

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).