

# Faith, Hope, and Charity

Alma and Joseph Smith

*Joseph M. Spencer*

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

## 1. FAITH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. HOPE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. AND CHARITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

#### 4. ALMA AND JOSEPH SMITH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

12. *Ibid.*, 128.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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