahemla-literary-and-historical-studies-book-mormon>.

60. For one extended example of trying to tease out the kind of translation, see Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

Lehi and Nephi used the term *Redeemer* most poignantly when speaking to their own family members. Thus, in 2 Nephi 2:3, Lehi said to his son Jacob, “Wherefore, I know that thou art redeemed, because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer.” We can read this particular statement in light of the nature of human kinship versus divine kinship. That is, we know from the book of Ruth that while kinsmen had the duty to redeem, human kinsmen did not always carry it out. In Ruth, the unnamed kinsman, closer in line to Naomi than Boaz, chose not to fulfill his duty. Boaz, who may well have tried to influence just this outcome, stepped in as the *go’el* or kinsman-redeemer. In context, then, perhaps we can paraphrase Lehi’s statement as, “because God is your kinsman-redeemer and unlike human kinsman-redeemers who are not always reliable and faithful in carrying out covenantal obligations, God is righteous. Therefore, you, Jacob, are surely redeemed, bought back, repurchased.”

King Benjamin’s speech, occurring at the temple in Zarahelma approximately 460 years after Lehi’s group left Jerusalem, dwells deeply on the doctrines of atonement, salvation, and redemption. Although not using the terms *redeem*, *redeemer*, or *redemption*, Benjamin’s text makes frequent use of the terms *atonement*, *salvation*, *saved*, and *Savior*. Mosiah 3:18 speaks of “salvation” and the “atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent,” terms that appear to draw on the Hebrew meanings of *yasha’*, including (in this coronation setting) the kinds of help and deliverance only the heavenly king can give, and of *kipper*, including (in this ritual setting) to purge, purify, expiate, or ransom. At the end of Benjamin’s speech, Mosiah 5:7–8 connects this cluster of ideas with a new kinship relationship through covenant making. Benjamin said to all his people—Nephites and Mulekites—that “because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters. And under this head ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free.” The making of this covenant entails a new relationship—it expresses kinship through the terms *sons* and *daughters*, and this new kinship relationship brings freedom. The fact that we have strong ties to language of the ancient Nephite records (Mosiah 1:2), as well as contextual ceremonial clues, together with the appearance of specific words, strengthens the plausible relevance of the Hebrew meanings in our understanding of the words *atonement* and *salvation* used in

Benjamin's speech. If the phrase under consideration in Mosiah 5:8 had contained the word "redeemed" instead of just "made free," this example would be even stronger, but we must take the text as it reads.

### Modern LDS Applications of These Three Israelite Conceptions

Not being aware of Hebrew linguistics, most Latter-day Saints tend to use "atone," "redeem," and "save" without knowing the broader and distinct Israelite contexts behind these terms. Moreover, LDS discourse tends to use the word *atonement* primarily in eschatological and theological contexts, focused on the obstacles of sin and death. While this should indeed be our ultimate concern, it should not exclude other aspects of atonement that can help our progress toward that goal. Latter-day Saints have also frequently relied on many types of extended metaphors to explain the complexities of the Atonement, often financial and often extrascriptural.<sup>61</sup> While these models are certainly useful, every metaphor or abstraction breaks down or is incomplete and can be misleading at some point. LDS understandings can be enriched through careful use of atonement metaphors, in pastoral care, personal discipleship, and scriptural exegesis. How, then, can the three Israelite concepts from the scriptures introduced above profitably broaden LDS understanding of atonement?

**Atonement.** While Mormonism has neither a system for the expiation of ritual pollution or of defilement of the holy land (as did ancient Israel) nor a yearly ritual in which the temple(s) or land are ritually cleansed (as would correspond to the priestly notion of atonement), one can well imagine some Mormons drawing on the Hebrew concept to include cleansing the land, taking "pollution" as concrete instead of ritual, thus making an environmental application. BYU Professor George Handley's book *Home Waters*, subtitled *A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River*, gestures toward just such an understanding: "Ecological restoration is neither technophilia nor antihumanist escapism. It is repentance, plain and simple."<sup>62</sup>

---

61. Extrascriptural metaphors are not inherently contrary to scripture or faulty, but they do tend to impose ideas or frameworks that scripture itself does not warrant, as well as preempt the actual metaphors used in the scriptures themselves.

62. George Handley, *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), xiii. My thanks to Kristine

Another, more personal, pastoral adaptation is possible. Thinking of atonement in financial or transactional terms has led some Mormons to struggle with perfectionism and an easy conflation of *worthiness* or *worthy* with (*self-*)*worth*, the idea or feeling that a person is loved, valued, or “worth” less because of mistakes, imperfections, and sins. Several productive ways of dealing with this have been suggested in the past, but I wonder if more integration with the idea of ritual rather than just moral pollution might help.

Ritual uncleanness<sup>63</sup> was incurred regularly through a variety of means, including regular biological processes of both men and women as well as sin, and had little necessary bearing on one’s righteousness or standing before God. Some encounters with uncleanness were an unavoidable part of creation and being alive; certainly Jesus himself incurred ritual uncleanness in his life under Jewish law, even deliberately at times,<sup>64</sup> but this fact in no way undermined his sinlessness, divinity, goodness, or self-worth. He would have simply undergone the proper cleansing rituals like everyone else and regained his ritual state of “cleanliness.”

If Mormons or Christians anywhere thought of sin more like ritual pollution, an inevitable circumstance or consequence from which they can be fully cleansed through the proper process, they might less readily spiral downward into despair. Perfectionists who try to maintain a perfectly clean slate at all times are likely to berate themselves, concede defeat, give up, and decide they are simply not celestial material.

---

Haglund for this reference. See further E. Calvin Beisner and others, “A Biblical Perspective on Environmental Stewardship,” *Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty*, <http://www.acton.org/public-policy/environmental-stewardship/theology-e/biblical-perspective-environmental-stewardship>.

63. One of my Jewish professors noted that “cleanness” and “uncleanness” carried misleading English implications. One could be spotlessly fresh from a shower but ritually impure or “unclean.” By contrast, the dirtiest, stinkiest Boy Scout recently back from a showerless week in the mountains might be “clean” or ritually pure.

64. “In the context of a society which is concerned with purity and in which contact with the impure carries with it significant consequences, Jesus’ touching of ‘sinful’ people, lepers, corpses, and others who in various ways were understood to be cultically compromised is indeed remarkable and warrants investigation.” Craig A. Evans, “‘Who Touched Me?’ Jesus and the Ritually Impure,” in *Jesus in Context: Temple, Purity, and Restoration*, ed. Bruce David Chilton (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 360.

Nonperfectionists, by contrast, can realize that such failure was both planned for and inevitable,<sup>65</sup> part of being human in mortality, and will avail themselves of the cleansing power of atonement through Christ Jesus.<sup>66</sup>

**Redemption.** While concepts of divine kinship and kinship-by-covenant certainly resonate with family-focused contemporary Mormons, modern Western European and North American cultures lack the social structures that anciently enabled the theological ramifications of divine kinship. I suspect Israelites encountered kin-based redemptive interactions with some regularity, which rendered those aspects of divine kinship imminent and concrete instead of merely theoretical.

There is a kind of quasi-kinship among Latter-day Saints, however. Evaluating the very nice (albeit temporary) housing my wife and I had found through “the Mormon mafia” (LDS networking), an envious non-LDS acquaintance quipped, “Mormon missionaries ought to be hawking *that* kind of thing door-to-door, instead of the Book of Mormon.” And indeed, Mormon networking provides some advantages similar to Israelite kinship. The formal duties of membership are often summed up with Mosiah 18:8–10, “mourning with those who mourn” and so on, but informally, Latter-day Saints perform the duties of community or even kinship for fellow Saints whom they know only remotely, if at all.

We no longer have legal institutions like debt-slavery or levirate marriage as the Israelites did, but fundamentally both LDS and Israelite ideas of kinship and mutual responsibilities are concerned with relationships. On such a basic level, we can perhaps apply some of God-as-divine-kinsman to our ideas of atonement. If our relationship with God is not characterized primarily as debtor-creditor, but as kinsman-kinsman (whether kin by covenant or kin by nature),<sup>67</sup> then perhaps

---

65. I do not suggest “inevitable” in a Calvinist way, but in the sense that as we are all human and fallen, all will sin at some point to a greater or lesser extent (Rom. 3:23).

66. While I cannot find my source, I recall one suggestion that we should conceive of sin as a *feature* of mortal existence, not a bug. A world in which sin was impossible would simply not function as an environment for learning, growth, and becoming like God.

67. Most Latter-day Saints, I suspect, would argue that we are already kin with God, in a sense other than the Israelites thought of it. At the same time, they feel strongly their indebtedness to God and recognize their inability to repay that debt even by giving God everything their whole soul might possess.

we can do as the Israelites and call on him for help *in terms* of that relationship. That is, thinking of God as a family member we turn to for help instead of as a banker concerned primarily with having his debt repaid means that we are more likely to seek that help. Thus, Hebrews 4:15–16 recasts how we approach God on the basis of how we conceive of him: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (NRSV).

The redemptive duties of kinship have a fairly direct application to temple work and family history. LDS theology typically holds that the spirit world is bifurcated. While relatively little is understood or known about this with any certainty, the reception of saving ordinances by proxy figures heavily in leaving “spirit prison.” Cast in terms of LDS temple work, we have kin in “prison” whom we have a duty to redeem and free through genealogy and performance of their temple work.

**Salvation.** On the one hand, the generic usage of *yasha'* as “save, help” does not have much to add to LDS conceptions, and its frequent specific martial context makes it the most difficult of these three terms to apply to an LDS setting. The challenge lies in a stark cultural and moral difference between modern Western culture and the world of the Old Testament, namely, that we have become much more uncomfortable with (divine?) violence than they appear to have been. This martial usage of “save” depends on and elevates the aspect of God as “divine warrior” and “a man of war” (Ex. 15:3). While the Old Testament is often caricatured as being a locus of violence,<sup>68</sup> this aspect of the ancient world is not limited to the Old Testament but is found in the New Testament in the apocalyptic depictions in the book of Revelation, as well as in the Book of Mormon in 3 Nephi 8–10. (In fairness, when Jesus says the two great

---

See Mosiah 2:22. Within a family context, the existence and forgiveness of such indebtedness is both natural and understandable.

68. See, for example, Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012). A popular treatment is provided by Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), especially ch. 6. On violence and other problems of scripture, see Kenton Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012).



laws are to love God and love your neighbor as yourself, he is quoting straight out of the Law in Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18.)

This depiction of God as engaging in violence, even in order to defend or protect his people from their enemies, nevertheless discomfits many modern readers, particularly as scriptural rhetoric sometimes glories in it. It is difficult to find aspects of divine violence in an atonement by a god who is motivated exclusively by infinite love, complete self-sacrifice, and altruistic concern. This conundrum is well worth puzzling over, and perhaps readers more authoritative or creative than I am can posit a good Christian application of this Hebraic concept of salvation.

### CONCLUSION

The Israelite roots of our modern atonement terminology, which we use synonymously and largely in ignorance of those roots, offer fruitful grounds for reexamining our own teachings and traditions about atonement. How and what we teach about it makes a great deal of difference in how we internalize, understand, and act on it. The explorations here are merely overviews and initial suggestions, but they will, I hope, prove useful “for the edifying” and “perfecting of the saints” (Eph. 4:12).

---

T. Benjamin Spackman is a PhD student in History of Christianity and Religion in North America at Claremont Graduate University. He graduated from Brigham Young University with a BA in Near Eastern Studies, then received an MA and did PhD work in Semitics at the University of Chicago. During that time, he taught Institute courses for a decade as a volunteer, as well as the occasional BYU course. He has published with the Maxwell Institute and *Religious Educator*, and writes online at Times and Seasons and Benjamin the Scribe. He anticipates publication of his book, *Reading Scripture, Reading Creation: The Ancient Context of Genesis 1* in late 2016 by the Maxwell Institute. His book feeds into one of his modern-era interests and focus at Claremont, the historical conflict between science, evolution, and interpretation of scripture. He lives in California with his wife, who finished her PhD first and currently teaches at Harvey Mudd College.