

2 Nephi 25:23 in Literary and Rhetorical Context

Daniel O. McClellan

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.

—2 Nephi 25:23

Introduction

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have interpreted 2 Nephi 25:23 in a variety of ways. The text is not particularly complex, but because the final clause carries significant soteriological weight, it has been fiercely debated among thoughtful readers of the text. What has been missing, however, has been concern for its linguistic and rhetorical contexts, and I suggest that we can have no real confidence in our reading until it has been interrogated within precisely those contexts. Texts, after all, have no inherent meaning. Meaning is created as readers impose interpretive frameworks based on their own experiences with, and understandings of, the conventions and patterns of language.¹

1. There is no natural or innate connection between the characters that make up our alphabet and the sounds they represent, nor is there a natural or innate connection between the sounds made by an arrangement of those letters (a word) and the concepts it may represent. The relationship there is conventional, or socially constructed. The

If we hope to understand what this text would have meant to its earliest readers, we must strive to approximate *their* understanding of the conventional forms it employs and the reasons for that employment. In the following, I briefly review the history of the passage's interpretation before turning to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century occurrences of the phrase "after all we can do" and related constructions, in order to demonstrate the contexts and conventions associated with them that will help reveal the passage's most likely intended sense and rhetorical function.

Latter-day Saint Commentary on 2 Nephi 25:23

The earliest potential allusion I can find to 2 Nephi 25:23 comes from an address given by Brigham Young in Salt Lake City on February 3, 1867. In the address, President Young states, regarding salvation:

It requires all the atonement of Christ, the mercy of the Father, the pity of angels and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to be with us always, and then to do the very best we possibly can, to get rid of this sin within us, so that we may escape from this world into the celestial kingdom. This is just as much as we can do, and there is no room for that carelessness manifested by too many among us.²

If 2 Nephi 25:23 is indeed in view here, President Young appears to understand it to mean the combination of the grace of Christ and our utmost effort are required for exaltation.

ability to construct meaning from spoken or written language is entirely contingent upon our experiences with and understanding of those conventional relationships. A good introduction to the approach to linguistics I espouse here is René Dirven and Marjolijn Verspoor, eds., *Cognitive Exploration of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd rev. ed. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004).

2. Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1854–1886), 11: 301. For comments on this quote, see David L. Paulsen and Cory G. Walker, "Work, Worship, and Grace," *FARMS Review* 18/2 (2006): 101–02.

The earliest explicit quotation of our text I find in the Scripture Citation Index³ comes from Elder Marion G. Romney's 1955 general conference address, "Repentance Worketh Salvation," in which he states: "For, after all, it is by the grace of Christ that men are saved, after all they can do. The thing they can and must do is repent."⁴ This reading seems to draw from Alma 24:11's statement that "it has been all that we could do . . . to repent of all our sins," which has become a common interpretive lens for 2 Nephi 25:23. This connection has more recently been promoted by Elder Claudio D. Zivic in a 2007 general conference address.⁵

In a 1970 general conference address, President Harold B. Lee took a different position, quoting the text and stating: "Truly we are redeemed by the atoning blood of the Savior of the world, but only after each has done all he can to work out his own salvation."⁶ Surely repentance is an element of this, but President Lee seems to widen the net to suggest we must exhaust all our efforts before grace is activated. This interpretation has for many years been the most salient institutional reading of the passage. For example, the current entry for "grace" in the *LDS Bible Dictionary* states that "grace cannot suffice without total effort on the part of the recipient. Hence the explanation, 'It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do' (2 Ne. 25:23)."⁷ In agreement with the *LDS Bible Dictionary*, the Church's Gospel Topics Essay on "Grace" quotes

3. Scripture Citation Index, <https://scriptures.bry.edu/>.

4. Marion G. Romney, "Repentance Worketh Salvation," *Conference Report* (October 1955): 123. A rare but terse exception to the twentieth century's consensus reading is found in the *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (published in 1955, but containing commentary written by George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, who died in 1909 and 1913, respectively), regarding this verse: "The doctrine here stated is, salvation is freely given and cannot be 'earned'" (George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Philip C. Reynolds [Salt Lake City: Deseret Press, 1955], 379).

5. Claudio D. Zivic, "After All We Can Do," *Ensign*, October 2007: 98–99.

6. Harold B. Lee, "Time to Prepare to Meet God," *Conference Report*, October 1970: 115.

7. *LDS Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "grace," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/grace?lang=eng> (accessed March 20, 2020).

2 Nephi 25:23 after explaining that “to receive this enabling power, we must obey the gospel of Jesus Christ, which includes having faith in Him, repenting of our sins, being baptized, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and trying to follow the teaching of Jesus Christ for the rest of our lives.”⁸ In a 2004 general conference address, Elder Dennis E. Simmons posed the question, “What does the Lord expect of us with respect to our challenges?” His answer: “He expects us to do all we can do. He does the rest.”⁹ He then quoted 2 Nephi 25:23.

This traditional reading has long been employed for the rhetorical purpose of exhorting members of the Church to give their all to Christ—and no less salient, it has become a central identity marker for our community—but a side effect has been the sociocultural embedding of an inaccessible soteriology, something with which many members of the Church have struggled, particularly the youth.¹⁰ The tide has turned in recent years, however, and in no small part because of a renewed emphasis on the Book of Mormon’s representation of the concept of grace. In 2015, then-President Dieter F. Uchtdorf reflected concern for the above-mentioned side effect in a general conference address he entitled “The Gift of Grace,” when he promoted a more nuanced reading of our passage:

8. In a recent *BYU Studies* article, Robert L. Millet quoted our passage and added: “I have met members throughout the Church who suppose this means that Christ can help us, strengthen us, empower us only after we have expended our best efforts and done everything we know how to do” (“The Perils of Grace,” *BYU Studies* 53/2 [2014]: 16). The gospel topics essay can be found at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/grace?lang=eng&_r=1.

9. Dennis E. Simmons, “But If Not . . .,” *Ensign*, May 2004: 75.

10. A response to this struggle was Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992). Perhaps in recognition of the same struggle, Elder D. Todd Christofferson struck a mediating tone in a 2014 article: “We do not need to achieve some minimum level of capacity or goodness before God will help—divine aid can be ours every hour of every day, no matter where we are in the path of obedience. But I know that beyond desiring His help, we must exert ourselves, repent, and choose God for Him to be able to act in our lives consistent with justice and moral agency” (“Free Forever, to Act for Themselves,” *Ensign*, November 2014: 19).

We must understand that ‘after’ does not equal ‘because.’ We are not saved ‘because’ of all that we can do. Have any of us done all that we can do? Does God wait until we’ve expended every effort before He will intervene in our lives with His saving grace?¹¹

This reading highlights the fact that no one is perfect in repentance or working out their own salvation. If “all we can do” is the prerequisite for grace, no one will ever receive it. This emphasis on grace is also influencing institutional messaging. The 2003 edition of the *Book of Mormon: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* quoted 2 Nephi 25:23 and asked, “How does this statement give you encouragement to do the best you can?”¹² The 2020 edition of the *Come, Follow Me—For Sunday School* manual, meanwhile, shares the paragraph quoted above from Elder Uchtdorf’s “The Gift of Grace.”¹³

Elder Uchtdorf’s position was not entirely original, of course. Scholars had advocated for more nuanced readings of our passage for some time. As Spencer Fluhman has highlighted, Ezra Taft Benson’s sustained emphasis on the Book of Mormon “brought Mormons unavoidably to Christocentric salvation.” Benson, he writes, “did more to awaken modern Mormons to grace than any popular writer ever could.”¹⁴ Stephen Robinson suggested in his influential 1992 book, *Believing Christ*, that the passage be interpreted to mean we are saved by grace *despite* all we can do.¹⁵ Robert L. Millet argued for the same reading in his 2007 book *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate*.¹⁶ More recently, Joseph M. Spencer suggested in a 2014 *Religious Educator* article that we look

11. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Gift of Grace,” *Ensign*, May 2015: 110.

12. *Book of Mormon: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 40.

13. *Book of Mormon 2020: Come, Follow Me—For Sunday School* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020), 25.

14. J. Spencer Fluhman, “*A Peculiar People*: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America” (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 5.

15. Robinson, *Believing Christ*, 91–92.

16. Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 188.

to 2 Nephi 10:24 for context, where we read: “Remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved.” This text exhorts the reader to first be reconciled to God and at that point to remember that it is by grace that we are saved. Using this context as an interpretive lens for 2 Nephi 25:23, “after all we can do” does not refer to the point at which grace is activated, but the point at which we remember Christ’s saving grace.¹⁷ Grace, after all, influences our lives well before we exhaust all our efforts. In 2017, Jared W. Ludlow published an essay in the *Religious Educator* that prioritizes the more immediate context of 2 Nephi 25 and suggests that Nephi’s use of “all we can do” refers to his people’s obedience to the law of Moses while it remained in effect.¹⁸

“After all we can do” in Literary and Rhetorical Context

While these different readings manifest a clear and growing concern for making better and more defensible sense of this passage, none of the approaches reflect particularly thorough linguistic, literary, or historical methodologies—they are primarily theological in orientation. In the following, and primarily for the sake of space, I bracket the question of the text’s source and treat the form of the English text of the Book of Mormon as a product of its environment. There is certainly a discussion to be had regarding the degree to which the prophet’s own agency and cognition played a role in the articulation of the English text, but I would suggest there is little case to be made that, whatever its proximate source, the English text obtained entirely independently of the conventions of the prophet’s literary ecology. Whether one grants Joseph Smith a role in the translation or asserts a brand of accommodationism, its very function as a text would be contingent upon achieving linguistic purchase within that ecology. If it were produced independently of

17. Joseph M. Spencer, “What Can We Do? Reflections on 2 Nephi 25:23,” *Religious Educator* 15/2 (2014): 25–39.

18. Jared W. Ludlow, “After All We Can Do’ (2 Nephi 25:23),” *Religious Educator* 18/1 (2017): 32–47.

it, existing conventions would have instantly suppressed any intended meaning that was not easily accommodatable.¹⁹ The English of Joseph Smith's time and place had to exercise a direct influence, and so consideration of that literary milieu remains the most secure means of establishing the intended sense.

So what support is available for these alternative readings beyond our own isolated theological readings of the Book of Mormon? The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists one of the senses of “after” as “in spite of, notwithstanding (a preceding event or action),”²⁰ and the majority of the examples it provides include the prepositional phrase “after all.” This is a different linguistic construction, but when used independently, “after all” can mean two things: “in view of everything,” or “in spite of expectations to the contrary.” The latter sense is primarily intended in the related construction where “all” is qualified in some way, as in this *History of the Church* example from around 1840:

19. In other words, to be understood according to its intended meaning, the text would have to be articulated in such a way that people would be able to arrive at that intended meaning through agreement with their own experiences with the English language. A convenient example of this is the phrase “making a difference.” We understand this today to communicate the idea of effecting a change or having a positive influence on something, since that is how it has prototypically been used throughout our lives. So if we turn to Jude 1:22 in the King James Version of the Bible, we read: “Of some, have compassion, making a difference,” and we understand this to mean that having compassion toward a person can effect change in their lives or have a positive influence on them. This is not what the King James translators meant, however, because the interpretation with which we are familiar did not develop until the twentieth century (The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s first attestation to that usage dates to 1917 [s.v. “difference,” n.1. P2. to make a difference” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <https://www.oed.com/>)]. They had no experience with that meaning in 1611, and so no one would have understood it that way. They were using it to refer to making a distinction or exercising discernment. Few readers today have experience with that usage, and so the intended meaning is almost entirely lost on us. Similarly, if the English of the Book of Mormon employed linguistic conventions with which readers had little or no experience, the most common interpretations of many passages would significantly miss the mark.

20. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “after,” <https://www.oed.com/>. Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828) does not include such a sense.

She refused to go any further with him; upon which he got hold of her by the arm to force her along; but her sister, was soon with them; and the two women were too many for him and he was forced to sneak off without his *errand* ^Prey, after all his labor and ingenuity.²¹

The full semantic load here includes the sense of following after in time, but more salient is the sense of “*despite* all his labor and ingenuity.” In spite of expectations in light of all his effort, he came away empty-handed. This kind of usage, almost contemporary with the publication of the Book of Mormon, ought to be governing our interrogations of 2 Nephi 25, but I have seen no such engagement with the nineteenth-century literary context.

As it turns out, the construction “after all (that) [NOUN/PRONOUN] can do” occurs a number of times between 1710 and 1840, and those occurrences clearly occur in contexts that demand the sense of “*despite* all (that) [NOUN/PRONOUN] can do.”²² This is not an incidental collocation of lexemes, but a specific idiom with a very clear meaning. The sense of following in time is not precluded in this usage, but it does not have to be for the phrase to be understood as describing circumstances that obtain in spite of everything that may be done to overcome, prevent, or avoid them. Here is an example from an 1829 edition of *A French Grammar*, published just before the Book of Mormon:

In the Dictionary, as I observed in paragraph 42, you will find, against every Noun, either *s.m.* or *s.f.* The former means Substantive (or Noun) *masculine*, and the latter Substantive (or Noun) *feminine*. And this, after all that Grammarians can do; after all the rules that they can give, is the only sure way of learning (from books) the Gender of the French Nouns.²³

21. History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 (December 23, 1805–August 30, 1834), <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/49>.

22. The Printer’s Manuscript and the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon include “that,” but it was quickly removed and has not appeared in subsequent editions.

23. William Cobbett, *A French Grammar: Or Plain Instructions for the Learning of French. In a Series of Letters. A New Edition* (London: William Cobbett, 1829), 68–69.

The point of the idiom here is to show that among all that grammarians can do or teach, there are no principles they can formulate from which one may *deduce* the grammatical gender of nouns. The gender of each noun must be memorized individually by reference to the grammar, notwithstanding, or *despite*, all else they might be able to explicate or systematize. This sense is demanded by the context; temporal sequence alone cannot make sense of the sentence. Memorizing the gender of French nouns does not suddenly *become* “the only sure way of learning” them only *after* grammarians have exhausted all other efforts and delivered all their other rules. In fact, one can simply memorize them without appealing to any, much less all, other potential methods of identification. Memorization always has been and remains the only sure way to know the gender *despite* everything else grammarians may do.

The majority of the examples of this phrase occur in more specialized contexts, however, and here is where a relationship to 2 Nephi 25:23 comes into focus. The following three passages, from 1710, 1761, and 1777, respectively, demonstrate an unambiguous pattern in their deployment of our construction:

Nor can it believe any *Merit* with finite imperfect Man, shortcoming and polluted in his most Holy Things, and owing his all to GOD, and having nothing of his own, and who, after all he can do, is still an unprofitable Servant.²⁴

It is certain that after all we can do, still we are unprofitable servants: we have done but that which was our duty to do, even supposing we performed a perfect and compleat obedience.²⁵

Every thinking man must be sensible, that after all his endeavours, and the very utmost he can do, he is still not only an unprofitable, but too often an ungrateful and disobedient servant.²⁶

24. Thomas Blackwell, *Ratio Sacra, or An Appeal unto the Rational World, about the Reasonableness of Revealed Religion* (Edinburgh: Heirs and Successors of Andrew Anderjon, 1710), 40.

25. Samuel Seyer, *Essays on the Important Truth Contained in the Holy Scriptures* (London: A. Millar & C. Richardson, 1761), 59.

26. Beilby Porteus, *An Earnest Exhortation to the Religious Observance of Good-Friday*, 2nd ed. (London: J. & F. Rivington, 1777), 8.

While the phrase “unprofitable servants” is familiar to us from the Book of Mormon, the texts above draw from Luke 17:10, which reads in the KJV: “So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.” Within the context of Luke 17, the rhetorical purpose is to insist that there is no special praise earned by doing everything we are commanded to do, since we would always merely be fulfilling our duty. In the literature quoted above, “all we/he can do” substitutes for and rhetorically expands upon the set of “all those things which are commanded you.” We are unprofitable not only if we do all we are commanded to do, but even if we do that as well as any and all other things we ever *could* do. Mosiah 2:21 reflects a similar expansion on Luke 17:10:

I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.

Mosiah 2 agrees with the writers above that we are unprofitable servants, not just *once* we have done all we can do, but *despite* everything *we ever could do*. The point here is clearly not that we suddenly become unprofitable servants upon completion of the entire list of possible works, but that no matter how short or long that list of works is, even *if* we were to complete it all, we yet remain unprofitable servants, just as we would be having left the list incomplete. This is a way to rhetorically amplify the necessity and the power of grace.

The connection with grace as an unmerited gift is made much clearer in later elaborations on this theme. Reverend David Brainerd was a missionary in the late eighteenth century to Indigenous peoples around New York and Pennsylvania. His memoirs, published in 1822, describe how he “exhort[ed], and endeavoured to persuade, them to be reconciled to God through his dear Son, and thus to secure an interest in his everlasting

favour.”²⁷ (Note the parallels here with the comments in 2 Nephi 25:23 about laboring to “persuade our children . . . to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God.”) Unfortunately, according to Reverend Brainerd, the Quakers were doing some exhorting of their own. He writes:

There were several of the Indians newly come here, who had frequently lived among Quakers; and, being more civilized and conformed to English manners than the generality of the Indians, they had imbibed some of the Quaker’s errors, especially this fundamental one, viz. *That, if men will but live soberly and honestly according to the dictates of their own consciences, or the light within, there is then no danger or doubt of their salvation.*²⁸

One Indigenous woman was an exception, though, and he gives the following account of their discussion:

She answered, in broken English, ‘*Me try, me try save myself; last, my strength be all gone;* (meaning her ability to save herself;) *could not me stir bit further. Den last me forced let Jesus Christ alone send me hell, if he please.*’ I said, ‘*But, you was not willing to go to hell; was you?*’ She replied, ‘*Could not me help it. My heart, he would wicked for all. Could not me make him good,* (meaning, *she saw it was right she should go to hell, because her heart was wicked, and would be so after all she could do to mend it.*)²⁹

This individual’s heart is not understood to become wicked upon completion of everything she could do to mend it; rather, it *remains* wicked *despite* all she could do to mend it.

John Hersey’s 1831 publication, *The Importance of Small Things*, gets a little more succinctly to the point:

27. Rev. Jonathan Edwards and Sereno Edwards Dwight, eds., *Memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd; Missionary to the Indians on the Borders of New-York, New-Jersey, and Pennsylvania* (New-Haven: S. Converse, 1822), 260.

28. Edwards and Dwight, eds., *Memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd*, 260 (all emphases in quotes from this volume are in the original).

29. Edwards and Dwight, eds., *Memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd*, 261.

But your own wisdom and greatness must be laid in the grave—it is after all you can do, *the free and unmerited gift of God*.³⁰

We can hardly accuse this author of insisting the free and *unmerited* gift of God is *merited* once we have exhausted every last ounce of effort.

A periodical called *Evangelical Magazine* published an article in May of 1834 entitled “Practical Tendency of the Doctrines of Grace,” and, in that article, the editors berated those “who are not pleased with the doctrine, as God has revealed it: who are not willing to admit that regeneration is by the immediate, sole agency of the Spirit.”³¹ They continue:

It has been often tried and proved, by sinners under the deepest conviction, that even their most ‘desperate efforts,’ unaided by the immediate operation of the Spirit on the heart, are altogether inadequate to the production of holy affections. . . . The reason is, they have no desire for that in which holiness consists; the fountain still remains corrupt. And after all they can do, without this Divine influence on the heart, they remain utterly unprepared for the kingdom of heaven.³²

The same conclusions are expressed in *The Fireside Friend*, from 1840:

You may, therefore, imagine that you are very good; and, like the young man, who, after recounting his virtues to our Saviour, complacently asked, ‘What lack I yet?’ you may suppose you are fulfilling all the commandments. But, after all that you can do, you will find, on examining yourself by the word of God, that you fall short of your duty, and need pardon and forgiveness. Mere morality is not sufficient to entitle us to the hopes of the gospel.³³

30. John Hersey, *The Importance of Small Things; or, A Plain Course of Self-Examination To Which is Added Signs of the Times* (Georgetown: Rind's Press, 1831), 20.

31. Anonymous, “Practical Tendency of the Doctrines of Grace,” *Evangelical Magazine* 2/11 (1834): 491.

32. Anonymous, “Practical Tendency,” 493–94.

33. Mrs. Phelps, *The Fireside Friend, or Female Student: Being Advice to Young Ladies on the Important Subject of Education* (Boston, MA: Marsh, Capen, Lyon, and Webb, 1840), 22.

The implicit and sometimes explicit target of these comments is the person who thinks that grace is earned, or that they can work their way to heaven. The eighteenth-century quotes took rhetorical aim at “natural religion”—and primarily its manifestation within deism—which was more concerned with promoting moral philosophy than with miracles or Jesus’s saving grace.³⁴ This approach sparked heavy criticism from traditional Protestants.³⁵ We even have a text from 1797 employing our construction while explicitly deriding Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*, lamenting that “I fear numbers will side with the infidels, after all believers can do.”³⁶ As with most all reactionary apologetics since the Enlightenment, proponents of “revealed religion” appropriated the framework of “Reason” to construct a philosophical defense of revealed religion over and against the natural

34. A pastoral letter from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1798 bemoaned conditions that were attributable in large part to the work of deism: “We perceive, with pain and fearful apprehension, a general dereliction of religious principle and practice amongst our fellow-citizens; a great departure from the faith and simple purity of manners for which our fathers were remarkable; a visible and prevailing impiety and contempt for the laws and institutions of religion, and an abounding infidelity which in many instances tends to Atheism itself, which contemptuously rejects God’s eternal Son, our Saviour, ridicules the gospel and its most sacred mysteries, denies the providence of God, grieves and insults the Holy Spirit” (“Pastoral Letter Occasioned by the Results of the French Revolution,” in *A Compend of the Acts and Deliverances of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, ed. William E. Moore [Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1873], 290).

35. In 1782, William Beadle, a Connecticut merchant, slit the throats of his wife and daughters and then fired two pistols into his head. The *Hartford Connecticut Courant* exploited his associations with deism for polemical effect, concluding that “he intended to die a proper deist” (*Hartford Connecticut Courant*, December 17, 1782). That article would be circulated around New England and down to Virginia, contributing to anti-Deist fervor that would only increase after the 1794 publication of Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (Paris: Barrois, 1794). See Christopher Grasso, “Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution,” *Journal of American History* 95/1 (2008): 43–68.

36. Thomas Scott, *A Vindication of the Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, and of the Doctrines Contained in Them: Being an Answer to the Two Parts of Mr. T. Paine’s Age of Reason* (London: G. Forman, 1797), ix.

religion of deism.³⁷ Both Deists and Protestants shared disdain for Catholics, however, since Catholicism asserted the mysteries and the miracles—which annoyed the Deists—but also asserted a priesthood and sacraments, which irritated both Deists and the Protestants. Perhaps the most explicit anti-Catholic rhetoric that included our phrase comes from a publication entitled *Lectures on Romanism*, by Joseph F. Berg. In Lecture VII, entitled “Indulgences,” the author explains: “But after all that the poor papist can do, though he be ever so obedient and dutiful, there is a heavy balance against him.”³⁸

While anti-Catholic discourse in the United States would not reach a fevered pitch until immigration in the mid-nineteenth century catalyzed an ethnocentric “nativist” movement among Protestants,³⁹ it was in broad circulation prior to that, and whatever their origin, resonances with that discourse occur in the Book of Mormon. Veiled references appear frequently in 1 Nephi, to the excesses, persecutions, and corruptions of that “great and abominable church, which is the mother of abominations, whose founder is the devil” (1 Nephi 14:9).⁴⁰ Mormon 8 even seems to rail against indulgences, prophesying of a time when churches will say: “Come unto me and for your money you shall be forgiven of your sins” (Mormon 8:32). One might also interpret claims about the corruption of the biblical text as implicit references to the Catholic Church. Since shortly after the Book of Mormon’s publication, Church leaders have sporadically identified the Catholic Church as the “church which is most abominable above all other churches,” although situationally emergent concerns have also catalyzed its identification

37. On this anti-deism, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 170–72.

38. Joseph F. Berg, *Lectures on Romanism* (Philadelphia, PA: D. Weidner, 1840), 207.

39. On some of the manifestations of anti-Catholicism in this period, see Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Timothy Verhoeven, *Transatlantic Anti-Catholicism: France and the United States in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

40. The most thorough condemnation is found in 1 Nephi 13:4–11.

with other organizations.⁴¹ Then-Elder John Taylor insisted there was no mystery to the identity of the “mother of abominations”: “The old church is the mother, and the protestants are the lewd daughters.”⁴² For recent generations, perhaps the most notorious identification of the “great and abominable church” with the Catholic Church is that of Bruce R. McConkie in the first edition of his *Mormon Doctrine*, which was removed in subsequent editions.⁴³ Despite these polemics, priesthood authority, the necessity of ordinances, and the material mediation of the divine harmonize in many ways better with Catholic ecclesiology than with Protestant, so the Church’s position has always been a bit nuanced.⁴⁴

Anti-deism is also detectable in the early history of the Church, but it is similarly nuanced. According to Lucy Mack Smith’s account, deism was not particularly welcomed in the Smith household. She writes that, prior to the prophet’s birth, her father-in-law became upset about them attending a Methodist church and hurled Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason* into the house and “angrily bade” Joseph Smith, Sr., that he “read that until he believed it.”⁴⁵ In 2 Nephi 26:20 we read that “the Gentiles are lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and have stumbled, because of

41. Stephen E. Robinson argues in “Warring against the Saints of God” (*Ensign*, January 1988: 34–39), that “the term great and abominable church has two uses, the one open (inclusive and archetypical), the other closed (exclusive and historical).” According to this reading, 1 Nephi 13 provides the “exclusive and historical” use, although Robinson concludes the Roman Catholic Church cannot qualify.

42. John Taylor, “The Church of England,” *Times and Seasons* 6/1 (1845): 811.

43. “There are two scriptural senses in which the titles *church of the devil* and *great and abominable church* are used . . . [this is the second of the two “scriptural senses” mentioned at the beginning of the quote]. The *Roman Catholic Church* specifically—singled out, set apart, described, and designated as being ‘most abominable above all other churches’ (1 Ne. 13:5)” (Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958], 129). Today, the Church emphatically denies the identification of this figure with the Roman Catholic Church.

44. Spencer Fluhman comments: “Mormonism assumed a counterimage to American Protestantism by both enacting its more ‘Catholic’ themes and partaking of its evangelical ethos while simultaneously repudiating it” (“Peculiar People,” 17).

45. Lucy Mack Smith, *History, 1844–1845* (<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/250> [accessed March 20, 2020]).

the greatness of their stumbling block, that they have built up many churches; nevertheless, they put down the power and miracles of God, and preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning, that they may get gain and grind upon the face of the poor.”

These words sounds like fairly standard anti-Deist fare. Some readers interpret Sherem, who denies prophecy, miracles, and Christ in chapter 7 of the book of Jacob, as a literary proxy for deism.⁴⁶ The Book of Mormon’s championing of prophecy and miracles, and its assertions in 2 Nephi 25 and 31 that Christ is the only name under heaven whereby humanity may be saved, tag Protestantism’s main anti-Deist bases. At the same time, however, perspectives within the Book of Mormon regarding the corruption of the Bible resonate with those of the Deists. This still serves the promotion of revealed religion over and against deism, however, as it attributes that corruption to the book’s prophesied antagonists and creates space for the Book of Mormon’s restorative function. Moroni writes on the Title Page of the Book of Mormon that “if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ.” In this way, the issue is acknowledged, but the perspective is still reconcilable with revealed religion.

In 2 Nephi 25:23, we find resonance with then-contemporary Protestant rhetoric aimed at Catholics and Deists regarding the role of morality and grace in our salvation. There is a particular nuance to the Book of Mormon’s structuring of grace within this rhetoric, however.⁴⁷ In keeping with the traditional Protestant view of grace, the Book of Mormon insists that believing in Christ is its primary catalyst. Even Joseph Smith added “alone” to Romans 3:28 to have it read: “We

46. The clearest example of this is from Ray Anderson’s self-published work *The Book of Mormon: A Voice from 19th Century Dust* (Seattle, WA, 2007), 27–28, but Sherem’s demand for a sign is also highlighted in a discussion of the Book of Mormon’s relationship to deism in Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith’s Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 126.

47. For an overview of grace in the Book of Mormon, see Brent J. Schmidt, “Grace in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54/4 (2016): 119–34.

conclude that a man is justified by faith *alone* without the deeds of the law.”⁴⁸ The word “justification” appears nowhere in the Book of Mormon, however; the concept is framed instead as reconciliation with God. This reconciliation is addressed in Jacob’s words in 2 Nephi 10:24, where we read: “Reconcile yourselves to the will of God, and not to the will of the devil and the flesh; and remember, after ye are reconciled unto God, that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved.” There is no qualification here regarding doing all that we can. Reconciliation to God is the only prerequisite for grace.

If 2 Nephi 10 and 25 reflect related soteriological perspectives, then either reconciliation to God does not occur until “after all we can do,” or once we are reconciled to God (justified), grace becomes the only means of securing salvation. The latter is the only reasonable interpretation for Book of Mormon soteriology. There is nowhere in the Book of Mormon where reconciliation to God, or coming unto Christ, is the final product of all of our effort. Rather, it is described as the beginning of a path. For example, 2 Nephi 33:9 expresses a hope that the Gentiles will “be reconciled unto Christ, and enter into the narrow gate, and walk in the strait path which leads to life, and continue in the path until the end of the day of probation.” Reconciliation and salvation are two different events. The former is simply the gate by which we enter that path to the latter. This two-stage process of justification/reconciliation followed by sanctification is reflected in the Church’s original *Articles and Covenants* from April 1830 (now D&C 20:30–32). It states:

We know that justification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true; And we know also, that sanctification through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is just and true, to all those who love and serve God with all their mights, minds, and strength. But there is a possibility that man may fall

48. On this variant, see Kevin L. Barney, “‘Faith Alone’ in Romans 3:28 JST,” in *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2011), 1–30.

from grace and depart from the living God; Therefore let the church take heed and pray always, lest they fall into temptation.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The original intended sense of our clause in 2 Nephi 25:23 was “it is by grace that we are saved, *despite* all we can do.” “After all” was an idiom with an established meaning in circulation at the time Joseph Smith was translating the Book of Mormon. Its usage in that translation fits seamlessly into the literary and rhetorical contexts provided by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts shared above, as well as into those found in the Book of Mormon itself. Our phrase is most accurately interpreted according to its usage in those contexts, which is the clear and consistent interpretation to which early informed readers would have appealed. The Book of Mormon did not appropriate contemporary conventions from the broader literary environment only to furtively reverse their meaning.

In the years following the publication of the Book of Mormon, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gravitated toward a more orthopraxic soteriology, likely as a result of developing ideologies and practices related to the nature of God, to priesthood and its associated ordinances, to industriousness, and perhaps also in reaction to anti-Mormon polemic on the part of mainstream Protestantism.⁵⁰ By the time we find Church leaders interpreting this passage

49. Note Elder D. Todd Christofferson’s comments on this two-stage process: “We are pardoned and placed in a condition of righteousness with Him. We become, like Him, without sin. We are sustained and protected by the law, by justice. We are, in a word, *justified*. Thus, we may appropriately speak of one who is justified as pardoned, without sin, or guiltless. . . . Yet as glorious as the remission of sins is, the Atonement accomplishes even more. That ‘more’ is expressed by Moroni: ‘And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye *sanctified* in Christ by the grace of God. . . .’ If justification removes the punishment for past sin, then sanctification remove the stain or effects of sin” (“*Justification and Sanctification*,” *Ensign*, June 2001: 20–21; emphasis in original).

50. Grant Underwood observes: “Throughout much of Mormon history, there has been a tendency to stress the human contribution. This seems to be the result of several factors. First and foremost is the stunning potency of the idea that human spirits

in print, the intended sense seems to have given way, thanks to ideological boundary maintenance, to decreased engagement with Protestant literature, and to the natural ambiguity of the idiom, to the long-normative notion that we must exhaust every last effort before God's grace is activated. This reading became a firmly entrenched identity marker for generations of readers of the Book of Mormon, but its retirement is long overdue.

Daniel O. McClellan is a scripture translation supervisor for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and an adjunct instructor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. He holds a PhD in Theology and Religion at the University of Exeter. The views expressed here are Daniel's own opinions and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

are God's literal children, endowed with seeds of divinity. This elevated anthropology has been reinforced by the way in which the practical demands of colonization and community-building in the second half of the nineteenth century infused Mormon preaching on spiritual growth with a pragmatic, 'can-do' quality. Moreover, an early revelation counseled the Saints to be 'anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For,' the revelation affirmed, 'the power is in them' (D&C 58:27–28)" ("Justification, Theosis, and Grace in Early Christian, Lutheran, and Mormon Discourse," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 2 [2009]: 219). For perspectives on the development of concepts of grace and salvation, see Blake T. Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," *Dialogue* 24/1 (1991): 57–84; Paulsen and Walker, "Work, Worship, and Grace," 83–177; Matthew Bowman, "The Crisis of Mormon Christology: History, Progress, and Protestantism, 1880–1930," *Fides et Historia* 40/2 (2008): 1–26.