Can God Truly Forget My Sins?

Christian Temporality and the Possibility of Repentance

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Overview

When we think about repentance, we face a conundrum. On one hand, we are promised new life. As Paul says, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). On the other hand, the repentant person remains the same person that he or she was. In the younger Alma's case, he is the person who "had murdered many of [God's] children, or rather led them away unto destruction" (Alma 36:14). How can Alma be both a new person and the person who led many to destruction? We are told that God will no longer remember our sins, as in passages such as Doctrine and Covenants 58:42 ("Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more") and Jeremiah 31:34 ("I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more"). Such scriptures imply that God no longer remembers the previous Alma, but how is that possible? We often deal with this question by assuming that God's forgetting should be understood metaphorically. After all, our all-knowing God cannot forget anything and still be all-knowing. Contrary to that usual assumption, I argue that God can, in fact, forget sin.

Some years ago, I argued that memory is more than recollecting an event in the past, that it is relational: remembrance (not the same as recollection) happens in my relations with persons and things and by taking part in shared practices.[1] I will make a related argument here. I will

1. James E. Faulconer, "Remembrance," in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 1–17.

argue that forgetting our past is a matter of remembering it differently, of being in a different relationship with it and therefore living in the world differently. That, I will argue, makes the past itself different. The past of the repentant person is different than it was before repentance, and that new past is what God remembers. God is in a different relation with the repentant person, who is in a different relation with his or her past.

Making such a case will require understanding repentance and God's forgetting by understanding time as an unfolding of the past through the present into the future rather than as a connecting linear sequence of moments. I argue that if we understand time as an unfolding, with each moment determining the meaning of the other moments to which it is related, then repentance makes possible a different unfolding of the past into the present. Thanks to Christ's Atonement, that past can be radically different than it would be in the case of ordinary regret and forgiveness. On such a view, God's forgetting is possible without altering his omniscience: God can forget my sins because my previous past no longer exists.

The key to my argument will be to recognize that every event is not only the movements that occur at a particular chronological moment but also the relation of those movements to other events in time. An event's meaning is a function of how it relates to the events surrounding it. As new relations obtain between present events, they give new meaning to past events. Each moment of the present changes the meaning of the past.

This is especially true for the person who repents before God: the repentant person's past is different after repentance than it was before. This is true not just for that individual but for all who share the person's relationship with God. After godly repentance, to remember someone's past accurately would be to remember the changed event, the event with a new meaning, the no-longer-the-same event of the past that opens into the present, and thereby also the future, differently. That changed event is the past that God knows. Namely, each event of the past with its accurate meaning in the present opens toward the kingdom of God at hand.

The Problem of an Indefeasible Past

The problem with understanding how God can forget the past is that the past seems to be unalterable—that is, indefeasible. If it is, then God cannot forget it. But if the past cannot be changed, that seems to constrain our ability to accept the Atonement. One contemporary thinker notes that our past can "assume undeniable authority as *facts,* as things-themselves that . . . give shape to who we are. Nothing undermines our freedom more than a predetermined and given nature, our fixed

facticity."[2] In other words, the facts of who we are, in themselves, put limits on what we are and can be. So if the past cannot be changed, it appears to prescribe at least roughly who we cannot avoid being: the product of who we have been; the social context, historical background, encounters, and physical experiences we have had. Based on this understanding of the past, it is difficult to understand the possibility of the kind of change demanded by true repentance—the transformation to a new person—much less the possibility that God could forget that past. Yet Christian repentance seems to require that the genuinely new person be possible. At least one event that is not determined by one's past must be possible—namely, coming to Christ.

Explaining how at least that new event is possible will require several steps. First, I will discuss time as a flow, followed by a discussion of how the new is possible in human experience. Then I will talk about how Abrahamic religions understand time and particularly what that means for early Christians. Finally, I will argue that the Christian understanding of time is predicated on an understanding of Christ's coming and that his coming into our lives, in the past, the present, and the future, makes the radically new future of the repentant Christian possible—a future that includes a remaking of the past.

Time as Flow

One way to explain the possibility of a new past is to understand time as flow rather than as a set of static moments that we move through. If we think carefully about time, it becomes clear that the regularity of clock-time is a flow. Each moment of time is a point that has motion, like a point on a curve on a Cartesian plane:[3] such points are not just sitting there, as it were; instead, each point in the curve has direction toward the next moment ("slope" in mathematics).[4] Rather than Euclidean

2. John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "The Anarchic Principle of Christian Eschatology in the Eucharistic Tradition of the Eastern Church," *Harvard Theological Review* 100, no. 1 (January 2007): 30.

3. A Cartesian plane (named after Rene Descartes, a seventeenth-century mathematician) is defined by two perpendicular number lines: the x-axis and y-axis. Cartesian coordinates are described using algebraic equations and allow for moving, dimensional points in space. See W. W. Rouse Ball, *A Short Account of the History of Mathematics* (New York: Dover, 1960), 268–76.

4. It may be no coincidence that the terms *moment* and *movement* have similar etymological histories. See *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "moment, n.," updated December 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1102916519.

points without dimension, the moments of time are not so much points as movements; time is a continual unfolding.[5] As a flow, each moment of the present is an unfolding of the past into the present and, at the same time, an unfolding of the present toward the future.[6] The present is an ongoing event rather than a fixed point. It is the happening in which the horizon of the past unfolds continuously into the horizon of the future. Even clock time, with its regularity, is not like the cogs of a clockwork machine ticking off discreet moments, as we often think of it (a view perhaps created with the invention of the mechanical clock). Clock time is one way of marking the flow of the past into the future.[7]

Thinking of the flow of time in these terms is not a new idea in philosophy. The sixth-century BC thinker Heraclitus famously suggested that time flows like a river.[8] Much later, in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas argued that we must understand human beings as being in a state of what he calls *status viatoris,* a state of being underway, rather than *status comprehensoris,* a state of having arrived.[9] That is radically who we are—beings who are becoming and who no longer exist if we are no longer becoming. Becoming is "the style in which we are"[10] as human beings, meaning that we cannot but move in time. We are never at a fixed point. Were we not becoming, moving toward something new, we would not be human beings. So the unfolding of time is not incidental to us.

If we understand the temporality of our lives as unfolding, then the first (incomplete) thing to say is that the present is the enactment of habit,

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5. Euclid (a Greek mathematician around 300 BC) wrote a famous treatise on geometry called *Elements.* He sought to understand the metrical properties of physical space using deductive reasoning. In Euclidean geometry, points are only static location markers without length, width, or height. See Ball, *History of Mathematics,* 52–60.

6. In many of these observations, I am indebted to Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Note sur le temps: Essai sur les raisons de la memoire et de l'esperance* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), 1–30.

7. See Hans Reichenbach, *From Copernicus to Einstein,* trans. Ralph B. Winn (New York: Philosophical Library, 1942), 67–69; Brian Greene, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2004), 233–35. Einstein's thinking exploded the classical understanding of time as points, and that explosion has continued into the present-day thinking of physicists. I take it that their work shows us the variety of ways in which the flow of time manifests itself, to the extent that ultimately time remains a mystery.

8. See Heraclitus, Fragment 12, and Plato, *Cratylus,* section 402a, discussed in Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus," section 3.1, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* updated December 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/#Flu.

9. See Pieper's explanation of Aquinas's thinking in Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 1997), 91–98.

10. Lacoste, *Note sur le temps,* 32.

custom, and so on—doing what the past gives as possible—but it is determined not only by that past. It is also oriented by our eye on the future. Consider a simple thing such as me reading a book to prepare for a discussion on philosophy. I am in my office, which is arranged as one might expect for a North American academic, with a desk and a number of bookshelves with books. I hold a fountain pen, and I lay a book on the desk before me. All these things are given to me by the past: my education; the objects, such as bookshelves and books, the desk, the book on the desk, my pen; their customary usage when preparing a lecture (rather than the book holding the door open, for example); and also the institutions within which being an academic makes sense, such as the university, with its heritage, customs, and expectations; and the broader community within which the university has a place. Together these things, events, and inheritances are a panoply of possibility within which I find myself.[11] They are the given within which I can act. Given the possibilities on offer, I can make choices within the permutations of possibility given. In fact, probably an infinite number of possibilities lie before me, given those permutations. But even if some particular possibility has never occurred before, it remains only a permutation of the past.[12] The radically new, the new possibility not given by one's past that I think repentance requires does not yet appear to be possible.

Further Understanding of How the New Is Possible

In the mid-twentieth century, the controversial thinker Martin Heidegger argued that if we understand habit, then we can also understand the possibility of the new: an event can interrupt the ways our past provided for understanding and dealing with things and give us new possibilities for action.[13] In Heidegger's view, the new arises through breaks or interruptions in the usually predictable present that has been shaped by the past. The new arises when the flow of time no longer proceeds smoothly. In a famous example, Heidegger argues for the possibility of

11. This panoply is not chaotic. I have conceptual categories and models as well as other means for distinguishing each thing and event from the others. If not, the world in which I live would be no more than a hubbub, like for a baby who lives in what William James called "a blooming, buzzing confusion." William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), 488.

12. Even if an infinite number of possibilities arise from any given facticity, there can remain other possibilities not available, just as a circle on a graph contains an infinite number of points, yet there remain points outside that infinity.

13. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), §15, 95–102. Though Heidegger's politics remain controversial, his discussion of habit is not.

the new by showing how a carpenter using his hammer habitually, in the manner that he has learned, continues building with it in more or less the same way he has always done until it breaks. At that point, of course he must stop hammering. He has two options: he can buy another hammer, or he can become a philosopher.

Becoming a philosopher does not mean that he now leaves his career working with wood, takes a degree in philosophy, and enters the overcrowded job market. It means that without thinking of himself as a philosopher, he begins to think about the essence of the hammer and hammering. Probably only implicitly, he asks himself questions like "What do hammers do?" "What other things are like hammers that I might substitute?" Asking those sorts of questions, questions about the being of hammers, opens the possibility of the new. The things around him look different in light of the problem he is facing, the break in the continuity of the flow of past into future. Perhaps he will find another tool in his workshop to use in place of his hammer because it shares certain essential traits with a hammer; perhaps he will use a pipe wrench to hammer until he has time to buy a new hammer. In doing that, something new appears—the pipe wrench is also now a hammer. Perhaps instead the carpenter will invent a better hammer, another way in which the break of his hammer would open the possibility of something new. The past gives him the material from which he lives in the world comfortably and habitually; the interruptions in the smooth flow of time, always or almost always by accident or incident rather than by decision, raise questions that require our decision and, thereby, make the new possible in our human response to that habitual world.[14]

Heidegger's argument is that every event or phenomenon is more than only an enactment of the past as it unfolds into the future. To be sure, the past is reenacted in the present. Without that reenactment, human life would be impossible. Yet because each moment can always be interrupted, every moment offers the potentiality of taking up the world in a new way.[15] The new that is not reducible to a permutation of

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14. I am grateful to a friend for reminding me in an email: "The Heidegger/hammer example is useful and good, but that broken hammer is just a single instance of the randomness and incompleteness that lies at the heart of existence and human action (or any action). . . . What the 20th Century showed above all is that what we can know of the world is fundamentally incomplete." Thus the explosion of the classical, Euclidean understanding of time and another understanding of the origin of the new.

15. See also Hannah Arendt, "Action," in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 175–247, for a similar, excellent account of how the new is possible in human action.

the past is always possible within the givenness, interruption, and consequent openness of the flow of time.

Time for Abraham's Children

Thus far I've given an account of time as flow and how that flow can be interrupted and give us the possibility of something uniquely new. But what does this notion of the new given by interruption have to do with the question of repentance and the change of the past? The answer is that, for Christians, Christ changes the nature of the new that is possible. To understand that claim, first consider how those with an Abrahamic background understand the flow of time and its possible interruption. In particular, consider how the promise of the Second Coming makes time different for Christians.

For those in Abrahamic cultures of the Mediterranean, time had a different character than it had for others: it was linear and eschatological rather than cyclical. For most ancients in the Mediterranean, the seasons repeated themselves, the years repeated themselves, and the eons repeated themselves. With endless repetition, the world was not thought to be going toward anything in particular except to the next cycle of time. Not so for the spiritual descendants of Abraham, for whom time is not cyclical; for them, time is linear, with a divine beginning, the Creation, and its end in divine promise, its "destination," an end point toward which history is headed. And, on this understanding, the final moment is not the moment when all is obliterated but the moment in which God fulfills his ancient promises to establish a just and righteous kingdom on earth and to restore his people to their inheritance: the kingdom of God.[16]

In New Testament Greek, this final moment of human history, the establishment of God's kingdom, is the *eschaton*.[17] The word *eschaton* means "the uttermost,"[18] and in Christian usage it has meant "the uttermost moment of worldly temporality"—namely, the revelation of Christ in the Second Coming. On this understanding of time, human history is strung between two poles: the Creation and Fall on the one hand, and the Second Coming and kingdom of God on the other. Those two poles give meaning to all the events that come between them; we do not understand any event fully if we do not understand it in light of the beginning

16. See Matthew 6:10 and parallels. See also Doctrine and Covenants 6:37; 10:55.

17. ἔσχατον.

18. Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek,* vol. 1 (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2010), 473, s.v. "ἔσχατος."

and the end of human history. The meaning of events is ultimately determined by what God has given and what God has promised.

Here the word *meaning* does not mean "semantic content" or "what a person thinks of or feels about something." Rather, it means the ways in which the things in question are related to each other. The meaning of an event is the way that event relates to other events. For those who know G. W. F. Leibniz's theory of space, it may stand as an analogue.[19] For Leibniz, space is not an independent entity like a container for objects. Rather, he argued, space is a system of relations between objects. Rather than being the container in which things find themselves, space is created by the relations of objects to one another. Similarly, the meaning of an event is created by its relations to other events in the unfolding of time. For those in Abrahamic religious traditions, ultimately, the Creation given and the kingdom to come determine the meaning of the events that are suspended between them. Those two poles give meaning to every event and particularly to whatever is new in human experience.

The New Testament Understanding of Time

The second difference that the Abrahamic understanding of time makes is that, for Abrahamic religions, the end of time is apocalyptic, meaning "revelatory" rather than "catastrophic," and that revelation is recursive on the whole of time. [20] In other words, the revelation of Christ will determine the meaning of every other event. For Christians, Christ's incarnation is the most important interruption in the flow of time. As an instantiation of both the long-awaited coming of God and the renewal of creation (the two poles of Abrahamic time), Christ's life and death and especially his Resurrection are the determining break for the meaning of human time as a whole. They are the midpoint between Creation and Apocalypse that gives ultimate meaning to all other events.

In keeping with that apocalyptic understanding of time, it appears that the writers of the New Testament believed that the Messiah's return

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19. Leibniz was an influential seventeenth-century German thinker: mathematician, philosopher, scientist, and diplomat. With Isaac Newton, he is credited as the codiscoverer of calculus, and his notation is standard today. For an account of Leibniz's theory, see Jeffrey K. McDonough, "Leibniz's Philosophy of Physics," section 5.2, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* revised July 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-physics/. Thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the analogy. Perhaps few will be familiar with Leibniz, but I think the analogy is helpful for those who are.

20. *Apocalypse* is from the Greek verb ἀποκἄλύπτω (*apokaluptō*), meaning "to uncover," "to disclose," "to reveal."

was imminent: he could return at any moment and force their decision about whether they were truly disciples. There were two words available for them to use to talk about the nature of time: *chronos*[21] (the word from which we get English words like *chronology*) and *kairos*[22] (a word that shows up in English mostly in theological or philosophical writing). The first of these, *chronos,* refers to what we could call "ordinary time," the flow of events in an orderly fashion, one moving into another relatively uninterrupted. The second term, *kairos,* refers to "critical time," a moment demanding decision and response, an interruption in the steady unfolding of time. An ordinary example of kairological time would be the event of Heidegger's breaking hammer—an event demanding that the carpenter respond, decide. For New Testament writers, the time in which they awaited the returning Messiah was also kairological; the meaning of each moment was partially determined by the anticipation of the Second Coming and the need to be prepared.

Early Christians could not expect to be prepared for the Second Coming if they were merely coasting on habitual practices at the critical time of the eschaton, living as if time were merely chronological with one moment flowing smoothly into the next. For them, as for every Christian, each moment is a moment demanding our response because it has *already* been interrupted, both by the promise that Jesus the Messiah died and has risen and by the assurance that his return is possible at this moment as well as any other. Indeed, for Christians, every moment is a time made full of possibility by Christ's birth, death, and return. Every moment grants us the possibility of something radically new because of something beyond human time. That newness is different than whatever newness is opened by any unfolding of time that doesn't take into consideration the Creation and, particularly, the Apocalypse. Christian kairological time is determined by the possibility of something *radically* new—namely, the kingdom of God that is to come.[23] And the kingdom of God is not only promised to come but also promised as present in the life and work of every faithful Christian. Adam Miller sums this up nicely: "The gospel is a promise and God's promises aren't bound by time. Promises defy time. They bring the future into the present."[24]

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21. χρόνος.

22. καῖρος.

23. The kingdom to come is radical in the sense that it goes to the root of things, requiring extreme change.

24. Adam S. Miller, *An Early Resurrection: Life in Christ before You Die* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 77.

This kairological, punctuated measurement of time is the time of both individual Christians and the Christian community as a whole. The Restoration began with the punctuation of human time by the Father and the Son appearing to fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith. As has been true in every previous dispensation, since the beginning of the Restoration in 1820, time continues to be punctuated by the promise of Jesus Christ's Second Coming, by his entry into human lives when they come to him through faith, repentance, and baptism (3 Ne. 27:13–21), and in particular by his entry into individual and institutional lives through the promised Comforter, the Holy Spirit (John 14:16).[25]

In John 3:8, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." The Spirit takes those who have been reborn out of the realm of ordinary determination and calculation, making it so that others may be unable to tell where they are coming from or where they are going. This is presumably because those others measure events as merely temporal rather than as apocalyptic and kairological.

At the everyday level, Christian temporality may seem like the temporality of non-Christians—perhaps exactly so. Christians get up in the morning, check their watches and email accounts, buy groceries, take children to school. They go about their daily business in what appears to be the same way as everyone else; they seem to live in time as anyone else does. But that appearance is deceiving.[26] For the Christian, each moment is a moment of possible revelation, even when we are not conscious that it is. It is a moment ultimately defined by the promised interruption of merely chronological time by the revelation of Jesus Christ and by what amounts to much the same thing for the individual Saint and the community of the Church—the presence of the Holy Spirit.[27]

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25. Presumably, the Light of Christ gives agency to human beings in a way that is similar to the way the Spirit gives the possibility of rebirth to Christ's disciples: the possibility of renewal, but not yet the possibility of rebirth.

26. Søren Kierkegaard's discussion of how the knight of faith goes about daily life looking like any ordinary burgher is relevant here: Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition,* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 39–40.

27. For an excellent discussion of revelation as interruptive, particularly as it applies to Nephi's writing, see Benjamin Peters, "The Missing Medium: Rereading Revelation as Interruption in 1 Nephi 1," in *A Dream, a Rock, a Pillar of Fire,* ed. Adam S. Miller (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2017), 124–37.

The End of the World Is at Hand

I have suggested that the idea of the eschaton means not just an expectation of an end to the world as we know it but also a different experience and understanding of the now. Perhaps under cultural influences that have put our focus on the eschaton as a time of dread and death rather than as a revelation of God's righteousness and restorative justice, sometimes Latter-day Saints think of the Second Coming in baleful terms. As Elder Robert M. Daines suggested, we "may look heavenward and see not the face of love and mercy."[28] To the degree that we dread the Second Coming, we have something more to be reminded of by Judaism, something the Latter-day Saint understanding of Adam and Eve's experience in the Garden also tells us: the world did not begin in sin.[29] And because it did not begin in sin, it will not end in death and destruction. For Jews, and therefore also for Christians and Muslims, the world began with God's Creation, and its end will be a new Creation prefigured by Christ's Resurrection.

But the revelation of Christ on which Christians wait, the kingdom of God, is not only to come. It is already at hand. When Jesus preached in Galilee and Jerusalem, he often said, "The kingdom of God [or of heaven] is at hand."[30] We see the same announcement in Doctrine and Covenants 1:12, 35–36: "The Lord is nigh." In Matthew and Mark, the verb translated "at hand"[31] means "is nigh" or "has come near,"[32] so the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants say the same thing. The verb translated as "is nigh" in Matthew and Mark is in the perfect tense, meaning it is something that has happened in the past but continues to have results in the present: "The kingdom has come and it is here."[33]

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28. Robert M. Daines, "Sir, We Would Like to See Jesus," *Liahona* 47, no. 11 (November 2023): 13.

29. See Norman Solomon, Historical Dictionary of Judaism, 3rd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 311–12, 343, for the idea of original sin and the Messiah's coming.

30. For example, see Matthew 10:7 and Mark 1:15.

31. ἐγγίζω.

32. See Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ἐγγίζω.

33. This is the author's understanding of Matthew 10:7. Mark 1:15 is similar—Matthew reads, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand"; Mark reads, "The kingdom of God is at hand." Both use the same verb in the perfect tense—meaning that the event happened in the past and continues in the present. This rendition is an attempt to capture the meaning of the Greek verb more exactly. See also Julie M. Smith, *The Gospel according to Mark,* Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2018), 106.

Those who heard Jesus preach in the first century understood him to mean that the establishment of God's kingdom on earth had already begun and would be completed soon. After Christ's ascension, it appears that early Christians understood the phrase in the same way, just as Latter-day Saints understand that the Restoration initiated an event that continues and will culminate in the Second Coming.[34] Elsewhere I suggested another way we might understand the phrase: "To hear the gospel preached is to experience the nearness, both temporally and spatially, of the kingdom. . . . The revelation of the kingdom of God to a person is figured by, is a type of, the revelation of his kingdom that will happen at the last day."[35] I take it that for those who have come to Christ, the kingdom is at hand in their present lives as well as in their expectations of the future. They reveal his nearness to the present world by setting out on the path he invites them to and remembering him in the lives they live by being his disciples.

In the King James New Testament, the word *disciple* is translated from the Greek word *mathētēs.*[36] As used in the New Testament, *mathētēs* implies personal attachment to a teacher such that the disciple's whole life is shaped by his or her discipleship and "leaves no doubt as to who is deploying the formative power"[37]—namely, the teacher. The will of the teacher—Jesus, the Son of God and Messiah—is at work in the Christian disciple rather than the will of the disciple. The disciple is not just one who studies with a teacher or believes certain things but especially one who is a witness of Jesus's revelation of himself as God.[38] The true disciples are those who, partaking of his flesh and blood, "take upon them the name of [the] Son, and always remember him, and keep his commandments" (Moro. 4:3). True disciples take Christ's name on themselves and emulate him in the way they live.

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34. See Doctrine and Covenants 110:11–12 and "The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World," *Ensign* 50, no. 5 (May 2020): inside front cover.

35. James E. Faulconer, "Rethinking Theology: The Shadow of the Apocalypse," in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture,* 109–10.

36. μαθητής

37. Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "Μανθάνω, Καταμανθάνω, Μαθητής, Συμμαθητής, Μαθήτρια, Μαθητεύω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 4:441.

38. Initially referring to only those in a small group around Jesus, the witnesses of the historical Jesus, the term *mathētēs* comes to refer to Christians more generally after the Resurrection (in the book of Acts).

Ideally, Christian life, individually and communally, is Christ's revelation of Zion, the kingdom of God, as it is possible in each moment of the world. Thus, Christians are waiting for the eschaton to happen at some future, unspecified point, and at the same time they are engaged in letting it be revealed through them, as disciples, at every moment. Christian life is ongoingly apocalyptic. For Christians, time is *always* starting over again, always interrupted by the new creation of Christ's revelation, an interruption that occurs through the presence of the Holy Spirit, which radically opens possibility that cannot be explained in ordinary terms (John 15:26–27). The new is constantly possible for Christians "because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever" (2 Ne. 2:26).

The Possibility of a New Past

When we understand time as a flow, then the new is possible, whether or not we are Christian. But Christians go further because, for them, a radically new future is opened by Christ's ongoing rupture of time: the promise of his incarnation and Resurrection and the promise of his return make possible a life that is otherwise impossible—a life directed by the Holy Ghost. The newness given by God's kingdom, in other words life in that kingdom, is possible at every moment.

Nevertheless, a problem remains: *if the past remains the same, then the past would be tragic—even if we can do what is new in the future.* Everyone knows (supposedly) that we cannot change what we have done in the past. But if that is true, then I will always be the person who spoke harshly to my spouse last night or who refused the beggar on the corner last week. The consequences of my sins will always be like those of the woman "taken in adultery" (John 8:3–11). Applying how that story is often understood, I may go and sin no more in the future, but I will always be the one who once gravely sinned.[39] It seems to me that,

39. See Matthew Ichihashi Potts, *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2022). Potts understands forgiveness as necessarily a matter of mourning precisely because of the irrevocability of the past: forgiveness is a mourning for what was lost and cannot be recuperated. Potts's work has much to recommend it, particularly in its insistence (borrowed from Vladimir Jankélévitch) that forgiveness is predicated on the possibility of sin: if no sin was committed, then no forgiveness can be offered. If there is an explanation or excuse for the offense, then there was no sin, and without there being a sin, there can be no forgiveness. The offense can only be overlooked or excused. Nevertheless, I believe that Potts's account of forgiveness is fundamentally

whether we understand time in classical terms or rethink it in the terms of contemporary philosophy and science, the tragedy of time is that if the past remains the same, then sin will be chained to every human being except Jesus. Our pasts will indissolubly mark each of us as unclean forever. How can a person break free from the tragedy of that chain so as to be clean before God not just in the future—from now on—but for the entirety of his or her life?

Sometimes we speak of God ignoring or not taking a full account of our past when he forgives us. Sometimes we speak as if, because he understands us, he excuses our sin. But excusing and forgiving are not the same,[40] and the scriptures do not speak that way. I understand their promise that the Father will forget our sins to be real rather than metaphorical.[41] Christ doesn't say that our sins will be ignored or excused but that they will be washed away. I take that to be an unbelievably bold claim about reality, not just a beautiful metaphor. Thus, as I understand scripture, if the promise of rebirth is real and not merely metaphorical, those scriptures imply a promise of a new past, a promise that the past is *not* irrevocable. As odd as it may seem, our lives, including our past, can in fact be washed and made clean (3 Ne. 27:19–20).

I argue that the kairological character of Christian time—that Christ and the Holy Spirit can enter our lives and disrupt the order of the merely human world—makes the past alterable. My claim is that repentance means transforming what has been—*without its erasure*—and Christian time's kairological character makes such changes possible. To hope to become new means either to hope to have no past at all or to hope for a revision of the past out of which a new future will arise. Between those two options, surely repentance means the latter. The hope of repentance is that my past will no longer be what it was, not that it will remain unchanged nor that it will no longer be at all.

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flawed due to his failure to recognize the significance of Christianity's kairological understanding of time and the way in which it removes the tragedy of the past.

40. See Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), for an excellent account of the conditions of forgiveness from a secular perspective. In general, Griswold's insights about secular forgiveness apply also to religious forgiveness.

41. For a brilliant discussion of what it can mean to say that God forgets our sins, that Christian rebirth is more than metaphorical, see Søren Kierkegaard, "Love Hides the Multiplicity of Sins," in *Works of Love,* trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 261–78, esp. 273–76.

For repentance to be different than mere regret, it must be possible for the past to change, to be altered without erasure. But that appears to suggest backwards causation, which seems nonsensical. Because the idea that the past can be changed seems like nonsense, we sometimes find ourselves going out of our way to redefine what repentance means and what it means that the Lord who knows everything will *forget* our sins. When we believe the past event is what it is and cannot change, metaphorizing repentance may seem like our only alternative. But I argue that there is an important, real sense in which the past can be changed by the present; in fact, I argue, the past is *always* changed by the present. Remembering what I said earlier about the relational character of the meaning of events can show us how that is not a nonsensical idea: we can be reborn literally. The real past is the past that, in the present, has meaning and effects. Repentance changes that past and gives the present new meanings and effects. That real past is what God knows.

It might be assumed that when I say that the past can be changed, I mean that it can be changed in the perception of the repentant person and others, but not that it can be changed in itself. However, given the assumption that the meaning of events in time is relational, I claim that the change of the past is not only a description of our subjective experience but also a description of time itself. If God remembers a new past and forgets an old one, that means that the old one doesn't exist. For God to remember an old past, the past would have to be something in itself—something apart from its relations to later events. The past is what it is only in its relation to the events that preceded it *and* the events that follow. Thus, God knows the only past that is—the one that has effects in the present.

To understand better why I say that this is not just about how the individual experiences time, but about how time is revealed differently in different frameworks, consider rhythm as an analog to the flow of time.[42] A drum beating a steady rhythm is analogous to the classical

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42. This analogy is a revision and expansion of something I wrote in James E. Faulconer, "Scripture as Incarnation," in *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture,* 151–202; in particular, see 160 n. 12.

In November 2009, at the meetings of the Intermountain Philosophy Society in Logan, Utah, David Grandy presented a paper, "The Moving Edge of Music." Afterward, he and I talked about the idea that repentance involves an actual change of events. I have no idea which of us first suggested that and the connection with music; perhaps it was a conclusion we came to mutually. We did not discuss the matter afterward, nor did we

chronological understanding of time. But think about what happens in even slightly more complicated rhythms. In them, each moment of the beats requires (already "contains") its before and its after. In other words, to be the rhythm beat that it is, each of its beats depends on the other beats in the rhythm—just as each point in a curve depends on its relation with the other points of the curve to be the curving point that it is. Similarly, each strike of the drumhead makes rhythmic sense only in relationship to those before and after it. If the drummer beats the drum steadily—*thrum, thrum, thrum, thrum*—with the same spacing between each strike, we have one rhythmic meaning. But if she beats the drum—*thrum, thrum, thrum-thrum*—with half the space between the third and fourth beats as between the first and second, then the rhythm *as a whole* is different. At the time of the last two beats, every moment of the rhythm is different, *even the first one.* The last two beats give a meaning to the first that it had neither at the moment it was struck nor at time of the second strike. Having been changed by what came later, the first beat is no longer the same after the third and fourth beats.

In a similar way, a present event changes the past events by changing the relationship of those events to each other, by reshaping the flow of time. Time is like this for everyone, not just Christians, though it is especially important for a Christian: the meaning of the past is determined by the present for everyone experiencing the rhythms of time's flow. This is particularly important to understanding what repentance means, both for the repentant person and our forgiving God.

Of course, there are cases that make the unfolding of past and future complicated. For example, the experience of conversion is an extreme case that can function as a metonym (or representation) for many others. Conversion is an experience that punctuates the present world and its past not only with new affordances for acting in the world one already inhabits but also with the possibility of a new world. That new world cannot help but be, in some sense, a hermeneutic unfolding of the old one. After I joined the Church, I was still the person born where I am certified to have been born, with the same parents, the same background, and so on. But I was living a new life. It makes no sense for *me* to have a new world if I do not retain my identity as the me who I was. At the same time, my experience of conversion unfolded a different future that

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exchange our research. But we both independently worked on this topic afterward and have come to similar conclusions.

rewrote my past, giving new meaning to old events and thereby opening a new future in the present.

Coming to Christ calls us to a work—namely, the work of living up to a new past and a new future by unfolding a new present. That means bringing our new past to bear in the cooperative life of a new, Christian world. After conversion, there is new work to do, work that was previously impossible without Christ. In light of our new world and its new work with conversion, we remember the past differently as we engage with a future to which we are called by that conversion. The reshaping of the past, which is part of time in every moment, is made new by Christian conversion.

If we take the perspective of the ordinary world in which we find ourselves, then the change of the past by conversion, as that change is described in the language of philosophical and theological reflection (rather than the language of scripture), may seem mysterious at best or obscurantist at worst. Yet scripture gives us several examples of this change. For Latter-day Saints, the case of Alma the Younger may come to mind first. In Alma 36:12–18, he writes that when he encountered the angel, he was "racked with eternal torment," recognizing the destruction he had caused. Then, after he encountered Jesus, he could no longer remember that pain (v. 19). The bitterness of the pain of the past had been replaced by the exquisite sweetness of joy (v. 21). After his conversion, Alma was no longer simply the person who led many away to destruction; he became a new being—even though others knew his old past and some probably treated him according to it. As a new being, Alma was one for whom Christ took away the burden of sin. With a new past and present, Alma felt the need to make restitution and to repair. His having led people away was now redefined by the relation of those events to Alma's conversion to Christ; Alma's past now required his love. In Alma's case, that meant preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. He chose repentance rather than pride (for those who refuse to see where they missed the mark and justify their sin) or guilt and torment (for those who recognize their sins but have not yet repented).[43]

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43. We are not told whether Alma did anything else to make restitution for the destruction he had brought about, but it would not be surprising if he did even more than preach the gospel. Though there is insufficient space here to explore what his repentance meant for others, it is important to note that repentance includes restitution: not only must the past be changed for Alma and God, it must be changed for those he has wronged—or it cannot be changed for either Alma or God. The change of the past for

The Alma whom God called into being through the angel's message and whom God remembers after Alma's repentance is the reborn Alma rather than the old one—and that is how Alma now knows himself as well, as do those who accept the reality of his conversion. But Alma's rebirth is not just a matter of now being different than he was and having a different future than he would have had otherwise. Alma's rebirth changed the meaning of the events of his previous life by changing how those events relate to the rest of the events of his life and the lives of others. The events of Alma's past now open a future that was previously impossible; Alma's past was made new by his repentance. We can see why Paul called God "the Father of [all] mercies, and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3).

Some may argue that even though the past now means something different than it did, the past itself has not changed: what happened happened! There may be a sense, one that a video recording could presumably capture, in which we can say that the repentant person still did the same thing in the past—*if* by that we mean that their bodies moved in the same way, the sounds that came from their mouth were still the same as recorded on an oscilloscope, and so on. But those movements and sounds do not define the event as such. They do not give it its *meaning*—its relation to other events in the past and present and those possible in the future—and meaning is essential to deciding what a human event really is. The most obvious example is that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross means something different in light of the Resurrection than it would have meant had there been no Resurrection. A camera recording the Crucifixion would record the same thing in both cases, but the event in question would have been radically different had there been no Resurrection. Thus, the insistence on the reality of the Resurrection by most Christians in the history of Christianity. There are not two things: the event in time on the one hand, and the meaning of that event on the other. Meaning cannot be separated from the event itself.

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the person wronged may not change the effects of the wrong done to them. Effects such as a serious physical injury may be unalterable. That cannot be changed in this life. Nevertheless, the meaning of that past wrong can be changed—even for the injured party, and it is especially important for the person who repents to make this change possible. If the meaning of the past wrong can be changed, then that past event is no longer the same event that it was, though its effects linger. They, too, have a different meaning, not that those effects now mean something good but now, in spite of them, reconciliation with one's enemy is possible. Some cases of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa show the reality of that possibility.

For the repentant person and those who share the world in which she now lives, the new world created by her relationship to Christ, the new meaning of her past events—and therefore each event itself—is given in the unfolding of the future brought about by the entry of Jesus Christ into time, including the historical time of the first century, Christ's coming at the Apocalypse, the time of the repentant person's rebirth, and her subsequent present and future life in Christ. What God remembers is the event refigured by Christ's Atonement; what God forgets—because it no longer exists except perhaps in the minds of those who do not or cannot yet accept the person's repentance—is the sinful, unatoned event.[44] But that sinful, unatoned event no longer exists because a new relation, the relation of atonement, has been created with other events.

Conclusion

Jean-Yves Lacoste reminds us that, for a Christian, "meaning comes at the end."[45] It is the return of Christ both now and in the future that gives history—and ultimately our lives, including our past—its real meaning. Christ's return ruptures time and changes the meaning—and therefore the reality—of what preceded it. Repentance changes a person's past by giving it a different meaning (both for the person and for the saints with whom the person now dwells). This experience of the end of history—in other words, of new creation—is available to each disciple of Christ. For most of us, it will not be as dramatic as that of Alma the Younger. It is likely to occur over a number of years rather than in a moment or over only a few days. But receiving the redemption of our past, of God no longer remembering our sins as sins but, instead, as matters revoked under the seal of repentance and made new, is central to what it means to be a follower in covenant relationship with Jesus Christ.[46] Covenants "are not rules to earn His love. . . . Covenants are the shape of God's embrace."[47]

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44. There are many reasons someone wronged by another might be unable to see that person's repentance, including, for example, psychological trauma. But if the person has genuinely repented, then the other person is mistaken about the repentant person's past, even if the other person has good reasons for being unable to see the change. Part of restitution, sometimes the most difficult part, is making it possible for the wronged person to come to terms with one's repentance.

45. Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man,* trans. Mark Raftery-Skehan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 137.

46. See Emily Belle Freeman, "Walking in Covenant Relationship with Christ," *Liahona* 47, no. 11 (November 2023): 76–79.

47. Daines, "Sir, We Would Like to See Jesus," 14.

Understanding the temporality of Christian life in this way would mean that a life reconciled to God is one that moves forward from the blessings that have already been granted (Creation, the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus, the Restoration) to genuine newness of life, past and future (through baptism and the reception of the Holy Ghost). Always already blessed by what has happened, the Christian moves forward, living as though the future promises are present. Ordinances such as baptism and the endowment allow each person to act as if our death, resurrection, and exaltation have occurred. We live a new life in covenant relationship with the Father, knowing the kingdom of God is already here. Christian life is new life on that moving cusp, and the Christian's responsibility is to live in the newness of life continually given by Christ. It is to live in a different time, kairological time, because one accepts the responsibility incumbent on the Christian at *this* moment, the responsibility to be engaged in the world facing both forward and backward, remembering Eden and Christ's Resurrection while moving forward toward his return and the promised establishment of Zion.

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