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### The Atonement II—In Harmony with a Reign of Law

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## The Atonement II— In Harmony with a Reign of Law

In a former chapter we said somewhat respecting the universe being under a reign of law (see chapter 6). That brief ~~treatise~~ **mention** had to do chiefly with physical laws, while the Atonement deals with moral and spiritual laws. However, it will be found that the physical universe and the spiritual universe are alike in this: both are under the dominion of law. And hence I am holding here that the Atonement is in harmony with a reign of law which obtains in the moral and spiritual kingdoms of the universe.

*The law.* “Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence ⟨from prison⟩, ⟨un⟩till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing” (Matt. 5:26). “Think not [that] I am come to destroy the law. . . . I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matt. 5:17-18).

*The essence of law.* First it is necessary to remark somewhat upon the nature of the law. Inexorableness is of the essence of law. There can be no force in law, only as it is inexorable. What effect is to cause, in the physical world, so penalty or consequence must be to violation of law in the moral and spiritual kingdom. The inexorableness of law is at once both its majesty and glory; without it neither majesty nor glory could exist in connection with law; neither respect, nor sense of security, nor safety, nor rational faith. If the idea of the “reign of law” be set aside and there be substituted for it the “reign of God” by his sovereign will, independent of law, even then we must postulate such conception of the

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In preparation for this chapter, Roberts suggested “a careful examination of all the citations of scripture in the text and the footnotes of this lesson with their context.”

attributes of God that regularity will result from his personal government, not capriciousness, today one thing, tomorrow another. Hence, one of old viewing God's government from the side of its being a direct, personal reign of God, rather than a reign of God through law, wrote his message from God as follows: "I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed" (Mal. 3:6).<sup>1</sup> And another holding the same point of view said: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights." And then he adds immediately, "with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17).

*The quality of regularity of law—how secured.* View the matter, then, from whichever standpoint you may. Government of the world by the personal, sovereign will of God, or the government of God through the reign of law, the quality of regularity that can only come of inexorableness (arising either from the quality of God's attributes or the inherent nature of law) is necessary to a sense of security, to right mental attitude, to rational thinking and right conduct. All this becomes apparent if the matter is thought upon conversely. If a reign of law is supposed to exist and the law is not inexorable, but may be set aside, suspended, abridged, enlarged, or its penalties modified or annulled altogether; and if these changes [were to be] affected not by the operation of any fixed principle, or by some controlling higher law, but capriciously through the interposition of some sovereign will, call it "special providence" or what not, then, of course, you have no reign of law at all, but the reign of a sovereign will that operates independent of law. Under such government—if, indeed, it could be called government—all would be confusion, uncertainty, perplexity, doubt, despair. Happily no such condition exists; but instead there exists—paralleling a reign of law in the physical universe—a divine moral and spiritual government in the universe, operating through a reign of law; and the virtue and value of that government arises from the inexorableness of the laws of which it consists.

*Where then is mercy?* If, however, the *in*exorableness of law is to be insisted upon up to this degree of emphasis, where then does mercy, which is supposed to mitigate somewhat the severity and inexorableness of law, and furthermore, is supposed in some way to represent the direct and gracious act of God when mitigating the law's severity—where does mercy appear? At what point does she enter into the

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<sup>1</sup>For the notion expressed in the text that Malachi viewed God's government from the side of a personal government, see the preceding verses of the chapter cited.

moral and spiritual economy? A large question, this, and one not to be considered just yet, except to say that the entrance of mercy into the economy of the moral and spiritual kingdom is not in violation of law, but in harmony with it. In fact, as we shall see somewhat later, mercy takes her part in the economy of the moral and spiritual kingdoms because of the existence of a reign of law, rather than in derogation of it.

*Seeming modifications of law in the moral and spiritual world in accordance with law.* When a reign of law is conceived as governing in the physical world, then the conception must also include the destructive or disintegrating forces as well as the integrating forces, else your reign of law is not universal and would be imperfect. Moses stood with God and beheld the vastness of his numberless creations:

And the Lord God said unto Moses: For mine own purpose have I <created them> [made these things]. . . . And worlds without number have I created; and I <have> [also] created them for mine own purpose. . . . Behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man. . . . And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works, neither to my words. (Moses 1:31-35, 38)

This passage implies constant movement in the universe. The statement, “As one earth shall pass away and the heavens thereof, even so shall another come” corresponds somewhat to the modern scientist’s notion of “evolution and devolution,”<sup>†</sup> the operation of integrating and disintegrating forces. But the thing to be noted here is that not only is God represented as having created these worlds and world systems “by the word of his power,” but also that “there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of his power.” By which we are to understand that destructive as well as creating forces in the physical world operate under law.

So also should we understand that in the moral and spiritual world, where there appears to be a modification of the inexorableness of law, such as comes in a manifestation of mercy in the modification or

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<sup>†</sup>The committee of the Quorum of the Twelve took exception to this as follows: “Evolution and devolution of worlds, as stated here, is questioned. Worlds pass away, just as this earth shall, but go on through the resurrection, or renewing, to continue their existence in permanent, or immortal form (D&C 29 and 88).” On all four of the committee’s remarks about points in chapter 41, Roberts simply noted in the margin of their report: **Meaningless.**

suspension or the obliteration of the penalty of a law, say by forgiveness of sins, “for sin is the transgression of the law” (1 Jn. 3:4), all this must not be thought upon as capriciousness, the arbitrary act of Deity in the interests of special favorites. No; the manifestation of mercy which seems to set aside the severity of the law, which seems to soften its inexorableness by allowing an escape from its penalty by forgiveness of sins, this must be viewed as the result of the operation of law as much so as when the law proceeds to the utmost of its severity, to the extreme manifestation of its inexorableness in the exaction of the utmost farthing of its penalty. It is not by special and personal favor that men shall have forgiveness of sins and find shelter under the wings of mercy. That must be obtained, if obtained at all, under the operation of law governing the application of mercy in the economy of the moral and spiritual world, by law that operates upon all alike. Forgiveness of sins, like other blessings, is predicated upon the obedience to law and is not based upon personal favor. “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundation[s] of <the> [this] world,” says the Prophet of the New Dispensation, “upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20-21)—forgiveness of sins with the rest. It is because we live under this reign of law that the scriptures teach that God is no respecter of persons. God “regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward” (Deut. 10:17). “Neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him” (2 Sam. 14:14). “Peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: For there is no respect of persons with God” (Rom. 2:10-11). “Call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man’s work” (1 Pet. 1:17).

*Sense of security under a reign of law.* Men stand under the reign of law then, before God, who administers the moral and spiritual law. No one may hope to escape the penalty due to violation of law through favor; no one will fall under the condemnation of the law through lack of favor with God, by reason of capriciousness in him, much less through vindictiveness, which is unthinkable in God. God will make no infraction of the law in the interests of supposed favorites; such “blessings,” whether in the providing of permanent opportunities for individuals, families, or races, as may reach through the apparent complexity of things to men; or occasional blessings such as seem to come to some individuals as special acts of providence; all will come in accordance with the laws upon which such blessings were predicated before the foundations of the world were laid; and this notwithstanding inequalities and diversity

of fortunes and misfortunes that exist among individuals, families, nations, races of men. Underneath all the diversities and inequalities that exist, so difficult to account for in some of their aspects, there law is operating despite all seeming incongruities; and out of all these diversities and complexities of experiences, at the last, will come justice—God’s justice; and men will be satisfied that it is so.

Meanwhile this reign of law, with all its inexorableness—nay, rather because of it—present and operating, present in the manifestations of mercy and special “acts of providence”; as also in manifestations of severity—how splendid it all is! How satisfying! What assurance, what confidence it gives! No wonder that John Fiske, remarking upon the idea of the reign of law, said: “So beautiful is all this orderly coherence, so satisfying to some of our intellectual needs, that many minds are inclined to doubt if anything more can be said of the universe than that it is a ‘reign of law,’ an endless aggregate of coexistences and sequences.”

But the deeper and truer view of things will be not to accept this “reign of law” as God nor mistake it for Deity, for mistake it would be if confounded with or mistaken for God. Let the reign of law be conceived rather as the means through which God is working to the achievement of his high purposes—God in the world and working through law “*⟨Reconciling⟩ [to reconcile] all things unto himself*” (*Col. 1:20*).<sup>2</sup> God [is] the administrative power in a perfect reign of law.

***The inexorableness of law required the Atonement.*** It is this quality of inexorableness in law that made the Atonement of the Christ necessary to the salvation of man. The condition was this: A law is

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<sup>2</sup>It is only just to John Fiske to say that such is his conception of the matter; for, commenting upon the effect upon the thinker who has this conception of the reign of law in the world, he says:

The thinker in whose mind divine action is thus identified with orderly action, ⟨reign of law⟩, and to whom a really irregular phenomenon would seem like a manifestation of sheer diabolism, foresees in every possible extension of knowledge a fresh confirmation of his faith in God. From this point of view there can be no antagonism between our duty as inquirers and our duty as worshippers. To him no part of the universe is godless. In the swaying to and fro of molecules and ceaseless pulsations of ether, in the secular shifting of planetary orbits, in the busy work of frost and raindrop, in the mysterious sprouting of the seed, in the everlasting tale of death and life renewed, in the dawning of *the* babe’s intelligence, in the varied deeds of men from age to age, he finds that which awakens the soul to reverential awe; and each act of scientific explanation but reveals an opening through which shines the glory of the Eternal Majesty. (Fiske, *Studies in Religion*, 167–68)



broken. The penalty must be paid. The majesty of law<sup>†</sup> has been violated; the law must be vindicated. It must be conceded that the law is just; for to suppose that the law itself is defective would be to challenge the whole moral system of the universe. If the law be conceded to be just, then its penalty must be executed by rigid enforcement *or a propitiation made*: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4).<sup>3</sup>

But the law must not be unjust; for injustice is not and cannot be law. And if in the nature of eternal things—such as a necessary opposition in all things, and the eternal existence of evil as well as of good be allowed, so that the good, the true, the beautiful and the harmonious may not be realized in the consciousness of intelligences but by setting into action the opposites of the good, the true, the beautiful, and the harmonious; and if the conditions to full equipment for eternal life and progress, such as eternally and deathlessly uniting elements of matter and spirits into immortal personages—then necessity would demand that such a program be inaugurated as would bring to pass the full achievement of these ends; and the obstacles which would hinder intelligences awaiting that opportunity for progression must be removed. And yet in bringing about these conditions, the violation of a law is involved—the law for the perpetuation of innocence. The fruit of the tree of knowledge, if eaten, will bring consciousness of evil as well as of good; and with that new and strange consciousness of evil, innocence will depart; the law on which her perpetuation depended has been violated. A new order of things will have to be brought in, a new order based upon a knowledge of good and evil. The new righteousness—for there must be righteousness—will be based upon virtue instead of upon mere innocence. It will be a righteousness founded upon experience, upon tested experimentation, an intelligent righteousness.<sup>††</sup>

*How harmony may be obtained in a reign of law.* But again the violation of the law? How shall the harmony of a reign of law be maintained if a law be broken and no penalty inflicted which vindicates it?

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<sup>†</sup>Wondering if Roberts overemphasized the role of law in the Atonement, the committee of the Quorum of the Twelve wondered if this chapter inferred that the law of Moses was an eternal law and asked: “The majesty of law—vindicated?” Reporting to President Clawson on October 10, 1929, George Albert Smith explained: “We feel that, inadvertantly [*sic*], the statement is made that the law of Moses was an eternal law. It was a temporary one.”

<sup>3</sup>The declaration is several times repeated in the same chapter, and the whole chapter should be studied to get the whole majesty of the doctrine.

<sup>††</sup>The committee of the Quorum of the Twelve left a remark here: “Experimentation and righteousness?”

The consequences of violated law, however, did fall upon those guilty of the violation. Adam and Eve, by eating of the forbidden fruit, did come to the knowledge of good and evil and spiritual death—banishment from the presence of God—followed; and, in due time, physical death—the dissolving of the union of spirit and element—followed. Owing to the conditions under which they are born, these consequences fell also upon all the posterity of the first pair. So that the situation requires a vindication of the law<sup>†</sup> that there may be redemption for the race subject to its consequences. Let the developing thought of this paragraph at this point be suspended for the moment, until other data are brought into view.

*The propitiation for sin.* When God, according to ~~the Mosaic fragment~~—the book of Moses—was instructing Adam on the means provided for his redemption, Adam asked the question: “Why is it that men must repent and be baptized in water?” And the Lord answered: “Behold I have forgiven thee thy transgression in [the Garden of] Eden. Hence came the saying ⟨around⟩ [abroad] among the people,” says the sacred writer of the text, “that the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt,<sup>4</sup> wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world” (Moses 6:53–54), i.e., under the conditions provided, of course, by the Atonement. Taking this full text into account, it is evident that God had forgiven Adam his transgression in the Garden of Eden not arbitrarily as an act of sovereign will, but “because the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt.” Propitiation had been—or would be—made for “original guilt”—eating the forbidden fruit in Eden, which violated the law of innocence and of life. It brought forth the consciousness of guilt and the certainty of death, but “the Son of God hath atoned for original guilt”: he would satisfy the claims of the law. But how? By the Son of God, who was in the beginning with God and who was God, “being made flesh,” and dwelling among men, and in that human life keeping in behalf of man the law of absolute obedience to God. Living man’s life, but yielding to no temptation. Suffering, but not for his own transgressions, for he was without sin (Heb. 4:15; cf. 7:26). Such is the whole tenor of the scriptures respecting the Christ: “For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his

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<sup>†</sup>The committee of the Quorum of the Twelve wondered about the phrase “vindication of law.”

<sup>4</sup>Or that he “would” atone for “original guilt” when the fulness of the time would have come; for necessarily the matter was at this time prophetic.



own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3–4). This passage is undoubtedly to be understood as follows: For what man could not do under the law in that he was weak because of the flesh (human nature), God sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to do, and condemned sin in that he in the flesh kept the law of perfect obedience, and thus for sin condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in them who thereafter should walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit.

“We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet *<remained>* without sin” (Heb. 4:15). “Christ also suffered . . . Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” (1 Pet. 2:21–22). “For he hath made him *<the Christ>* to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

The Christ suffered for Adam’s transgression, not for his own; and for the transgression of all men, for the sins of the world. He suffered for all men, that they might not suffer on certain conditions—***the condition of repentance, and acceptance of the Christ*** (D&C 19:16–17)—and that by reason of his stripes men might be healed (Isa. 53:1–5). He made “propitiation” for men’s sins (1 Jn. 2:2), and thus satisfied the claims of the law to the uttermost even unto death—the death of the cross. But it was not “possible that he should be holden of it” (Acts 2:24), i.e., of death; for he was Lord of life and of death. He had power to lay down his life, and to take it up again: “I lay down my life for the sheep *<men>*. . . . Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father” (John 10:15–18).

The Christ’s suffering and death, then, wherein consists his sacrifice, will be voluntary. But since he may not “be holden of death,” he will take up his life again in a resurrection from the dead; and so will all men ~~by this means~~, and ***that*** by the power of the Christ ***imparted unto them***; “For as in Adam *<through one>* all die, [even] so in Christ *<by one>* shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22).

*Man freed “from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2).* It should ~~also~~ be observed, in passing, that in the matter of original sin, the Atonement of the Christ arrested the ***permanent*** visitation of that sin of the fathers upon the children: “Behold I have forgiven thee thy transgression

in the Garden of Eden,” said the Lord to Adam, “Hence came the saying . . . the Son of God hath atoned ⟨speaking prophetically⟩ for original guilt, wherein the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children, for they are whole from the foundation of the world” (Moses 6:53–54). That is to say, that while death as a result of Adam’s transgression will come upon all men, in that all must die, yet it will not be permanent, there is redemption from it, and free redemption; ~~that is~~, there is no condition precedent necessary to this redemption, **except only, of course, the Atonement made by the Christ**. For though death may have reigned from Adam to Moses, and from Moses until now, “over ⟨those who have⟩ [them that had] not sinned after the similitude of Adam’s transgression,” yet “not as the offence, so also is the free gift. . . . And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one ⟨un⟩to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification” (Rom. 5:14–16). From all which it appears, that while death came as a result of Adam’s transgression, there came also free and universal redemption from death through the Atonement and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In view of this, the Church of the Latter-day Saints say in their summary of faith: “We believe that ⟨all⟩ men will be punished for their own sins, and *not* for Adam’s transgression” (A of F 2; emphasis added).

***The Atonement infinite.*** Take note again that this Atonement is made by the Son of God, “who was in the beginning with God, and who was God.” It was, then, an Atonement made by God; and by virtue of that fact it was the highest atonement that could in any way be made—a supreme sacrifice indeed! And that is why, no doubt, it is so frequently referred to as “an infinite atonement.” It is a supreme sacrifice because it was made by a Deity, and because it also embraced all that could be given even by Deity; and that done, the law that was broken in Eden must stand vindicated at the bar of the reign of law.

As to whether the sacrifice by an innocent person can atone for the sin of a guilty one; or whether vicarious suffering for sin can be admitted in the scheme of things at all under a reign of law, I shall postpone the consideration of [that] to the last chapter dealing with this subject of **the** Atonement (chapter 45 below).

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Further references recommended by Roberts for this lesson: Draper, *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, ch. 9; Drummond, *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, esp. introduction; Lodge, *Science and Immortality*, ch. 3; Spencer, *First Principles*, 53, 59, 203, 347 and note, 384, and 589–91; Tennyson, *In Memoriam*; White, *History of the Warfare of Science*, esp. vol. 1, ch. 4.