

Singular and Plural Address in the Scriptures

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Steeped in post-Enlightenment philosophy with its primary focus on the individual, modern readers may unwittingly assume that the Lord likewise is focused solely on individuals when he promises blessings or assigns responsibilities. Although the scriptures contain many instances where the Lord speaks to individuals separately, he also speaks to the Church or his people collectively. It is not always easy to distinguish between these two modes of address, especially because the English pronoun *you* can be either singular or plural. However, awareness of this linguistic issue can improve our reading of the scriptures, at times revising our understanding substantially.

It is evident that the Lord uses both collective and individual discourse. To be sure, he sometimes states explicitly that he is speaking one way or the other. For example, in assuring the elders of the Church in 1831, the Lord made it clear that he was speaking “unto the church collectively and not individually” (D&C 1:30). Three years later, in reprimanding the Saints for their transgressions, the Lord likewise stated that he spoke “concerning the church and not individuals” (D&C 105:2), and twice in section 61 he clarified, “What I say unto one I say unto all” (D&C 61:18, 36).

Although these passages are exceptional in that they overtly distinguish between singular and collective discourse, in truth the Lord has often distinguished between the Church and its individual members. Indeed, the Lord’s concern about the Church’s collective worthiness has deep but often overlooked roots. The idea of “collective responsibility” was fundamental in ancient Israelite thought. Old Testament scholarship frequently comments on the collective nature of Israelite justice and mercy,¹ and examples of collective responsibility for individual sin are common in the Old Testament.²

Israelites were bound to God not only individually but also collectively through God's covenant with the entire nation. Each Israelite had a personal duty to keep the commandments so that the entire nation would progress.³ Thus it is common in the Old Testament, but also in other scriptures, for the Lord to address his people both individually and collectively.⁴

Sometimes the grammatical form of a text will be in the singular even though the sense of the passage applies to the group, as in "thou [singular] shalt love the Lord thy God" (Deuteronomy 6:5), which is a commandment directed toward all Israel (Deuteronomy 6:4). Other times the form may be plural, but the force of the discourse is individual, as in "choose you [plural] this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15), for the covenantal choice will be made by each individual. Thus careful reading and attention are required to discern whether a text is speaking individually, collectively, or perhaps even in both of these modes.

Recognizing that the Lord speaks both collectively and individually may cast his promises and doctrines in different lights. One asks, for example, whether in Malachi 3:8–12 the Lord is speaking to one or to all when he states:

Will a man rob God? Yet ye [plural] have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you [plural] the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the Lord of hosts.

Focusing exclusively on individual discourse and perhaps misdirected by the opening question "will a man [singular] rob God?," readers often infer that the Lord will pour out financial blessings upon each individual who pays tithing. In fact, however, it appears that the Lord is speaking not to individual Israelites but to the house of Israel collectively. An initial indicator of the collective address is the passage's use of the plural. In the Hebrew, verses 8–12 use the second person plural masculine pronoun *'attem* and the plural verb ending *tem* instead of the singular *'attah* and *tah*. The King James translation also preserves a part of this singular/plural distinction in its use of the plural pronoun "ye" instead of the singular "thou."

Admittedly, as addressed above, the employment of plurals, and particularly of plural pronouns, is not a definitive indicator of collective

address. Speakers, including the Lord, often intend their remarks to apply to each individual within an audience even though they address the audience collectively with a plural “you.”⁵ This passage in Malachi, however, has other indications of collective address beyond the plural pronouns *we* and *ye*. The Lord states that he has been robbed by “this whole nation,” suggests that “all nations shall call you blessed,” and promises that “ye shall be a delightsome land.” This additional language strongly suggests that the Lord’s promise in Malachi 3 is a collective promise and not, in the first instance, an individual promise. If Israel collectively will pay her tithes and offerings, Israel collectively will be blessed.

Understood in this collective sense, the Lord’s promise takes on a different cast. The message is not that individuals will necessarily receive financial rewards for tithe paying but that every individual has an obligation to the Lord and to his kingdom to pay tithing so that his people as a whole will prosper.⁶ Thus the fact that some individuals are faithful tithe payers yet remain impoverished is not an indication that the Lord’s promise in Malachi has not been fulfilled. In fact, their faithfulness should be recognized as a contribution to the communal responsibility to tithe. It is in part because of their faithfulness that the Church as a whole is blessed. It follows that a tithe payer who is financially blessed should be cautious in attributing his own wealth strictly to personal adherence to the principle of tithing. It could be that the financial blessings are in part attributable to the righteousness of the Church collectively, and that the Lord rightly expects the member to use his wealth to help build up the kingdom, to ensure that Israel’s storehouses are full.⁷

This collective understanding of Malachi also applies to the frequently advanced suggestion that the Book of Mormon promises prosperity to those who are righteous. Carefully read, however, the typical Book of Mormon promise of prosperity in Alma 50:19–20 is a promise to the entire posterity of Lehi and not an individual promise to every person who keeps the commandments. Indeed, usually when the Book of Mormon discusses the prosperity that flows from righteousness, it refers to “prosperity in the church.”⁸

The idea that the Lord uses both collective and individual discourse can help us interpret numerous scriptures. For example, understanding that the Lord speaks collectively can be usefully applied to Ether 12:27, where the Lord states that he gives “unto men [plural] weakness that they may be humble.” If one’s focus is on individual rather than collective address, this scripture seems to suggest that the Lord gives each person specific trials or weaknesses to teach humility or induce private growth. But if the Lord is speaking collectively about giving men weakness, rather

than giving each man weaknesses, then Ether 12:27 becomes more readily compatible with the doctrine that trials, sicknesses, and suffering are not necessarily individually designed by God, but are often a function of the sin and inequality that result from our and others' exercise of free agency.⁹

Another illustration comes from Genesis 17:9–13. In setting forth the Abrahamic Covenant, the Lord shifts between individual and collective address for conscious purposes. This shifting in Genesis 17 has been discussed by Kevin Barney in his work on *enallage* (Greek for “interchange,” or shifts between singular and plural for rhetorical effect).¹⁰ In that passage, the Lord initially addresses Abraham in the second person singular “thou” when describing the covenant he will make with Abraham and his seed, and then the text shifts to the second person plural “ye” in discussing the implications of the covenant for both Abraham and his seed.¹¹ The Lord's shift to collective address emphasizes that the covenant obligates and blesses not only Abraham but also his posterity.

In sum, paying close attention to the audience addressed rewards readers with more to ponder. Our understanding of doctrine in the scriptures is enhanced by realizing that the Lord may be speaking individually, collectively, or both.

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1. See Joel S. Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 16–29.

2. For example, Genesis 18–19 (the Lord is willing to spare all the people within Sodom and Gomorrah if only ten righteous can be found); Joshua 6:17–7:26 (Joshua's army faces a setback because Achan has violated the ban on plundering Jericho; in turn, Achan's family and animals are stoned for Achan's sin); 2 Samuel 21:1–14 (famine is visited upon Israel because of Saul's slaying of Gibeonites; the problem is remedied by acceding to Gibeonite demand that they be allowed to hang seven of Saul's offspring); Judges 19–21 (the Benjamites suffer until the city of Gibeah is destroyed); Jonah 1:1–16 (Jonah's boatmates suffer until Jonah confesses that he is the source of the problem and allows himself to be cast overboard); Deuteronomy 5:9–10 and Exodus 20:5–6 (“for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments”).

Some scholars have challenged the view that ideas of collective responsibility in the Old Testament are really a departure from more modern ethical constructs. See Saul Levmore, “Rethinking Group Responsibility and Strategic Threats in Biblical

Texts and Modern Law,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 71 (1995): 85–86, 120. Levmore’s thesis is that most of the so-called group responsibility for individual error in the Old Testament occurs in the context of warfare, where even modern law recognizes that innocents can properly be made to suffer for the actions of others within their country. His view is that ancient legal systems shared our inclination to use group responsibility and strategic threats sparingly and were concerned primarily with individual responsibility.

3. See Deuteronomy 26:17–18. Kaminsky draws a useful lesson from this point:

Ancient Israel’s fundamental insight into the fact that we are all our ‘brother’s keeper’ could provide a corrective to many of our current philosophical and political tendencies that inform us only of our rights as individuals but rarely of our responsibilities as members of larger communities. (Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility*, 13–14)

Although collective responsibility and reward were an important aspect of Israel’s understanding of its relationship with the Lord, individual obligations and consequences are also present in the Old Testament. For example, Genesis 19:17–26 (Lot’s wife is turned into a pillar of salt for disobediently looking back upon Sodom); Deuteronomy 29:18–21 (the Lord “shall separate . . . unto evil” certain wicked, individual Israelites “out of all the tribes of Israel”).

4. For example, 3 Nephi 10:5 (“O ye people of the house of Israel, who have fallen; yea, O ye people of the house of Israel, ye that dwell at Jerusalem, as ye that have fallen; yea, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not”); 2 Chronicles 7:14 (“If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land”); Exodus 32:9 (“And the Lord said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people”); Deuteronomy 26:18–19 (“And the Lord hath avouched thee this day . . . to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name”).

5. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–3, Paul exhorts the Thessalonian Saints: “As ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. . . . For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication.” Although Paul uses the plural “ye,” his intention appears to be an injunction to each individual and a statement that their individual “sanctification” depends on their individual obedience. See also 3 Nephi 9:14 (“Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life”); 3 Nephi 12:1–2 (“after that ye are baptized with water”).

6. President Hinckley has focused on the collective blessings associated with tithing: “May all be honest, and even generous, in the payment of tithes and offerings, and may the windows of heaven be opened and *blessings be showered down upon us as a people* as we walk with boldness and in faith before the Lord to accomplish His eternal work.” *Ensign* 28 (May 1998), 88, emphasis added.

7. This is not to suggest that every member of the Church who is wealthy is wealthy as a result of the collective righteousness of the Church. Plainly, individuals can become wealthy by other principles upon which the acquisition of wealth is predicated. See Doctrine & Covenants 130:20–21 (“There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, 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”). Nor can one conclude that individual blessings are never associated with paying tithing. The experience of individual tithing and the message of Doctrine & Covenants 64:23 witness that individual blessings do attach to obedience to the law of tithing, but it is not at all clear that one of those individual blessings is financial wealth.

8. See Alma 49:30 (“And there was continual peace among *them*, and exceedingly great *prosperity in the church* because of *their* heed and diligence which *they* gave unto the word of God,” italics added); Alma 1:30 (“And thus they did prosper and become far more wealthy than those who did not belong to their church”). See also Helaman 3:24–25 (equating prosperity with the growth of the Church and the number of convert baptisms).

9. Alma 28:13–14. The source and nature of adversity is a topic beyond the scope of this short study. Although we may not be able to determine which hardships are individual tutorials designed by the Lord and which are merely the result of the plan of salvation working itself out among men, the understanding that the Lord often speaks collectively as well as individually helps avoid improper anger at God for suffering that he may not have aimed at us personally.

10. Kevin L. Barney, “Divine Discourse Directed at a Prophet’s Posterity in the Plural: Further Light on Enallage,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 229.

11. Barney, “Divine Discourse,” 229–34, points to probable examples of this same sort of enallage in the Book of Mormon (citing 1 Nephi 12:9; 2 Nephi 1:31–32; and 2 Nephi 3:1–2). For a further inquiry into enallage in the Book of Mormon, see Kevin L. Barney, “Enallage in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (1994): 113–47. For another significant shift from singular to plural between Matthew 6:5 and 6:9, see John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 79.