

Faith and Commodification

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THERE IS NOTHING QUITE LIKE home-grown produce. Somehow, it just tastes better. Social scientists have empirically documented this fact and psychologists now have ready explanations. When we tend a garden, we are required to exert effort to fight back the weeds. Fruit does not spring forth immediately, so we must also practice patience as we wait for the earth, sun, and sky to play their roles in the ripening process. As we invest ourselves, a distinct desire is fostered that links us to the fruit for which we wait with anticipation—anticipation wrapped with personal meaning and significance. Sometimes we grow impatient, yearning for the fruit's sweet taste. At other times we grow complacent in our care and then worry if we think the fruit may be lost. At long last, if all goes well, the mature fruit is harvested and we partake with delight and deep satisfaction.

With the rise of globally-integrated markets, however, the fruit trade is booming and it makes less and less economic sense to tend our own gardens and grow our own fruit. For much less effort, and usually less expense, we can pop into the local supermarket and have our pick from a wide selection of beautifully-presented fruit. Thanks to modern technology and various international free-trade agreements, high quality fruit is in abundant supply. The pain-staking efforts required to grow our own fruit survive in our day mostly as a

hobby. The convenience of imported fruit is too difficult to resist and, although it might not taste quite as good to us as home-grown fruit, imported fruit is still very tasty. For these very sensible reasons, fruit markets have come to resemble countless other commodity markets in today's global economy.

A similar phenomenon is occurring in epistemological matters. Thanks to recent breakthroughs in science, technological miracles can now be bought and sold. Today, the best available scientific evidence can be easily reviewed so as to form the basis of practically any form of belief. Oftentimes, the only personal investment needed in forming beliefs is the time it takes to type in a few search terms and click a handful of links describing what beliefs are most scientifically justified. In our information age, knowledge is thus becoming increasingly cheap and faith, in turn, is becoming increasingly unnecessary, especially among the educated. As a result, faith is becoming increasingly marginalized. To declare, for example, that one's beliefs are rooted in personal faith rather than empirically tested results is a sure way to raise suspicions that one is ignorant and out of touch with modern sources of knowledge. Science is increasingly crowding out faith.

Ancient prophets in the Book of Mormon faced similar problems regarding faith, long-before the rise of modern science. The basic role of faith in the formation of beliefs and the attainment of knowledge has actually not changed much over the centuries. Alma, in particular, preached against the dangers of taking a commodified approach to faith and knowledge. In today's consumerist culture and scientific age, Alma's discourse to the Zoramite poor has become critically relevant.

I. CONSUMING SIGNS

For Alma, the essence of sign-seeking is an inversion of the proper relationship between belief and knowledge. On Alma's account, sign-seekers are those who say, "if thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven,

then we shall believe” (Alma 32:17). This sign-seeking formulation resonates with the methods of modern, scientific inquiry: when data are not sufficient, well-trained scholars are taught to be skeptical. In reality, however, basing beliefs on evidence is something enjoyed only by *consumers* of scientific knowledge. *Producers* of scientific knowledge, in contrast, are more apt to recognize the crucial role that hope and belief play in the process of scientific discovery. Without hope that an experiment will prove worthwhile and without belief in the scientific method, experiments would never be undertaken. Hope and belief thus play a critical role in the production of scientific knowledge, even if consumers of this knowledge are apt to forget.

In general, consumerism fosters forgetfulness. Consumers are, by definition, interested in consuming, without having to remember any particulars about the production process. If a consumer happens to be socially-minded or ethical, he will care whether, for example, sweatshop labor was used in the production process. But this is a qualification of what it means to be a consumer—the consumer *as consumer* does not care about such production process details. Consumers are interested in the end product to be consumed, without needing to remember the work and effort that went into the process of producing the final product. Sign-seekers have a consumer-like attitude toward knowledge, desiring a sign only to “consume it upon their lusts” (D&C 46:10). Sign-seekers, effectively, do not care about the process of knowledge production; rather, they want knowledge as cheaply and conveniently as possible. Investing time or effort in the development and production of knowledge is avoided, as much as possible.

In contrast to the sign-seeker, Alma preaches that the sincere seeker of knowledge must be humble. Many of the Zoramites are too proud to listen and repent. Repentance requires change, and the proud do not like to change. Ask any economist: consumers don’t repent, or even request; consumers *demand*. According to modern economic theory, consumers have inborn, pre-given preferences that demand to be satisfied. To act counter to these preferences would be irrational.

These unchangeable preferences and their rational unfolding in market institutions form the causal basis for supply and demand theory.

Alma suggests a similar causal mechanism at work in the sign-seeking approach. Sign-seekers believe that a sign can cause belief. Alma counters this view by arguing, “if a man knoweth a thing he hath *no cause to believe*, for he knoweth it” (Alma 32:18, emphasis mine). Alma makes this statement as part of a discussion about humility and compulsion, saying, “he that truly humbleth himself ... shall be blessed—yea, much more blessed than they who are compelled to be humble” (Alma 32:15). There is a parallel here between the compulsion of a sign with respect to knowledge and the compulsion of circumstance with respect to humility. In both cases, Alma praises those who rise above causal forces. Those who are truly humble are those who are humble not simply because of poor circumstances; similarly, those who truly believe are those who believe not simply because of signs. Alma’s sermon might thus be interpreted as an argument against teachings rooted in undeviating or uninterrupted causal laws. In our time, Alma might say there are strict limits to the ability of scientific theories to explain natural and social phenomena, since a full explanatory account must include some account of agent-driven change (like repentance) that works counter to the causal mechanisms forming the basis of science.

Alma’s phrase “no cause to believe” is quite similar to a phrase used by Samuel the Lamanite. Samuel, also in the context of explaining signs, says that signs are given “to the intent that there should be *no cause for unbelief* among the children of men” (Helaman 14:28, emphasis mine). If we iron out Samuel’s use of a double negative—the “no” in “no cause” and the “un” in “unbelief”—it seems his positive claim is that signs cause belief. Formulated this way, Samuel seems to be making the very claim that Alma accused sign-seekers of making. How can we understand this? On my reading, the negative formulation used by both Alma and Samuel is key to reconciling their doctrines with each other. Combining their claims, we have the following: signs

do not cause belief (Alma), nor do they cause unbelief (Samuel). In other words, signs are simply not causal agents, in the sense of efficient causation. Rather, “cause” here should be understood more in terms of a cause that one believes in and fights for (cf. Captain Moroni’s “cause of liberty” in Alma 51:17).

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, seems to describe signs in a similar manner. The sign of circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant, but it was given to Abraham when he was uncircumcised. Thus, Abraham is able to be the father of the circumcised *and* uncircumcised (Romans 4:11–12). Like the sign of circumcision, signs in general can be used either to strengthen faith, as with the faithful, or to short-circuit faith, as with sign-seekers. To first exercise faith and then receive a sign, or to receive a sign without demanding one, amounts to treating signs as gifts; to first demand a sign amounts to treating signs as commodities.

2. PREFABRICATED CREEDS

Alma’s opposition to sign-seeking is structurally parallel to his opposition to the apostate mode of worship practiced among the Zoramites. As recounted in Alma 31, when the Zoramites pray, they presume to know God’s mind and intentions. This presumption is fostered by creed-based beliefs that preclude the need for individuals to personally seek more knowledge or exercise more faith.

Credal statements of belief can be understood as serving a function that is similar to standards for traded commodities. Industry standards for commodities establish guidelines such that, for example, a barrel of crude oil has an established market price regardless of the particular oil well from which it was extracted. These standards facilitate trade since buyers of crude oil effectively care only about two things: that the oil meets industry standards, and that it is purchased at a competitive price. Commodity standards efface all other differences. Theological creeds can have a similar difference-effacing

effect. When a theological creed establishes, say, a set of attributes regarding the nature of God, it obviates the need for an individual worshiper to discover these attributes for themselves. Thus, when it comes time to pray to God, the danger is that the worshiper will end up praying to an imagined representation of God, rather than God himself. As a theological system of beliefs becomes more elaborate and widely accepted, there is less and less need to pray, since the theological system can increasingly provide the answer to any question that might be posed. Questions, regardless of their source, can be processed by the creedal system of theological beliefs and a generic answer can be verified as meeting theological standards and then delivered on-demand.

The Zoramites seem to have established a creedal system of worship that became standardized in this way. The “same prayers” (Alma 31:20) the Zoramites offered were an attempt to avoid grappling with things “they knew nothing about” (Alma 31:22). This desire to avoid the unknown in favor of that which was (supposedly) known is analogous to the priority that the sign-seeker gives to knowledge over belief and faith. That is, rather than humbly acknowledging one’s lack of knowledge and using this lack as an opportunity to exercise faith, the sign-seeker embraces a prefabricated, creed-based knowledge. Sign-seeking, like the Zoramite prayer upon the Rameumptom, tries to use knowledge to supplant the need for exercising faith in the face of what is unknown.

But our lack of knowledge can be productive. The veil separating us from God can help us cultivate a desire to learn more about God and draw closer to Him. By revealing Himself only through messengers bringing his word, God remains unknown and mysterious, although not unknowable. Similarly, even when Alma discusses perfect knowledge, he emphasizes its non-comprehensive, non-totalizing nature. There is always more to learn. There are always more revelations to be revealed. In Alma’s “word as seed” analogy, he poses a series of five rhetorical questions about the seed’s growth to which he answers

“Yea” (Alma 32:29, 30, 31, 34, 35). Then, with rhetorical emphasis, Alma reverses this pattern after explaining how knowledge can be “perfect in that thing” (Alma 32:34), regarding the goodness of the seed. Alma asks, “and now behold, after ye have tasted this light is your knowledge perfect? Behold I say unto you, *Nay*; neither must ye lay aside your faith” (Alma 32:35–36, emphasis mine). This emphatic “Nay” is then followed by several verses that explain the need to continue to nourish the tree, exercising diligence, faith, and patience (Alma 32:36–43).

For Alma, it thus seems that knowledge is eternally intertwined with faith. Faith and knowledge are in an eternal relation with each other, with faith as the underlying productive force by which knowledge is generated. This ongoing relationship is analogous to the ongoing relationship that is generated by gift exchange transactions, in contrast to the lack of relation generated by commodity transactions. When a commodity is bought or sold on an over-the-counter electronic exchange, for example, buyers and sellers often do not even know each other’s identity. From the perspective of economic exchange, the personal investment required in coming up with a thoughtful gift is an efficiency-undermining friction. In this sense, an anonymous, electronic market for the exchange of commodities with very low transaction costs represents one pole of maximal economic efficiency, whereas the opposite pole might be represented by the ideal Mormon home where eternal relationships are forged and nurtured with great personal investment, and where gifts of time and love are freely given without regard to self or market values.

A theology comprised of prepackaged creeds objectifies our relationship with God. True worship requires subjective involvement. We must follow Christ’s example, “becoming subject to the Spirit” (Mosiah 15:5). We cannot be detached and neutral in our worship; rather, we must subject ourselves, giving place within our own souls for the transformative effects of God’s word.

3. FINDING PLACE

When Alma invites the Zoramite poor to “experiment upon [his] words,” he explains that a first requirement is to “give place for a portion of [his] words” (Alma 32:27). Alma continues, “Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold ... if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief ... it will begin to swell within your breasts” (Alma 32:28). This place for the seed can be understood as being opened when one’s lack of knowledge is recognized. When religious consumers feel comfortable in terms of having ample and convenient access to knowledge, this supposed knowledge takes up the space that the true believer would otherwise fill with faith. When Alma encounters the Zoramite priests, they are comfortable in their place of worship and with their religious knowledge. They thus have no desire for change and there is no room in their hearts to receive more of God’s word. The humble poor, in contrast, have no place to worship, and this emptiness effectively opens a space in their heart to receive God’s word. When the poor are cast out of the synagogues, they feel disoriented and confused, not knowing what to do. This lack of knowledge is a reversal of the way that the Zoramite creeds crowd out faith and the desire to learn. Thus, the Zoramite poor, in the process of being humbled, develop a desire to learn what to do because this is something about which they lack knowledge: “we have no place to worship our God; and behold, what shall we do?” (Alma 32:5)

Later, Alma describes a similar kind of space to his son Corianton: “For behold, if Adam had put forth his hand immediately, and partaken of the tree of life, he would have lived forever, according to the word of God, *having no space for repentance*; yea, and also the word of God would have been void, and the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated” (Alma 42:5). According to Alma, when Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden, after partaking of the tree of knowledge but before partaking of the tree of life, space was given in which the natural consequences of their transgression were postponed. This space is, then, precisely the space in which we, each

being like Adam and Eve, are to exercise faith and repent in order to reestablish a live, non-creedal relationship with Deity, whom Alma describes elsewhere as the “living God” (Alma 7:6).

If we are unwilling to change, then the space we have been provided to repent will serve no purpose. In light of this, we can better understand Alma’s conclusion to his sign-seeking discussion in Alma 32:19 where he poses a question precisely about the issue of expedited judgment and condemnation: “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?”¹ By posing a rhetorical question here, Alma is able to raise, in both form and content, the question of subjectivity and change. He asks his listeners to do more than just sit back in a detached, uninvested way, consuming the benefits of life in the kingdom. Alma explicitly invites us to be involved, to begin actively judging and discerning, planting and cultivating, desiring and seeking to learn more, to obtain more knowledge through the ongoing work of exercising faith. By engaging the word, plunging our hands into the soil, we give place to the word in our lives. By becoming subjectively involved, the word will begin to have real effects, sprouting into new ways of thinking, living, viewing, and experiencing the world.

If we take advantage of this space by giving place to the word in our hearts, then God promises that we will find “that *place* which [God has] prepared in the mansions of [his] Father” (Ether 12:34). Because of the partially revealing nature of God’s word, the blow that judgment would otherwise inevitably inflict upon us is deferred, and it is in this created space that the seeds of change can be sown.

This place in our heart and space for repentance, created by humility and our lack of knowledge regarding God’s mysteries, serves to establish particular and personal bonds of meaning and significance. The mansion in heaven prepared for us is not a cookie-

1. The phrase “only hath cause to believe” corroborates the discussion above regarding the meaning of the term cause. If cause were understood in terms of efficient causation, the use of the term “only” would be difficult to make sense of here.

cutter, manufactured home that we are lining up to receive, but a particular place given as a reward at the end of our own personal journey, shared with our particular family and friends. The seed in our heart gives rise to a life/tree shaped by our own experiences, commensurate with our personal involvement, engagement, and investment in the process of nurturing the word. Only if we each take up the task of cultivating our own family trees and growing our own community fruit can this fruit be genuinely shared, appreciated, and enjoyed.

4. ENJOYING THE FRUIT

When Alma meets the poor, outcast Zoramites, he responds with—of all emotions—“great joy” (Alma 32:6). Clearly, Alma does not experience joy merely because they are cast out. Rather, Alma’s joy comes from the increased possibility of redemption their persecuted state has effected. The hope is that the Zoramite poor will, because of their afflictions, prove humble enough to receive God’s word and to repent and change, eventually receiving with gratitude the gift of eternal life. Since the Zoramite poor built the synagogues from which they are cast out, they are alienated from the fruit of their labor. But this alienation is not all bad. Alienation itself can be received as a gift. It can eventually result in deeper desire, appreciation, and enjoyment.

This positive understanding of alienation lies at the heart of the Mormon view of the Fall. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve took fruit that had not been offered to them and then found themselves alienated from God. This alienation opened new possibilities for them. Upon hearing the plan of salvation, Eve “was *glad*, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the *joy* of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient” (Moses 5:11, emphasis mine). The difficulties imposed by the transgression in the Garden opened the door to the path toward redemption. Eve’s claim here is not just that redemption would not have been

experienced without the fall, but that they would not have *enjoyed* redemption without the fall. This perspective aligns with Lehi's teaching in 2 Nephi 2 that there must be opposition in all things and that joy could not be known without also knowing misery (2 Nephi 2:11, 23). Alma's joy at seeing the alienated Zoramite poor is similar to Eve's joy: in both cases, a state of alienation provides space for change to occur and desire to be fostered, thus preparing for the enjoyment of redemption.

Earlier in the Book of Mormon, Lehi has a dream in which he sees what an unappreciated (or un-enjoyed) redemption might look like. One group of people first partook of the fruit of the tree of life and then were afterwards ashamed because those in the great and spacious building scoffed at them. As a result, they soon fell away (1 Nephi 8:24–28). In order to avoid such a fate, faith and desire must be sufficiently cultivated so that the fruit of the tree of life will be enjoyed, appreciated, and received as a gift, with sincere gratitude. Otherwise, we risk being distracted by the apparently effortless consumptive lives of those who mock (but will eventually mourn).

Returning to Alma's discourse, we find in Alma 32:28 a succinct and comprehensive preview of the "seed as word" metaphor. The rest of the chapter goes on to elaborate this analogy, but it is not obvious how the verses that immediately follow add anything of substance to the teaching in verse 28. Verses 29–34 in particular seem to comprise a rather wordy and redundant unit that makes an ultimately simple, even trivial, point: a good seed will grow and bring forth after its own likeness. Why does Alma make such an elaborate presentation to make this relatively simple point?

Structurally, verses 29–34 seem to form a unit bookended by the question of "perfect knowledge" at the end of verse 29 and the beginning of verse 34. The center of this thematic unit occurs in the second half of verse 31, "for every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness." This structurally emphasized message of fecundity is particularly interesting in light of the "perfect knowledge" bracketing. In Hebrew, the word for knowledge, *yada*, is usually used to refer to experiential knowledge, oftentimes with respect to sacred experiences

such as intimate relations associated with reproduction. After verse 36, no form of the word “know” or “knowledge” occurs. Instead, Alma talks metaphorically in terms of the fruit of tree of life that is “most precious,” a phrase Mormon employs in Moroni 9:9 to refer to “the chastity and virtue” of the daughters of the Lamanites, as “that which is most dear and precious.” Nephi also uses the phrase “most precious” to describe the fruit of the tree of life (1 Nephi 15:36) in a context rife with allusions to Israel’s family tree.

To a modern day Mormons, these rhetorical linkages between multigenerational family trees, the tree of life and its fruit, reproductive possibilities, and sacred knowledge all have a familiar resonance. The family metaphor helps vividly convey how sacred experiences can be produced in relations built on fidelity and trust. And, although many people cherish these family experiences as “the most desirable of all things” (1 Nephi 11:22), not everyone treats these experiences as sacred. Efforts to commoditize the kind of experiences cherished within committed family contexts usually result in heartbreak, disappointment, disaffection or exploitation. Happy homes cannot be cheaply bought and consumed. Rather, they are produced with significant personal investment and commitment. Relationships cannot survive without exercising faith and hope. Devoted family members must be willing to repent and forgive in the face of wrongs and continue to patiently cultivate the meaning and significance of these relationships.

Similarly, God’s word should be treated as a sacred gift rather than a commodity. We should humbly recognize that our creed-like preconceptions may need to be revised and that God’s word must be personally nourished, cherished, and internalized in order to have its transformative effect. We must give place in our own hearts for this seed. Only then will we feel the swelling motion of its power within our own lives, appreciate the fruit that results, and share it with loved ones. If we do this, we “shall feast upon” this fruit (Alma 32:42), seeking it not as a commodity to be seized and controlled but as a precious gift that can be gratefully received, deeply enjoyed, and faithfully cherished.