

THE PARADOXICAL NATURE OF SIN

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“Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression, my eyes are opened...”

(Adam; Moses 5:10)

Paradoxes are seemingly contradictory or incompatible ideas which, when combined together, contain truth. The gospel contains numerous paradoxical statements and ideas:¹ “many who are first shall be last; and the last first” (Mark 10:31); “Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:12); “He that is the greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:11); “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it (Matthew 10:39); “Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5); “If men humble themselves before me... then will I make weak things become strong unto them” (Ether 12:27). In spite of the seeming inconsistencies inherent in this small sample of gospel teachings, we still accept such statements as containing profound spiritual truths. We do this because we believe the larger scheme of the gospel which asserts a reality separate from the things of this world—a reality in which charity, faith, humility, and sacrifice are eternal, blessed virtues, and are rewarded. Because we accept a larger, paradoxical scheme of a universe which is both spiritual and temporal at the same time, these smaller paradoxes make sense; the meek of the earth really can inherit the glories of heaven, and the humble really can be the strongest of all. Paradoxes, then, are devices which can be used to help us see things at a deeper level, to change our perceptions of reality. They encourage us to challenge traditional concepts, explore new possibilities, soften rigid boundaries and categories, and thus to undergo not just a change of mind but a change of heart, which is repentance in its most basic form.

Sin represents a paradox: although sin is *the enemy* of mortality, it is a necessary component of human experience in order that we evolve spiritually and progress eternally. Every human who has come to earth has inevitably sinned (Romans 3:23). While it would be a logical fallacy to assume “inevitability presumes necessity,” the ubiquity of sin is nonetheless an intriguing reality. Sin, willfully rebelling against God and experiencing the attendant effects of that rebellion, is perhaps one of the most important, yet heavily risk-laden experiences mortality has to offer, but the risk was foreseen and deemed necessary by an omnipotent, benevolent God.

This idea may strike many as unorthodox, speculative, or even dangerous. Yet, it may not be as radical as it seems. I have long felt within myself

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that my own mistakes and sins have ultimately served a crucial role in furthering my own development and learning. My professional work and ecclesiastical experiences have only served to reinforce what are to me these dimly-lit truths. Periodically, I have come upon statements made by church leaders, such as the one below, underscoring these ideas:

It is for the benefit of His sons and daughters that they become acquainted with evil as well as good, with darkness as well as light, with error as well as truth, and with the results of the infraction of eternal laws. Therefore, he has permitted the evils which have been brought about by the acts of His creatures, but will control their ultimate results for His own glory and the progress and exaltation of His sons and daughters, when they have learned obedience by the things they suffer. The contrasts experienced in this world of mingled sorrow and joy *are educational in their nature*, and will be *the means of raising humanity* to a full appreciation of all that is right, true and good.²

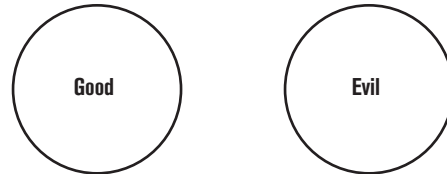
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The scriptures admonish us to ponder the gospel, and to seek further light and knowledge regarding the mysteries of God (1 Nephi 2:16, 10:19; Mosiah 2:9; Alma 12:9-11; 3 Nephi 17:3; Moroni 10:3; *Doctrine and Covenants* 6:7, 11:7, 42:61, 63:23). These processes are by their very nature speculative. Yet such speculation, if done with a sensitivity to the Spirit of Truth, can be positive and beneficial in various ways. It can help our faith to remain vibrant and alive. It can be an antidote to dogmatism. It can shed new light on previously accepted truths. It can broach new categories of thought. Mormonism, perhaps more than any other Christian faith, provides rich and fertile ground for speculation because its theology is so open-ended; a faith which teaches that God has created “worlds without number” (Moses 1:33) and asserts, “As man is God once was, and as God is man may become” (Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 430-431), provides endless avenues for pondering. We may shy away from speculating for fear of being wrong, being deceived, or somehow discovering something new which would challenge our faith. These are real concerns. However, they should not outweigh the opposing risk of being lulled into complacency by our comfortably accepted traditions (e.g. “I vote only for conservative political candidates”) and unofficial creeds (e.g., “When one of the brethren speaks, the thinking is finished.”). The proper role of speculation should not be to create new doctrine, a new gospel, or a new church; rather, it should be to move us further into our religion and deeper into our faith and convictions, ultimately serving to enhance our desires for Christian discipleship and the embracing of life. The following will be a brief discussion of principles relevant to the paradoxical nature of sin. These ideas will support the view that sin, while inherently destructive, is ultimately transcendable with divine help, and plays an essential part in the betterment of human kind.

THE NATURE OF GOOD AND EVIL: CONTINUAL VS. DICHOTOMOUS

We must beware thinking of good and evil as absolute opposites... Recognition of the reality of evil necessarily relativizes the good, and the evil likewise, converting both into halves of a paradoxical whole. (Carl Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections)

A common belief is that good and evil represent static, permanently affixed dichotomous extremes which have no relation or connection with each other as represented by the figures below:



According to this view, all goodness is a state of purity, all evil is a state of corruption, and never the twain shall meet. Perhaps a more accurate view of these concepts would depict them as existing on a continuum rather than as entirely separate and distinct:



When understood in this way, we realize good and evil exist on a gradient—while polarized, they are not dichotomous.³ Such a view does not obliterate nor confuse either category (as Isaiah 5:20 warns against), but rather acknowledges the complexity of each, and the difficulty clearly demarcating where one wholly begins and the other completely ends. We begin to think in terms of “better” and “worse” rather than a choice or action being entirely good or entirely evil. For example, is it a greater good to be present at church to give an assigned talk, or to risk being late or not showing up at all in order to provide assistance to someone stranded on the roadside? Is it a greater good to give money to a beggar who asks, even if he might spend the money on alcohol or drugs, or to withhold in order to avoid contributing to his drug use? Or is it a greater evil to drop a nuclear weapon over a large civilian population in hopes of swiftly ending a war than to face the enemy’s military might on a soldier-to-soldier basis, and take the attending casualties? Questions such as these support the view that good and evil are entities-in-relation, inextricably intertwined with each other, both theoretically and practically: Goodness is meaningless without evil to juxtapose it, since neither good nor evil can be actualized without the presence or potential of the other (2 Nephi 2:11, 13, 23); none of us can live utterly uncontaminated by evil; every good can

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go bad, an angel can become a devil, but by the same token, every evil can reflexively serve as a reference point for generating a good.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONTEXT

Once good and evil are viewed as a continuum rather than as dichotomous extremes, context becomes vitally important in decision-making.⁴ An action taken in one context could be deemed an exalting, righteous act, whereas the same action taken by the same person in a different context could be both damaging and unrighteous. Even with respect to such seemingly black-and-white alternatives as killing or not killing, stealing or not stealing, context can make a significant difference. Consider, for example, the case of Nephi and Laban (1 Nephi 4). Nephi was commanded by God to take possession of the plates. Laban did not wish to part with his property. Nephi faced a difficult situation: either disobey God and not bring back the plates, or listen to the Spirit which encouraged him to break certain commandments in order to obey God—to behead the drunken and defenseless Laban, impersonate him, take his property, and flee with it into the desert. Another example involves a comparison between the Anti-Nephi-Lehites (Alma 24), and King Saul (1 Samuel 15). In one context, the Anti-Nephi-Lehites’ refusal to inflict harm on an enemy in any way, even in defense of their own lives, was deemed an example of great righteousness, while in another context, Saul’s refusal to completely annihilate the Amalekites by sparing the life of King Agag and the best of his spoils in order to make sacrifices to Jehovah signaled his fall from grace.

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A contextual, continual understanding of good and evil is further suggested in Moses 6:60 where we read: “For by the water ye keep the commandment; by the Spirit ye are justified, and by the blood ye are sanctified.” One approach to understanding this verse is that a hierarchy is suggested involving three paradigms of life in a gospel context. The foundational paradigm involves entering into the waters of baptism as a token of one’s obedience to and acceptance of Christ, and the new covenant. New church members come into the church from a variety of contexts. A potential exists for much confusion and uncertainty. These fledgling members need a structure which places their feet firmly on the gospel path. Rules, commandments, and guidelines provide this needed structure.

As we increase in experience and maturity within the gospel, becoming more familiar with the rules, laws, and structures of the church, this beginning paradigm becomes insufficient in and of itself. We realize that the commandments can sometimes be in collision. In situations such as these, the second paradigm becomes important: “by the Spirit ye are justified.” The Spirit can prompt us toward which of two seemingly righteous

or less righteous alternatives to choose, even which commandment to break, in a given situation. Paramount here is that it is not our own self-interest which reigns supreme, but rather the Spirit working within us, guiding us into the right choice, given the context involved.

This approach should not be confused with situational ethics. Real-life decision making is complex because it so often includes multiple backgrounds, circumstances, situations, and conditions. Subtle interactions between a loving, patient, tutoring God and a struggling son or daughter with mortal limitations offers a much richer reality than can be captured by the concept of situational decision making. A divinely appointed grounding exists upon which we base our decisions. Our choices are not, however, limited only to dichotomous deciding with either/or, right/wrong possibilities. Life presents us with a “mixed bag” in which few choices are clearly flawed or clearly without flaw. We realize that even righteous choices can contain shades of gray; conversely, even some of the worst decisions can be motivated by positive desires, intentions, and aspirations.⁵

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POTENTIAL VS. ACTUAL

As members of the same species, Gods, devils, and human beings each possess the potential for doing good and evil. There is nothing tragic about having the potential for evil. As a free and intelligent being, God himself would have this potential. Ancient prophets have underscored this reality by declaring that God could cease to be God if he did or didn't do certain things (2 Nephi 2:13; Alma 12:31; 42:13). Of course, God actualizes only the good. This is why we say God is good and there is no darkness in Him. Devils, on the other hand, have the capacity to do good, but actualize only evil, while human beings actualize both good and evil, and therefore, have the capacity to ultimately become either gods or devils.

Ancient scripture and modern revelation declare that God's spirit sons and daughters had the potential for good and evil premortally, just as they do now (*Doctrine and Covenants* 29:36; Moses 4:6; Abraham 3:19, 22, 23; Jude 1:6; Revelation 12:4, 9). One-third of his offspring ultimately made choices incompatible with either remaining in the heavens with God, or coming to earth mortally. Were all of these individuals entirely evil, totally devoid of any good or virtuous qualities? By the same token, does the fact that we aligned ourselves with Jehovah in a significant way long ago imply that we only chose the good in our premortal state, or that we were entirely holy? Both seem unlikely, especially when we remember that the scriptures state that our premortal spirits were *innocent*, not perfect, from the beginning (*Doctrine and Covenants* 93:38). This is an important distinction. Perfect spirits have nothing held against them.

Innocent spirits are not perfect, but they are not held responsible for failings or short-comings.⁶ For reasons not fully understood, the one third who chose to align themselves with Satan were cast down to Earth in disembodied form, actualizing only evil, while the remainder were given the privilege of experiencing mortality where they would be allowed to actualize both good and evil to refine them and to see which they would ultimately prize (Abraham 3:25).

Why do human beings actualize evil? Two opposing views are typically endorsed: one asserts that human beings are spiritually flawed (this is *not* the same as saying humans are inherently evil), that in spite of their best efforts, they cannot consistently avoid evil and choose good; the other asserts that human beings are spiritually sound, but lack the proper guidance and direction to be consistently good. Each assumption leads to a different remedy: If we are spiritually flawed, then the solution is spiritual empowerment and transformation. If we are spiritually sound but unenlightened, then the answer is learning proper laws, receiving proper guidance and education. Plato and some modern social scientists support the latter view. The scriptures support the former (1 Nephi 10:6; Mosiah 4:5): because we are *fallen*, no matter how hard we try to put into practice all the proper teachings, codes of conduct, moral exhortations, directives, and commandments we're given, we won't always be able to choose good, and will need a Savior's grace to be redeemed (2 Nephi 25:23; Mosiah 2:21). Rules, regulations, directives, and exhortations are both helpful and necessary, but they are not sufficient in themselves to keep people from actualizing evil. The potential for sin can be clarified by the law, but not eliminated by it. That is why the law can only be a schoolmaster to teach us of our plight and to encourage us to look for the cure: Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:24).

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BRINGING GOOD OUT OF EVIL

For man must strive, and striving he must err. (Goethe, Faust: Part One)

Since no aspects of human experience can be considered wholly righteous or pure on their own merits (Mosiah 2:21), and since good and evil are so inextricably linked together, none of us can live utterly uncontaminated by evil. As a result, God can either write us off completely, or he can work, over time and throughout eternity, to reclaim as many as possible. Fortunately for us, he chooses the second alternative. It is not enough for him to say, as did Milton's God:

... Whose fault?
Whose but his own? Ingrate! He had of me
All he could have; I made him just and right,

Sufficient to have stood, but free to fall
...they cannot justly accuse
Their maker, of their making, or their fate
...they themselves decreed
Their own revolt, not I...
...they themselves ordained their fall.⁷

Mere condemnation does not make a bad or painful situation better. More is required if good is to be brought out of evil, if paradise is ever to be regained, and God does much more. He does not obliterate our evil out of existence, but consistently extends himself to his creations, most often in subtle, quiet, gentle ways, offering them grace for grace, unworthy though they may be, that their evil may ultimately be transcended (2 Nephi 9:10). God is not good because he is utterly disassociated from evil, but because he is willing not only to recognize the evil inherent in us, but is willing, through personal sacrifice, to bring good out of evil, such as in the redemption of Saul (Acts 9), or the sin of David and Bathsheba giving rise to the lineage of the Messiah.⁸ Experiencing the transformation of good out of evil is the central process by which human beings grow and evolve spiritually; it is also the primary process by which God continues to be glorified (Moses 1:39).

THE ATONEMENT OF CHRIST: VEHICLE OF PARADOX

The ideas presented thus far help explain both sin's necessity and its transcendable nature. However, the degeneracy and estrangement caused by sin would remain a permanent, iron-clad reality without the one true source of syntropy in the universe: the atonement of Jesus Christ. It is only by and through Christ's atonement that sin can ever be turned on its head—that good can be brought out of evil, light out of darkness, fullness out of emptiness, health out of sickness, and perfection out of imperfection. It is only through the atonement of Christ that evil does not remain a permanent fixture on our eternal landscape, shutting us out from God's presence forever. Christ's great and last sacrifice is the renewing life-source, the cleansing power extended to humans by which the pain, suffering, and damage done by sin can be eradicated and ultimately transcended.

Resisting sin as a primary "test" of mortality is a truth so widely accepted in the church it hardly bears mentioning. It is also a truth that none but Christ has been able to live completely free of sin. Does this imply that he is the only one who has ever passed the test? The answer is "yes" only if we assume passing means living a sinless life. No one else has ever been able to pull that one off. Rather than living without sin, the scriptures point out our objective is to "endure to the end" (1 Nephi 13:37; Alma 32:15; 3 Nephi 27:16). Hugh Nibley, in his regular

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The objective, therefore, is progressive repentance, not individually attained purity. pithy style, defined this small phrase as meaning “continuing to forgive, and continuing to repent.”⁹ This suggests what we all already know—we will continue to sin throughout our lives. The objective, therefore, is progressive repentance, not individually attained purity. We are not here to avoid pain and impurity but to bring good out of evil while immersed in the manifold convolutions of a temporal world.¹⁰ If this is the case, how can the reality of sin in our lives be of any use to us?

“USES” OF SIN

I have heard said many times that one way or another, life gives us what we need. Some have called this idea the “school of hard knocks.” Perhaps another way of stating this is to say that we play out in life our core vulnerabilities and issues until we learn or “master” them, and move on to something else. This is not to say that life doesn’t often “happen” to us, but rather, it is to say that all of us have certain strengths and weaknesses; the multifaceted conditions of life provide stimulus for us to project and act out the inherent good and evil within. This idea is similar to what is known in psychology as the “projective hypothesis,” which asserts, in essence, that when confronted with an ambiguous stimulus, human beings will project upon that stimulus their own individual modes of perceiving the world and behaving in it.¹¹ This “projection” will be both for the good and the bad; strengths and weaknesses will be played out. In other words, along the way, poor choices will be made; sins will be committed. But this need not be tragic. To the extent that our sins represent core vulnerabilities, they can be instructive to us if we recognize them as arising from areas of deficit or specific weakness. Choices made lead to consequences, and consequences can be instructive; they enhance learning, and with learning, resolution often follows. The point is, our weaknesses and vulnerabilities need to be addressed and/or accessed if they are to be ultimately worked through. Sometimes, making specific errors and mistakes allows for learning and resolution at the deepest level.

This brings up the issue of vicarious learning versus real-life experience. Without question, human beings do learn a great deal through vicarious channels, such as through observing others,¹² reading books, and hearing stories. We may be much better off learning certain lessons vicariously (i.e., “the easy way”) rather than “the hard way.” Yet, if vicarious channels were sufficient for all the types of learning upon which eternal life is based, why come to earth? Why not simply observe from the safety of the heavens the foibles of a few mortals on earth and pledge not to repeat their mistakes? If each of us looks within, we will likely concur with Theodore Reik, a brilliant student of Freud, when he said:

[I seem to have] an inability to learn from other people's mistakes. All the wisdom of proverbs and all exhortations and warnings seem useless to me. If I am to learn from the mistakes of others, I must make them [on] my own.... [What's more] I am almost incapable of learning from my own mistakes unless I have repeated them several times.¹³

Vicarious channels of learning, significant though they may be, are insufficient in and of themselves in order that certain lessons be learned. Take, for example, the experience of physical pain, or the emotional pain accompanying the loss of a loved one. The film *Shadowlands* portrays these realities quite well: C.S. Lewis' character discourses time and again in a very heady, intellectual way upon the meaning and nature of suffering. It is not until his own beloved suffers from and ultimately succumbs to a ravaging cancer that he realizes truths about suffering he never could have learned, no matter the number of books read or lectures given on the subject. This is not only true of such morally neutral experiences as physical pain and relational loss, but also for the morally-charged, personal vulnerabilities we all possess.

I do not believe we are placed on earth to see if we can somehow manage to learn everything the easy way. If so, we have all failed miserably, as none of us have done that. Rather, it seems the purpose of life is not to successfully avoid and reject everything different and risky, but to have both our strengths and weaknesses accessed in very real ways—coming to ultimately prize the good through both obedience and disobedience. Real experience is a vital component in this process (2 Nephi 2:11-15).

Conventional wisdom asserts that people are never better off for having sinned, that people are always better off for avoiding sin. While these ideas may have a certain validity to them on the surface, they are problematic on various levels:

First, such ideas are inherently pessimistic. They do not inspire hope. They tend to encourage despair over ground lost in a lifetime battle with sin. We know we have sinned and will continue to sin. If the conventional wisdom is true, we can never really be "better off;" our situation is ultimately hopeless because we've lost ground we can never make up.

Perhaps more than being merely pessimistic, such ideas seem to fly in the face of personal experience with what the prophet Amulek called the "infinite and eternal atonement of Christ" (Alma 34). One way the atonement is indeed infinite is that it is limitless in its ability to heal, to mend, and more than this, to enhance what we were previously, so long as we stand before the Lord as a truly penitent soul. Each of us who have ever sinned and gone on to experience the full measure of the atonement can attest to this.

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Finally, the conventional wisdom asserts an *imatatio dei* (both a way to imitate God and an ethic for living) of purity, whereas the *imatatio dei* of Christ was to emphasize compassion.¹⁴ While these two ideas need not be incompatible, they often come into conflict in our lives. A striving for purity and holiness encourages separation and distance from everything deemed to be unclean. Compassion, on the other hand, encourages a striving for inclusiveness, tolerance, and understanding. Compassion, in its literal sense, means “to feel with.” To experience compassion is to feel the feelings of another person in a visceral way, and to be compassionate is to be moved to do something for another person because of those feelings. It is my assertion that compassion is possible only as we relate the difficulty, sufferings, and sins of others to our own. Hence, without sinning and suffering ourselves, we could never have compassion for others who sin, Christ being the lone exception. He was the epitome of compassion although he never sinned. We must recall that somehow, Christ “descended below all things that he might comprehend all things” (*Doctrine and Covenants* 88:6). Because of this singular miracle, we know Christ is able to not only have perfect compassion for the sinner, but to take upon himself the full weight of the repentant sinner’s sins though he himself never sinned.

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I have often wondered what would be the nature of our characters and dispositions if we never made mistakes. If human beings have difficulty being humble and compassionate now, how much worse would it be if we rarely or never commit sins or made blunders? Innocence and purity are virtues; but the humility and suffering which accompany sin open the way, through the atonement of Christ, to far greater virtues: compassion, charity, tolerance, and understanding. These are the virtues which ultimately matter the most (Matthew 25:40; Luke 10:30-37; 15:11-32), and I submit these virtues are practically impossible for innocents to attain because an innocent has no way of understanding suffering or people’s weaknesses. It is the reality and awareness of our own sins and the pain they cause which predisposes us toward compassion and humility. As the scriptures make clear, it is only when we are humble that we can see ourselves as we truly are, and become teachable—soft, reliant, submissive, willing to surrender to God (Ether 12:27). Many times in life, the antidote to weakness and sin is not to exert greater will power and resistance, but simply to ask for compassionate help.¹⁵

If it is true that sin can eventually be utilized for the spiritual learning and redemption of humankind, then it is only Satan who has no hope, because evil ultimately ceases to be evil. Adam and Eve’s fall gave us the opportunity to learn from direct experience. This gift, only superseded by the immeasurable grace of Christ’s life and atonement, makes possible a much more actualized life than Adam and Eve’s innocence, or our own, could ever have achieved. ☺

ENDNOTES

1. I am greatly indebted to Margaret and Paul Tascano's book, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology*, for the spirit of this paper. Their thinking has been influential on me in too many ways to mention. In this paper, I borrowed from their ideas liberally, but principally, they are manifest in paragraphs covering paradox, gospel speculation, and potential/actual good and evil.
2. Joseph F. Smith, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4, 325-326. Emphasis added.
3. I first became exposed to this idea by Dr. Lane Fischer of BYU when he taught, "although good and evil may be polarized, they are not dichotomous."
4. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Robert Gleave of BYU who's paper, *Sorrow, Suffering, and Evil: Is There Reason to Hope?*, was highly influential in my exposure to and understanding of these ideas. I have borrowed heavily from his ideas on contextual/hierarchical decision making and how these differ from situational ethics.
5. I have long disagreed with the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." I would much rather be surrounded by very flaky people—those who have good intentions but never actually carry them out—than I would people who don't have good intentions to begin with. As a therapist, I find that it is much easier to work with a positive impulse already present than to attempt to bring one into existence.
6. This meaningful distinction was made by Dr. Lane Fischer in his unpublished paper, *That Thou May Know of Mine Integrity*.
7. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, 80 81.
8. Margaret and Paul Tascano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology*, 112.
9. See *Faith of an Observer*, BYU Films, 1989.
10. Margaret and Paul Tascano, 112-113.
11. Dr. Lane Fischer called this idea to my attention during a private discussion at a recent AMCAP conference.
12. The psychologist Albert Bandurra conducted numerous watershed experiments during the 1960's and 70's which showed unequivocally that children learn a great deal simply by observing others and the consequences of their actions.
13. Theodore Reik, *Listening with the Third Ear*, Farrar Strauss, 1948, xii.
14. See Marcus J. Borg's (1994) wonderful book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*, especially chapter three: "Jesus, Compassion, and Politics" for a much fuller extension of these ideas.
15. See Facsimile No. 1 in the Book of Abraham for a graphic depiction of "turning to something larger" to get out of a bind we've gotten ourselves into.