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# Is Not This Real?

*Joseph M. Spencer*

*The following essay is a slightly revised version of a talk originally delivered at Brigham Young University on November 29, 2018, as part of the Wheatley Institution's semiannual Reason for Hope lecture series.*

Latter-day Saints often take Korihor, the infamous Nephite anti-Christ, to be a fool, someone perhaps rightly struck dumb for stupidly demanding signs when he knew better. After all, he self-contradictorily trusted “an angel” who told him that “there is no God” (Alma 30:53). One popular commentary remarks: “Wickedness does not promote rational thought!”<sup>1</sup>

Such an approach to Korihor is good fun, perhaps, but it fails to comprehend Korihor’s place in the Book of Mormon. Presumably, his voice is present in the narrative for a reason. Should we not assume that Mormon, as author of the Book of Alma, wishes us to reflect on Korihor’s critique of Nephite Christian faith? We are presented with Korihor’s own words in Alma 30, despite the fact that these words led many Nephite Christians into serious spiritual error. True, as we read on, we are told of Korihor’s unseemly demise and reminded by Mormon that such is “the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord” (Alma 30:60). But this end result does not, I think, lessen the fact that Mormon gives us Korihor’s actual words and arguments. It seems we are being asked to think through them.

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1. David J. Ridges, *Your Study of the Book of Mormon Made Easier, Part Two: Mosiah through Alma* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2007), 280.

Not only are we being asked to think through Korihor's words, but we are arguably also being asked to watch as Alma thinks through them. As I will show, it seems Alma is at first caught off guard by Korihor and that it takes him awhile to sort out how to respond to the critique. Though God gets involved in the situation with Korihor, which settles affairs to some degree (see Alma 30:49–50), this resolution does not seem to leave Alma settled in his mind and spirit. And so he works out a complex response to Korihor's critique over the course of several chapters. In the following pages, I wish to probe Korihor's appraisal of Nephite Christian devotion, sorting out the basic stakes of his argument, and then I wish to look at how Alma slowly and belatedly develops a full response to Korihor.

Before beginning in earnest, I should explain briefly why I believe this analysis is worth pursuing. The question at the heart of the exchange between Korihor and Alma concerns *knowledge*, what Alma calls the *real* (Alma 32:35). And this question of knowledge seems to be a concern many in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have right now. Is it really possible to know the truth of the Restoration? Some skeptically ask if people just talk about knowing religious truths because they're either naïve or opportunistic—either following blindly without having asked any hard questions or being consciously inauthentic to get along in a culture that is obsessed with certainty. Is there any space today for knowledge, especially in religious contexts?

Well, let us begin with Korihor.

According to the text, Korihor's critique of Nephite Christian devotion derives from a kind of cynicism. That is, behind his more strictly philosophical criticisms lies a suspicion that the whole of Nephite Christianity was created by "ancient priests" who sought "power and authority," ultimately in the hopes of getting gain (Alma 30:23). These priests, he claims, figured out that they could prevent people from "enjoy[ing] their rights and privileges" or "mak[ing] use of that which is their own" by providing a system of "ordinances and performances" overseen by individuals with immense social capital: people others would be naturally afraid to "offend" (30:23, 27–28).

What corruptly shields these priests from criticism, according to Korihor, is a set of unverifiable things: "traditions," "dreams," "whims," "visions," and "pretended mysteries" (30:28). Such is Korihor's institutional critique of Alma's church. Now, it strikes me as deeply interesting that Alma does not bother himself much with these accusations, though they apparently lie at the root of Korihor's attitude. Alma dismisses them as untrue with a simple wave of the hand (see 30:34–35). What

interests Alma, it seems, is not Korihor's institutional critique, especially when it sets forth its own unverifiable claims. In Alma's view, all this is apparently superficial, and so he gives his attention primarily to Korihor's philosophical criticisms about whether Nephite Christian claims are true and how one comes to know the truth. He addresses these issues in detail and at length.

I want, though, to pause for a moment on the fact that Alma prioritizes questions of knowledge over questions of authority, on the fact that he privileges philosophical questions over what might be called ethical questions. This prioritization seems noteworthy for today's context because the past decade or so has seen, in the larger culture surrounding the Church, an inversion of Alma's priorities. In other words, at least from my own observation, those struggling with or in fact leaving the Church *tend* (let me emphasize that this is only a *tendency*) to begin with and seldom get beyond suspicions about the ethical nature of the institution.

I refer here not only to worries about the Church's stance on certain political or social issues but also to the oft-asserted claim that the Church has hidden historical or financial information from its membership. I do not mean to deny that such concerns are important, but I think I have often felt like Alma when encountering these concerns. It seems to me that most such questions about the Church as an institution are only important *if* one begins from the conviction that there is something *real* at work in the Restoration. Truth first, ethics later. This is the position I see Alma taking. He wants to address matters of truth and knowledge, and then, if necessary—and heaven knows it is necessary—we can discuss institutional ethics.

For the purposes of this essay, then, I wish to follow Alma's lead and move right to the heart of the matter: whether and how one can *know* the truth. What are Korihor's *real* criticisms?

Korihor seems to direct two precise points of criticism toward Nephite Christian devotion. What allows the reader to identify them is a bit of repetition. Twice Korihor speaks of things he calls "foolish," and twice he raises questions about what one "can know." First, he says that Nephite Christians are guided by "a foolish and a vain hope" (30:13); second, he says that they trust the "foolish traditions of [their] fathers" (30:14). Note how Korihor's critiques point in opposing temporal directions: in hope, one looks to the future, while tradition comes to a person from the past. Consequently, Korihor offers two distinct (but related) objections. Regarding hope, he claims that "no man can know of anything which is to come" (30:13)—future events are, by definition,

unknowable; they are unavailable to present empirical experience. And regarding tradition, he claims that one cannot have knowledge with any “surety,” since “ye cannot know of things which ye do not see” (30:15)—one cannot be certain about an account of a past event, since its very pastness hides it from present empirical experience. Here, then, we have two objections, but they converge on one overarching issue: knowledge.

Note that Korihor sees a connection between tradition and hope—between “foolish” adherence to tradition and “foolish” anticipation of things to come. “Ye look forward” to Christ, he says, but this “is the effect of a frenzied mind; and this derangement of your minds comes because of the traditions of your fathers” (30:16). Naïve adherence to tradition distorts one’s thinking, and only such distorted thinking could allow a person to think that the future is decided and clear.

Here, then, is Korihor’s critique of Nephite Christian devotion. First, he does not like that its point of departure is tradition—so many reports “handed down” (30:14) over centuries regarding extraordinary experiences and events about which one cannot be certain because they lie inaccessibly in the past. Second, he does not like that Nephite Christians derive hope from these uncertain traditions—a blind sense of security about the future that, by definition, cannot be known. From Korihor’s perspective, then, either Christians unwisely believe that they have knowledge when they do not (the assumption being that knowledge derives primarily from direct experience), or they are consciously oriented by something other than knowledge (such as faith) when they ought to be oriented by knowledge. Korihor thus presents to Nephite Christians a kind of dichotomy. Either you are deluded because you think you know what you definitely do not know, or you are deluded because you knowingly orient yourself to something other than knowledge. Either way, Nephite Christians are foolish, frenzied, and deranged.

Now that we have a clearer understanding of Korihor’s critique, we can now straightforwardly state what Alma must do if he wishes to address Korihor’s critique directly. He can (1) defend the idea that one *can* know the truth about traditional claims or (2) explain why something other than knowledge, such as faith, is preferable as a point of orientation. Fascinatingly, Alma does both. On the one hand, as I will argue, he contends that Korihor has a fetishistic relationship to knowledge that is deeply problematic and that faith is a better place to start (and end) than knowledge. Thus, he will effectively displace knowledge as a core value, arguing, in fact, that faith not only is not lesser than knowledge but also goes beyond knowledge and produces something

of infinitely more value. On the other hand, he will also argue that one nonetheless can know the truth of the Christ tradition—know it, in fact, perfectly. I want to trace both of Alma's points here.

I would like to make a preliminary point first, however. Strange as it may seem, Alma does not offer his double response to Korihor's critique until after Korihor's death. Alma offers an immediate response to Korihor's onslaught in Alma 30, but he later develops a fuller and, in my view, more mature response in Alma 32. From the perspective of the later response, Alma may be said to offer only a weak defense when talking with Korihor in person. This is perhaps disappointing in a certain way, but Alma's experience is a common one. All too often, it is only when it is already too late that we figure out what we should have said in a socially complicated situation. This was apparently the case for Alma on this occasion.

Although many have been deeply impressed and inspired by Alma's in-person exchange with Korihor, others may well wonder whether the exchange is fully satisfying, especially in a twenty-first-century context. Initially, Alma says just that he knows both that "there is a God, and also that Christ shall come" (Alma 30:39). How does he justify this bold claim? First, he makes a rhetorically clever move that nonetheless will never convince someone like Korihor. Alma says, "And now what evidence have ye that there is no God, or that Christ cometh not? I say unto you that ye have none, save it be your word only" (30:40). This statement is certainly true, and maybe it keeps Korihor honest to some degree (he does, in fact, retreat a bit, qualifying his criticism). But such a rhetorical move will never convince an atheist or agnostic that someone can know spiritual truths with any certainty. Alma then goes further, stating, "I have all things as a testimony that these things are true" (30:41). He explains, "All things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (30:44). Here Alma offers a positive argument in his defense, but, again, such an argument is unlikely to persuade an atheist or even an agnostic—especially in the twenty-first century. A believer naturally and rightly sees God's hand in the order of the universe, but unbelievers are seldom swayed by this kind of argument. In other words, what Alma offers in response to Korihor within Alma 30 is an interesting defense of the faith he himself already has, but it is not a satisfying reason to begin believing. The response certainly does not work on Korihor, who persists in disbelief until he has direct empirical evidence of God's power (though,

even then, Alma is left with the impression that Korihor has not changed his mind; see 30:54–55). And of course, today any “argument from design” (as arguments like Alma’s from Alma 30 are usually called) is even less likely to compel belief because there are perfectly satisfying scientific explanations for the ordered nature of the universe.<sup>2</sup>

It thus seems that Alma lacks a fully developed defense when he first confronts Korihor’s skepticism. Really, he seems surprised at Korihor’s belligerent atheism, which is unprecedented in recorded Nephite history. He counters his foe with a description of the orderliness in Creation, which he, as a believer, sees as divine, but he does not yet have a way of explaining to someone like Korihor how a nonbeliever might come to know the truth of a religious tradition.

Before moving on, I wish to make clear that I do not mean to cast aspersions on Alma by gently criticizing his immediate response to Korihor. I think the text suggests that Alma himself felt he needed to develop and elaborate on this first response: two chapters later, when Alma finds himself preaching among the Zoramites, he seems still to be thinking about Korihor, still attempting to work up a complete response to Korihor’s critique.<sup>3</sup> The second he begins speaking to an eager audience of the Zoramite poor, he speaks of “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” (32:17). Alma takes his opportunity to preach as an occasion, in part, to work out a better answer to Korihor, who is already dead. Alma apparently thinks Korihor’s questions need better answers than what he provided before this point, and he has evidently developed what he considers to be better responses. Thus, although the Zoramite poor do not approach Alma in the same faithless way as Korihor, Alma, as it were, asks them to sit down and listen to the sermon he wishes he could go back and give to Korihor.

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2. It is important to make clear that the believer is not wrong to see divine influence in the immensely complex order of the world. The point is that non-believers have alternative explanations, with the consequence that the complexity and orderedness of the world in no way *compels* them to believe in a higher power. I owe thanks to Ralph Hancock for helping me to see the importance of clarifying this point.

3. When Joseph Smith dictated the text of the Book of Mormon to his scribes, the chapters were longer than those in current editions. It seems important that what are now Alma 30 and Alma 32 were actually within a single chapter, chapter XVI (now Alma 30–35), in the original Book of Mormon.

Let us now take a look at Alma's more mature response to Korihor's critique, found in Alma 32 rather than in Alma 30. Alma 32 is, of course, a chapter with which Latter-day Saints are generally familiar. We are not, however, familiar enough with it, in my view. I say that for a specific reason. My experience is that Latter-day Saints tend to read Alma 32 as being about how faith is preparatory to and eventually replaced by knowledge. When I ask students or average Church members about Alma 32, their spontaneous response suggests that they read it as a treatise on how a lesser intellectual state (faith) eventually gives way to a greater intellectual state (knowledge).<sup>4</sup> I think this is a mistaken reading, which I will try to show.<sup>5</sup>

Alma 32 famously contains a parable of sorts about what it means to have faith. "Now," Alma says, "we will compare the word unto a seed" (32:28). Here already one must be careful. Thanks in part to a popular Primary song, there is a common view of this text that is mistaken—a view expressed when people speak of planting "a seed of faith." But what Alma compares to a seed is *not* faith; it is *the word*. Although Alma will speak of faith being "increased" or of it "grow[ing] up" in the course of his discussion (32:29), the point of his parable is not to illustrate how faith grows from something small into something great. What grows into a plant—and then into a tree—is the word. Faith in Alma's discourse is just the trust that one places in the seed's potential goodness (and then later in its actual goodness). Alma appears to be less interested in encouraging his hearers to develop more or stronger faith than in clarifying what faith in the word looks like.

Faith's first task, according to Alma, is to plant the seed in what he calls "an experiment" (32:27). He hopes that, at first, his hearers can simply "believe in a manner that [they] can give place" for the word (32:27). But what does "the word" refer to? God, Alma explains, "imparteth his word by angels" (32:23). And what is it that angels announce? Alma urges his hearers to "begin to believe in the Son of God" and the plan of salvation (33:22) and states his "desire that [they] shall plant *this*

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4. It is important to note that published commentaries on and discussions of Alma 32 tend to read the text in more nuanced ways.

5. I learned much about reading Alma 32 by participating in the 2008 Mormon Theology Seminar project, which focused on Alma 32. For the final results of that project, see Adam S. Miller, ed., *An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma 32* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2014).



word in [their] hearts” (33:23, emphasis added). The word or seed is thus the angelic announcement of the Son of God’s atoning work, however this may actually come to an individual. (Note that the word comes to Alma’s hearers through him, rather than directly through angels. That is, of course, how most of us receive the word. This is a point to which I will return.)

Thus, what Alma asks first is that, with faith, his hearers give some space for the word. Can we trust it enough to try an experiment with it? Only once we have done that, Alma explains, can we start to track what happens and therefore make a responsible decision regarding the word’s goodness. Here is what is supposed to happen: “If it be a true seed, or a good seed,” says Alma, “behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts” (32:28). If the seed is good, it will swell. This is what good seeds do when planted. Moisture in the soil causes a seed to swell before it then sprouts and begins to grow. Alma claims that this metaphorical swelling is something one can feel. It has an immediate and undeniable effect on us. “When you feel these swelling motions,” he says, “ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed” (32:28). Notice that Alma says that honest observers of their own unmistakably internal experiences will start talking to themselves. They will conclude, for themselves, that the seed is good. Why? “It swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow” (32:30), which is what every good seed does. A sensible person, therefore, recognizing what is happening, will naturally conclude that they have encountered a good seed. That is the metaphor in the parable: as Alma says so simply: “If a seed groweth it is good” (32:32).

Now comes the key moment. Alma asks, “Are ye sure that this is a good seed?” (32:31). His answer is simple and affirmative: absolutely! Because a person is absolutely sure that the seed is good, he says, “ye must needs know that the seed is good” (32:33). Here is the key word: *know*. Having tried the experiment, one *knows*. Alma next asks if such “knowledge” is “perfect” (32:34). And he again—perhaps against our expectations this time—answers in the affirmative: “Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing” (32:34). Here Alma speaks of perfect knowledge, of sure knowledge, of apparently undeniable knowledge. He adds the following rhetorical question: “O then, is not this real?” (32:35). Alma believes that anyone undertaking this experiment will have an experience of something real, of something indelible, of something that resists mere subjective interest.<sup>6</sup> Here Alma sees the dawn of very real

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6. That Alma speaks here of the real perhaps helps to explain why he stands in awe before the complex order of nature. If the word of God can be known to

knowledge, of an actual and discernible encounter with something, in fact, reproducible and verifiable.

It is worth reflecting at least briefly on the kind of knowledge at stake here. Alma elsewhere distinguishes between different kinds of knowledge—separating out, for example, “temporal” from “spiritual” knowledge, or knowledge that is “of the carnal mind” from knowledge that is “of God” (36:4). As for the sort of knowledge he has in mind in Alma 32 (and in Alma 36), it appears to be akin to what we would today call aesthetic knowledge. This distinction seems clear from the fact that he ties knowledge directly to taste. At the very moment he speaks of the real, he says that experience of it amounts to having “tasted” it (32:35). (He speaks in a similar fashion in Alma 36:26: “Many have been born of God, and have tasted as I have tasted . . . ; therefore they do know of these things of which I have spoken, as I do know.”)<sup>7</sup> Philosophers have long spoken of taste (not only as one of the five senses but also as the taste that one cultivates) as a peculiar sort of knowledge. As one thinker recently summed up the tradition, taste simultaneously concerns “an excess of knowledge that is not known . . . but that presents itself as pleasure” and “an excess of pleasure that is not enjoyed . . . but that presents itself as knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> Tasting something that is “sweet above all that is sweet” (32:42) is an excessive experience, one that overflows the categories of understanding but that, in a way, nonetheless produces a kind of knowledge. One develops a taste for religious truth, and one *knows* that it is good.

Alma is certainly convinced that the taste one develops for the word is a form of real knowledge. But let us be clear: what one knows, surely and perfectly, is pretty limited, according to Alma. He qualifies his talk of perfect knowledge with the phrase “in that thing” (32:34). One *can* know something in an absolute way, but all that Alma says we can know is *just this one thing*: that the seed is good. Beyond that, does the person

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be good and if one encounters the real in experimenting on the word, it should follow that reality in general cannot be divorced from God and his goodness. Of course, one must try the experiment and come to know the goodness of the word before one can see the goodness of Creation. It thus remains necessary to respond to the nonbeliever with a discussion about the experiment on the word rather than with any argument of design.

7. I owe gratitude to John Tanner for drawing my attention to the epistemological importance of Alma’s references to taste, and to Matthew Wickman for giving me the opportunity to think through the importance of the aesthetic in Alma 32.

8. Giorgio Agamben, *Taste*, trans. Cooper Francis (New York: Seagull Books, 2017), 43.

involved in an experiment like this know anything perfectly? Note that Alma himself raises this question: “Is your knowledge perfect?” he asks, apparently with reference to things apart from the seed’s goodness (32:35). This time, he answers negatively (32:36). Apparently, we know nothing apart from the seed’s being good (or not being good). That is all we know. But again, let us be clear: a person can know that one thing, according to Alma, and know it perfectly, surely, and really. We have a foundation, a foothold. We know little, but we do know something. And Alma claims that this little bit of knowledge will spur us to keep working, encouraging the word to grow: “Ye will say: Let us nourish [the seed] with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us” (32:37). This kernel of knowledge, minimal but sure, is enough to mobilize one’s efforts with the seed. It is enough to solidify one’s faith.

Here is the interesting thing: Alma says knowledge mobilizes one’s further exercise of faith. When he asks if the experimenter’s knowledge is perfect in general (rather than just “in that thing”), he answers, “Nay; neither must ye lay aside your faith” (32:36). Here, crucially, faith goes beyond knowledge. Faith’s first efforts, in fact, yield a bit of knowledge, but it is minimal, just enough to spur us to invest our faith in the word in a genuinely productive way. Knowledge, we might say, dawns early rather than late in the experiment, and it arrives primarily so that we will get to work seriously on the seed, or the word. Now, you might be thinking to yourself, “Well, yes, we’ve got to keep working because we’ve got only a bit of knowledge, and faith needs to keep experimenting until our knowledge *in general* becomes perfect. We don’t lay aside faith once we’ve got a bit of knowledge, true, but that’s because there’s a lot more knowledge to come!” But here we must slow down and look carefully at the text. From this point to the end of the chapter, Alma never again speaks of knowledge. Faith continues beyond knowledge—that is, beyond knowledge of the seed’s goodness—but not because it aims at producing more knowledge or more general knowledge. It apparently aims at something else. And what does it aim at? Alma is perfectly clear about this: faith aims at life, at eternal life.

Alma is explicit on this score. When he speaks of what to anticipate from the seed, he refers to “the fruit of the tree of life” (32:40). He further says, “If ye will nourish the word . . . , looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life” (32:41). Echoing Lehi’s famous dream about the tree of life, he also promises this: “By and by ye shall pluck the fruit” of this tree, “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” (32:42). Here, then, is what faith-beyond-knowledge aims at. It does not strive for more knowledge; it strives toward life, life eternal. Knowledge is, in Alma’s parable, a crucial but ultimately brief moment occurring early in the long road of faith. It is also focused on just one tiny but essential detail: whether or not the seed that one plants is good. Then knowledge fades into the background as one chases after the good life, the life whose goodness is signaled by the goodness of the seed that grows into a tree of life. One hungers for life rather than for knowledge.

Let me pause here to highlight, for a moment, Alma’s theological brilliance. Alma has laid out a path that begins with eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, the tree that gives knowledge specifically of good and evil. But then the path leads to a tree of infinitely greater value, the tree of life. Although he does so subtly, Alma seems to build his whole parable as a sustained reflection on the two trees in Eden. (Incidentally, I think that the common reading of Alma 32, which regards faith as inferior in some way to knowledge and therefore assumes that the parable is about progress from faith to knowledge, makes it impossible to see Eden’s two trees clearly.)<sup>9</sup> Alma thus places his listeners and us as readers on a path that leads from the real effects of eating from Eden’s first tree—its effect in this context is that we can know perfectly whether the angelic announcement regarding Christ is good—to the anticipated experience of eating from Eden’s second tree. From the bitter tree to the sweet tree (see 2 Ne. 2:15)—this, I think, is what Alma 32 is about.

All this constitutes Alma’s belated response to Korihor. Korihor asked how anyone can be certain about a religious tradition. Alma’s mature answer has nothing to do with the complex and beautiful order of Creation, as does Alma 30. He instead argues in Alma 32 that one must experiment with the word provided by the tradition and that one relatively quickly comes to know perfectly and certainly that the word is good. In this way, Alma responds to Korihor’s skepticism first by providing a parable about what it looks like to know the goodness of the word.

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9. For more on Edenic themes in Alma 32, see David E. Bokovoy, “The Word and the Seed: The Theological Use of Biblical Creation in Alma 32,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 1–21. These issues are also addressed in Jenny Webb, “It Is Well That Ye Are Cast Out: Alma 32 and Eden,” in Miller, *Experiment on the Word*, 43–56.

It is possible to know. But even as he insists that religious knowledge is a real possibility, Alma goes on to suggest that Korihor places too much value on knowledge. Alma emphatically does not regard knowledge as the end or the aim of one's devotional efforts. Knowledge is, rather, something of importance gained near the beginning of one's journey of faith. Knowledge therefore must be subordinated to life. Knowledge serves as a spur to get one moving passionately in the direction of the tree of life, but it cannot be itself the end or the aim of all things. If, like Korihor, we privilege knowledge over life, our values are confused, and they require serious reconsideration.

As anticipated, then, Alma's response to Korihor is twofold. Korihor is wrong to suggest that one cannot be certain about the goodness of a tradition. But Korihor is also wrong to make knowledge the measuring stick for everything, because the truly good life, life worth living for eternity, is the real measuring stick.

For my part, I find Alma's mature response to Korihor largely satisfying. He convinces me that life should be granted greater privilege over knowledge, and he convinces me that knowledge of the religious real is possible. But a critical reader must at this point confess that Alma's parable regarding the seed is at least partially problematic and partially unsatisfying. Anyone struggling to know if the word offered by the Restoration is good, or anyone deeply worried about someone struggling with such questions, likely feels as if Alma is hiding behind a metaphor. He speaks of planting and swelling and growing and eating, but what do these images mean in the context of real life? How do I come to know that the word is good? According to Alma, I must "plant" it, but what does it mean to plant the word? And Alma goes on to say that I should watch to see whether the seed "swells" and "sprouts" and "begins to grow," but what does it look like for the word to do any of these things? Alma's parable is beautiful, but what, concretely, is it supposed to mean? Again, for anyone going in circles about their own feelings and experiences, the metaphor can feel too vague. And this is, I think, an entirely legitimate concern. I also think, however, that Alma has a full and satisfying answer to this worry, which is good news. That answer comes in Alma 36.<sup>10</sup>

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10. The treatment of Alma 36 that follows relies heavily on the extended analysis of the text I provide in Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2016), 2–7, 11–24. Naturally, some of my own thinking about this chapter has developed beyond what is available in this earlier discussion.

Chapter 36 finds Alma talking with his son Helaman, his soon-to-be successor in the Nephite church. Alma opens his words with encouragement to know, returning to the theme of chapters 30 and 32. “I beseech of thee,” he says to Helaman, “that thou wilt hear my words and learn of me; for I do know” (Alma 36:3). The moment he says he knows something, however, Alma appears to recognize that his son might have worries about what it means to know something in a religious vein. At any rate, Alma backs up a step, offering a clarification I have already cited: “I would not that ye think that I know of myself—not of the temporal but of the spiritual, not of the carnal mind but of God” (36:4). Having drawn these basic distinctions, Alma goes on to outline a kind of puzzle, highlighting the ways in which spiritual knowledge can be confusing—if not, in fact, paradoxical. “If I had not been born of God,” he explains, “I should not have known these things; but God has, by the mouth of his holy angel, made these things known unto me, not of any worthiness of myself” (36:5). This verse is strange. Alma seems to say first that he had to be born of God in order to come to know certain things, but then he adds that God went ahead and made them known to him *regardless* of whether he had been born of God (or at least regardless of his worthiness).

These first verses from Alma 36 thus work together to raise a complex question, essentially equivalent to the question I have been asking here: how does one come to know something religious with any certainty? But if the first verses of the chapter outline a question, then what comes next provides a kind of answer; Alma 36:1–5 outlines a problem, and then Alma 36:6–25 provides a solution. Interestingly, the solution does not come in the form of a philosophical discourse or even a theological parable, but rather in the form of a personal story. What explains knowledge is not theory but experience. Alma will tell how he came to know, without relying on obscure metaphors. Further, he recommends to Helaman that he come to know in the same way, indicating that anyone can have the same experience Alma did. Here, perhaps, we can get a real sense for what it looks like to come to know, perfectly and surely, that a religious word is good.

Alma therefore jumps into a well-known story—the story of when he and the sons of Mosiah were going about “seeking to destroy the church of God,” only to encounter a “holy angel” who spoke with “the voice of thunder” (36:6–7). As Alma tells the story, this encounter had an immediate effect on him: he “fell to the earth” and “did hear no more” (36:10–11). He collapsed while the world around him retreated into oblivion. The

effect of the encounter was, in short, to trap Alma in his own head. At the heart of Alma 36, therefore, we have an opportunity to see the inner workings of the young man's mind. His friends fade from the picture. His physical surroundings fade away too. Even the angel disappears from the text. All we have after the collapse is Alma's singular psyche, for ten verses (see 36:13–22).<sup>11</sup> As we read, we are trapped with Alma in his head.

There is a point worth being quite clear about before going any further. I often hear it said that Alma's conversion was unusual because it was instigated by an angel. I think, though, that this is not quite right. The angel indeed forces Alma to ask some hard questions, but the angel does not convert him. If anything, in fact, the angel sends him into a three-day spiral of depression. When Alma begins to come out of it, interestingly, he says nothing about the angel. It is not the shock of a sign-like angelic visit that forces Alma to know. There is something else, something much more mundane at the heart of his conversion—of his coming to know the goodness of the word. Alma is not an exception, filled with knowledge simply because he got the sign Korihor wanted so badly.

Since the reader is trapped in Alma's head for ten verses here at the center of Alma 36, it seems natural that this stretch of the text contains repeating instances of the words "thought" and "memory." Each of these terms appears five times, and they are arranged largely in alternating pairs: memory, thought, thought, memory, memory, thought, thought, memory, memory, thought. As Alma tells the story of his three-day psychological struggle, he seems to present it as a confrontation of sorts between his thoughts and his memories. The whole episode unfolds in five sequences, which we must track to develop a sense of how Alma came to know the goodness of the word. He begins in a situation where his memories and his thoughts cannot be reconciled, leaving him in doubt and despair, but he then moves to a situation where his memories and his thoughts are wholly reconciled, putting him in a position of perfect knowledge regarding the goodness of the word. A full analysis of these five sequences would require much more space than I can give to them here, but even a brief treatment should clarify the meaning of Alma's metaphors from Alma 32.

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11. By the end of verse 12, Alma has completely collapsed, and we are listening only to his thoughts. Beginning with verse 23, Alma is waking up and re-encountering the world. It is only in verses 13–22 that Alma's psyche takes up the whole stage.

At the beginning of the story, in the first sequence, Alma remembers just one sort of thing: “I did remember all my sins and iniquities” (36:13). The immediate result of this memory is torture: “I was tormented with the pains of hell” (36:13). At this same point, the content of Alma’s thought is similarly narrow. He speaks of “the very thought of coming into the presence of my God,” which produces “inexpressible horror” in him (36:14). Here, then, is where Alma begins. His memory, the past as he sees it, initially focuses on only his sins and iniquities. His thought concerns the future, a day of judgment, a reckoning in the presence of God. When these combine—a past of sin and a future of judgment—Alma experiences torment and horror. Thus, when the second sequence opens, Alma tries out another thought: “Oh, thought I, that I could be banished and become extinct” (36:15). Here he tries to replace his first thought with another, a kind of antithought, a desperate wish to cease existing. Unfortunately, it gets him nowhere. “Three nights” of being “racked . . . with the pains of a damned soul” follow, marking the futility of his attempt to escape from judgment (36:16). Note that Alma’s memory, in the course of the second sequence, remains exactly the same as in the first sequence: “I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins,” he repeats in verse 17.

The third sequence, however, marks an interesting change. First, it opens with a new memory: “I remembered *also*,” Alma says (36:17, emphasis added). This is quite a formula, I think. All of a sudden, Alma’s memory expands. And what does he *also* remember at this point? “Behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world” (36:17). This is crucial. Alma remembers *also*, and what he remembers is *the word*. It must be emphasized that Alma says nothing about the angel at this transitional point. The word, which converts him, is the humble but prophetic word of his father—something entirely mundane and yet so potently transformative. At any rate, this new memory immediately provides Alma with a new thought—namely, “the coming of one Jesus Christ.” “My mind caught hold upon this thought,” he tells us as the third sequence continues in verse 17. And this thought leads him to pray. “O Jesus, thou Son of God,” he cries, pleading for mercy (36:18).

The fourth sequence follows quickly. “And now, behold, when I thought this,” he says, referring back to his prayer (36:19). There is a point here worth highlighting. At the end of the third sequence, Alma’s thought remains abstract; it concerns the *idea* of Christ. At the beginning



of the fourth sequence, however, Alma's thought becomes concrete; it is a direct *prayer to Christ*. What results from this new, concrete thought? "I could remember my pains no more," Alma says (36:19). This thought has a particularly interesting consequence for Alma's memory. In the course of the fourth sequence, the additional memory of the third sequence pushes out a problematic memory. Pain disappears from his memory.

Then follows, at last, the fifth and final sequence of Alma's story. Once his thoughts are focused concretely on Christ, he says, "I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more" (36:19). This is crucial, and it must be read carefully. Notice that the content of Alma's memory at this point is again, as in the first sequence, made up of his past sins. His memory, what he sees as his past, has not changed in the end, but his relationship to it has. The memory of his past was originally a source of torment, but now, we are told, Alma is "harrowed up" by that memory no more. He also says something about the state of his thought at this point, but he puts that off for two verses in order to mark the astonishing contrast between the moment before his prayer and the moment after: "And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy" (36:20–21). These might be the two most beautiful verses in the Book of Mormon.<sup>12</sup> But then Alma follows them with a clarification of his final thought: "Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne . . . ; yea, and my soul did long to be there" (36:22). Alma's final thought too brings his story full circle. His thought is of the future presence of God, just as in the first sequence. Here again, though, while the thought is the same, Alma's relationship to it is fundamentally changed. Before, he was racked with "inexpressible horror." Now, he says, his "soul did long to be there"—there with God.

Now, somewhere in these five sequences, Alma gains real knowledge. He makes this clear as soon as he tells of having woken up. "Because of the word which [God] has imparted unto me," he says, "many . . . do know of these things of which I have spoken, as I do know; and the

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12. It should be noted that these verses return to the imagery of Eden's two trees, especially as these are presented in 2 Nephi 2:15. They also reemphasize the question of taste and its connection to knowledge.

knowledge which I have is of God” (36:26). This sequence of thoughts and memories has produced knowledge in Alma. And so the story in Alma 36 helps us answer questions from the parable of the seed in chapter 32. Where in this story, then, does Alma’s knowledge dawn? Is it possible to nail down the exact psychological content, so to speak, of his metaphor about the seed? What does it mean to say that the seed swells and sprouts and begins to grow?

It seems to me that the crucial possibility-creating moment occurs when Alma “remembered also.” His soul, one could say, *swells* at exactly that moment; the world—both the past world of Alma’s memory and the future world of Alma’s anticipating thoughts—gets bigger. That is the moment when the word—which was not given directly by the angel, but more humbly by Alma’s father—has not just been planted but in fact swells. What creates knowledge, however, comes a moment later when the seed sprouts and begins to grow, which the word does in a rather straightforward way in Alma’s autobiographical story. Alma’s soul breaks open, and he cries out to Christ, who overwhelms him with mercy.<sup>13</sup> It is as he prays to Christ that he knows both the bitter and the sweet, that he feels as deeply as possible the absolute gulf between the two experiences. When this yields in him a completely different relationship to the past and to the future (although the past and the future remain effectively the same), he *knows*. This, I think, is Alma’s metaphor made plain and concrete.

I am struck that in Alma 37, still talking to Helaman, Alma says the following about the sacred records Alma has kept (he is speaking specifically about the brass plates): “They have enlarged the memory of this people . . . and brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (37:8). This verse, it seems to me, provides a beautiful little formula for what Alma spells out in detail in Alma 36. What does it mean for the word to swell, for one to feel swelling motions in one’s soul? It means that the word enlarges the memory, helping a person to focus on the words of life they have heard. And this

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13. George Handley has pointed out to me the possibility of locating Alma’s knowledge in his experience of God’s love. There is little question that love has its own kind of knowledge (as biblical metaphors make clear). While this is unquestionably a key part of any experience like Alma’s, it seems important to remain within the ambit of Alma’s own lexicon, and he never himself refers to love in the course of chapters 30, 32, and 36.

inaugurates a process that quickly brings the individual to know Christ and his goodness.

Thus might anyone come to know religious truth. And I wish to say in my own name that I believe this is real. “Is not this real?” That is Alma’s question, but now *I* say: Yes, it is real. We can know, can know of the goodness of the word that has been given to us. In this I find I have a reason to hope, a “cause to believe,” as Alma puts it (32:18). With Alma, I want to say that *I know*. I know the word is good. And the word gets me moving in the direction of sustaining life. I do not know much, to be sure, but I know—and I believe I know this with real and indelible certainty—I know that the word of Christ is good. Alma’s word, Nephi’s word, Moroni’s word, Joseph Smith’s word—these are good words. They bear fruit in me. And that is enough—that is knowledge enough. There is one thing I think I can say I know without qualification. My memory has been enlarged—in my case, most especially by the Book of Mormon—and consequently I have felt the abyss between pain and joy, between the bitter and the sweet. That abyss is real. Like daylight from dark night, the word divides my past experience in two. There is before, and there is after. I remember my sins, but the thought of God’s presence fills me with longing.

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Joseph M. Spencer is a philosopher and an assistant professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University. He is the author or editor of six books and dozens of articles in the fields of philosophy and Latter-day Saint scripture. He serves as the editor of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, the associate director of the Mormon Theology Seminar, and the coeditor of the book series *Introductions to Mormon Thought* (published by the University of Illinois Press). He and his wife, Karen, live in Provo, Utah, with their five children.