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An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma 32

Adam S. Miller

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AN EXPERIMENT ON THE WORD



AN EXPERIMENT ON THE WORD:
READING ALMA 32

EDITED BY ADAM S. MILLER

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLASHIP

BRIGHAM YONG UNIVERSITY

AN EXPERIMENT ON THE WORD
Reading Alma 32

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CONTENTS

Series Introduction	vii
An Experiment on the Word: Introduction <i>Adam S. Miller</i>	I
Summary Report	9
Desiring to Believe: Wisdom and Political Power <i>James E. Faulconer</i>	21
You Must Needs Say that the Word is Good <i>Adam S. Miller</i>	31
It is Well that Ye are Cast Out: Alma 32 and Eden <i>Jenny Webb</i>	43
Faith, Hope, and Charity: Alma and Joseph Smith <i>Joseph M. Spencer</i>	57
So Shall My Word Be: Reading Alma 32 through Isaiah 55 <i>Julie M. Smith</i>	71
Faith and Commodification <i>Robert Couch</i>	87
Bibliography	99
Contributors	101



Series Introduction

THIS SERIES OF BOOKS is based on a novel idea: that Mormons do theology. Doing theology is different from weighing history, deciding doctrine, or inspiring devotion. Theology speculates. It experiments with questions and advances hypotheses. It tests new angles and pulls loose threads. It reads old texts in careful and creative ways.

Theology, in this sense, is not an institutional practice. It has no force beyond the charity it demonstrates and it decides no questions beyond what the Brethren have settled. It is the work of individuals who, for its own sake, want to see what ideas about Mormonism may, at least for a time, fly.

The Mormon Theology Seminar aims to promote such work. The Seminar is both unofficial and independent. It is scholarly in orientation and cooperative in practice. It focuses on organizing short-term, seminar-style collaborations that, over the span of a few months of intense discussion, consider specific questions about Mormon theology through close readings of basic Mormon texts.

The books in this series make public the papers that result from these seminars. They display, in print, theology as a Mormon ideal.



An Experiment on the Word

Introduction

Adam S. Miller

THE PAPERS PRESENTED in this book are the fruit of an experiment in Mormon theology. They grow out of a root project called the Mormon Theology Seminar that is distinctive in two respects: (1) it reads Mormon scripture theologically rather than historically, doctrinally, or devotionally, and (2) it undertakes this reading in a way that is intensely collaborative. These papers exemplify the aims of the larger project because they collectively attempt very close, theological readings of Alma 32.

Granted that the terms “Mormon” and “theology” may be an unusual pair, an initial word of explanation is in order. First, why do theology? And what does it mean to do theology in a Mormon context?

I. SHOWING CHARITY

The working thesis of this particular experiment—and, in the end, of the Seminar as a whole—is that theology, as a collaborative but non-institutional endeavor, matters only to the extent that it is able to show and extend charity. It is our position that charity (or the love of God) is the one object upon which theology ought to ceaselessly reflect. Just as life defines the scope of biology, charity defines the proper span of theology. Theology is worth only as much charity as it is able to show.

It is the specificity of this task that distinguishes theological reflection from work that is historical, doctrinal, or devotional. Where

historical work is concerned with reconstructing past events, doctrinal work with the determination of what is institutionally normative, and devotional work with the expression of personal piety, theology is concerned with charity. Doubtless, theology must respect historical facts and reflect with care on what beliefs are binding, but it does not do so for the sake of historical accuracy or institutional propriety. Though intertwined with history, doctrine, and devotion, theology has nothing but charity as its own legitimating end. If a reading shows charity, either in the substance of its remarks or in the manner of its expression, if it addresses the root of human suffering with insight and compassion, then it is a theological success. If it does not, then—whatever else its merits—theology is nothing.

2. READING

Methodologically, Mormon theology ought to be shaped by the centrality of scripture. Absent any “systematic theology” or professional clergy, Mormonism emphasizes the need for persistent, individual engagement with its foundational texts: The Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price. Within the scope of ongoing revelation, these “standard works” organize Mormon experience around the work of personally and collectively exploring the ideas and practices narrated by these texts. For Mormons, reading is a core religious practice.

In response, the papers collected here understand Mormon theology to be primarily the work of reading Mormon texts. Theology reads. With immense care and patience, it reads and re-reads sacred texts for the sake of charity and with a keen eye for each text’s latent patterns and defining details. Theology participates in the illumination of patterns that show charity, produce meaning, and overwrite senselessness. Reading, theology maps meaning.

The key to theologically illuminating a text’s latent patterns of meaning—those charitable patterns that are present in a text but

have remained undeveloped—is the inclusion of one additional methodological condition. This additional condition distinguishes the freedom of a theological reading from those readings that are more properly historical, doctrinal, or devotional. As an experiment in Mormon theology, the papers in this book posit that, by definition, theological readings are *hypothetical*.

What does it mean to say that theological readings are “hypothetical”?

3. HYPOTHESES

Texts are not static recordings but dynamic, meaning-making machines. The strings of letters, words, and sentences on a page create meaning when we turn the machine on by reading it. As a machine with precisely positioned, interlocking parts, a text clearly cannot produce just any meaning whatsoever, but it is nonetheless true that it can produce a variety of meanings depending on the questions brought to bear by its reader. Texts, as meaning-making machines, are responsive to our engagement with them.

For example, if we read a text historically, then that text will produce information about the time and place that it describes or the context and setting in which it was produced. We might, for instance, read Alma 32 with an eye for the complexities of Nephite and Zoramite political history or, similarly, with careful attention to what the text might reveal about Mormon’s editorial work or Joseph Smith’s approach to translation. If we read a text doctrinally, then the history and specificity of the text will recede as the machine produces general information about what beliefs and principles may be normative and binding for members of the Church. Read in this way, Alma 32 might be mined for whatever free-standing doctrines or principles can be extracted, correlated, and then generally applied. Further, if we read a text devotionally, then the machine might function as an occasion for personal piety. Here, even the bare work of page-turning can express

something of an individual's commitment to God and open the door to greater insight into one's personal circumstances.

These typical approaches, however, do not exhaust the meaning of a sacred text. Theology is an attempt to explore the range of meanings that scripture is capable of producing beyond the bounds of its historical, doctrinal, and devotional responses. Theology runs experiments for the sake of mapping a text's own latent patterns. Its power to illuminate these unseen, latent patterns derives from its freedom to pose hypothetical questions: *if* such and such were the case, *then* what meaningful pattern would the text produce in response?

The papers collected in this volume pose just these kinds of hypothetical questions. For example, James Faulconer's paper, "Desiring to Believe: Wisdom and Political Power," asks how our understanding of Alma 32 might be enlarged if read in the context of the Book of Mormon's larger, original chapter divisions. Here, Alma's discourse on faith would be clearly embedded in the sweep of a broader narrative (from Alma 30:1–35:16) about the limitations of both political power and gospel preaching. In light of these limitations, the text drives home our persistent need for the wisdom of God to address the sorrow of sin.

Adam Miller's paper, "Ye Must Needs Say the Word Is Good," posits that humility, as Alma 32 describes it, is an unavoidable necessity for both rich and poor. If humility—as a knowledge of our ongoing insufficiency and lack of autonomy—is unavoidable, then knowledge, rather than being the fulfillment of faith, is the place from which faith begins. Faith, Alma contends, is a willing affirmation of the knowledge we already possess: it is an affirmation of our perpetual weakness and an acceptance of God's promise of mercy and grace.

Further, Jenny Webb's paper, "It Is Well That Ye Are Cast Out," asks how our reading of Alma 32 might change if we were to read the chapter's structure and narrative details as a reflection of Adam and Eve's experience in the Garden of Eden. In this light, the chapter's account of Alma's preaching to the Zoramites—an account that describes how the Zoramite poor are cast out, entertain a messenger from the Lord,

and then receive detailed instructions meant to lead them to the tree of life through a careful cultivation of the seed/word—productively resonates in unforeseen ways with core Mormon beliefs.

Joseph M. Spencer’s paper, “Faith, Hope, and Charity: Alma and Joseph Smith,” focuses on Alma 32:21–23. In these verses, Spencer notes the curious absence of charity from Alma’s elaboration of the relationship between faith and hope. If, however, these suggestive verses are read constructively in light of Joseph Smith’s revelations about the eternal nature of love, the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, and the importance of angelic visitation, it becomes possible to mark the place of charity in Alma’s discourse.

Julie M. Smith’s paper, “So Shall My Word Be: Reading Alma 32 through Isaiah 55,” examines how our reading of Alma 32 might be amplified if we follow numerous intertextual parallels and read the chapter through the lens of Isaiah 55. When we do so, we find that several key themes in Alma are emphasized or clarified, including the idea that Zoramite poverty has a spiritual solution, that access to a special place is not required in order to have a relationship with the Lord, and that the intervention of a Savior is essential to the process of planting God’s word.

Finally, Robert Couch’s paper, “Faith and Commodification,” asks if there is a substantial connection between a desire for signs and our contemporary consumer culture. If Alma’s discourse is read as a warning against the dangers of “commodifying” faith, then how would this influence our understanding of the proper relation between knowledge and faith?

The merit of each of these hypothetical questions depends entirely on the richness of the pattern that the text develops in response and, conjointly, on the amount of charity that this pattern is able to show.

Thus, when read theologically, the historical, doctrinal, and exegetical dimensions of scripture are essential but not decisive. In addition to these dimensions, theological readings involve an explicitly creative engagement with the text that depends on: (1) the details of the text’s latent patterns, and (2) the hypothetical questions that, as

with chemicals and an undeveloped negative, create a reaction that can bring novel patterns into developed focus. Theological readings aim to develop a text's latent images of Christ.

However, it is essential to remember that, because it is fundamentally hypothetical, theology is always tentative and nonbinding. Theology, though sensitive to what is normatively binding, never decides doctrine. Though this is a kind of weakness, this weakness is also the source of theology's unique strength. Because it is hypothetical, theology is free to map whatever charitable patterns the details of the text may prompt it to pursue. The rich theological possibilities of a text like Alma 32 are, in principle, limited only by the spiritually productive questions that we as readers are capable of bringing to bear. If a particular approach does not bear charity, then nothing has been lost. If an approach does reveal patterns of meaning that address the root of human suffering, then its productivity speaks for itself. The key is to pose hypothetical questions that will allow the text's own voice to respond. The patterns that emerge in response to a given question may or may not coincide with our understanding of the author's original intention or with the contours of more familiar readings. To be theologically productive, the patterns need only show charity and be rigorously grounded in the words of the texts themselves.

4. COLLABORATION

In addition to the imperative of charity and the independence of the text, the freedom of theology is delimited by one further condition: the necessity of collaboration.

Here, the centrality of charity to the work of theology calls us to avoid reading alone. Rather, charity naturally casts theology as a collaborative endeavor. Unsatisfied with the work of simply reflecting on charity, theology wants to be undertaken in such a way as to simultaneously enact it. To this end, the Mormon Theology Seminar is itself an attempt to practice charity by organizing collaborative

readings of Mormon scripture. The Seminar is committed to the idea that the full strength of a text's capacity for charity can develop only when our engagement with that text is triangulated by an equally important engagement with the hearts and minds of other readers. A text's latent patterns develop most clearly when jointly illuminated by a reading that is shared.

To this end, the Seminar is committed to organizing short-term, seminar-style collaborations that consider specific questions about Mormon theology through close readings of Mormon texts. Its primary aim is to create a common space where theological work can be undertaken in a way that is both concentrated and collaborative.

Through the creation of such common spaces, we hope to avoid two difficulties that have traditionally plagued theological work. On the one hand, focused theological work has typically been an individual affair and the spaces that customarily support this work tend to reinforce isolation and idiosyncrasy. For instance, the writing of conference papers and journal articles tends to be relatively private work that only briefly flares in the common space of a presentation or publication. On the other hand, common spaces typically conducive to spirited discussion and collaboration generally tend to preclude focused and sustained concentration. Exchanges on blogs and discussion lists, for example, while often invigorating and instructive, consistently lack focus and resolution. In short, collaboration tends to diffuse concentration and vice versa.

In order to address this difficulty, the Seminar organizes small, temporary study groups (or seminars) designed to facilitate creative, collaborative readings of primary Mormon texts.

These seminars are organized along the following lines:

- (1) Each seminar consists of 4–6 people, preferably including both men and women, and preferably with a variety of backgrounds.
- (2) Each seminar collaborates for a period of only 3–4 months.

(3) Each seminar is organized around the reading of a small selection from a Mormon text (typically less than 20 pages). An agreed upon reading schedule paces the work over the span of several months.

(4) Prior to the work of reading itself, seminar participants formulate a small, provisional set of key questions in order to bring focus to possible avenues for future discussion and aid them in formulating concise summaries of their findings. These questions should be freely modified, extended, or replaced as the seminar proceeds.

(5) Members of the seminar take turns leading weekly discussions that address that week's reading assignment in view of the seminar's key questions. In light of the discussion, possible answers are then tentatively framed in the discussion leader's summary of that week's work.

(6) At the conclusion of the seminar, the participants co-author a concise report that summarizes their provisional findings. In addition to the joint report, participants may also compose individual papers prompted by their work in the seminar.

(7) Reports and individual papers are then indexed for easy reference and publicly archived.

The individual papers and collaboratively written report (see chapter 1) presented in this book are the direct result of one such seminar that was organized around a close reading of Alma 32. The full text of the seminar's several months of active discussion is publicly archived on the Mormon Theology Seminar website.

It will, I believe, be obvious to the reader that each of this volume's papers bear the mark of the distinctively theological approach described above and that, further, one will not need to read very far to recognize that each paper has been shaped by a core of common understanding forged over months of collaboration. However, in the end, as with any such endeavor, the value of this collaborative effort must only be measured in terms of the charity that it has and may yet be able to show.

Summary Report

Question 1: What does Alma 32 teach us about exercising faith?

Throughout Alma 32, Alma characterizes faith as an affirmative response to the word of God as delivered by a divine messenger. Faith is exercised by “giving place” to the seed of God’s word, by refusing to cast out that seed, and by allowing that word to grow within us, transforming us from the inside out. Faith is a willingness to say, in response to the changes wrought upon us by the word of God, that the word is good.

In this way, faith is exercised as a kind of active restraint or affirmative letting-be. Faith does not plant the seed, it does not cause the seed to grow, and it is not responsible for the transformative effects that follow from the seed’s taking root in our hearts and minds. God’s mercy and grace, extended through his Son, accomplish these acts. We exercise faith through an active and affirmative cultivation of restraint that grants sufficient room for the word to work. Faith affirms without compulsion the necessity of both our humility and God’s mercy. Faith openly and persistently acknowledges that only God can transform us and that the work of the word upon us is to be welcomed rather than feared.

The specific phrase “exercise your faith” occurs only once in Alma 32 and once more as a variant (see verses 27 and 36 respectively). Interestingly, these occurrences frame what is often considered to

be the heart of Alma's discourse: his description of the experiment that he desires the Zoramites to perform. Until verse 27, Alma has focused his attention on humility, signs, and the relationship between faith and knowledge. However, verse 27 begins with a call to action: "But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith..." This call to action is explicitly intertwined with desire and this desire is expressed through an act of humility that gives place in our hearts for something other than ourselves: "yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words."

Alma then outlines the process of the experiment in verses 28–35. The result of the experimental process is that the subject who makes room for the seed/word and allows it to follow its natural course without casting it out through unbelief will be able to gain a perfect knowledge that the seed/word is, in fact, good. However, in verse 35, Alma makes clear that the resulting knowledge is no end in itself. Rather, it is only part of the required journey: "neither must ye lay aside your faith, for ye have *only* exercised your faith to plant the seed that ye might try the experiment to know if the seed was good" (emphasis added). In other words, verses 28–35 relate a specific, limited example of exercised faith.

Crucially, these verses imply that, even in light of the received knowledge, we must choose to *continue* to exercise faith. Though, as Alma says in verse 34, faith may become "dormant" with respect to a specific object, it endures in and beyond the perfection of knowledge. Having exercised faith and experimented upon the word, and thus having discovered without a doubt the goodness of the word, we must continue to actively affirm through all eternity that the word's work is good and desirable. We must continue to say that we *want* the word. Indeed, rather than faith passing away with the arrival of a perfect knowledge, we might better say that only faith's continued affirmation of God's word can perfect the knowledge that the experiment reveals.

Question 2: What does Alma mean by “the word,” and why is it so central to faith?

“The word” is arguably the central theme of Alma’s discourse to the Zoramite poor. In fact, Alma explains in 31:5 that the entire mission to the Zoramites is undertaken because “the preaching of the word ... had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them.” The word, Alma contends, wields a kind of power and this unique power must be understood as fundamentally different from the strength of the sword.

In one sense, the whole of Alma 32 might be read as an extended meditation on this relationship between the word and the sword. This is particularly clear in the passage where Alma uses the phrase “the word” for the first time in his discourse to the Zoramite poor. It initially occurs when he makes a distinction between those who are “compelled to be humble” because of their circumstances and those who “truly humble themselves *because of the word*” (Alma 32:14, emphasis added). Here, while the word effects a “true” humility, the sword (or power of compulsion) can produce only a forced humility. Any clear understanding of “the word” in Alma’s teachings must be tied to a clarification of these two kinds of humility and the principles that differentiate them.

Of particular interest is the way that these two kinds of humility complicate what might otherwise be regarded as a straightforward, binary opposition between pride and humility. If there are two kinds of humility—one forced, one “true”—then humility cannot simply be the opposite of pride. Moreover, because the second, “more blessed” variety of humility is caused by “the word,” it would seem that it is precisely the word that complicates the difference between pride and humility. For Alma, the word adds something to the situation that can reconfigure its basic coordinates in a potentially liberating way.

The situation in which Alma delivers his message to the Zoramites, then, can be seen as an unsupplemented situation in which the simplistic opposition holds sway. The Zoramites have divided themselves into two classes: a ruling class of the wealthy (those who are proud) and a poor, working class (those who are compelled to be humble). How, then, does the word supplement this ordinary division of the situation in a transformative way?

Alma explains in 3 2:22–23 that: “And now, behold, I say unto you, and I would that ye should remember, that God is merciful unto all who believe on his name; therefore he desireth, in the first place, that ye should believe, yea, even on his word. And now, he imparteth his word by angels.” Faith (used synonymously with “belief” throughout Alma’s sermon to the Zoramites) is said to be a question of the word: to have faith is to “believe, yea, even on his word.” The content of this word is God’s promise of mercy. Moreover, the source of the word is provided: “he imparteth his word by angels.” Faith, in other words, is a question of one’s belief in or fidelity to an angelic message that, precisely *as* angelic, is supplementary to the situation in which one otherwise finds oneself.

It is through this angelic reconfiguration of the situation that it becomes possible to speak of an additional kind of humility. On the one hand, there is a humility before (or without) the advent of the angelic word, a kind of humility that amounts to humiliation. On the other hand, there is now the possibility of a humility that unfolds as fidelity to the angelic word. The advent of the angelic word allows the situation to be rewritten through faith so that one’s humiliation can be remade as a willing and saving dependence on God’s mercy.

If all of this clarifies the relationship between the word and *faith*, it is only in the culminating second half of Alma 3 2 that Alma clarifies the relationship between the word and *knowledge*. Here, Alma develops an extended comparison of the word to a seed that intertwines the meaning of this angelic supplement with Edenic themes.

These Edenic themes highlight a basic difference between faith and knowledge, a difference that precisely mirrors Alma's previously discussed distinction between a willing humility and a forced humility. Alma, for instance, is critical of those who would demand signs specifically because knowledge *without faith* can produce only a forced humility, not the willing humility that is an effect of the word (cf. 32:17–18). In order for humility to be “blessed,” we must not be “compelled to know” by a sign (32:16). The knowledge imparted by such signs, unsupplemented by faith, can only *remove* cause for belief: “for if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it” (32:18).

It is no surprise, then, that in the second half of the chapter Alma focuses exclusively on the tree of *life* as opposed to the tree of *knowledge*. Already acquainted with death and suffering (i.e., the fruit of the tree of knowledge), the Zoramite poor, figured as Adam and Eve, receive from the divine messenger a seed/word from the tree of life. Their faithful cultivation of this seed results directly in eternal life: “if ye will nourish the word, year, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life” (32:41).

Question 3: What is meant by “experiment” in Alma 32:27?

The word “experiment” occurs only five times in LDS scripture: three times in Alma 32, once in Alma 34, and once in 2 Corinthians 9:13. The Greek term used in 2 Corinthians, *dokime*, means something like “proof” or “test.” In the Old and New Testaments, these and related terms are often used in connection with God's work of proving or testing humankind. However, humankind is also described as testing or proving God. Typically our “testing” God has negative connotations (e.g., Israel testing God's patience during the provocation—see, for example, Psalm 95:8–11), but it sometimes has a positive resonance

(e.g., Elijah “proving” God by setting the altar sacrifice on fire in 1 Kings 18:22–39, Ahaz being invited by the prophet to ask God for a sign in Isaiah 7:11–12, and God inviting Israel to “prove” him by paying their tithes in Malachi 3:10).

In Alma 32, the term “experiment” is used to describe a similar, positive testing of God, while “sign-seeking” is used to describe its negative valence. The differences between these two attitudes of testing or proving are important for understanding Alma’s sermon. The problem with sign-seeking is not that a *request* has been made, but that a fulfillment of the request has been *demand*ed. Further, sign-seekers threaten withdrawal from the relationship if their demands are not met. This attitude is not conducive to a saving relationship because, rather than responding to God’s proffered mercy, the sign-seeker’s posture of demand effectively refuses to acknowledge God as God.

Reading Alma 32 from a modern perspective, this distinction between experimenting and sign-seeking is helpful in grappling with the now-scientific connotations of the word “experiment.” On the one hand, there are many useful parallels between scientific experimentation and the way Alma advocates interacting with the word. For example, in scientific experiments, it is important that the scientist be open and receptive to the results of the experiment. If, in contrast, one is looking simply to confirm a preconceived notion about what the experiment will yield, then this is bad science. Similarly, if one approaches the word of God with a preconceived notion about what the word is going to produce, then this is bad faith. In science and in reading God’s word, one must be willing to go wherever the experiment leads, no matter how surprising this path might seem.

This is precisely the problem with the apostate forms of worship prevalent among the Zoramites: they are not really experimenting with God’s word. As Alma 31:1 puts it, Zoram was “leading the hearts of the people to bow down to dumb idols.” The dumbness

of the idols is echoed in the fixed prayers of the Zoramites which declare what their beliefs are and, without leaving room for God himself to speak, effectively tell God what they are willing to believe about him. This non-experimental attitude of holding to fixed beliefs without seeking to learn God's will is also the problem with the sign-seeking attitude that Alma describes. The sign-seeker refuses to recognize the signs that God has already shown—like the earth itself and the motion of the planets (cf. Alma 30:43–44)—and instead insists that God meet the sign-seeker's demands regarding when, where, and how appropriate signs are to be revealed. Rather than responding to God's revelations, these cases reveal a self-centered and self-imposing mode of worship that is antithetical to the spirit of genuine experimentation.

On the other hand, even a model of open-minded scientific experimentation can lead to an improper understanding of what Alma means by the term “experiment.” For example, Alma advocates *internalizing* the seed/word of God so that the experiment has a direct effect on the person conducting the experiment. In scientific experimentation this is unacceptable. Rather, the scientist must take a detached approach and merely observe the outcome of the experiment. Being subjectively invested in the way that Alma advocates breaks with the scientific method. In this sense, the common root with the word “experience” comes to the fore in the Book of Mormon usage of the term “experiment”: to experiment upon the word is to experience the word. Whereas a direct mode of experiencing the process of experimentation is something that science eschews because it would compromise objectivity, for Alma, this direct, personal mode of experimentation comprises a crucial part of the process. Only by giving place in one's own heart for the word can the growth and eventual fruit be experienced.

Internalizing the word also underscores the importance of the listener's role in yielding space to the seed in order for the conversion process to take place. Once the word presents itself, a subjective

choice must be made. Understanding this helps explain why Alma uses three active verbs in conjunction with *experiment* to describe the experimenting process in verse 27: “if ye will *awake* and *arouse* your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and *exercise* a particle of faith ... let this desire work in you.” And, in the end, the subject must make a subjective judgment about the *value* of the seed/word—“you must needs say that the word is good”—in order for the experiment to be efficacious.

By giving place to the seed, a genuine change is thus made possible. And, because of this change, a mutual relationship with God can develop. The proving work of the seed is a two-way street: the listener proves the seed, and the seed proves the listener. Through this mutual proving, God and the faithful listener are able to give place to each other and genuinely respond to one another. If the listener proves himself by responding to God’s word, then God will further prove himself by responding with additional generosity: “And when he shall prove himself faithful in all things that shall be entrusted to his care, yea, even a few things, he shall be made ruler over many” (D&C 124:113). The experiment, then, for Alma, should be understood as an invitation to begin an ongoing relationship in which God and the faithful listener are given a chance to try one other and establish a proven relationship that can be trusted to continue through whatever difficulties may come.

Question 4: How might paying close attention to the textual, historical, and political contexts of Alma 32 shape or re-shape our understanding of Alma’s treatment of faith?

Faith has the last word in Alma 30–31, quite literally: the word “faith” does not appear in these two chapters until the very last word of the very last verse of chapter 31. That the word appears in chapters 32–34 over two dozen times highlights the unusual nature of this

single appearance in chapters 30–31. Its placement as the final word of these otherwise “faith-less” chapters suggests that Alma 30–31 not only can (in light of chapter 32’s heavy emphasis on faith), but also ought to be read as working toward the question of faith. Because 31:38 ties faith specifically to “the prayer of Alma,” faith might be understood as emerging through a contrast of prayers: Alma’s prayer with that of the Zoramites.

Note that the Rameumptom prayer frequently employs the verb “to believe,” while Alma’s prayer never uses it. Instances of “to believe” in the Zoramite prayer are all in the first personal plural: “we believe” four times, and “we do not believe” once. This confessional flavor, combined with the mantra-like repetition of the phrase, gives the Rameumptom prayer a kind of creedal spirit. Perhaps, then, the distinction between the prayer of faith and the faithless prayer can be said preliminarily to be grounded in a difference in attitude towards creeds. Moreover, the five creedal statements here are all statements about transcendent *facts*: whereas Alma simply talks in his prayer about what he has seen immediately before him, the Zoramites make claims about things that have not been—indeed, cannot have been—experienced personally. Where the creedal prayer lays a heavy emphasis on the communal or collective, Alma’s prayer has a manifest focus on the individual.

The concept of “place” is multivalent and crucial to the meaning of faith in Alma 32. Note that when the Zoramite poor ask Alma what to do about having been cast out of the synagogue (see Alma 32:5), Alma responds with a discourse on faith (Alma 32:8–43). But when they ask him about faith (Alma 33:1), he tells them what to do about having been barred from the synagogue (Alma 33:2–23). Thus, location and faith are linked. The Zoramite poor are operating under the misunderstanding that they need access to a certain place to worship, but Alma teaches that the only “place” they need is the place they must make in their hearts for the seed to grow. And,

here, Alma's call to "give place" echoes his description of Korihor as someone who had "put off the Spirit of God that it may have no *place* in you" (Alma 30:42, emphasis added).

Thus, the primary location for faith is the heart of the worshipper. At the same time, physical, exterior locations carry symbolic weight. While Zoramite praying occurs in "a place built up in the center of their synagogue, a place for standing" (Alma 31:13), Alma preaches from a hill (Alma 32:4). Both Alma's hill and the Rameumptom have the superficial similarity of being "high places," but Alma's is natural (or: God-created) and out of doors while the Zoramites' is man-made and contained within a synagogue. While Zoramite worship is surrounded by the man-made (synagogue, Rameumptom, fine clothing, and jewels), Alma is in nature with nothing artificial mentioned and he preaches a parable that is nature-focused. Alma sees that not only were the Zoramites' bodies lifted up, but that "their hearts were lifted up" (Alma 31:25) as well.

Zoramite worship (31:13) uses physical space symbolically to: (1) suggest the superiority of one person above the others (contrast Alma 30:7, where we learn that the motivating principle behind Nephite law was to be sure that people were *not* placed on "unequal grounds"), (2) make worship into an exterior, public performance (contrast the interiority of the experiment upon the word in Alma's parable), (3) present worship as unchanging instead of growing (unlike the seed of Alma's parable), and (4) make worship into a discrete event instead of a continual process (contrast Amulek's admonition in Alma 34:27 that they pray continually).

Contextually, the contrast between Alma's and Korihor's conversion experiences also functions as an immediate backdrop to Alma's parable of the seed. Korihor's experience with the devil's angel is strikingly similar to Alma's conversion experience with an angel of God. One could say that while chapters 30–31 are a case study in distinguishing true from false messengers, chapter 32 is a theoretical elaboration

of how to prove the goodness of a messenger's word. While Alma cultivates the word through extensive fasting and prayer (see Alma 5:46) in order to obtain a spiritual witness of the word he receives, Korihor simply accepts the message without any personal verification or experimentation. The parable of the seed makes clear that one can and must test the "seed" of an angelic visitation to determine its goodness.

Further, it is important to note that geopolitical concerns motivate Alma's mission to the Zoramites. He explicitly tells us that he has chosen to preach to the Zoramites in order to prevent them from joining with the Lamanites and thus threatening the peace of the Nephites (see Alma 31:3–5). Of course, that is exactly what happens as a *direct* result of his mission (see Alma 35:8–10), an irony which may suggest that the Lord's purposes for Alma's mission were larger than Alma's.

Finally, the theme of being "cast out" is prominent throughout Alma 30–35: Korihor is cast out, the poor are cast out of the synagogue, and Alma encourages the Zoramite poor *not* to cast out a good seed. The text reminds us that, although the Zoramites have been cast out of their synagogue, they may still choose to plant a seed that no one else can cast out. Here, we also have a kind of thematic link forged between the Zoramite poor and the word/seed itself. This link encourages us to identify the poor with the seed: the Zoramite poor are a potentially good seed that, in order for faith to grow, must not be cast out. To cast out the poor—as the wealthy Zoramites do—is to cast away the opportunity to develop saving faith in God's word. When Alma urges the poor to resist "casting out" the seed, when he urges them to "give place" to something other than themselves, his exhortation must have pointedly resonated with the difficulty of their own current circumstances.



Desiring to Believe

Wisdom and Political Power

James E. Faulconer

ALL BEGINNING PHILOSOPHY STUDENTS learn that the word “philosophy” means “love of wisdom.” As Socrates argues in Plato’s *Symposium*, we should understand “love” in that etymology to mean “desire” rather than mere adoration. To be a philosopher is to desire wisdom, to want it and to seek it. In Alma 32, Alma the younger answers the question of the Zoramite poor, “What shall we do?” (Alma 32:5) by urging them to desire, to desire at least to believe. It doesn’t take much imagination to understand the sermon that follows this admonition as teaching that such a minimal desire will lead to wisdom and fulness of life: the tree of life will spring up in them (Alma 32:41; 33:23). Alma 32 is a sermon on philosophy in its original, broad sense, a sermon on the desire for wisdom and its fruits. But in what does that wisdom consist? I will argue that part of the wisdom of the Alma story, taken as a whole, is that the knowledge of God produces something other than political wisdom. It cannot bring us political peace.

When we read and discuss Alma’s sermon to the Zoramites, we sometimes fail to notice that the sermon is two chapters long rather than just one. We more often fail to notice that Amulek’s sermon in chapter 34 begins with an explanatory summary of Alma’s teaching, highlighting what Amulek understood to be Alma’s primary points, and not dividing it artificially as we do because of the break between chapters 32 and 33. Amulek tells us that Alma has prepared the minds of the Zoramite poor by exhorting them to have faith and

patience, that they should have faith to plant the seed of the word, and that the word is in Christ through whom redemption comes (Alma 34:3–7). Given such a summary, we ought to ask ourselves how our interpretations fit with Amulek’s, and perhaps we should feel uncomfortable if the answer to that question is that they are not relatively well-aligned. Much of what we say about Alma’s sermon would perhaps be revised if we were to pay closer attention to those elements of its context.

But there is an even larger context for Alma’s meaning. In the first edition of the Book of Mormon, Alma 30:1 through Alma 35:16 was one chapter, chapter 16.¹ (I will refer to that pericope as “the original chapter.”) Since this chapter of the first edition occurs also in the manuscript,² we can assume that the chapter division is an artifact of the golden plates themselves, and not something inserted by Joseph Smith. He could hardly have created chapter divisions in mid-dictation, since he didn’t know what was coming, and there is no report by his amanuenses of his having made such insertions. That suggests that the story of Korihor and the story of Alma’s mission among the Zoramites was, for its writer or editor or both,³ one story rather than two. If we wish to understand what the Book of Mormon intends to teach us with Alma’s sermon, we should ask how to understand it within the larger story.

The outline of the original chapter is: peace among the Nephites, the story of Korihor, the story of Alma and Amulek among the Zoramites, and the expulsion of believers by the Zoramites. Then, however, we have this odd ending:

Now Alma, being grieved for the iniquity of his people, yea for the wars, and the bloodsheds, and the contentions which were among them; and having been to declare the word, or sent to declare the

1. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo: FARMS, 2001), 281–319.

2. Thomas W. Mackay, “Mormon as Editor: A Study in Colophons, Headers, and Source Indicators,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2.2 (1993): 92–93.

3. I assume that the arrangement is Mormon’s rather than Alma’s, though I do not have strong reasons for doing so.

word, among all the people in every city; and seeing that the hearts of the people began to wax hard, and that they began to be offended because of the strictness of the word, his heart was exceedingly sorrowful. Therefore, he caused that his sons should be gathered together, that he might give unto them every one his charge, separately, concerning the things pertaining unto righteousness. And we have an account of his commandments, which he gave unto them according to his own record.

The first part of chapter 35 tells of the Zoramites casting out the believers among them and Alma and the other missionaries returning to Zarahemla. That is a logical end to the story of Alma and Amulek's mission to the Zoramites. But that reasonable ending is followed—as the ending of the original chapter—with Alma's woe for his people, a charge to his sons concerning the things of righteousness, and a testimony that we have Alma's record. The story of the original chapter moves from peace among the righteous to war among the hard-hearted, with Alma's sermon on the fruits of desiring the word as the apex of the story's arc. Our interpretation of Alma's sermon ought to situate it at that apex.

For the moment, however, return to the beginning of that arc, the well-known story of Korihor, and notice that it is a contest over desire: Alma tells us that the law allowed freedom of religious conscience (Alma 30:9), and he explains that law in terms of desire: those who desired to serve God were allowed to do so, but there was no punishment for those who did not have that desire. Korihor, however, takes that law to have been created in bad faith. According to him, the freedom to worship as one desires is not what it appears to be. Addressing the high priest, Giddonah, he says, "Ye say that this people is a free people, but I say they are in bondage" (Alma 30:24), and that is because "ye lead away this people ... according to your own desires" (Alma 30:27) rather, I assume, than allowing people to do what they would if they did not have the bondage of religion. Korihor's claim is that though the freedom to serve God appears to be a straightforward freedom, it is really the disguised desire of religious leaders for power (Alma 30:27–28). According to Korihor, the supposed freedom to serve God if

one desires is no freedom at all. It is that by which the Nephite priests enslave the people.

In contrast to the thinking of Korihor, Christianity requires that we depend on others, that we recognize our weakness. Most of all, we depend on the Messiah, without whom there can be no salvation, temporal or spiritual. And if we depend on the Messiah, then we also depend on each other, as Alma's father has so beautifully reminded us in Mosiah 18:8–10. For Korihor, however, true wisdom is recognizing that the desire to serve God and our fellows, in other words, to serve those on whom we depend, is false consciousness. For him, religion is a way for ordinary people to understand the world which justifies their oppression by their rulers. For Korihor, true wisdom means recognizing that we depend only on ourselves as individuals: "Every man fare[s] according to his genius, and ... every man conquer[s] according to his strength" (Alma 30:17). Service to God and dependence on others are elements of the false consciousness of religion.

Alma refutes the particulars of Korihor's argument: "Thou knowest that we do not glut ourselves on the labors of this people. [...] Then why sayest thou that we preach unto this people to get gain?" (Alma 30:32, 35). Alma testifies of God's existence (Alma 30:39)—and, therefore, of the need for religion—and he engages Korihor in a contest whose outcome vividly demonstrates that we do *not* depend merely on our own genius and strength. What better proof could he offer Korihor than the fact that Korihor became a beggar, depending on others for food (Alma 30:56) and that, in the end, he was trampled by Zoramites, devoid of the strength, either of the body or the mind, to save himself (Alma 30:59)? But the refutation of Korihor does not end with what is now Alma 30, for the refutation to that point is only negative: it shows us that Korihor is wrong, but it doesn't show us what the alternative is, and anyone seeking wisdom needs more than negative knowledge. The original chapter of the Book of Mormon presents Alma's sermon as a response to Korihor's accusation that religion is false consciousness and that we ought to serve only ourselves.

Who, having previously read the original chapter, could ignore the irony that Korihor's death is brought about by those who subscribe to a religion with beliefs that are in some ways like Korihor's, focusing on getting gain and on the denial that there will be a Messiah, one on whom we depend (Alma 31:16, 24)? The irony is compounded, however, by the fact that, as the beginning of Alma 35 shows, unlike Korihor, the Zoramites practice a religion. Indeed, they practice the kind of religion which Korihor accused Alma and the Nephite priests of practicing. The Zoramites use religion for power over the people, as we see in the story at the beginning of chapter 35, where we find the Zoramites plotting the expulsion of those who believed Alma, and as the text notes when it says that Alma's preaching "did destroy their craft" (Alma 35:3). Thus, we can read the story of the original chapter as posing the question, "What is wisdom if it is not what Korihor says it is?" and answering with Alma's and Amulek's sermons. The sermons teach us the alternative to Korihor's vision of our existence; they teach us the wisdom of humility (rather than genius) and weakness (rather than strength).

In and of themselves, however, humility and weakness do not constitute wisdom. The Zoramites who come for Alma's help illustrate that well, for they have humility and weakness aplenty, but little wisdom. These people lacking in wisdom are the answer to Alma's prayer for wisdom at the end of chapter 31. There, we find Alma pained by the wickedness of the Zoramites. As a consequence, he acknowledges his weakness and that of his fellow missionaries, and prays for comfort (Alma 31:30-32). Then he prays for power, specifically for "power and wisdom" (Alma 31:35) to bring the Zoramites to the Lord. But the power that Alma prays for is not like that which Korihor has accused him of taking. Alma has already shown that he does not preach for gain. In addition, I take the phrase "power and wisdom" to be a pleonastic pair, in other words, a pair of words which say the same thing in two ways (as in the phrase of Genesis 1:2, "without form and void"). Given the etymology of the word "comfort" (literally "power with"), in scripture I understand it to mean less "to soothe"

or “to take away pain” and more “to give strength to,” “to enable to withstand.” In other words, I take scriptural comfort to be a species of power, perhaps as Doctrine and Covenant 121:41–44 suggests, the only real power. Thus, as I understand Alma’s prayer, he prays for the very thing he will give to the Zoramites, wisdom and real power rather than temporal power.

The Zoramite poor think that they cannot worship God because, whether by decree or by social stigma, they cannot take part in the worship on the Rameumptom of the synagogue, so they come to Alma with the question of what to do (Alma 32:5). Alma begins to answer them: “Behold I say unto you, do ye suppose that ye cannot worship God save it be in your synagogues only? And moreover, I would ask, do ye suppose that ye must not worship God only once in a week?” (Alma 32:10–11). However, just as he begins, he changes his topic. As Amulek says in his sermon, Alma realizes that the question they ask, “What can we do about having been excluded from the synagogue?” is not their real question. Though they do not know it, their real question is “whether the word be in the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ” (Alma 34:5). The answer to Alma’s prayer for wisdom is first of all the wisdom to know what the real question is. Whereas the Zoramite poor take the question to be, “How do we get political power, the power to worship with our fellow citizens?” Alma knows that their question ought to be about the word, about wisdom. They desire power, but Alma knows that they really need wisdom, and the first requirement for wisdom, he tells them, is humility: “It is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom” (Alma 32:12).

With his admonition to humility, we might expect that Alma would next turn to the wisdom that humility can bring. Instead, however, we find in verse 17 what seems to be an odd turn. As if Korihor has suddenly come to mind, Alma ceases to speak of humility and instead speaks of sign-seeking: “There are many who do say: If thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe” (Alma 32:17). Paraphrased: many say “Give us

a sign and we will have sure knowledge, and if we have sure knowledge, then we will believe.” They do not see the incongruity of their assumption that in order to believe one must have sure knowledge. Why has Alma’s sermon taken this turn? What is the connection between the need for humility and sign-seeking? I believe that the answer lies in Korihor’s basic principle that we each fare according to our genius and conquer according to our strength (Alma 30:17) and in the peculiarities of Zoramite worship.

Sign-seeking makes our genius the measure of what is worthy of belief, for it says “I demand a sign, and based on the acceptability of that sign as I judge it, I will believe or not.” Sign-seeking and humility are mutually exclusive, a lesson that is particularly important to the Zoramites because for them, I think, worship is, at its heart, a matter of signs: their social superiority and their wealth prove that they are elect. They presume no longer to seek the signs because they think that they already have them, but that makes them nonetheless sign-seekers. Recall that in the mandatory prayer of the Rameumptom the worshiper says, “We believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren ... We believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children” (Alma 31:16). Zoramite worship consists in “thanking their God that they were chosen of him” (Alma 31:22). Rather than equality with others—including God! (Romans 8:15–17 and Philippians 2:6)—the Zoramites take religion to be that which demonstrates their superiority. And it appears that they take their wealth—“their costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things which they are ornamented with” (Alma 31:28)—to be a sign of being chosen, for Alma connects the two directly, saying “their hearts are set upon [their precious things], and yet they cry unto thee and say—We thank thee, O God, for we are a chosen people unto thee, while others shall perish” (Alma 31:28). Like Korihor, the Zoramites are sign-seekers, but true humility demands that they give up their insistence on signs.

Alma cannot tell the Zoramite poor what they can do about their expulsion from the synagogues until they are humble, but their

humility must go beyond that induced by their “exceeding poverty” (Alma 32:12). They must give up the very form of worship in which they desire to participate; they must give up signs as the basis of belief. The Zoramite poor are open to change because circumstance has made them humble. Their humility has created a new desire, but *what* do they desire? To believe? Not yet. When they first approach Alma they desire only not to be cast out from their places of worship, but what does that mean in their case? It means that they desire to be like the other Zoramites, to practice a religion of signs and status and power. Not only must they be humble, they must replace that desire with a new one.

Before Alma can answer the question of the poor (which he will do in chapter 33, especially 33:2), he must give them a new understanding of religion, of the desire to serve God. He must teach them about faith and its fruits. So, in verse 24 he breaks off answering their question about what to do about being cast out of the synagogue and in verse 26 he begins the part of his sermon devoted to faith, giving his thesis in verse 27: “If ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words” (Alma 32:27). Desire and the work of desire produce belief rather than knowledge. This is what Korihor, who said he needed to have sure knowledge in order to believe (Alma 30:15, 43) did not understand. It is what the Zoramites on the Rameumptom, already secure in their “knowledge” of their superiority, did not understand. If they wish wisdom, they must have desire: they must be attracted to belief.

This lesson is a lesson in humility and dependence because it is only minimally a lesson about what those who seek religion can do. It is only minimally about their power. They must “give place, that a seed may be planted” in their hearts (Alma 32:28). Here, rather than *doing* something, they must *allow* something to happen. They must refuse to cast out the seed that has been planted (Alma 32:28). This is not so much an act in itself as a refusal to act against what has

happened. They must desire to believe (Alma 32:27), which means little more than finding it attractive, and finding something attractive is no action in the usual sense of the word. We find something attractive because it attracts us, not because we choose among available things and designate one of them attractive. Alma's assumption seems to be that the wisdom of faith is desirable, so in order to be attracted to it, all we must do is give up *not* being attracted. We must stop resisting, which Korihor would not do (Alma 30:42).⁴ If we will allow it, the word will attract us, and if it does, and we allow that attraction to continue to work, the result will be "a tree springing up unto everlasting life" (Alma 32:42), from which we can pluck the fruit "which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure" (Alma 32:42). Wisdom is produced by desire rather than power, and its fruit is salvation (Alma 34:6) rather than costly apparel, ringlets, bracelets, and gold.

The original chapter teaches us that the desire to which Alma admonishes us is the alternative to the fight for social and political power. For Korihor, wisdom is what brings political power. For the Zoramites, it is what brings hierarchical status and riches—and political power. For Alma, wisdom is desire for the word of God, which brings equality, purity, and peace. But the ending of the original chapter, the woe, comes back to haunt us. The story of the original chapter is also the story of the Book of Mormon as a whole: the wisdom of the gospel does not assure us of political salvation; Alma's confidence in the preaching of the word may be misplaced, as may also be King Mosiah's hope for the reign of the judges. But the alternative to the wisdom of the word and the possibility of misplaced confidence or hope is not Korihor's wisdom (radical individualism) nor is it that of the Zoramites (insinuating what purports to be religion into the political as power). One lesson of the original chapter is that the temporal result of the wisdom of the word is not likely to be political power.

4. My thanks to Julie M. Smith for reminding me of this verse.

Knowing that the sword does not bring peace, having seen that one cannot bring peace by the sword, Alma seeks to bring it by preaching the word of God (Alma 31:5), but though he has success in individual cases, he does not succeed overall, neither with the Zoramites nor with his own people. The desire for the word of God produces wisdom, and those who desire it are the truest of philosophers, but that desire does not produce political power nor the political peace that would, presumably, flow from it.

This understanding of the original chapter also helps explain its final two verses, those in which we find Alma's woe for his people, a charge to his sons concerning the things of righteousness, and a testimony that we have Alma's record (Alma 35:15–16). Those verses tell us that sorrow for the sin of the world, and even of the people of God, is inevitable. We cannot avoid it by our own exertions, whether that means taking political power *or* preaching the word of God. We cannot bring peace. Nevertheless, the proper response to the sorrow for sin (the same sorrow which prompted the Zoramite mission) is righteousness, in other words, the wisdom of the word of God—the wisdom of the Word of God. And we know that this is true because a prophet has left us a record of his sorrow and his response to sorrow: teaching wisdom, teaching us to let go of our pride and desire for position and power and to allow the word of God to be planted in our hearts.

You Must Needs Say that the Word is Good

Adam S. Miller

WE BEGIN, AS WE MUST, with necessity. And nothing is more necessary than humility. In Alma 32, Alma teaches the Zoramite poor about faith by distinguishing two kinds of humility. Humility, he says, may either follow from circumstances that force us to confront our insufficiencies (such as poverty) or it may follow from what Alma simply calls “the word.” These two humilities are not, however, mutually exclusive. It is not as if humility is only sometimes compelled and on other occasions, when necessity does not intervene, is freely chosen. The truth is—and this truth is essential to faith—that humility *always* imposes itself as a necessity. Faith, as a live question, is a question about how we will respond to the necessity of what is plainly and persistently obvious: we are inadequate and insufficient. In the end, faith is a being faithful to the work of not only confessing but freely affirming the joint necessity of both our humility and God’s promised magnanimity. Faith, as Alma puts it, is a willingness to say that the word is good.

I. NECESSITY AND POSSIBILITY

My reading of Alma 32 depends on one central thesis and three related premises: (1) humility is for every human being an unavoidable necessity, (2) humility is a kind of *knowledge*, a knowledge of one’s limitations, dependence, and insufficiency, (3) pride is an attempt to cover up this knowledge because we have judged our humility to be

bad, and (4) faith is an affirmation that, on the contrary, our humility is good. If we begin with the premise that humility is universally imposed, how might we read Alma's discourse on faith?

I begin with verses 24–25 of Alma 32. These verses can be read as offering a key to the rest of the discourse.

And now, my beloved brethren, as ye have desired to know of me what ye shall do because ye are afflicted and cast out—now I do not desire that ye should suppose that I mean to judge you only according to that which is true—for I do not mean that ye all of you have been compelled to humble yourselves; for I verily believe that there are some among you who would humble themselves, let them be in whatsoever circumstances they might. (Alma 32:24–25)

Here, Alma wants to reassure the Zoramite poor that he does not mean to judge them, as he puts it, “only according to that which is true” (32:24) because in the context of faith, “that which is true” is only one part of the story.¹ Alma's righteous judgment will take into account not only “the truth” but something else in addition—something supplemental and easily effaced.

What is “the truth” to which Alma here refers? He immediately supplies the reference in verse 25: the truth, he tells the poor, is that “you have been compelled to humble yourselves.” We may productively take this definition of truth as a baseline for Alma's entire discourse: the truth is the necessity of humility, the inevitability of our insufficiency. The truth about the poor is that their humility has been compelled and is not an effect of “the word” that Alma brings to them.

But what is this something else, this supplement, that Alma promises to take into account *in addition to* the truth of their compelled humility? This something else is Alma's own belief about the

1. It is plausible—and perhaps even typical—to read the “only” in this verse as meaning that Alma intends to judge the Zoramite poor “only in a way that is truthful.” However, I believe that the alternate reading I've proposed here is also plausible and, in many respects, more productive.

Zoramite poor: “I verily *believe*,” Alma says, “that there are some among you who *would* humble themselves, let them be in whatsoever circumstances they might” (32:25, emphasis mine). The bare truth is supplemented by Alma’s belief and Alma’s belief is directed toward what *would* have or *could* have been the case—were it not for the compulsion of their circumstances.

We have, here, a kind of basic schema for mapping the remainder of Alma’s discourse about faith, both in his treatment of humility and in his comparison of the word to a seed. The truth is what is actually the case: the necessity of a compelled humility in the face of inevitable insufficiency. But faith takes into account not only what is true, but what *could* have been true were it not for necessity. In sum, faith supplements the truth of what is actual with a sensitivity to what may have been (or may yet be) possible.

2. THE THREE FACES OF HUMILITY

Keeping this in mind, let’s turn our attention back to the distinction that Alma initially makes between two kinds of humility: where one kind of humility is compelled, the other is an effect of “the word.” Alma’s promise to judge the Zoramite poor not only according to the truth but also in light of what *could* have been the case clarifies the relationship between humility as a necessity and humility as an effect of the word. In what way?

The Zoramite poor are not an exception in that they have been compelled to be humble. Rather, their pronounced destitution and social exclusion only *display* to greater effect what is necessarily true of everyone in every situation: we are all insufficient and incapable of autonomy. None are righteous; no, not one. In this sense, the Zoramite poor reveal only a general truth: the actuality of humility’s compulsion.

But if we are all perpetually compelled to be humble, then what of the other kind of humility? In light of necessity, what room is there

for humility to be alternatively an effect of the word? Humility, as an effect of the word, does not preclude its already imposed necessity. Rather, as Alma indicates, it arrives as a supplement to this necessity. The actuality of a compelled humility is necessarily the case, but a humility of the word adds to this necessity not only what is true but the possibility of what could have been (or may yet be) true. Faith adds to the fact of this necessity what it has to say about possibility.

An additional question then arises: if humility is universally imposed as a necessity, then why isn't everyone humble?

Though Alma discusses only two kinds of humility, his discourse is embedded in a narrative that distinguishes three faces of humility: (1) the faithful, (2) the poor, and (3) the rich.

In the first case, we relate to the necessity of humility by adding to it the word. To do so is to have faith. On the other hand, as in the second and third cases, we might experience the necessity of our insufficiency as pure compulsion. However, we might bear this un-supplemented suffering of necessity in one of two ways. We might bear it as do the poor, who are confronted by their insufficiency with such brutal directness that they cannot even pretend to be other than humble. Or, we might bear it as do the rich, who, when confronted by their insufficiency, cloak this necessity with "their costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things [with] which they are ornamented" (3 1:28).

3. BELIEF AND HUMILITY

What, then, of the faithful? Alma uses the words "faith" and "belief" synonymously in Alma 3 2. (See, especially, verse 18 for a clear equation of faith and belief.) Granted their substitutability, the chapter's most productive definition of faith may come in verse 16 rather than in verse 21. There, Alma says:

Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; *or rather, in other words*, blessed is he

that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe. (Alma 32:16, emphasis mine)

The verse breaks in two around the “or rather, in other words” that sets up the first phrase as equivalent to the second. The basic equivalence (leaving baptism aside for the moment) is this: humbling oneself without compulsion = believing in the word of God. Or, more simply: *faith is humility without compulsion*.

Note that Alma is, in this verse, emphatic about the importance of this subtractive “without.” The experience of faith is so intertwined with this “without” that he repeats it three times in just this sentence. Further, it is particularly important to note that faith subtracts compulsion from humility precisely because it bears a certain relation to the word of God. Faith, because it supplements necessity with the word, is able to subtract from that necessity the experience of it as a compulsion. Conversely, we might say that a compelled humility is a humility whose necessity is not supplemented by a faithful relation to God’s word.

Faith is a kind of free affirmation of that humility which is, in the end, unavoidable. And, through this affirmation that subtracts compulsion, faith is able to recover from necessity a dimension of possibility that a compelled humility effaces. Without the subtraction of compulsion, faith is unable to reveal in necessity the promise of what could be. It is left only with “that which is true.”

4. GOD’S WORD OF MERCY

We have, to this point, left unaddressed what Alma means by “the word of God.” Alma most succinctly addresses what he means by “the word” in verse 22: “And now, behold, I say unto you, and I would that ye should remember, that God is merciful unto all who

believe on his name; therefore he desireth, in the first place, that ye should believe, yea, even on his word.” This verse is especially helpful because it does not speak of “*the* word” but “*his* word.” Alma says: God desires that we believe on “his” word. Here, the weight of the possessive pronoun shifts the primary sense of the phrase away from the abstract register of doctrine and toward the concrete register of a personal promise so that we might read “God’s word” as primarily having the sense of “giving one’s word.” To believe on God’s word is to put our faith in the trustworthiness of his promise.

What, then, is the promise? God desires that we should believe and remember that he “is merciful unto all who believe on his name.” The content of the word is God’s promise of mercy.

Why would the faithful addition of *this* word to the necessity of our humility subtract compulsion? The connection of this particular word (God’s promise of mercy) with the problem of humility and compulsion is quite exact. Humility is unavoidable because we are, each and every one, perpetually insufficient. We continually fail in our attempts to be independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient. In other words, we continually find ourselves in open need of others. Mercy, on the other hand, is nothing other than the willing extension of the help we perpetually need. We are compelled to be humble because we are in need of mercy. It is our lack of self-sufficient independence that marks our dependence on God.

In order for the necessity of humility to be experienced as something other than a compulsion, we must believe in God’s promise of mercy. We must believe that our interdependence is not a mark of failure to be suffered only because it is required but, instead, nothing other than mercy and redemption itself. We must believe and affirm and repeat that the necessity of our humility *is* the unconditionality of God’s mercy. Our insufficiency and God’s mercy are two sides of the same coin: faith is the willing affirmation of this identity. To refuse our humility and despise its necessity is to reject God’s mercy and choose, instead, the compulsion that is damnation.

5. COMPARE THE WORD TO A SEED

These themes come to a head in Alma's comparison of the word to a seed. The opening verse is especially rich:

Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—it must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me. (Alma 32:28)

Note, first of all, that Alma is comparing a seed to the word, not faith. This word, like a seed, must be planted, but it must be planted in our hearts. This image resonates with what we have said thus far.

First, the image of a seed being planted in our hearts requires that we abandon, right from the start, any conception of our “selves” as self-sufficient, whole, or independent. The image moves us to consider ourselves as bearing, from the inside out, something more than and other than ourselves. In our beating hearts, at that most intimate center of who we are, we must give place for a word whose promise is that the necessity of our insufficiency can bear the fruit of mercy and love.

Further, we do not plant this seed. The seed *is* planted (note the passive construction) and it swells and grows without our intervention or control. Our task is to simply “give place” to something other than ourselves. We must overcome the temptation to reclaim our lives as our own by resisting the word or casting it out.

Notice also how the agricultural image of a seed being planted slips easily into the register of parenthood and pregnancy: having had a seed planted in our hearts, this seed will begin to swell and grow inside of us, filling us with a life and light that is not our own, like a child

growing in the womb. The result, Alma says, will be the enlargement of our souls. With a seed that is not our own growing inside of us, swelling and pushing us away from the center of our own lives, we will find our souls stretched and pressed right out beyond the rims of our bodies and into the world. What is other than us will grow in us and we will be pushed out into the world beyond us. The outside will be inside, and the inside out.

Out beyond ourselves, our understanding will be enlightened and we will see that our humility is not a curse to be endured but the mark of our interconnectedness with God and our openness to the world. Here, suddenly, what we feared as most distasteful—the necessity of humility, the abandonment of our “autonomy”—will begin to be delicious to us.

6. YOU MUST NEEDS SAY

However, in and of itself, the growth of the word is insufficient. Words are meant to be spoken. It is not sufficient to discover that the word is true. Truth bears only the necessity of our actual insufficiency. We must add to the truth our faithful saying that this word is *good*. Our humility must be *affirmed* in order to subtract the dimension of compulsion from its necessity.

Alma is very clear about this. Already in verse 28 he pointed out that “when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—it must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good.” Thus, the swelling of the word will produce one effect in particular: it will move us to *say* something. It is with respect to this “saying” that faith either will or will not intervene. Verse 30 emphasizes this point:

But behold, as the seed swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, then *you must needs say* that the seed is good; for behold it swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow. And now, behold, will not this strengthen your faith? Yea, it will strengthen your faith:

for ye will say I know that this is a good seed; for behold it sprouteth and beginneth to grow. (Alma 32:30, emphasis mine)

Twice in this verse Alma stresses the importance of our saying. When the seed begins to swell and grow, “then you *must needs say* that the seed is good.” Without this saying, faith cannot add to necessity the supplement of possibility. We must give birth to the word that is swelling in us by giving voice to the promise that it contains. Will not this saying strengthen your faith, Alma asks? Yea, he answers, it will strengthen your faith “*for ye will say* I know that this is a good seed.” Why is our faith strengthened? *Because* we gave voice to the word within us.

7. PERFECTING KNOWLEDGE

What, then, can we finally say about the relationship between faith and knowledge? Three passages in particular deal explicitly with the relationship between faith and knowledge. The first is 32:16–18:

Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, blessed is he that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe. Yea, there are many who do say: If thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe. Now I ask, is this faith? Behold I say unto you, Nay; for if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it.

Verse 18 summarizes Alma’s description of the relationship between faith and knowledge. There, he argues that “if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe.” In brief, knowledge is that which separates faith from its cause. Knowledge interposes itself between faith and its cause because unsupplemented knowledge is experienced as a compulsion. In order to believe in the word of God, in the promise of his mercy, we must believe “*without* being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before [we] will believe.”

Notice as well that whereas the cause of faith is the word, the cause of knowledge is the sign. The difference between faith and knowledge is concentrated in this difference between their causes: where faith follows from the word, knowledge follows from the sign.

What is the sign from which knowledge follows? What kind of knowledge are we talking about here? The knowledge in question is not only a knowledge that we all *already* share, but a knowledge that we are *compelled* to recognize: it is a knowledge, as Alma says in verse 24, of “that which is true.” We cannot avoid it, especially if we, like the Zoramite rich, deploy endless strategies of avoidance: we all know the necessity of humility. In this sense, the sign is the sign of necessity. If someone asks for a sign, the only proper response is to point out that the request is itself disingenuous. When Korihor asks Alma for a sign in 30:43, saying “If thou wilt show me a sign ... then I will be convinced of the truth of thy words,” Alma responds in the only way possible: “Thou hast had signs enough; will ye tempt your God?” (30:44).

The problem with signs is not that we have failed to receive them. The problem with signs is that they are all we have received. The signs of our insufficiency, of the necessity of our humility, are always already given. We do not lack knowledge and we do not lack signs. The acquisition of knowledge marks our entry into mortality. We become mortal only by eating its fruit.

Thus, faith does not operate as a stop-gap that tides us over until knowledge arrives. Faith is that which supplements the raw necessity of a knowledge we already have and cannot escape. Faith is not what comes in the *absence* of knowledge. Faith is what comes to supplement the raw compulsion of knowledge with the promise of mercy.

Faith is the affirmative “saying” that converts a mere sign into the promise of God’s word.

It is true, then, that “faith is not to have a perfect knowledge.” (32:21). But this is not because faith lacks knowledge. Precisely the contrary. Faith is not identical with knowledge because faith is what

comes to rescue us from the stifling weight of the knowledge we already have. Faith is not a perfect knowledge, faith is what “perfects” knowledge by subtracting from the necessity of humility its compulsory dimension. When faith arrives, our knowledge becomes “perfect in that thing” (32:34).

In short, faith subtracts compulsion from necessity. Or: faith subtracts certainty from knowledge—and thus perfects it.

In conclusion, we might summarize this point by returning to the image of the seed. If we allow the word to be planted in our hearts and do not cast it out by our unbelief, then it will begin to grow. And if we then *say* that this seed is good, it will become a tree and bear fruit. What is this tree?

The tree that grows from the seed or word is the tree of life, *not* the tree of knowledge. Our mortal condition is set in motion by the reception of knowledge, not by its lack. Adam and Eve, having eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, are confronted with the necessity of their humility, with the fact of their limitations and insufficiency: that is to say, they are confronted with their mortality. Here, the sign of knowledge is the necessity of death. We have *already* eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

The question is whether we can learn to relate to this knowledge as something other than a compelled necessity. The question that decides the meaning of our lives is whether or not we can affirm the truth of our humility as something good. Can we swallow this word and say that it is good? Can we perfect the knowledge we already have by positively naming our insufficiency as God’s mercy? Can we affirm that this necessity from which all mankind flees is instead that “which is most precious, which is sweet above all that sweet, yea, and pure above all that is pure?” (32:42). Only in doing this will we come to see that the tree of knowledge already bears for us the fruit of the tree of life.

We do not need knowledge. Rather, we need to faithfully supplement the necessity of what we already know with the saying of a word that promises not just truth but mercy.

It is Well that Ye are Cast Out

Alma 32 and Eden

Jenny Webb

WHEN THE ZORAMITE poor first approach Alma on the hill Onidah, a spokesman steps forward. His understanding of their situation is revealing: he asks “Behold, what shall these my brethren do, for they are despised of all men because of their poverty, yea, and more especially by our priests; for they have cast us out of our synagogues which we have labored abundantly to build with our own hands; and they have cast us out because of our exceeding poverty; and we have no place to worship our God; and behold, what shall we do?” (32:5). There are several elements that are repeated in this description, namely, the poverty of the Zoramite group, their having been “cast out,” and their question “what shall we do?”

To begin, let us focus on what it means to the Zoramite poor to have been cast out. Specifically, they see themselves as being cast out of their synagogues, or in other words, the space where they see themselves as able to worship God. At this point in the narrative, the Zoramite poor view worship as an act that takes place within a clearly demarcated space and defined liturgy (the prayer on the Rameumpton). Therefore, being cast out of the synagogue would be a significant event to the Zoramites. Without the space of the synagogue available, they apparently see no other way to access their God—private worship seems to have been either unknown, or at the very least, not legitimated (see 32:10–11). The ritual elements

of the Rameumpton prayer (the sacred, elevated space of the “holy stand” [i.e., the Rameumpton; 3 1:21] itself, the singular prayer, the outstretched hands [3 1:14]) are important in that they indicate the possibility of both accessing God through one’s prayers, but also of God’s presence in the ritual space. Hence, we are able to see that the problem the group brings to Alma is not just one of being cast out of their synagogues, but more accurately one of being cast out from the possibility of accessing God.

This situation—being cut off from God—is one we are generally familiar with. It is, in fact, the narrative of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. As a consequence to eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve were cast out from Eden. Adam was told that the ground would be “cursed” (Moses 4:23) and that he would have to labor exceedingly to survive (4:25), a description that thematically resonates with the poverty of the Zoramites, who also “labored abundantly” (Alma 32:5) with little economic result beyond their subsistence. In the book of Moses, the Lord says that he actually “had *driven* [Adam and Eve] out” of Eden (5:1; my emphasis), an action that foreshadows the poor Zoramites being cast out of the synagogues specifically by the priests themselves (Alma 32:5).¹ Even the question of action—the central question concerning “what shall we do” to worship God—is present in the prior narrative of the Fall: after leaving Eden we are told that “Adam and Eve ... called upon the name of the Lord ... and he gave unto them commandments, that they should worship the Lord their God” (Moses 5:4–5). Evidently, Adam and Eve sought the Lord in order to obtain instructions, specifically instructions concerning *how*

1. “[F]or [we] are despised of all men because of their poverty, yea, and more especially by our priests; for they have cast us out of our synagogues”; notice that the antecedent of the they, while technically unclear (they could refer to either “all men” or the “priests”), is contextually most likely to refer to just the priests as they are the ones with the ecclesiastical authority to deny entry to the synagogue. Also, note that this reading is problematic in that it aligns the priests with God; the Zoramite priests were certainly not “holy” in the sense that God is, yet both occupy similar roles in their respective religious power structures.

to worship God, just as the Zoramites ask Alma what they should do to worship God. Both groups seek some sort of concrete action when faced with the perception that they are “shut out from [God’s] presence” (Moses 5:4).

The thematic connections to the story of the Fall are strengthened by Alma’s response to the group. Whatever the Zoramites’ expectations, they most likely were unprepared for Alma’s reaction. Alma turns and looks upon the spokesman with “great joy” (32:6); his first words are “I behold that ye are lowly in heart; and if so, *blessed* are ye” (32:8; my emphasis). The Zoramites might have expected to be ignored, given their social status, or perhaps they were hoping that this man with his strange, anti-Rameumpton message and capacity for leadership (recall that Alma was there with a relatively large group of missionaries including Amulek, Ammon, Aaron, Omner, Zeezrom, Shiblon, and Corianton [Alma 31:6–7]) might be willing to lead them in a revolt against the priests.² In any case, it is unlikely that they were prepared to hear themselves described as “blessed.” In their view, their condition was rather the inverse: denied access to God, they saw themselves as cursed, or possibly damned. However, Alma continues with his characterization of their state as blessed, saying “it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom; for it is necessary that ye should learn wisdom; for it is because that ye are cast out, that ye are

2. The fact that the Zoramite poor approached Alma in a large group and were sufficiently organized to have chosen their own leader lends support to this hypothesis, as does the location: Onidah as a place name is found only twice within the Book of Mormon; once here in Alma 32:4, and then later in Alma 47:5, which defines Onidah as “the place of arms,” or in other words, a place where weapons were stored, such as a garrison. While it is possible that the two locales are distinct, it is also likely that they refer either to the same place, or to similarly militant locations. This linguistic tie is additionally strengthened by the fact that the Zoramites were led by Zoram, who is described earlier as a “chief captain over the armies of the Nephites” (Alma 16:5) and by all accounts is a powerful military leader (powerful enough that Alma feared his defection to the Lamanites—it was this concern that motivated his mission to the Zoramites to begin with [Alma 31:1–4]).

despised of your brethren because of your exceeding poverty, that ye are brought to a lowliness of heart; for ye are necessarily brought to be humble” (Alma 32:12).

There is much going on here. To begin, Alma confirms his previous assertion that it is ultimately a blessing for the Zoramites to be denied access to their synagogues. His reasoning may sound familiar: “that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom.” Leaving aside humility for the moment, let us recall Satan’s description of the fruit of the tree of knowledge given to Eve: “God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Moses 4:11). In other words, the type of knowledge resulting from eating the fruit of that tree is a knowledge of degrees and distinctions—good versus evil. It is a knowledge that enables the knower to compare, contrast, and perform qualitative judgments. Such knowledge provides the theoretical capacity for wisdom. Eve perceives the value of that fruit following Satan’s words: “when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it became pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired *to make her wise*, she took of the fruit” (Moses 4:12; my emphasis).

It is clear that Alma perceives the situation of the group as a blessing in that their expulsion enables them to learn true wisdom and humility. An enabling expulsion such as this one not only recalls the events of the Fall, but also evokes what is ultimately a larger archetypal scene in which being separated from God leads to an opportunity for growth and/or atonement. We see this archetype at work in the narratives of the pre-mortal existence with its council, war, and ultimate departure from God’s courts, and even in the underlying narrative of the atonement itself both in its thematic ritualization through the scapegoat as well as in its dependence upon Christ’s departure from his Father’s presence. Throughout this archetype, the narratives pivot around the notion that the expulsion ultimately leads to the possibility of redemption—the ability to see oneself as cut off becomes thematically necessary for progression. Alma values

this ability. He realizes that it is only in this state of preparation that the possibility for salvation presents itself. Alma explains the value of humility, including compelled humility, again in terms of blessing: “And now, because ye are compelled to be humble blessed are ye; for a man sometimes, if he is compelled to be humble, seeketh repentance; and now surely, whosoever repenteth shall find mercy; and he that findeth mercy and endureth to the end the same shall be saved” (Alma 32:13). It is only through recognizing one’s own true nature as humble, as entirely dependent upon the atoning power of Jesus Christ, that repentance can be motivated and mercy found.

Alma succinctly encapsulates the plan of salvation here. We are fallen, and when we recognize that truth we are humbled. Humility enables the recognition of the need for repentance, and repentance inevitably results in mercy. When mercy is endured completely, salvation results. The process of becoming humble, seeking repentance, finding mercy, and enduring to the end was a pattern established by Adam and Eve as they left Eden, called upon the Lord, learned of the symbolism behind sacrifice, and endured, faithful, even as their own children and descendants ceased to believe their words. Alma’s initially surprising response to the Zoramites’ petition serves a dual purpose: it establishes the pattern of the plan of salvation and it simultaneously opens a space wherein the Zoramites are invited to re-envision their own spiritual status. They are not in need of redress, but redemption. And such redemption can only come through faith in Christ.

I. THE FALL

Once this groundwork has been laid, we might expect these Edenic themes to diminish. After all, they have done their work: we now understand that the story of the Zoramites is the story of us all—we are all our first parents as we move through this life. And whether or not the Zoramites themselves have understood the implied connection

between themselves and Adam and Eve, their consciousness has been sufficiently jarred by Alma's unexpected joy at their situation to begin to see that there may be other ways of looking at it. However, intriguingly enough, the thematic links to Adam and Eve continue as Alma expands the connections between humility, faith, and the words of God.

In the midst of a discussion of the question of sign seeking, Alma asks the following question: "And now, how much more cursed is he that knoweth the will of God and doeth it not, than he that only believeth, or only hath cause to believe, and falleth into transgression?" (Alma 32:19). While the question is interesting in its own right, at this point we will only look at it briefly in order to note the phrase "falleth into transgression" and its linguistic evocation of the concept of the Fall. Both Adam and Eve as well as the Lord himself also refer to the Fall as their "transgression" (see Moses 5:10-11 and 6:53). However, Alma seems to be employing the phrase "falleth into transgression" to denote a lesser defiance of God's will than the earlier description of "he that knoweth the will of God and doeth it not." And it is, in fact, the former situation that more accurately describes Adam and Eve in Eden as they were told explicitly that "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Moses 3:17). In either case, this text presents us with a subtle thematic connection to the Edenic context established previously in the chapter.

Following his discussion of sign seeking, Alma returns to the topic of faith in verse 21: "And now as I said concerning faith—faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true." While this verse is often cited as a "definition" of faith, re-reading it in light of its possible Edenic connections may help us read the familiar verse more carefully. The first thing that Alma says about faith here is not what it is, but rather what it is *not*: it is *not* to have a perfect knowledge. The use of the phrase "to have" here is particularly interesting. Why

does Alma use that additional verb rather than stating things more simply as “faith is not a perfect knowledge”? The equation is not simply faith \neq perfect knowledge, but rather faith \neq *having* perfect knowledge. Perfect knowledge is thus cast in terms of possession, a thing capable of being had (or held) by an individual.³

One of the prominent characteristics of the narrative of the Fall is the emphasis on the theme of possession. Eve explains to Satan that she and Adam are not only not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, but they are not even to touch it (see Moses 4:9). When Eve does eat the fruit we read that “she *took* of the fruit thereof” (Moses 4:12; my emphasis), a subtle reminder that she holds the fruit in her hands both to eat and, additionally, to pass to Adam. In other words, a component of the transgression may lie in the actual act of holding, possessing, and then ingesting the fruit of the tree of knowledge. And, given its appearance in Eden itself, such fruit can itself be seen as perfect, not fallen: for a moment, then, Eve and Adam literally possessed and consumed perfect knowledge. The consequence of this action, if we follow Alma, would be the absence of faith, a condition fundamentally impossible within the Edenic reality, and thus their removal from the Garden. It appears, then, that Alma’s description of faith as “not to *have* a perfect knowledge” (my emphasis) is possibly quite literal on one level: the state of having faith cannot co-exist with the state of having perfect knowledge. However, given that we already live in the fallen world, the consequence of possessing perfect knowledge is not another fall, but rather the simple absence of faith itself.

The tree of knowledge of good and evil is one of two trees mentioned by name in the Eden narrative. The other is the tree of life. The possibility that Adam would “put forth his hand and partake also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever” (Moses 4:28) served

3. Note that this reading is not meant to preclude the possibility of having faith. I am not arguing that possession is thematically linked with perfect knowledge alone, but rather, that Alma’s introduction of the subtle possibility of possession into the discourse is worth our attention.

as motivation for God to expel Adam and Eve from Eden—living forever in their fallen state would preclude them from partaking of the atonement.⁴ And so God chose to guard the tree of life: he “placed at the east of the Garden of Eden, cherubim and a flaming sword, which turned every way to keep the way of the tree of life” (Moses 4:31). While the exact manner in which the cherubim and flaming sword kept the tree of life is a bit vague,⁵ the text is clear that the tree remains. Not removed or cut down or transplanted, but protected, its path hidden from view—unseen. This description of the tree of life is thematically evoked by the second half of verse 21 in Alma 32 in which Alma states that those who have faith “hope for things which are not seen, which are true.” Recasting Alma’s words in Edenic terms, the entire verse might read “faith is not to partake of the tree of knowledge; therefore if ye have faith ye hope in the tree of life, which is not seen, which is true.”

2. THE TREE

Alma continues to speak to the Zoramites, inviting them to participate in an experiment to discover whether the words he shares with them are good by comparing the word to a seed. He tells the Zoramites that if they will humbly plant the seed in their hearts and not resist the Spirit of the Lord that the inevitable result will be that the seed “will begin to swell” (Alma 32:28). He then makes a qualitative judgment upon that swelling: it is “good” (32:28). As the seed continues to grow, the same qualitative assessment is made: “the seed is good; for behold it swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow” (32:29).

4. Given the necessity and role of resurrection in the atonement.

5. One option being found in the fact that the sword turns “every way.” A turning sword would reflect any available light; the glory of the cherubim reflected from the turning sword would indeed create the appearance that the sword was in fact on fire (“flaming”). The brightness of this refracted glory would thus hide the tree of life—any who looked for it would be dazzled, temporarily (one hopes) blinded. The image of the tree of life hidden behind the light but still present is quite striking.

Alma uses a particular understanding of the concept of “good” throughout his description of the agrarian experiment. The goodness of the seed is not a moral issue—the seed is not good because it produces moral results, or because it causes the subject to behave according to a specific moral code. Rather, the goodness of the seed is consistently cast in terms of its ability to grow. Alma addresses this specific conceptualization of goodness in verses 31–33: “And now, behold, are ye sure that this is a good seed? I say unto you, Yea; for every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness. Therefore, *if a seed groweth it is good*, but if it groweth not, behold, it is not good, therefore it is cast away. And now, behold, because ye have tried the experiment, and planted the seed, and it swelleth and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, ye must needs know that the seed is good” (emphasis mine).

We should not be surprised at this point to discover that a similar concept of goodness exists within the Creation narrative. After each creative period, God looks upon the work accomplished and pronounces it “good.” More specifically, goodness in the creation accounts of living things such as plants and animals is presented alongside their ability to reproduce themselves. “And the earth brought forth grass, every herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed should be in itself, after his kind; and I, God, saw that all things which I were made were good” (Moses 2:12). In this example, we do not learn anything concerning the nature of the plants beyond the fact that they possess the ability to create seeds capable of growth, and the judgment pronounced upon them is that of goodness. The text concerning the creation of the animals contains a similar account. Alma’s experiment, then, is at first centered around producing a certain kind of result given to us in terms that recall the creation: the goodness of the seed—its capacity to grow and reproduce its parent plant—is tested and proven.

At this point in his discourse, Alma is dealing with a complex of overlapping concepts, themes, and motifs present throughout the entire scriptural canon. By comparing his words to a seed, Alma

began a fairly straightforward metaphor to describe the results of desiring to believe his words. However, that apparent simplicity is complicated by the linguistic connections opened up through this comparison. The words of Alma, as a missionary, serve as the words of God. If one plants the word of God as a seed in one's heart, and the seed is good, the logical consequence of that planting will be the growth of the seed, and that growth will be a growth into the likeness of the parent plant. What will the word of God grow into? A heavenly discourse? A "language which [is] pure and undefiled" (Moses 6:6)?⁶ The word of God cannot help but call forth the Word of God (Christ). If the Word of God is planted in one's heart, what will grow but the Word himself?

What does Alma tell the Zoramites will grow if they continue to care for the sprouted seed? A tree. But this tree is one that we have seen before: it is "a tree springing up unto everlasting life" (32:41) and it produces fruit "which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst" (32:42). This is a tree whose fruit fully and eternally satiates the needs of mortal embodiment and thus provides eternal life. The implication, of course, is that the tree *is*, on a certain level, both the tree of life and Christ and His atoning power.

Alma is not the only prophet to present us with a tree. In 1 Nephi 11, Nephi asks to see the tree shown to his father Lehi. An angel asks Nephi if he believes that his father saw said tree, to which Nephi answers affirmatively (11:4–5). The angel then rejoices, telling Nephi that he is blessed "because [he] believest in the Son of the most high God" (11:6). To believe in the tree of life is to believe

6. Joseph Spencer has provided some fascinating thoughts on the ties between Priesthood and the acts of reading and writing, part of which take into account these verses in Moses 6 (see Moses 6:5–7).

in Christ and vice versa. The tree that Nephi sees is superlatively beautiful, white, and “precious above all” (11:9; see also v. 8). He describes it as being “like unto the tree which my father” saw (11:8). In his own vision, Lehi describes the tree as bearing fruit that was “most sweet, above all that [he] ever before tasted ... [and] white, to exceed all the whiteness that [he] had ever seen” (1 Nephi 8:11). White, sweet, pure, and precious—it is clear that Lehi, Nephi, and Alma are all dealing with the same arboreal manifestation.⁷

Alma consistently identifies this tree as the “tree of life” (Alma 32:40). It is important to realize that all of these interactions with the tree of life do not occur within our visual plane. Lehi and Nephi both see the tree in visions while caught up in the Spirit. But Alma’s description seems, at first, to uncover the tree and bring it into human sight as he tells the Zoramites what the results of their continued care for their growing seed will be. If we look at the text, however, we find that Alma’s version of the tree can only exist internally, concealed by body and soul. This internality is important because it stresses the individual relationship between the subject and salvation. It is not enough for one’s relatives or associates to cultivate the tree of life—salvation and eternal life are only possible through an individual planting and cultivation.

Just as partaking of the tree of knowledge produced the Fall, cutting off Adam and Eve from the presence of God, partaking of the tree of life and the individual cultivation of the word/Word necessary to this partaking intimately reverses the effects of the Fall, restoring

7. Note that the context in which each tree is seen is distinctly different: Lehi’s vision centers around the theme of familial salvation, while Nephi’s tree appears in a vision that opens onto global soteriology. Alma, in turn, utilizes the tree for a discourse on religious epistemology. While each context inflects the finer details regarding the varying interpretations of the tree, the similarities in the sense vocabulary used to identify the type of tree under discussion (one that bears a precious fruit) are striking and allow us to assume a type of underlying generic arboreal identification at work in these texts.

communion with God as we become sons and daughters of Christ and heirs to the kingdom.⁸

3. THE MESSENGER

The thematic connections to the Creation, Garden, and Fall are consistent throughout Alma 32. The question is, why are they there? What purpose do they serve? That question is addressed in part as we examine the tree of life cultivated in chapter 32 in conjunction with other experiences with the tree. Alma repeatedly stresses the desirable nature of the fruit produced by the tree of life. The tree is nourished with the goal that it may “grow up, and bring forth fruit” (Alma 32:37), and the Zoramites are told they will need to look “forward with an eye of faith to the fruit” in order to pluck it (32:40). The fruit is precious, sweet, white, pure, and satisfying (see 32:42). Lehi describes it as “desirable above all other fruit” (1 Nephi 8:12). We know the fruit is powerfully desired; what Alma does not explore is what happens once the fruit is consumed. Alma’s description of feasting upon the fruit until satisfied in verse 42 implies that the consumption of the fruit is not necessarily an eternal or ongoing process. Rather, one eats until fully satiated. There is no indication, however, that the tree stops producing fruit once one has eaten. What is to be done with all the precious fruit? Surely it should not be wasted.

Lehi points us toward an answer in his vision. After he eats the fruit, he is filled with “great joy; wherefore, [he] began to be desirous that [his] family should partake also” (1 Nephi 8:12). Lehi’s initial

8. Is this restoration somehow at odds with knowledge? We should note that Alma initially presents the exercise of faith as a means to reach a specific, contextualized knowledge (is the seed good?). But intriguingly, the culmination of these repeated experiments is not described as an illuminating, all-comprehending moment of insight or knowledge. Rather, continuing in the experiment leads directly to the tree of life and its precious fruit. Why does knowledge apparently disappear from the discussion at the end of the chapter? While I do not have clear answers to these questions, I think they are worth our continued consideration.

reaction upon eating is to share the fruit of the tree with his family. The fruit of the tree of life is not meant to be hoarded or left hanging to spoil—it is meant to be shared with others. And if a piece of fruit is shared with another person and consumed by them, what is left? The seed. In other words, the result of cultivating the seed is not just the growth of the tree and the consumption of the fruit, but the sharing of that fruit so that others may have the same opportunity to plant the seed, accept the Word, and receive eternal life. Understanding the Edenic themes throughout Alma 32 helps us to see the text as a presentation of the plan of salvation. The Zoramites approached Alma with a specific question—what should they do to regain their ability to worship God and implicitly return to his presence?—and Alma’s answer is one that points them toward salvation via the very essence of the plan: become a son or daughter of God and then share the good news with others.

The gospel has always been taught to mankind through divine messengers. Let us take one final trip back to the story of Adam and Eve. After being cast out from the Garden, Adam and Eve were commanded by the Lord to offer sacrifices, which they did.

And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me. And then the angel spake, saying: This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth. Wherefore, thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore. (Moses 5: 6–8)

The role of the messenger here is to offer interpretation, explanation, and instruction to Adam and Eve regarding the role of Christ, their repentance, and their worship. If we take the lives of Adam and Eve to be our pattern, then it is clear that we must seek such messengers. And if we read Alma 32 in the context of their lives, it is clear that we must also seek to *be* such messengers and share the word of God.

Alma himself serves as such a messenger to the Zoramites. He and his companions have come to the Zoramites with the desire to preach the word of God (see Alma 31:5). He instructs the Zoramites, providing them with details regarding the plan of salvation. His discourse continues in chapter 33 in which he teaches the Zoramites that they may pray or worship anywhere, so long as they understand that their salvation is always “because of [the] Son” (33:13, 16) of God. Amulek too serves as a messenger, witnessing the truth of Alma’s words (34:1–7) and the sacrificial quality of the atonement (34:8–16) before teaching them how to pray (34:17–27), the necessity of caring for the needy (34:28), and exhorting them to prepare to meet God now, in this life (34:32).⁹

This final insight into Alma’s role as messenger is particularly significant as we take one final step back, examine the context of Alma 32, and realize that in the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, chapters 30–35 constituted a single chapter. Thus, just prior textually to the complete context of chapter 32 we find a familiar refrain: “O that I were an *angel*, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people! Yea, I would declare unto every soul ... repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth” (29:1–2; emphasis mine). How interesting that after expressing his desire to be angel,¹⁰ a messenger of the gospel, Alma does just that as he guides the Zoramites through the plan of salvation to the tree of life itself.

9. Reading Alma and Amulek’s discourses together, it becomes clear that we are dealing with another instantiation of the thematic progression Creation, Fall, Atonement, and Veil prevalent throughout the Book of Mormon (see, for example, Joseph Spencer’s “Book of Mormon, Lesson #8: 2 Nephi 6–10” available at the Feast Upon the Word Blog [<http://feastuponthewordblog.org/2008/02/17/book-of-mormon-lesson-8-2-nephi-6-10/>]). While the themes are intertwined throughout the discourses, their general progression is toward that of regaining the presence of God through the reception of the atonement.

10. See also Alma 10:20–21, Alma 13:21–26, and Alma 24:14 (where I believe the term “angel” may specifically refer to people).

Faith, Hope, and Charity

Alma and Joseph Smith

Joseph M. Spencer

I PROPOSE TO READ Alma 32:21–23 by asking a hypothetical question: What if these three verses were read as articulating not just the relationship between faith and hope, but the full theological triad of faith, hope, and charity? What follows in this paper is, as a result, along the lines of (1) a creatively interpretive commentary on the passage in question, followed by (2) a brief attempt to show how this reading of Alma’s words both motivates the study of and is motivated by what has sometimes been called Joseph Smith’s “Nauvoo theology.”¹

1. FAITH

Though it is often put to such work, Alma 32:21 does not provide a positive definition of faith. In fact, it avoids this task in two different ways. The first half of the verse delimits faith, but it only does so negatively: “faith is *not* to have a perfect knowledge of things” (emphasis mine). The second half of the verse in turn refuses to say what faith is, opting instead to say something about what the faithful do, or about what faith is coupled with: “if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.” In short, verse 21 of Alma 32 tells us that (1) faith breaks, in some as yet unidentified sense,

1. See, for instance, Boyd Kirkland, “The Development of the Mormon Doctrine of God,” in Gary James Bergera, ed., *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 38.

with knowledge, and (2) faith is coupled with, but is not necessarily equivalent to, hope.

Actually, it tells us more than this. It also makes clear that there is a connection between faith's break with knowledge and its coupling with hope, as evidenced by the word "therefore" at the center of the verse: "faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; *therefore* if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true" (emphasis mine). The implication is that faith mobilizes hope—it grounds the possibility of there being hoped-for possibilities—precisely because it breaks in some way with perfect knowledge.

But if this verse refuses to provide us with a definition, then *what is faith?* Indeed, how could Alma, intent on getting his Zoramite hearers to develop faith, justify not providing them with some kind of definition, with some kind of understanding of what faith actually is—especially since it seems clear that they had no idea? As we will see, Alma does provide such a definition. Though we may tend to halt our quest for a definition with verse 21, Alma goes on to articulate precisely what faith is in verses 22 and 23.

Verse 22: "And now, behold, I say unto you, and I would that ye should remember, that God is merciful unto all who believe on his name; therefore he desireth, in the first place, that ye should believe, yea, even on his word." Faith, first and foremost, is a question of believing on God's name or word. But what does that mean? Verse 23: "And now, he imparteth his word [and/or name] by angels unto men, ... women ... [and] children." Faith is, for Alma, a question of one's relation to what is revealed in the unanticipated course of an angelic encounter or revelatory *event*. To have faith is to be faithful to God's word or name as it is imparted by a (true) messenger.

What this means is that faith is a question of one's relation to a past event, to an actual, experienced past. Faith is not, for Alma, a groundless, fanciful flight into the unknown. Nor is it a vague sense of how things ought to be. Nor, again, is it confidence in some merely internal, spiritual sign (a warm feeling, a sense of peace, etc.). For

Alma, faith is a question of fidelity—of staying true—to an actual encounter with a messenger whom one must *decide* to believe.

This is what the entire second half of Alma 32 articulates with its metaphor of the word and the seed. Faith is the diligent, patient dedication of oneself to the substance of a messenger's word. Though that fidelity clearly results in what Alma describes in verse 34 as a "perfect knowledge" of the message's goodness and hence of the messenger's being true, he is quick to emphasize (in verse 36) that one must not therefore "lay aside [one's] faith." In fact, even as all talk of knowledge vanishes away for Alma after verse 35, faith, as Paul might say, abides through the remainder of the chapter's forty-three verses. In the end, this means that knowing that this or that particular messenger was or is a *true* messenger does not abrogate the necessity of faith or fidelity. One must be infinitely faithful to the true messenger, *especially* once one knows that the messenger was or is without question a true messenger.

In sum, faith is for Alma a person's unyielding fidelity to the word imparted in an actual and actually past angelic encounter.²

2. HOPE

If, in general, we seem less interested in defining hope than faith, this is likely because hope seems a more straightforward concept. Hope is a question of one's relationship to the future, to the as yet undecided, undetermined, or at least unknown. We hope because there remains, for the present moment, an array of real possibilities.

2. I use the term "past" here—as well as the terms "future" and "present" in what follows—less in terms of a strictly linear conception of time (where "past," "present," and "future" are mere referents for identifiable stretches on a universally legible timeline) than in terms of a temporality oriented by the looser categories of possibility and actuality. One can of course be faithful to an event that lies in the future if one takes its realization as given, just as one can harbor hope about something that is, strictly speaking, in the past if one regards as real the possibility of the past being other than what it seems to be.

It becomes clear, then, how, according to Alma, faith and hope ultimately differ from one another and why they should not be equated. While faith is a question of one's fidelity to a singular event in the *past*—an encounter with a true divine messenger—hope is a question of one's recognition of the real possibilities of the *future*.

But if faith is not to be equated with hope—if faith is not to be defined as hope, nor hope as faith—what is Alma actually saying about how these two “theological virtues” are related in his discourse to the Zoramites? Note, first, that Alma sees them as inevitably coupled: “if ye have faith ye hope.” Alma is not saying that faith is hope, nor that hope is faith; rather, he is saying that faith and hope arise together, that they cannot ultimately be found apart from one another. Though faith is not hope, faith is not without hope. And though hope is not faith, hope is not without faith.

What this suggests is that faith and hope are tied together by the word or name delivered by the angel. Inasmuch as faith is a question of one's actively believing the word to be true, hope is a question of one's recognition of the possibilities that are opened by the word or name that has been delivered. To say that faith is always coupled with hope is to say something about the nature of the messenger's word. The word to which one is asked to be faithful is never redundant and never announces what is *already* known by the world. If it revealed only what is already known, then it would fail to be revelatory. Rather, the angelic word always speaks of possibilities, of what (because it is as yet “only” a possibility) fails to appear in the world. The word speaks, as Alma plainly says, of “things which are not seen.”

This is why faith and hope are called for: the messenger speaks of what is true but *invisible*. However, it might be noted that faith and hope here entail two different modes of invisibility.³ First, even once one *knows* that a particular messenger is true (by trying what Alma calls “the experiment”), one will need to remain faithful to

3. See Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 90–91.

that messenger, since the angel's word, especially as lodged in an irretrievably past event, is by definition invisible. The spoken word, *as spoken*, is something that never appears, that in fact cannot appear as such. Words are heard, not seen. The invisibility of what one believes might thus be called a necessary invisibility.⁴ The hope engendered by the angel's word, on the other hand, anticipates an eventual visibility of things that fail to appear only for now. If the angel's word is *necessarily* invisible, it nonetheless mobilizes hope for what might be called the *accidentally* invisible, for things whose invisibility is only contingent or temporary.

Hope, in sum, is the work of uncovering unseen possibilities in light of our faithfulness to the word announced by an angelic messenger.

3. AND CHARITY

There is little question that faith and hope are central in Alma 32:21–23, but where is charity or love? The question is worth asking because, as far as I am aware, there are no other passages in the Book of Mormon where (1) the relation between faith and hope is addressed so directly but (2) no mention of charity is found. Despite this omission, then, do these verses nonetheless have something to contribute to an understanding of charity?

My hypothesis is that, in light of Joseph Smith's later revelations about the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, these verses have a great deal to say about charity. The key words, as I read them, are found in verse 23: "And now, he imparteth his word by angels unto men, yea, not only men but women also. Now this is not all; little children do have words given unto them many times, which confound the wise and the learned."

4. One might object, of course, that the *written* word is visible. But it should be recognized that the written word only appears to render the spoken word visible. Indeed, because the spoken word, as spoken, remains invisible even when it is written, the apparent visibility of the written word all the more radically renders the spoken word as such invisible.

First, the uniqueness of this verse in the Book of Mormon should be recognized. Nowhere else in the Book of Mormon—indeed in ancient scripture generally—is the word “men” picked apart as it is in this verse.⁵ Though there are a number of instances in the Book of Mormon where “men” (or “they,” or “people”) is expanded to “men, women, and children,”⁶ only in this passage is the generality of the word “men” *denied* rather than *clarified*. Whereas other texts emphasize that “men” is *inclusive* (“men” *means* “men, women, and children”), Alma here takes the word as *exclusive* (“men” means *only* “men”) and then adds “women” and, eventually, “children” to it.

Moreover, it might be noticed that Alma does so in a halting manner. Rather than simply saying something like “as also women and children,” a trope that would just as effectively make the term “men” exclusive rather than inclusive, Alma’s awkward language could be read as a way of making the distinction *overly* emphatic. One might even respond to Alma’s description (“... men, yea, not only men but women also. Now this is not all; little children ...”) with something like impatience.

Taking this impatience as cause for further reflection, I want creatively to explore what verse 23 may suggest in light of later revelations. Perhaps at least this much. If one keeps an eye on the explicit differentiation of men from women, women from men, and children from women and men, then the verse suggests that *it is specifically the advent of the angelic word that calls for an emphatic drawing of distinctions between genders and generations*. Or, to put this more provocatively, it may be that the very structure of the family cannot, for Alma, be disentangled from the Book of Mormon’s “angelology.” Obviously, a bit of additional explanation is in order.

Alma’s focus on angels in verse 23 plays into a much broader angel theology that is of immense importance to the writers of the Book

5. A similar analysis of the word, however, does appear in D&C 18:42, recorded at the very time of the translation of the Book of Mormon. It seems to me that this parallel passage from modern revelation deserves the same kind of theological attention I am here giving to Alma 32:23.

6. For instance, 2 Nephi 9:21; Mosiah 24:22; Helaman 1:27; and 3 Nephi 17:25.

of Mormon. From Nephi's descriptions of so many angelic visits during their journey from the Old to the New World to the strong concluding sermons of Mormon and Moroni about the necessity of continual angelic ministration, the theme is returned to again and again. Moreover, the angelology expounded within the text strongly resonates with the circumstances of the text's own translation. The plates were revealed by Moroni, now himself an angel, who appeared to Joseph Smith on behalf of his people and God's covenant with that branch of the family of Israel.

But, despite these much broader angelic themes surrounding and saturating the Book of Mormon, it is certainly Alma himself who has the most to say about the basic meaning of angelic ministration. It is Alma whose conversion is precipitated by the shock of an angel's appearance and it is Alma who is later turned back to Ammonihah by the same messenger. It is, moreover, Alma who then goes on to preach in Ammonihah about the role of angels in the atonement and their visiting Adam, Eve, and their children outside the Garden of Eden. Further, Alma presses Korihor into revealing that false angels are a serious concern and it is Alma who announces a few chapters later that angels are visiting people all over the New World in order to prepare the hearts of their children for the coming of Christ among the Lehitess a generation later.

Alma's constant talk of angels was not without influence. Mormon may be best read as drawing specifically on Alma's angelology of Alma 12–13 in none other than his sermon on the triple theme of faith, hope, and charity in Moroni 7. In Alma 12–13, Alma describes the angels who were sent to Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, angels who made it possible for them to converse with God so as to receive certain covenants and their associated penalties, along with ordinances that introduced them into the order of the Son and so prepared them to enter into the rest of the Lord. Mormon in turn, in Moroni 7, describes angels as being sent “to call men unto repentance, and to fulfill and to do the work of the covenants of the Father, which he hath made unto the children of men” (Moroni 7:31),

covenants one can presume, in light of the title page of the Book of Mormon (which I will cite a little further on), to be what I would describe as the clearly gendered and generational covenants given to the ancient patriarchs and matriarchs.

Indeed, the Adam-and-Eve story that Alma takes as his primary theme in Alma 12–13 may not be far from his mind in his words to the Zoramites. Not only is the word/seed to grow, through one’s faith, into a single tree of life among so many trees of knowledge, but it is to do so specifically for the Zoramite poor who have been *cast out*, who have nothing to look forward to besides *death*. When Alma sees that the Zoramite poor are “in a preparation to hear the word” (Alma 32:6), this may be specifically because he recognizes them as having, like Adam and Eve before them, been granted what he elsewhere calls “a preparatory state” (Alma 42:10), a state induced by their being intentionally “cut off from the presence of the Lord” (Alma 42:9).⁷

This confluence of images and themes might be taken to suggest that there was something of an established Nephite doctrine—known at least to the prophets—that angels come as messengers of the patriarchal/matriarchal covenant through which *not one but two* (not just man, but man and—in her own right—woman)⁸ are jointly promised a chosen seed.⁹ Indeed, Moroni, on the title page of the

7. See Jenny Webb’s excellent contribution to this same volume.

8. On the idea of an irreducible Two (male/female) being essential to love as something more than a sometimes pleasant romantic sentimentality, see Alain Badiou, “What Is Love?” trans. Justin Clemens, in Renata Salecl, ed., *Sexuation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 263–81. Another translation of the same essay can be found in Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2008), 179–98.

9. One might justifiably ask how this reading can account for the striking absence of the matriarchal—or the feminine more generally—in the Book of Mormon. The question is crucial, but perhaps it should simply be turned around. Might the approach to the text that I am beginning to work out here imply that there is perhaps more to the story of the matriarchal/feminine absence from the Book of Mormon than at first appears? That there are unstated hermeneutic assumptions behind the assertion that the absence in question is real? It may be that what is needed is a revision of hermeneutic assumptions rather than a revision of the text.

Book of Mormon, might be said to have made this the *primary* aim of this other testament of Jesus Christ, for which he would become the angelic announcer. The Book of Mormon, according to its title page, “is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.”

The advent of the angelic word, then, has *everything* to do with gender and generations, according to the Book of Mormon. Angels come in the first place only because of some familial covenant, because of “what great things the Lord hath done for [the] fathers,” and the message of the angel has always to do with this covenant that draws emphatic attention to the difference between male and female, between patriarchs and matriarchs.

It is my hypothesis, then, that Alma 32:23 implicates love or charity in its discussion of faith and hope through a suggestive recognition of this gendered difference. The verse calls us, though subtly, to see that love or charity cannot be disentangled from faith in an angelic announcement, an angelic announcement that neither they without us, nor we without them, can receive. The angelic word lays the foundation for “a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and power, and glories ... from the days of Adam even to the present time” (D&C 128:18). Mormon, in his own already-mentioned sermon on faith, hope, and charity, is emphatic that the angelic message comes to those who will thereafter have to help “the residue of men” to develop “faith in Christ” (Moroni 7:32). Does this not suggest that charity—understood preliminarily as a kind of generic love for others—cannot ultimately be separated from the massive project of constructing the sealed family of Adam and Eve? It is, after all, as Mormon says, only “after *this* manner” that the *Father* “bringeth to pass ... the covenants which he hath made unto the *children* of men” (Moroni 7:32, emphases mine).

4. ALMA AND JOSEPH SMITH

At this point, it must already have become clear how heavily my reading of Alma 32:21–23 is intertwined with what is commonly called Joseph Smith’s “Nauvoo theology.” And it will inevitably be said that I have thus pressed the Book of Mormon text beyond its interpretable bounds. To paraphrase Tertullian: What has Nauvoo to do with New York? Indeed, there is something of a consensus between “conservative” and “liberal” Mormons on this point. Does not the average, “conservative” Latter-day Saint feel, in this post-President-Benson era of relatively heavy focus on the Book of Mormon, just a bit embarrassed by some of what Joseph had to say in Nauvoo? And is it not more or less taken for granted in “liberal” Mormon circles that Joseph’s thought must be described as an evolution from the almost non-denominational Christian doctrines of the Book of Mormon to the excessive, if not excessively dangerous, teachings of Nauvoo? In short, is it not essentially a given that the “Nauvoo theology” must be kept quite separate from Book of Mormon teachings and, so, that the interpretation I have wagered above of Alma 32:21–23 must ultimately be irresponsible?

Quite likely. But its irresponsibility must ultimately be said to be grounded in its fidelity—in other words, in its being a faithful interpretation that cannot be disentangled from personal testimony and its inevitably subjective nature. Indeed, it is precisely in the curiously subjective circularity of “trying” an experiment that a definitively faithful interpretation breaks with both “conservative” and “liberal” approaches. Cutting right across the polarized politics of textual hermeneutics, the faithful interpretation might be said to be illegal, not because it breaks the interpretive law, but because it reorients or even gives a deeper, ultimately symbolic meaning to it, much as Christ’s faithful atonement did with the Law of Moses.¹⁰ It might be said, then, that faithful interpretation is neither obedient nor disobedient to the

10. I personally find Alain Badiou’s analysis of Paul’s doctrine of the law to be most helpful: Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

hermeneutical law: it is an interpretation that is distracted from that law by its fidelity to an event—indeed, in Alma’s terms, to an angel’s revelatory word.

But what angelic encounter or what supplementary word motivates the interpretation I offer here? That is, to what event is one being *faithful* in reading Alma 32:21–23 as an articulation of doctrines Joseph would only make quite explicit in his Nauvoo sermons? Or again, what event could motivate the *hope* that we as a people remain as yet a long way from having been done with the task of interpreting and reinterpreting the Book of Mormon? Or yet again, what event could give one to suggest that the Book of Mormon can only be *charitably* preached in its fullest significance from within the bonds of the new and everlasting covenant of marriage?

The answer: the second section of the Doctrine and Covenants, reporting Moroni’s rendition of Malachi 4:5–6 during the 1823 visit to Joseph Smith.

This remarkably rich, three-verse section only became a part of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1876, some fifty-three years after the event in which its words were spoken.¹¹ The words themselves were not recorded until fifteen years after the event in 1839, after Joseph began to write his “official” history.¹² Perplexingly, Joseph mentioned briefly in an 1835 journal entry that Moroni had quoted Malachi 4, but the entry says nothing of Moroni’s alterations to the King James text;¹³ and, more perplexingly still, Oliver Cowdery’s famed 1835 description of the visit in the *Messenger and Advocate*, despite the long list of texts it claims Moroni dwelt on in his interview with Joseph, never mentions the Book of Malachi at all.¹⁴

11. Robert J. Woodford, “Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants,” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 126.

12. *Ibid.*, 128.

13. Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet’s Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 51.

14. Oliver Cowdery, “Letter IV to W. W. Phelps, Esq.,” *Messenger and Advocate* 1.5 (February 1835): 77–80; and Oliver Cowdery, “Letter VI to W. W. Phelps, Esq.,” *Messenger and Advocate* 1.7 (April 1835): 108–12.

What we have in Doctrine and Covenants section 2, then, is an irretrievable event, an invisible, angelic word that was only recorded a decade and a half after it was spoken and canonized much later still. To trust (1) that Joseph was telling what he believed to be the truth about the visit from Moroni, (2) that he correctly remembered not only the event but the actual alterations made to the biblical text by Moroni, and (3) that Joseph was not simply mentally disturbed—to declare, in a word, unflagging fidelity to the word of D&C 2:1–3—is (common though it ultimately must be among Latter-day Saints) quite frankly *radical*. Which is to say that it breaks with the pretended interpretive hegemony of both “conservative” and “liberal” approaches to the text by calling for a revolutionary reading of the Book of Mormon. But, then, what does this supplementary word say, and why does it call for the kind of reading I have here offered of a few verses in Alma 32?

“Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming” (D&C 2:1–3). The word comes here, in the very language of Alma 32, as a *planting in the heart*, as the investment of an experimental seed given to the *children*, specifically by the *fathers*, and with the intention of sealing up—through the *Priesthood* with a capital P—the entirety of the human family. The Book of Mormon is just such a seed, as Joseph Smith taught on more than one occasion,¹⁵ and as Moroni himself made quite clear by rewording Malachi’s prophecy during his first conversation with the Prophet. Indeed, the Book of

15. Cf. especially Joseph Smith, “To the Elders of the Church of the Latter-day Saints,” *Messenger and Advocate* 2.3 (December 1835): 227; and Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1980), 9–10.

Mormon comes, in the words of Nephi, to “mak[e] known ... the covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 22:9).

In fidelity to Joseph’s report of his encounter with the angel Moroni, then, one must confess to believe that the Nauvoo theology effectively *follows from* rather than *breaks with* the Book of Mormon. Indeed, one might or even *must* faithfully say that it is *only* in light of the Book of Mormon that men and women actually *become* men and women, and that children actually *become* children. And so it is only by holding as tightly as possible to the subtle but revolutionary words of the Book of Mormon that one, or really *two*, can actually hope that the whole family of our founding but fallen parents can be rewritten as the very council of the gods. But—and this is the vital point—the revolutionary words of the Book of Mormon are only revolutionary for the one or the two who declare(s) impossible fidelity to the ludicrous and yet, I trust, *true* story Joseph Smith told about the coming forth of that curious volume.

Indeed, as Joseph Smith himself might have put it: It is only in genuinely eventual faith, hope, and charity that we can, at long last, hear “Glad tidings from Cumorah! Moroni, an angel from heaven, declaring the fulfillment of the prophets—the book to be revealed” (D&C 128:20).



So Shall My Word Be

Reading Alma 32 through Isaiah 55

Julie M. Smith

THE TERM “INTERTEXTUALITY” was coined by philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva to describe the practice of reading one text through the lens of another. This paper will read Alma’s encounter with the Zoramite poor intertextually with Isaiah 55. While the focus will be on Alma 32, material from Alma 30–35 will be considered since that pericope reflects the original Book of Mormon chapter divisions. Additionally, Isaiah 54 and 56 contain many parallel passages that develop the themes of Isaiah 55, so those will be referenced as well.

With any intertextual reading, the question arises: What relationship do these texts have? In this case, we have four possibilities:

- (1) There is no historical or intentional relationship between the two texts.
- (2) The Book of Mormon writers and/or redactors deliberately crafted their account in a way that alludes to the Isaiah text.
- (3) Isaiah prophesied of the Book of Mormon events.
- (4) The writers and/or redactors of Alma and Isaiah drew on a common source.

The evidence that I will present suggests that (2) is most likely: Book of Mormon writers or editors intentionally alluded to Isaiah 55 in order to elucidate, undergird, and emphasize various key themes in

Alma 32.¹ However, I recognize that the intent of the ancient author(s) is not accessible to us and it may be the case that (1) is correct and that there is no inherent relationship between the two texts. Even in that case, we can still find much value in an intertextual reading and it would still be hermeneutically justifiable. While virtually every word of Isaiah 54–56 can be read with reference to the story told in Alma 30–35, space constraints will limit this paper only to those referents that shape our interpretation of the text in Alma.

We begin with the two direct citations of Isaiah 55 in the Book of Mormon. While neither of these is in Alma 32, both have strong thematic ties to that chapter and thus provide an important part of the backdrop and justification for this intertextual reading. Isaiah 55:1 reads:

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

That verse is referenced in 2 Nephi 26:25–26 (I have italicized the material from Isaiah):

Behold, doth he cry unto any, saying: Depart from me? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but he saith: *Come unto me all ye ends of the earth, buy milk and honey, without money and without price.* Behold, hath he commanded any that they should depart out of the synagogues, or out of the houses of worship? Behold, I say unto you, Nay.

Note that the Isaian material is surrounded by uses of the word “depart,” used in relation to the idea that no one is asked to depart from a place of worship. This suggests that the Book of Mormon tradition interpreted Isaiah 55:1 as an invitation to worship that

1. There are indications that Isaiah 55 is alluded to elsewhere in the Book of Alma; see, e.g., Alma 1:20 (where the “word of God” is imparted “without money and without price”) and Alma 5:34 (where the fruit of the tree of life is probably linked to Isaiah 55:1).

must be extended to all, which explains why Isaiah 55 might have been chosen to undergird Alma 32, where exclusion from worship is a key concern.

Isaiah 55:2 reads:

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.

This passage is quoted in 2 Nephi 9:51 (Here, I have italicized significant *deviations* from Isaiah's text):

Wherefore, do not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy. Hearken diligently unto me, *and remember the words which I have spoken; and come unto the Holy One of Israel, and feast upon that which perisheth not, neither can be corrupted,* and let your soul delight in fatness.

Note that Isaiah's phrase "eat ye that which is good" is replaced with "and remember the words which I have spoken; and come unto the Holy One of Israel, and feast upon that which perisheth not, neither can be corrupted." While it is possible that the Nephites had an alternate recension of the Isaiah text,² it is more likely that the phrase was deliberately changed in order to suggest a relationship between "eating the good," remembering sacred words, and feasting upon them. If this is the case, then we have a possible thematic link to Alma 32, where a parable comparing the word to a seed ends with the promise of feasting (see Alma 32:42). So the attentive Book of Mormon reader is additionally prepared for the possibility of reading Alma 32 and Isaiah 55 intertextually by the careful quotation of Isaiah 55:2 in 2 Nephi 9 which aligned the idea of eating the good with remembering the words and feasting.

2. While certainty in this matter is not possible, the fact that Isaiah is poetry and the 2 Nephi version disrupts the poetic structure suggests that 2 Nephi doesn't reproduce the original text but rather alters it.

The balance of this paper will work sequentially through Isaiah 55 in order to see what light it might shed on Alma 32. We begin by noting that the poetic parallelism in the first two lines of Isaiah 55:1 (“Ho, *every one that thirsteth*, come ye to the waters, and *he that hath no money*; come ye, buy, and eat;”; italics added) equates those who thirst with those who have no money. In Alma 32, the Zoramite poor are, obviously, without money and are promised in verse 42 that when they feast upon the fruit, they shall not thirst (“ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst”). What Isaiah contributes to the discussion in Alma is an alignment of a monetary need with its spiritual solution: the answer to the Zoramites’ poverty isn’t more money or better clothing or access to the synagogue; it is the fruit of the tree of life. The verse in Isaiah also emphasizes that the Zoramites’ poverty need not keep them from the feast that Alma promises, since it specifically makes the invitation to worship to the poor. The concept of a spiritual response to a financial problem also explains Alma’s responses to the Zoramites’ questions: when the Zoramite poor ask him what to do about the fact that they are cast out of the synagogue (Alma 32:5: “Behold, what shall these my brethren do, ... for they have cast us out of our synagogues?”), Alma responds with a discourse on faith (Alma 32:8–43). But when they ask him about faith (Alma 33:1: “Now after Alma had spoken these words, they sent forth unto him desiring to know whether they should believe in one God ...”), he tells them what to do about having been barred from the synagogue (Alma 33:2–23).³ One result of these reversed questions and answers is to associate the idea of faith with the idea of place. The Zoramite poor are operating under the misunderstanding that they need access to a certain place to worship, but Alma teaches that the only “place” they need is the place that they give to the seed to grow.

3. I credit this observation to James Faulconer.

The theme of place is also elucidated in the chapters surrounding Isaiah 55. In Isaiah 54:11–13, we read of the Lord himself building a place for those who are in distress:

O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children.

And then, bookending that reference, we find the same sentiment in Isaiah 56:4–7:

For thus saith the Lord unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off. Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant; Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people.

Note that the primary descriptor of the faithful in this passage is that they keep the Sabbath; this is particularly appropriate for our intertextual reading given that the Zoramites' apostasy is described in terms of improper Sabbath worship. These are multidimensional links to Alma 32's message of place, casting out, and worship. The irony is that being prevented from entering the holy place has put the Zoramite poor in a place—literally and figuratively—to hear the word. The audience is being called upon to examine their assumptions about the value of so-called holy places.

Also significant in Isaiah 55:1 is the idea that one can purchase food and drink without money (“come, buy wine and milk without money and without price”). What Alma describes as growing fruit that “ye shall feast upon ... even until ye are filled” (Alma 32:42), Isaiah calls buying without price. This is not to imply that the goods are free, but rather that the price has been paid by someone else; hence there is a subtle teaching here about the atonement. This message is amplified in Isaiah 55:10–11:

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

In that passage, “bread for the eater” is tied to its source, the waters from heaven, and is paralleled to the Lord’s word. Similarly, the feasting done at the end of Alma’s parable is only possible because the price has been paid by Jesus Christ. In this case, Isaiah 55 serves as an important supplement to Alma’s parable, which otherwise could be (mis)construed as teaching that salvation can be achieved solely by planting and nourishing a seed and without the intervention of a Savior. By making clear that the fruit of the tree of life has been paid for by another—even if it is “grown” within the audience—Isaiah 55 enhances our reading of Alma’s parable. Isaiah 55:1 also contextualizes the story of Korihor, where his ignoble end involves begging for food (Alma 30:58); he, clearly, has not chosen a path that leads to being freely offered food without price. This is one of many ways in which Korihor’s experience serves as a foil to that of Alma and the Zoramite poor.

In Isaiah 55:2, we find two questions: “Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not?” The Zoramites have adopted sartorial social markers, but Isaiah questions the practice of spending money on anything that

does not sustain life. That first phrase in 55:2 is paralleled to the idea of laboring for that which won't satisfy, using language reminiscent of that in Alma 32:5, where the complaint of the Zoramite poor is that they have been cast from a synagogue that they "have labored abundantly to build with [their] own hands." Perhaps because of this investment of labor, they prize the synagogue and desire to re-enter it. But the juxtaposition of the first two lines of Isaiah 55:2 implies that this labor will satisfy them no more than the fine Zoramite clothing will. Further, it suggests that the Zoramite poor may be just as culpable as the Zoramite rich; note that both Alma (Alma 32:13) and Amulek (Alma 34:17, 33) will preach of the Zoramites' need for repentance. The Alma text makes clear that they need to repent; the Isaiah text may give us a window into *why* they need to repent.

This theme of repentance may also explain the puzzling remark from the narrator that Alma "turned him about, his face immediately towards him" (Alma 32:6): it may have been included to echo Isaiah 54:8, which reads, "in a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee." The Lord's promise to turn his face back toward a penitent people is reflected in the narrator's phrase that Alma "turned him[self] about" and faced the Zoramites. A secondary purpose for that phrase may be to emphasize the closeness between Alma and the Lord: the Lord's favor is reflected in Alma's actions toward this penitent people.

Isaiah 55:2 ends with these words: "hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness." This tricolon suggests the interrelatedness of hearkening, eating the good, and delighting in fatness; it is reminiscent of Alma's parable, particularly verse 28, where experimenting on the word leads to a fruit whose key characteristic is that it is good and whose swelling will enlarge the soul:

Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will

resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me.

The final line in Isaiah 55:2, with its reference to delighting in fatness, serves as a counterpoint to the previous statement about laboring for that which will not satisfy. Thus, the intertextual reading serves to make explicit that the solution to the poor Zoramites' problem isn't re-admittance to the synagogue but rather trying the experiment upon the word and delighting in the growth of the seed; the Isaiah text once again makes clear that the financial and social problem has a spiritual solution.

The beginning of Isaiah 55:3 reads, "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live." The repetition in these phrases serves to emphasize the importance of listening. Read intertextually, it calls attention to a curious feature of Alma 32: Alma's repeated use of the phrase "I say unto you" and its variants, which occur fourteen times in this chapter.⁴ This is a surprisingly high number for a phrase that might easily have been omitted, but a closer inspection of these phrases, along with phrases Alma uses to indicate what others say, reveals some interesting patterns. First, the sequence begins with "thy brother hath said" (Alma 32:9) and ends with "ye will say" (Alma 32:37), which suggests that one point of Alma's discourse is to help the audience transition from focusing on what others do to what they

4. Alma refers to himself speaking in Alma 32:10 ("I say unto you"), 32:11 ("I would ask"), 32:12 ("I say unto you"), 32:14 ("as I said unto you"), 32:18 ("now I ask"), 32:18 ("I say unto you"), 32:20 ("I say unto you"), 32:21 ("as I said"), 32:22 ("I say unto you"), 32:26 ("as I said"), 32:29 ("I say unto you"), 32:31 ("I say unto you"), 32:35 ("I say unto you"), and 32:36 ("I say unto you"). Alma refers to others speaking in 32:9 ("thy brother hath said"), 32:17 ("there are many who do say"), 32:28 ("ye will begin to say"), 32:30 ("ye will say"), and 32:37 ("ye will say").

themselves do. Note that the audience literally gets the last word in determining what will happen. Also note that the first time the audience says anything, it is “ye will begin to say” (Alma 32:28). That makes obvious sense, but it also points to the fact that at that moment, the audience has begun to interact with the word. When Alma indicates that the audience “will say: Let us nourish it with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us” (Alma 32:37), the emphasis isn’t just on the nourishing process but also on the *saying* process. That is, the decision by the people to verbalize their plans is, at that moment, a significant constituent of their faith. This suggests that Korihor’s sign of muteness was partially symbolic: it made him literally unable to say that which he had chosen not to say. Additionally, this pattern highlights the fact that the construction of faith has a back-and-forth element between Alma and the people and is, truly, a dialogue. Further, the emphasis on “saying” also serves to humanize and dignify the Zoramite poor, who have apparently been treated as non-entities, unworthy of being conversation partners. To sum, the verse in Isaiah calls the reader’s attention to the fact that saying and speaking are used in the Alma text in a way that, while not strictly required to keep the story moving forward, functions to elucidate some its major themes.

Isaiah 55:9 reads, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” We might read this as a rebuke not only to the worship on the “high” Rameumptom,⁵ but also as a rebuke to the Zoramite poor who desire to worship in the same way. Further, the Isaiah verse compares the difference between heaven and earth to the difference between the Lord’s thoughts and man’s thoughts; thus, it encourages us to see the physical attribute of height as imbued with symbolic meaning. This same connection is made when Alma sees that not

5. There are also interesting parallels to the story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

only were the Zoramites' bodies lifted up but, in verse 25, that "their hearts were lifted up" as well. Zoramite worship uses physical space symbolically to accomplish several things. First, it suggests the superiority of one person above the others in contrast to Alma 30:7, where we learn that the motivating principle behind Nephite law was to be sure that people were *not* placed on "unequal grounds." Secondly, it denies the communal nature of worship by allowing only one person at a time to worship; contrast Alma's communality—e.g., "let us nourish it" in Alma 32:37. Next, it makes worship into an exterior, public act; contrast the interiority of the experiment upon the word in Alma's parable. Fourth, it presents worship as unchanging instead of growing, unlike the seed of Alma's parable. And, finally, it makes worship into a discrete event instead of a continual process, unlike Amulek's admonition in Alma 34:27 that they pray continually (see also Alma 33:4–7).

There is another significant contrast between the Rameumptom and Alma's preaching: while the Zoramite speaking occurs in "a place built up in the center of their synagogue, a place for standing" (Alma 31:13), Alma preaches from a hill (Alma 32:4). Both Alma's hill and the Rameumptom have the superficial similarity of being "high places" but Alma's is natural—by which I mean God-created—and out of doors while the Zoramites' is man-made and within a synagogue, which is also man-made. While Zoramite worship is surrounded by the man-made (synagogue, Rameumptom, fine clothing, and jewels), Alma preaches in nature with nothing artificial mentioned as he teaches a parable that is nature-focused. The implication is that the Zoramites are trying to achieve closeness to God on their own terms, through their own creations. Note that in Isaiah 54 and 56, even those things that we would normally consider human creations, such as buildings, are portrayed as God's creation (see, e.g., Isaiah 54:11–12). These references work together to establish the value of God's creations over human creation and imply the same hierarchy for God's thoughts and beliefs.

Isaiah 55:10 compares the word of the Lord to rain, which waters the earth, makes it bud, and, ultimately, “give[s] seed to the sower, and bread to the eater.” While the previous verse in Isaiah emphasized the distance between God and man, this one explains how that gap can be bridged. It is critical to note that this distance is not spanned by human creations such as the Rameumptom; rather, it is the word of the Lord that links heaven to earth. Verse 10 has an interesting constellation of similarities to and differences from Alma’s parable. Note that both compare natural plant growth to the word of the Lord, but in Alma, the word is a seed while in Isaiah, it is the rain. Water plays an important but understated role in Alma’s parable—since the plant will be scorched and die without nourishing—and the seed plays an important role in Isaiah’s metaphor—since the ultimate goal of the water coming down from heaven is to create the seed. When we read intertextually, we see that even the seed itself in Alma’s parable comes from God. This is a key point since both Korihor and the Zoramites are guilty of self-aggrandizement; what Isaiah adds to the story is that while true growth occurs from within the person, it ultimately comes from God.

The importance of water is further explored in the chapters surrounding Isaiah 55 through references to the dry and barren. Isaiah 54:1 reads:

Sing, O barren, thou that didst not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, thou that didst not travail with child: for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, saith the Lord.

And Isaiah 56 begins with a description of a time when eunuchs (who, of course, are barren) will not be excluded from the temple. Appropriately enough for our comparison to Alma 32, it describes the eunuchs as blessed so that they won’t be a “dry tree.” We can use these Isaiah references to the improved state of the barren to better understand what Alma means when he tells the Zoramite poor that

if the seed doesn't get root, it is because their ground is barren (Alma 32:39). Unlike the parable of the soils in Mark 4, in Alma, barren ground is not a permanent condition but rather something under the control of the sower: the sower can choose to better nourish the ground so that growth will occur (see Alma 32:41). The image of the fruitful eunuch is a particularly compelling example of the Lord's ability to cause the barren to bear. When Isaiah prophesies that the barren will someday bring forth, it emphasizes Alma's message that growth is under the control of the sower and makes clear that the Zoramite poor are not limited in their spiritual growth because they have been cut off from the synagogue. Further, the references to eunuchs in Isaiah 56 emphasize that it is not the Lord's will that his followers be separated from the main body of worshippers. This is an important counterpoint to the Alma 32 story because it emphasizes the importance of community, an idea which might otherwise have been lost in Alma's teachings about the interiority of true worship.

Isaiah 55:11 ("So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.") sheds light on an irony in Alma 30–35: Alma decides to preach to the Zoramites specifically so that they won't enter into a league with the Lamanites and therefore threaten the peace of the Nephites (see Alma 31:3–5). This, however, is *exactly* what does occur as a *direct* result of his mission (see Alma 35:8–10). Isaiah's claim, then, that the Lord's word "shall not return unto [Him] void, but it shall accomplish that which [He] please[s]" (Isaiah 55:11) helps explain this irony. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote, "we must not automatically regard irony as a sign of God's disinterest. It is more a reflection of His precision."⁶

6. See Neal A. Maxwell, *We Talk of Christ, We Rejoice in Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1984), 132. See also Neal A. Maxwell, "Irony: The Crust on the Bread of Adversity," *Ensign*, May 1989, 62f.

Reading intertextually suggests that even if Alma failed to achieve his own goal, his preaching still worked to fulfill God's purposes, which may have been even larger than Alma's.

Isaiah 55:12 reads, "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." The parallelism between this verse and the two previous ones in Isaiah suggests that those who "go out," as Alma and his coworkers do, should model themselves on the rain that the Lord sends. This furthers the association between Alma and the Lord that was noted above. Isaiah 55:12 is also the most likely explanation for the extremely unusual phrasing in Alma 31:36, where it is twice noted that Alma clapped his hands upon his co-workers. While clapping one's hands and clapping one's hands *upon* a person are somewhat different, the verbal echo makes a connection between the two. Read intertextually, Alma is pictured as the tree, which is a most appropriate metaphor in light of his parable of the seed: the image of Alma himself as a tree implies that Alma has tried the experiment on the word and allowed the tree to grow up within him, the end result of which is his ability to convey the Holy Spirit to his co-workers.

Isaiah 55:12 mentions joy ("For ye shall go out with joy"), a concept also found in Alma 31:38 ("he also gave them strength, that they should suffer no manner of afflictions, save it were swallowed up in the joy of Christ"). Further, what Isaiah poetically describes as the hills "break[ing] forth before you into singing" (Isaiah 55:12), the writer of Alma more prosaically calls "teaching and speaking unto the people upon the hill" (Alma 32:4). When the Isaiah text links the singing hills to the clapping trees, it encourages the reader to associate Alma's preaching with the action by which he fills his companions with the Holy Spirit (Alma 31:36: "And behold, as he clapped his hands upon them, they were filled

with the Holy Spirit”). In other words, his preaching is not merely under his own authority but rather is accomplished by the same divine power by which he can confer an outpouring of the Spirit, an association which is strengthened by the note in verse 7 that “he stretched forth his hand,” a phrase which usually connotes the use of divine power (see, e.g., 1 Nephi 17:53, Mosiah 12:2, Alma 14:10, and Alma 19:12).

Perhaps the most interesting part of Isaiah 55 to read intertextually is verse 13:

Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Note that thorns and briars are what grow where the land is neglected, while firs and myrtles are evidence of nourishment and cultivation. In terms of Alma’s parable, then, the promise is made that the nourished and nurtured trees will, in fact, grow up unto the Lord—that it is possible for the Zoramite poor *not* to end up with a bad seed or a scorched plant, despite what the wealthy Zoramites have led them to believe.

What Isaiah calls “an everlasting sign” is of key importance to the Alma text, where Korihor asks for a sign, where the Zoramites take their wealth to be a sign of God’s favor, and where Alma preaches against those who ask for signs. What the Isaiah text makes clear is that the only everlasting sign is the growth of the healthy tree, something we have seen in Alma where Korihor’s sign led only to his death. The issue of counterfeit signs might be especially important to Alma in this context, where Korihor’s experience with the devil’s angel (see Alma 30:53) is unfortunately similar to Alma’s conversion experience with an angel of God (see Alma 36:6). In the face of a spiritually immature audience, Alma needs to explain how and why he knows that his angel is true and Korihor’s is false and he does this by delineating what Isaiah calls “the everlasting sign.” Korihor

is portrayed as the brier and thorn—the false sign that is the result of no nourishing and care, a point which is emphasized by the summary statement to the Korihor story: “and thus we see that the devil will not support [=nourish] his children at the last day” (Alma 30:60). This is why Alma discourages sign seeking in Alma 32: no external sign is everlasting. Only the interior sign—the seed, becoming a tree, bearing the fruit of the tree of life—is the eternal sign. Any other sign sought or received is not an everlasting sign, because it will not lead to faith.

The Isaiah text mentions that this everlasting sign will not be “cut off.” The concept of being cut off (or cast out) is prominent in Alma, where Korihor is cast out, where the poor are cast out of the synagogue, and where Alma encourages them not to cast out a good seed. The Isaiah text reminds us that, although the Zoramites have been cast out of the synagogue, they can still choose to plant the seed which will create a sign that no one can cast out. They have assumed that worship is tied to a particular place; they are right, but that place isn’t the synagogue, it is the interior of the worshipper. As Amulek will say, the Lord “dwelleth not in unholy temples, but in the hearts of the righteous doth he dwell” (Alma 34:36). Note that the parallelism of that statement contrasts unholy temples with the heart of the righteous. This emphasizes the internality of true worship, for which the Rameumptom’s very public prayer is the foil. It also serves to emphasize the identification of the Zoramite poor with the seed: they were the (potentially) good seed which was cast out by the wealthy Zoramites. Alma relies on this Zoramite experience of being cast out as the basis for his parable. This Zoramites-as-seeds reading is strengthened by the fact that after they are cast out once again (this time from the land itself), the people in the land of Jershon “nourish[ed]” them (Alma 35:9), a phrase which echoes the language of the parable of the seed.

In this paper I have endeavored to show the ways in which Alma 32 relies on Isaiah 55 to develop key themes. Reading intertextually emphasizes certain facets of Alma 32 and helps to prevent some potential misunderstandings. Most importantly, it emphasizes the role of a Savior in the creation of faith and nourishing of the word.

Faith and Commodification

Robert Couch

THERE IS NOTHING QUITE LIKE home-grown produce. Somehow, it just tastes better. Social scientists have empirically documented this fact and psychologists now have ready explanations. When we tend a garden, we are required to exert effort to fight back the weeds. Fruit does not spring forth immediately, so we must also practice patience as we wait for the earth, sun, and sky to play their roles in the ripening process. As we invest ourselves, a distinct desire is fostered that links us to the fruit for which we wait with anticipation—anticipation wrapped with personal meaning and significance. Sometimes we grow impatient, yearning for the fruit's sweet taste. At other times we grow complacent in our care and then worry if we think the fruit may be lost. At long last, if all goes well, the mature fruit is harvested and we partake with delight and deep satisfaction.

With the rise of globally-integrated markets, however, the fruit trade is booming and it makes less and less economic sense to tend our own gardens and grow our own fruit. For much less effort, and usually less expense, we can pop into the local supermarket and have our pick from a wide selection of beautifully-presented fruit. Thanks to modern technology and various international free-trade agreements, high quality fruit is in abundant supply. The pain-staking efforts required to grow our own fruit survive in our day mostly as a

hobby. The convenience of imported fruit is too difficult to resist and, although it might not taste quite as good to us as home-grown fruit, imported fruit is still very tasty. For these very sensible reasons, fruit markets have come to resemble countless other commodity markets in today's global economy.

A similar phenomenon is occurring in epistemological matters. Thanks to recent breakthroughs in science, technological miracles can now be bought and sold. Today, the best available scientific evidence can be easily reviewed so as to form the basis of practically any form of belief. Oftentimes, the only personal investment needed in forming beliefs is the time it takes to type in a few search terms and click a handful of links describing what beliefs are most scientifically justified. In our information age, knowledge is thus becoming increasingly cheap and faith, in turn, is becoming increasingly unnecessary, especially among the educated. As a result, faith is becoming increasingly marginalized. To declare, for example, that one's beliefs are rooted in personal faith rather than empirically tested results is a sure way to raise suspicions that one is ignorant and out of touch with modern sources of knowledge. Science is increasingly crowding out faith.

Ancient prophets in the Book of Mormon faced similar problems regarding faith, long-before the rise of modern science. The basic role of faith in the formation of beliefs and the attainment of knowledge has actually not changed much over the centuries. Alma, in particular, preached against the dangers of taking a commodified approach to faith and knowledge. In today's consumerist culture and scientific age, Alma's discourse to the Zoramite poor has become critically relevant.

I. CONSUMING SIGNS

For Alma, the essence of sign-seeking is an inversion of the proper relationship between belief and knowledge. On Alma's account, sign-seekers are those who say, "if thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven,

then we shall believe” (Alma 32:17). This sign-seeking formulation resonates with the methods of modern, scientific inquiry: when data are not sufficient, well-trained scholars are taught to be skeptical. In reality, however, basing beliefs on evidence is something enjoyed only by *consumers* of scientific knowledge. *Producers* of scientific knowledge, in contrast, are more apt to recognize the crucial role that hope and belief play in the process of scientific discovery. Without hope that an experiment will prove worthwhile and without belief in the scientific method, experiments would never be undertaken. Hope and belief thus play a critical role in the production of scientific knowledge, even if consumers of this knowledge are apt to forget.

In general, consumerism fosters forgetfulness. Consumers are, by definition, interested in consuming, without having to remember any particulars about the production process. If a consumer happens to be socially-minded or ethical, he will care whether, for example, sweatshop labor was used in the production process. But this is a qualification of what it means to be a consumer—the consumer *as consumer* does not care about such production process details. Consumers are interested in the end product to be consumed, without needing to remember the work and effort that went into the process of producing the final product. Sign-seekers have a consumer-like attitude toward knowledge, desiring a sign only to “consume it upon their lusts” (D&C 46:10). Sign-seekers, effectively, do not care about the process of knowledge production; rather, they want knowledge as cheaply and conveniently as possible. Investing time or effort in the development and production of knowledge is avoided, as much as possible.

In contrast to the sign-seeker, Alma preaches that the sincere seeker of knowledge must be humble. Many of the Zoramites are too proud to listen and repent. Repentance requires change, and the proud do not like to change. Ask any economist: consumers don’t repent, or even request; consumers *demand*. According to modern economic theory, consumers have inborn, pre-given preferences that demand to be satisfied. To act counter to these preferences would be irrational.

These unchangeable preferences and their rational unfolding in market institutions form the causal basis for supply and demand theory.

Alma suggests a similar causal mechanism at work in the sign-seeking approach. Sign-seekers believe that a sign can cause belief. Alma counters this view by arguing, “if a man knoweth a thing he hath *no cause to believe*, for he knoweth it” (Alma 32:18, emphasis mine). Alma makes this statement as part of a discussion about humility and compulsion, saying, “he that truly humbleth himself ... shall be blessed—yea, much more blessed than they who are compelled to be humble” (Alma 32:15). There is a parallel here between the compulsion of a sign with respect to knowledge and the compulsion of circumstance with respect to humility. In both cases, Alma praises those who rise above causal forces. Those who are truly humble are those who are humble not simply because of poor circumstances; similarly, those who truly believe are those who believe not simply because of signs. Alma’s sermon might thus be interpreted as an argument against teachings rooted in undeviating or uninterrupted causal laws. In our time, Alma might say there are strict limits to the ability of scientific theories to explain natural and social phenomena, since a full explanatory account must include some account of agent-driven change (like repentance) that works counter to the causal mechanisms forming the basis of science.

Alma’s phrase “no cause to believe” is quite similar to a phrase used by Samuel the Lamanite. Samuel, also in the context of explaining signs, says that signs are given “to the intent that there should be *no cause for unbelief* among the children of men” (Helaman 14:28, emphasis mine). If we iron out Samuel’s use of a double negative—the “no” in “no cause” and the “un” in “unbelief”—it seems his positive claim is that signs cause belief. Formulated this way, Samuel seems to be making the very claim that Alma accused sign-seekers of making. How can we understand this? On my reading, the negative formulation used by both Alma and Samuel is key to reconciling their doctrines with each other. Combining their claims, we have the following: signs

do not cause belief (Alma), nor do they cause unbelief (Samuel). In other words, signs are simply not causal agents, in the sense of efficient causation. Rather, “cause” here should be understood more in terms of a cause that one believes in and fights for (cf. Captain Moroni’s “cause of liberty” in Alma 51:17).

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, seems to describe signs in a similar manner. The sign of circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant, but it was given to Abraham when he was uncircumcised. Thus, Abraham is able to be the father of the circumcised *and* uncircumcised (Romans 4:11–12). Like the sign of circumcision, signs in general can be used either to strengthen faith, as with the faithful, or to short-circuit faith, as with sign-seekers. To first exercise faith and then receive a sign, or to receive a sign without demanding one, amounts to treating signs as gifts; to first demand a sign amounts to treating signs as commodities.

2. PREFABRICATED CREEDS

Alma’s opposition to sign-seeking is structurally parallel to his opposition to the apostate mode of worship practiced among the Zoramites. As recounted in Alma 31, when the Zoramites pray, they presume to know God’s mind and intentions. This presumption is fostered by creed-based beliefs that preclude the need for individuals to personally seek more knowledge or exercise more faith.

Credal statements of belief can be understood as serving a function that is similar to standards for traded commodities. Industry standards for commodities establish guidelines such that, for example, a barrel of crude oil has an established market price regardless of the particular oil well from which it was extracted. These standards facilitate trade since buyers of crude oil effectively care only about two things: that the oil meets industry standards, and that it is purchased at a competitive price. Commodity standards efface all other differences. Theological creeds can have a similar difference-effacing

effect. When a theological creed establishes, say, a set of attributes regarding the nature of God, it obviates the need for an individual worshiper to discover these attributes for themselves. Thus, when it comes time to pray to God, the danger is that the worshiper will end up praying to an imagined representation of God, rather than God himself. As a theological system of beliefs becomes more elaborate and widely accepted, there is less and less need to pray, since the theological system can increasingly provide the answer to any question that might be posed. Questions, regardless of their source, can be processed by the creedal system of theological beliefs and a generic answer can be verified as meeting theological standards and then delivered on-demand.

The Zoramites seem to have established a creedal system of worship that became standardized in this way. The “same prayers” (Alma 31:20) the Zoramites offered were an attempt to avoid grappling with things “they knew nothing about” (Alma 31:22). This desire to avoid the unknown in favor of that which was (supposedly) known is analogous to the priority that the sign-seeker gives to knowledge over belief and faith. That is, rather than humbly acknowledging one’s lack of knowledge and using this lack as an opportunity to exercise faith, the sign-seeker embraces a prefabricated, creed-based knowledge. Sign-seeking, like the Zoramite prayer upon the Rameumptom, tries to use knowledge to supplant the need for exercising faith in the face of what is unknown.

But our lack of knowledge can be productive. The veil separating us from God can help us cultivate a desire to learn more about God and draw closer to Him. By revealing Himself only through messengers bringing his word, God remains unknown and mysterious, although not unknowable. Similarly, even when Alma discusses perfect knowledge, he emphasizes its non-comprehensive, non-totalizing nature. There is always more to learn. There are always more revelations to be revealed. In Alma’s “word as seed” analogy, he poses a series of five rhetorical questions about the seed’s growth to which he answers

“Yea” (Alma 32:29, 30, 31, 34, 35). Then, with rhetorical emphasis, Alma reverses this pattern after explaining how knowledge can be “perfect in that thing” (Alma 32:34), regarding the goodness of the seed. Alma asks, “and now behold, after ye have tasted this light is your knowledge perfect? Behold I say unto you, *Nay*; neither must ye lay aside your faith” (Alma 32:35–36, emphasis mine). This emphatic “Nay” is then followed by several verses that explain the need to continue to nourish the tree, exercising diligence, faith, and patience (Alma 32:36–43).

For Alma, it thus seems that knowledge is eternally intertwined with faith. Faith and knowledge are in an eternal relation with each other, with faith as the underlying productive force by which knowledge is generated. This ongoing relationship is analogous to the ongoing relationship that is generated by gift exchange transactions, in contrast to the lack of relation generated by commodity transactions. When a commodity is bought or sold on an over-the-counter electronic exchange, for example, buyers and sellers often do not even know each other’s identity. From the perspective of economic exchange, the personal investment required in coming up with a thoughtful gift is an efficiency-undermining friction. In this sense, an anonymous, electronic market for the exchange of commodities with very low transaction costs represents one pole of maximal economic efficiency, whereas the opposite pole might be represented by the ideal Mormon home where eternal relationships are forged and nurtured with great personal investment, and where gifts of time and love are freely given without regard to self or market values.

A theology comprised of prepackaged creeds objectifies our relationship with God. True worship requires subjective involvement. We must follow Christ’s example, “becoming subject to the Spirit” (Mosiah 15:5). We cannot be detached and neutral in our worship; rather, we must subject ourselves, giving place within our own souls for the transformative effects of God’s word.

3. FINDING PLACE

When Alma invites the Zoramite poor to “experiment upon [his] words,” he explains that a first requirement is to “give place for a portion of [his] words” (Alma 32:27). Alma continues, “Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold ... if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief ... it will begin to swell within your breasts” (Alma 32:28). This place for the seed can be understood as being opened when one’s lack of knowledge is recognized. When religious consumers feel comfortable in terms of having ample and convenient access to knowledge, this supposed knowledge takes up the space that the true believer would otherwise fill with faith. When Alma encounters the Zoramite priests, they are comfortable in their place of worship and with their religious knowledge. They thus have no desire for change and there is no room in their hearts to receive more of God’s word. The humble poor, in contrast, have no place to worship, and this emptiness effectively opens a space in their heart to receive God’s word. When the poor are cast out of the synagogues, they feel disoriented and confused, not knowing what to do. This lack of knowledge is a reversal of the way that the Zoramite creeds crowd out faith and the desire to learn. Thus, the Zoramite poor, in the process of being humbled, develop a desire to learn what to do because this is something about which they lack knowledge: “we have no place to worship our God; and behold, what shall we do?” (Alma 32:5)

Later, Alma describes a similar kind of space to his son Corianton: “For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately, and partaken of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, *having no space for repentance*; yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated” (Alma 42:5). According to Alma, when Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden, after partaking of the tree of knowledge but before partaking of the tree of life, space was given in which the natural consequences of their transgression were postponed. This space is, then, precisely the space in which we, each

being like Adam and Eve, are to exercise faith and repent in order to reestablish a live, non-creedal relationship with Deity, whom Alma describes elsewhere as the “living God” (Alma 7:6).

If we are unwilling to change, then the space we have been provided to repent will serve no purpose. In light of this, we can better understand Alma’s conclusion to his sign-seeking discussion in Alma 32:19 where he poses a question precisely about the issue of expedited judgment and condemnation: “And now, how much more cursed is he that knoweth the will of God and doeth it not, than he that only believeth, or only hath cause to believe, and falleth into transgression?”¹ By posing a rhetorical question here, Alma is able to raise, in both form and content, the question of subjectivity and change. He asks his listeners to do more than just sit back in a detached, uninvested way, consuming the benefits of life in the kingdom. Alma explicitly invites us to be involved, to begin actively judging and discerning, planting and cultivating, desiring and seeking to learn more, to obtain more knowledge through the ongoing work of exercising faith. By engaging the word, plunging our hands into the soil, we give place to the word in our lives. By becoming subjectively involved, the word will begin to have real effects, sprouting into new ways of thinking, living, viewing, and experiencing the world.

If we take advantage of this space by giving place to the word in our hearts, then God promises that we will find “that *place* which [God has] prepared in the mansions of [his] Father” (Ether 12:34). Because of the partially revealing nature of God’s word, the blow that judgment would otherwise inevitably inflict upon us is deferred, and it is in this created space that the seeds of change can be sown.

This place in our heart and space for repentance, created by humility and our lack of knowledge regarding God’s mysteries, serves to establish particular and personal bonds of meaning and significance. The mansion in heaven prepared for us is not a cookie-

1. The phrase “only hath cause to believe” corroborates the discussion above regarding the meaning of the term cause. If cause were understood in terms of efficient causation, the use of the term “only” would be difficult to make sense of here.

cutter, manufactured home that we are lining up to receive, but a particular place given as a reward at the end of our own personal journey, shared with our particular family and friends. The seed in our heart gives rise to a life/tree shaped by our own experiences, commensurate with our personal involvement, engagement, and investment in the process of nurturing the word. Only if we each take up the task of cultivating our own family trees and growing our own community fruit can this fruit be genuinely shared, appreciated, and enjoyed.

4. ENJOYING THE FRUIT

When Alma meets the poor, outcast Zoramites, he responds with—of all emotions—“great joy” (Alma 32:6). Clearly, Alma does not experience joy merely because they are cast out. Rather, Alma’s joy comes from the increased possibility of redemption their persecuted state has effected. The hope is that the Zoramite poor will, because of their afflictions, prove humble enough to receive God’s word and to repent and change, eventually receiving with gratitude the gift of eternal life. Since the Zoramite poor built the synagogues from which they are cast out, they are alienated from the fruit of their labor. But this alienation is not all bad. Alienation itself can be received as a gift. It can eventually result in deeper desire, appreciation, and enjoyment.

This positive understanding of alienation lies at the heart of the Mormon view of the Fall. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve took fruit that had not been offered to them and then found themselves alienated from God. This alienation opened new possibilities for them. Upon hearing the plan of salvation, Eve “was *glad*, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the *joy* of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient” (Moses 5:11, emphasis mine). The difficulties imposed by the transgression in the Garden opened the door to the path toward redemption. Eve’s claim here is not just that redemption would not have been

experienced without the fall, but that they would not have *enjoyed* redemption without the fall. This perspective aligns with Lehi's teaching in 2 Nephi 2 that there must be opposition in all things and that joy could not be known without also knowing misery (2 Nephi 2:11, 23). Alma's joy at seeing the alienated Zoramite poor is similar to Eve's joy: in both cases, a state of alienation provides space for change to occur and desire to be fostered, thus preparing for the enjoyment of redemption.

Earlier in the Book of Mormon, Lehi has a dream in which he sees what an unappreciated (or un-enjoyed) redemption might look like. One group of people first partook of the fruit of the tree of life and then were afterwards ashamed because those in the great and spacious building scoffed at them. As a result, they soon fell away (1 Nephi 8:24–28). In order to avoid such a fate, faith and desire must be sufficiently cultivated so that the fruit of the tree of life will be enjoyed, appreciated, and received as a gift, with sincere gratitude. Otherwise, we risk being distracted by the apparently effortless consumptive lives of those who mock (but will eventually mourn).

Returning to Alma's discourse, we find in Alma 32:28 a succinct and comprehensive preview of the "seed as word" metaphor. The rest of the chapter goes on to elaborate this analogy, but it is not obvious how the verses that immediately follow add anything of substance to the teaching in verse 28. Verses 29–34 in particular seem to comprise a rather wordy and redundant unit that makes an ultimately simple, even trivial, point: a good seed will grow and bring forth after its own likeness. Why does Alma make such an elaborate presentation to make this relatively simple point?

Structurally, verses 29–34 seem to form a unit bookended by the question of "perfect knowledge" at the end of verse 29 and the beginning of verse 34. The center of this thematic unit occurs in the second half of verse 31, "for every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness." This structurally emphasized message of fecundity is particularly interesting in light of the "perfect knowledge" bracketing. In Hebrew, the word for knowledge, *yada*, is usually used to refer to experiential knowledge, oftentimes with respect to sacred experiences

such as intimate relations associated with reproduction. After verse 36, no form of the word “know” or “knowledge” occurs. Instead, Alma talks metaphorically in terms of the fruit of tree of life that is “most precious,” a phrase Mormon employs in Moroni 9:9 to refer to “the chastity and virtue” of the daughters of the Lamanites, as “that which is most dear and precious.” Nephi also uses the phrase “most precious” to describe the fruit of the tree of life (1 Nephi 15:36) in a context rife with allusions to Israel’s family tree.

To a modern day Mormons, these rhetorical linkages between multigenerational family trees, the tree of life and its fruit, reproductive possibilities, and sacred knowledge all have a familiar resonance. The family metaphor helps vividly convey how sacred experiences can be produced in relations built on fidelity and trust. And, although many people cherish these family experiences as “the most desirable of all things” (1 Nephi 11:22), not everyone treats these experiences as sacred. Efforts to commoditize the kind of experiences cherished within committed family contexts usually result in heartbreak, disappointment, disaffection or exploitation. Happy homes cannot be cheaply bought and consumed. Rather, they are produced with significant personal investment and commitment. Relationships cannot survive without exercising faith and hope. Devoted family members must be willing to repent and forgive in the face of wrongs and continue to patiently cultivate the meaning and significance of these relationships.

Similarly, God’s word should be treated as a sacred gift rather than a commodity. We should humbly recognize that our creed-like preconceptions may need to be revised and that God’s word must be personally nourished, cherished, and internalized in order to have its transformative effect. We must give place in our own hearts for this seed. Only then will we feel the swelling motion of its power within our own lives, appreciate the fruit that results, and share it with loved ones. If we do this, we “shall feast upon” this fruit (Alma 32:42), seeking it not as a commodity to be seized and controlled but as a precious gift that can be gratefully received, deeply enjoyed, and faithfully cherished.

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