

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.