

Adam as a Theological Vehicle in Early Mormon Thought

Summer Seminar on Mormon Theological Foundations

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From the earliest days of Mormonism, the figure of Adam played a significant role in a theological understanding of the nature of God and the human family. In addition to viewing Adam as an important historical figure, early Mormons recognized a profound theological dimension to his story. Adam thus became a springboard for doctrinal discourse regarding the origin of the human soul, the nature of agency, and the potential for a glorious post-mortal existence. This early discussion and integration of Adam-related theological items laid the foundation for a radical divine anthropology and provided a trajectory for later doctrinal discussions.

The idea of using Adam as a means for exploring the nature of God and humanity was present in Joseph Smith's mind as early as 1829 during his translation of the Book of Mormon. An example of this appears in 2 Nephi 2. In an extended meditation upon the nature of agency and creation, the prophet Lehi transitions rather quickly from a discussion of the Eden episode in Genesis 3 to a proclamation of humanity's potential for salvation: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall" (vv. 25-26).¹ A discussion of Adam serves as a segue into a discourse on the role of the Messiah and the redemption of humanity.

¹ A similar rhetorical device occurs in Alma 12:22. The prophet Alma states, "Now we see that Adam did fall by the partaking of the forbidden fruit, according to the word of God; and thus we see, that by his fall, *all mankind* became a lost and fallen people" (emphasis added).

This rhetorical / theological device was used to describe a method of doctrinal discourse later in the Book of Mormon, and may have served as a model for the early Mormon church.

This particular doctrinal encounter appears in the book of Alma:

And it came to pass that when Aaron saw that the king would believe his words, he began from the creation of Adam, reading the scriptures unto the king—how God created man after his own image, and that God gave him commandments, and that because of transgression, man had fallen. And Aaron did expound unto him the scriptures from the creation of Adam, laying the fall of man before him, and their carnal state and also the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, through Christ, for all whosoever would believe on his name (Alma 22:12-13).

This practice of exploring theological concepts with reference to Adam appears elsewhere in the Book of Mormon (e.g. Alma 42; Mormon 9:11-14). From this point on, the figure of Adam was central to understanding the nature of humanity and the journey of the soul within early Mormonism.

Subsequent to the publication of the Book of Mormon, Joseph received a revelation in September 1830 that utilized the story of Adam in order to discuss the nature of human agency.²

This discussion begins:

Verily I say unto you, that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal, neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam your father, whom I created. Behold I give unto him that he should be an agent unto himself.

Still using Adam as a point of reference, the Devil is introduced into the narrative. Again, the role of agency is highlighted; just as Adam was an “agent unto himself,” so too were the Devil and his angels agents unto themselves in their pre-mortal rebellion against God, resulting in their being “thrust down.”

² This revelation must have been viewed as being particularly significant, as evidenced by its printing in one of the earliest issues of the *Evening and Morning Star* (Vol. 1, No. 4, September 1832) (=D&C 29).

The revelation then explains, “It must needs be that the Devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves.” It is not just Adam, the Devil, and his angels that are agents in this cosmic drama; all of humanity are active participants. Throughout this revelation, the narrative repeatedly shifts from a description of Adam’s personal experience to a description of humanity’s experience in general. These frequent shifts, along with a complete absence of references to Eve, suggest that the figure of Adam was being used here to achieve a particular rhetorical / theological effect.

Another avenue of inquiry relating to Adam in early Mormonism was tied to the language spoken by this first human. Beginning in June 1830, Joseph was engaged in an “Inspired Translation” of the early chapters of Genesis, which dealt extensively with the figure of Adam. By November 1830, Joseph recorded this addition to the Genesis narrative regarding Adam and his posterity:

And a book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration; And by them their children were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled (Moses 6:5-6).

According to this passage, Adam used a language that was “pure and undefiled” in order to communicate inspired messages.³ This “pure” language of humanity’s patriarch received special attention in an item recorded in the Kirtland Revelation Book 1 sometime in March 1832.⁴

Entitled “A Sample of pure Language, given by Joseph the Seer,” this discussion of the “pure language” spoken by Adam immediately turns to significant theological issues regarding the natures of God and humanity. The name of God is given as “Awman,” which is defined as

³ This concern with to a “pure” language also appears in a Hebrew Bible passage dealing with the apocalyptic “Day of the LORD.” Zephaniah 3:9 reads, “For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.” Here, God describes the transition to a “pure language” that will serve to unify his people.

⁴ Kirtland Revelation Book 1, circa March 1832, p. 144 [verso].

“the being which made all things in all its parts.” The human family is given the name “Sons Awman,” which “signifies...the greatest parts of Awman.” This example of Adamic language was theologically saturated, and served as a point of reflection for other early Mormons leaders (which will be discussed below).

The very next year, another significant item was received that dealt directly with the figure of Adam. Sandwiched in between two revelations given to Joseph Smith, an unattributed item entitled, “Sang by the gift of Tongues & Translated” records a vision of Enoch that describes the origin of the human race:⁵

He saw the begining the ending of man he saw the time when Adam his father was made
and he saw that he was in eternity before a grain of dust in the ballance was weighed he
saw that he emenated and came down from God he saw what had passed and then was
and is present and to come.

Here, it appears as though the “beginning” and “ending of man” are described in terms of the figure Adam. He is described as existing “in eternity” and as having “emanated and [come] down from God.” While a link between the pre-mortality of Adam and that of the human family is only alluded to, such an association was made explicit in the poetic adaptation of “Sang by the gift of Tongues & Translated” under the heading “Songs of Zion:”⁶

He [Enoch] saw before him all things past / From end to end, from first to last;
Yea, things before the world began / Or dust was fashion'd into man.

The place of Adam's first abode / While in the presence of his God:
Before the mountains rais'd their heads / Or the small dust of balance weigh'd.

With God he saw his race began / And from him emanated man,
And with him did in glory dwell / Before there was an earth or hell.

⁵ Kirtland Revelation Book 2, February 27, 1833, pp. 48-49. Although the evidence is ambiguous, one scholar argues that this song was received and translated by Frederick G. Williams, whose handwriting recorded this item. See Frederick G. Williams, “Singing the Word of God: Five Hymns by President Frederick G. Williams,” *BYU Studies* 48:1 (2009), pp. 57-88.

⁶ *Evening and Morning Star*, Vol. 1, No. 12, May 1833.

From age to age, whate'er took place / Was present then before his face;
And to the latest years of man / Was plain before him, heav'ns' plan.

His eyes with wonder did behold / Eternal glories yet untold;
And glorious things of latter time / Which angels have to tell to men.

Both “Sang by the gift of Tongues & Translated” and “Songs of Zion” employ the figure of Adam to launch into a discussion of pre-mortality. Whereas the former only implicitly had reference to the pre-mortality of humanity, the latter explicitly extends a preexistence to the entire human race. In addition to this discussion of pre-mortality, both passages dealing with Adam make references to the “ending” or “latest years of man.” “Songs of Zion” even speaks of “eternal glories yet untold,” alluding to a glorious post-mortal existence.

These depictions of Adam and the human race “emanating” from God are in harmony with the “Sample of pure Language,” where humanity is described as the “greatest parts of Awman [i.e. God],” and suggest that these items relating to Adam were perceived by some as part of a coherent theological system. Such an association was articulated by Parley P. Pratt in his pamphlet *Mormonism Unveiled*. In speaking of the relationship between God and humanity, Pratt writes, “There must be *equality*. That is, the redeemed to return to the fountain, and become *part* of the great *all*, from which they emanated [*sic*]. Hence the propriety of calling them ‘Gods, even the *sons of God*.’”⁷ Pratt’s language of humanity becoming “part of the great all” is evocative of the “Sample of pure Language” where the human family is described as “the greatest parts of Awman.” Also, his depiction of humanity’s “return to the fountain...from which they emanated [*sic*]” is identical to the language used to describe both Adam and the human race’s genesis in “Sang by the gift of Tongues & Translated” and “Songs of Zion.”

While Pratt does not specifically mention Adam in this passage, his articulation of the nature and

⁷ Parley P. Pratt, *Mormonism Unveiled* (New York, 1838), p. 27.

destiny of humanity appears to be dependent upon items that arise from employing the figure of Adam in a theological discussion of the relationship between God and humanity.⁸

The use of Adam as a theological vehicle appears much more subtly in a letter written by W.W. Phelps and printed in the *Messenger and Advocate* in June 1835. He writes:

I am truly glad you have mentioned Michael, the prince, who, I understand, is our great father Adam. New light is occasionally bursting in to our minds, of the sacred scriptures, for which I am truly thankful. We shall by and bye learn that we were with God in another world, before the foundation of the world, and had our agency: that we came into this world and have our agency, in order that we may prepare ourselves for a kingdom of glory; become archangels, even the sons of God where the man is neither without the woman, nor the woman without the man in the Lord: A consummation of glory, and happiness, and perfection so greatly to be wished, that I would not miss of it for the fame of ten worlds.⁹

The invocation of Adam triggers a meditation upon pre-mortality and post-mortal glory (with intimations of celestial marriage¹⁰). The author gives no explicit reasoning behind the sudden shift from “our great father Adam” to suggestive scenes of pre-mortal action and post-mortal perfection. However, given the earlier examples of this rhetorical / theological usage of Adam in

⁸ These same Adam-related items may have also served as a basis for similar articulations of the human soul by Joseph Smith. He was reported as saying, “I believe that God is eternal. That He had no beginning, and can have no end. Eternity means that which is without beginning or end. I believe that the *soul* is eternal; and had no beginning; it can have no end. Here he entered into some explanations, which were so brief that I could not perfectly comprehend him. But the idea seemed to be that the soul of man, the spirit, had existed from eternity in the bosom of Divinity; and so far as he was intelligible to me, must ultimately return from whence it came” (Letter of M.L. Davis to his wife Mary, 6 February, 1840, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* [Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], p. 33).

A related statement a few years later expresses a similar understanding of the connection between humanity’s pre-mortal nature and post-mortal potential, and comes closer to an association with the figure of Adam: “What was the design of the Almighty in making man, it was to exalt him to be as God, the scripture says [ye] are Gods and it cannot be broken, heirs of God and joint heirs...with Jesus Christ equal with him possessing all power &c” (James Burgess Notebook, 27 August 1843, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 246). While it is not clear whether the “making of man” referred to a pre-mortal or a mortal sphere, the creation of “man” is the central to Joseph’s argument and implies an association with the figure of Adam.

⁹ “Letter No. 8,” *Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, No. 9 June, 1835. This is W.W. Phelps’ response to a published letter from Oliver Cowdrey (“Letter No. V” *Messenger and Advocate*, Vol. 1, No. 6 March, 1835).

¹⁰ This is quite possibly the earliest printed reference to celestial marriage, suggesting that Joseph Smith had discussed the concept with Phelps. Given Joseph’s later linkage between Adam and humanity, perhaps the association between Adam and celestial marriage was part of this early discussion of celestial marriage.

launching a discussion of the nature, origin, and destiny of the human family, such a shift is understandable.¹¹

Another theological use of Adam appears in the writings of Parley P. Pratt in 1840.¹² Here, he describes Adam as “formed of noble principles, and bearing in his godlike features the emblems of authority and dominion.” This description of Adam’s “godlike features” is continued: “he was placed on the throne of power, in the midst of the paradise of God, and to him was committed power, and glory, and dominion, and the kingdom, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven.” Such language emphasizes the divine heritage of Adam as one who was “fashioned in the express likeness and image of the Father and the Son.”

Pratt goes on to describe the creation of woman using quite unique terminology: “From the bosom of this noble being, or rather from his side emanated woman.” When viewed in light of the earlier references to Adam and humanity’s “emanation” from God in a pre-mortal realm, this use of the term “emanation” in the creation of Eve is striking. Perhaps Pratt described the creation of Eve using this unique language in order to create a very specific analogy between the creation of the human soul and the creation of the human body. That is to say, just as Eve was created (or “emanated”) from pre-existent material (Adam), so Adam was created (or “emanated”) from pre-existent material (God). Adam, then, becomes a theological vehicle for describing the nature of God.

One final example: in March 1841, Joseph Smith made a statement that combined the Adamic imagery from the “Sample of pure Language” and subsequent theological discussions

¹¹ Joseph Smith makes use of a similar rhetorical / theological shift years later in his King Follett sermon. According to Thomas Bullock’s report, Joseph stated that “God made man & put into it Adams Spirit & so became a living Spirit—the mind of man—the mind of man is as immortal as God himself” (Thomas Bullock Report, 7 April 1844, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 352). Once again, a reference to Adam immediately launches into a discussion of humanity’s pre-mortal glory, and shortly thereafter transitions into a discourse on the glorious potential of the human family.

¹² Parley P. Pratt, *Millennium and Other Poems: To Which is Annexed, A Treatise on the Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter* (New York: W. Molineux, 1840), pp. 114-115.

involving Adam in yet another way. He said, “The Great God has a name By wich He will be Called which is Ahman—also in asking have Referance to a personage Like Adam for God made Adam Just in his own Image Now this a key for you to know how to ask & obtain.”¹³ The use of the name Ahman for God is clearly a reference to the “Sample of pure Language” where the name for God is given as Awman.¹⁴ Perhaps the unique title “the Great God” used here by Joseph alluded to the description of God in the “Sample of pure Language.” Because God “is the being which made all things in all its parts,” among which the human family are “the *greatest* parts of Awman,” he could appropriately be referred to as “the Great God.”

Such a relationship between “the Great God” and humanity may have been implicit in Joseph’s use of the name “Ahman.” If so, then the association of “Ahman” with “Adam” in the following clause may be explainable. After referencing the manner in which God is to be addressed, Joseph goes on to say that a “key” to approaching God is to “have Referance to a personage Like Adam.” He then specifies that “God made Adam Just in his own Image.” In reflecting upon Adam, in a sense, one also reflects upon the God who made Adam in his own image. A worshipper who contemplated the nature of Adam and his relationship to God could then have understood their own nature and relationship with God, allowing them to “ask & obtain” from God in prayer. Thus, Adam becomes a very specific theological vehicle. He becomes a sort of “doctrinal icon,” a means for focusing the mind of a worshipper on Deity.

¹³ McIntire Minute Book, 9 March 1841, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 64.

¹⁴ John Whitmer was the scribe for “A Sample of pure Language,” where the name “Awm{e\ a}n” is introduced (circa March 1832). Whitmer also served as scribe for a revelation received March 1, 1832, now known as D&C 78. One of the final phrases of this revelation originally read, “Wherefore, do the things which I have commanded you, saith your Redeemer, even Jesus Christ, who prepareth all things.” W.W. Phelps later revised this to read, “Wherefore, do the things which I have commanded you, saith your Redeemer, even **the Son Ahman**, who prepareth all things.” This revision is not dated, but it is clear that he was familiar with equation of Jesus Christ with Son Ahman / Awm{e\ a}n, and perhaps its associated theology regarding the “parts” of creation. This alternative spelling (“Ahman” instead of “Awman”) also appears in the manuscript of a revelation given June 1, 1833 (=D&C 95:17), of which John Whitmer was also a scribe.

Such a usage moved beyond Adam being *useful* for a theological understanding; understanding Adam became *necessary* to approach God.

The figure of Adam effectively served as a theological vehicle for discussing the nature, origin, and destiny of the human family. While not explicitly invoked during all such discussions, the principles explored through early Adam-related doctrinal items seem to be the backdrop for many subsequent doctrinal discourses. These different theological uses of Adam demonstrate that this figure was an integral part of early Mormon thought. An understanding of such conceptualizations may open further avenues of research regarding the development of Mormon temple theology and illuminate the theological uses of Adam in later Mormonism, including “Adam-God” speculation. Only in appreciating the many facets of early Mormon conversations concerning Adam can scholars come to understand the minds of Mormonism’s first generation of theologians.