

Desiring to Believe

Wisdom and Political Power

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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.