

ALMA 32:5-34:6

In the first edition of the Book of Mormon, Alma 30-35 are one chapter (16).

Korihor (30)

Zoramites (31-32a; 35)

the poor in spirit (32a)

faith and the atonement (32b-34)

Separation of the Ammonites from Jershon (35)

This suggests that we should read these stories as a piece: stories about how Alma deals with apostasy. Alma's sermon in chapters 32 and 33 (which, since they are divisions within the whole sermon, should not be treated separately), with Amulek's response to Alma's sermon, are the conclusion or climax of the story. Consider a quick tour through some of the interesting facets of chapters 32, 33, and the first few verses of 34.

Background: The great battle with the Lamanites (Alma 28); Alma's encounter with Korihor (Alma 30); Alma hears of the apostasy of the Zoramites (Alma 31), and fearing that the Zoramites will enter into a covenant with the Lamanites and come against the Nephites in war (Alma 31:4), he decides go with others on a mission to convert the Zoramites because "the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead people to do that which was just—yea, it had had a more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword" (Alma 31:5); Alma prays for the success of his mission (Alma 31:26-35).

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^{¶1}And it came to pass that they did go forth, and began to preach the word of God unto the people, entering into their synagogues, and into their houses; yea, and even they did preach the word in their streets. ²And it came to pass that after much labor among them, they began to have success among the poor class of people; for behold, they were cast out of the synagogues because of the coarseness of their apparel—³Therefore they were not permitted to enter into their synagogues to worship God, being esteemed as filthiness; therefore they were poor; yea, they

were esteemed by their brethren as dross; therefore they were poor as to things of the world; and also they were poor in heart.

They were poor in three senses: monetarily (they could not afford fine cloth for their clothing), in social standing (they were valued as filthy by their fellow citizens), and spiritually (they were not allowed to worship). The last of these, “poor in heart,” follows from the first two in their case, though as we will see, it need not.

Alma may be implicitly connecting their status to dirt, thereby comparing them to the soil that has been prepared to receive the seed (verse 28).

⁴Now, as Alma was teaching and speaking unto the people upon the hill Onidah, there came a great multitude unto him, who were those of whom we have been speaking, of whom were poor in heart, because of their poverty as to the things of the world. ⁵And they came unto Alma; and the one who was the foremost among them said unto him: 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?

Hyperbole: “despised of all men.”

“Our God” suggests that they are not sure whether their God and Alma’s is the same. In fact, they seem skeptical.

¶⁶And now when Alma heard this, he turned him about, his face immediately towards him, and he beheld with great joy; for he beheld that their afflictions had truly humbled them and that they were in a preparation to hear the word.

Alma recognizes their humility. In fact, it gives him joy.

As we saw in verse 3, their humility has prepared them to hear the word—compare 34:3, where Amulek says that Alma has spoken to them “to prepare your minds.” That suggests that Alma is not preaching the word to them here, only preparing them for it. If so, then perhaps the word is found in Amulek’s sermon (34). Or perhaps the preaching of Alma and Amulek prepares them to receive the word from the Spirit.

⁷Therefore he did say no more to the other multitude; but he stretched forth his hand, and cried unto those whom he beheld, who were truly penitent, and said unto them: ⁸I behold that ye are lowly in heart; and if so, blessed are ye. ⁹Behold thy brother hath said, What shall we do?—for we are cast out of our synagogues, that we cannot worship our God. ¹⁰Behold I say unto you, do ye suppose that ye cannot worship God save it be in your synagogues only? ¹¹Moreover, I would ask, do ye suppose that ye must not worship God only once in a week?

Alma answers their question with two rhetorical questions: do you think worship requires a synagogue? and do you think it is something that is done only once a week?

The first question is directed at the use of the Rameumptom (31:12-18)—they do not understand how to worship; the second addresses the separation of religion from their everyday lives (31:23)—they do not know what worship is.

Alma has already seen two problems in the Zoramites: pride and the desire for riches (31:24-28); they also claim to know there would be no Christ (31:29).

This suggests that these are also things that Alma must address in speaking to these people whom the Zoramites have cast out. After all, they want to join with the Zoramites in worship; unlike Alma and the other missionaries, these people are neither astonished (31:12) nor grieved (31:24) by the Zoramites mode of worship nor by their beliefs. They have been humbled, but they do not yet have right desires. If Alma is to convert them, he has to convert their desires from the desire to join with the main body of Zoramites to a desire for proper worship of the true God.

Worship (OED): “1) to honour or revere as a supernatural being or power, or as a holy thing, to regard or approach with veneration, to adore with appropriate acts, rites, or ceremonies; 2) to honour, to regard or treat with honour or respect, to treat with signs of honour or respect, to salute, bow down to; 3) to invest with, raise to, honour or repute, to confer honour or dignity upon.”

¶¹²I say unto you, 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; [. . .]

Having briefly answered their question, Alma turns to a more important question: rather than “How should we worship?” the issue is how they are to learn wisdom. Or,

perhaps better, the answer to their question about where and how they are to worship is to be found if they gain wisdom. What they need for that is the desire for—love of—wisdom, philosophy if we think that word etymologically). One way to understand the experiment Alma offers is to see it as teaching them how to come to love wisdom and, therefore, how eventually to obtain it.

We must ask, “What is wisdom?” Alma’s answer will be: “The good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected for our sins” (33:13, 22; 34:5)

It is necessary for the Zoramites to learn wisdom; learning wisdom requires humility (cf. Mosiah 4:5-11).

for it is because that ye are cast out, that ye are 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. ¹³And 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.

Some who are humbled involuntarily seek repentance.

Anyone who repents receives mercy, regardless of whether they do so of their own accord.

¹⁴And now, as I said unto you, that because ye were compelled to be humble ye were blessed, do ye not suppose that they are more blessed who truly humble themselves because of the word?

¹⁵Yea, he that truly humbleth himself, and repenteth of his sins, and endureth to the end, the same shall be blessed—yea, much more blessed than they who are compelled to be humble because of their exceeding poverty.

But it would be better if they humbled themselves; they would be more blessed.

¹⁶Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, in other words, blessed is he that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe.

The point of this part of the discussion comes primarily here: we can see the ideal in those who believe without being compelled to believe.

¶¹⁷Yea, 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.

The mention of sign-seekers reminds us of the Zoramites's denial of Christ. Alma may have Korihor particularly in mind. Notice that verse 14 referred to those who are compelled to believe. He may be gently comparing the poor Zoramites to Korihor.

¹⁸Now I ask, is this faith? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it.

Those who demand a sign, demand certainty, but that is not faith. At least part of the problem is that the poor Zoramites misunderstand what it means to have wisdom. They take it to mean certainty and, apparently, it does not.

Alma seems not to separate clearly two senses of "faith," namely "trust" and "belief in the face of and including uncertainty." However his failure is strategic; in fact, he will use the difference as well as the confusion of the difference to make his point.

¹⁹And 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? ²⁰Now of this thing ye must judge. Behold, I say unto you, that it is on the one hand even as it is on the other; and it shall be unto every man according to his work.

They must decide whether those who know and don't do are more cursed than those who believe and don't do. But the important thing for them to remember is that both cases have the same result: those who fail to do will be cursed.

¶²¹And 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.

Alma returns to the topic of faith, continuing to define it by contrasting it to what seems to be a category of knowledge: faith is not the same thing as having perfect knowledge.

Notice that this definition does not contrast faith and knowledge; it only contrasts faith and perfect knowledge. In addition, though we sometimes speak as if Alma is teaching us how to have perfect knowledge, he is not doing so.

Notice too that it is not obvious what Alma means by “perfect knowledge.” I think we assume that he means “certainty like the kind we have in a mathematical proof,” but that seems as much a consequence of the fact that we anachronistically interpret knowledge in terms of certainty and perfection in terms of mathematics and science as of what Alma says.

Perfect¹: “1) finished, complete, consummate, having all that is requisite to its nature and kind; 2) completely informed; 3) complete in moral excellencies.”

To have faith is to hope for true but unseen things. Philosophy has most often discussed truth in terms of vision: to know is to see; to be true is to be visible. Here the truth of the thing does not seem to be defined by its visibility. Though visibility and light will enter into the discussion, they seem not to be determinative of the truth, though philosophy and contemporary science, physical and social, has assumed that they are.

By referring the definition of faith to hope, Alma is moving away from the epistemic definition of faith and toward an understanding of faith in terms of trust.

²²And 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.

God’s mercy is extended to all who believe his word, in other words, to all who trust him. That is what he wants, our trust.

²³And 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.

Through angels, God gives his word to all.

¹Unless otherwise stated, all definitions are from the 1827 edition of *Webster’s*.

Notice that he does not (usually?) give his word directly, but through messengers. Alma himself has had this experience. Perhaps his reference to children is a self-reference, though the modifier “little” makes that less likely.

And Alma himself is a messenger, an “angel.”

Remember, too, that what Alma learned from the angel did not become knowledge except by prayer and fasting:

Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true. And how do ye suppose that I know of their surety? ⁴⁶Behold, I say unto you they are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God. Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit; and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me. (Alma 5:45-46)

The wisdom that comes from the word of God confounds those who are thought to be wise and learned.

Confound: “1) to mingle or blend different things so that they are indistinguishable; 2) to throw into disorder; 3) to mix or blend so as to occasion a mistake of one thing for another; 4) to perplex, to disturb the apprehension by indistinctness of ideas or words; 5) to throw the mind into disorder; 6) to perplex with terror; 6) to destroy, to overthrow.”

The wisdom that Alma has received and has to teach is one that undoes the distinctions of the worldly wise, in other words, the learned. We should, therefore, be leery of using his discourse to justify learned distinctions, such as those we make between faith and knowledge.

¶²⁴And now, my beloved brethren, as ye have desired to know of me what ye shall do because ye are afflicted and cast out—now I do not desire that ye should suppose that I mean to judge you only according to that which is true—²⁵For I do not mean that ye all of you have been compelled to humble yourselves; for I verily believe that there are some among you who would humble themselves, let them be in whatsoever circumstances they might.

Aposeopesis: presumably what follows in verse 26 is Alma's answer to what they should do because they have been cast out.

He doesn't presume to decide which of them have been compelled to be humble and which would have been humble any way.

¶²⁶Now, as I said concerning faith—that it was not a perfect knowledge—even so it is with my words. Ye cannot know of their surety at first, unto perfection, any more than faith is a perfect knowledge.

This verse is chiasitic: faith is not a perfect knowledge, my words; my words, faith is not a perfect knowledge.

In the process of beginning over again by distinguishing between faith (epistemic uncertainty) and knowledge and applying that distinction to his own discussion, Alma begins to undo the distinction by referring to the surety of his words. The word "surety" is ambiguous: "certainty", but also "security, safety." It captures both sides of the distinction between the two kinds of faith (epistemic uncertainty and trust).

What happens to the meaning of "faith is not a perfect knowledge" if we factor in our uncertainty about the phrase, "perfect knowledge," and remember that it may refer not to epistemic certainty but to moral excellence?

²⁷But behold, 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.

Faculty: "1) that power of the mind or intellect which enables it to receive, revive, or modify perceptions; 2) the power of doing anything; 6) power, authority; 9) privilege."

Experiment: "1) a trial, an act or operation designed to discover some unknown truth, principle or effect."

All that is required for them to have an answer to their question is a minute portion of faith.

That particle of faith is described in terms of desire, not knowledge, certain or otherwise.

Notice also that faith is described as an exercise, something we do, not something we simply have. As in the work of Søren Kierkegaard (“Love Believes All Things,” Works of Love), faith is active—in contrast to the passivity of knowledge.

Modernism is characterized by its attempt to control desire. (See Descartes’ Discourse on Method for Rightly Conducting the Reason.) That is a way in which it seeks to replace Christianity, for Christianity already offers a discipline of desire, the discipline of faithful obedience. Alma has not yet shown us whether the discipline of Christianity is a matter of control/will, but I think it will not be.

¶²⁸Now, we will compare the word unto a seed.

Alma has shifted from his word (in verse 27) to the word. Since his word is a delivery of the word, the shift is natural, but nonetheless significant to the point for which Alma is arguing. To understand the experiment, we must understand it as an experiment on not just any proposition or belief, but an experiment on the word.

Of the 191 instances of the phrase, “the word,” in the Book of Mormon, 50 percent of the uses are by Alma. Only three times does Alma use the phrase to refer to something other than “the word of God” or its equivalent (Alma 19:9 and 41:13 and 15). (It has another referent in a similar percentage of cases outside Alma.) The phrase, “the word,” almost certainly means “the word of God” in this place. In Alma 16:16, he gives what I think serves as a definition of the phrase: “the word which should be taught among them at the time of his [Christ’s] coming.” See also what Alma says he wants them to begin to believe in 33:22:

in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins; and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him, to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works.

Amulek says that Alma has been teaching that “the word is in Christ unto salvation” (34:6). That is what Alma compares to a seed.

Compare Alma’s use of the phrase, “the word” to John’s similar phrase, ὁ λόγος (John 1:1-2).

Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart,

Notice the passive voice. To give place to a seed is to allow it to be planted. It is not to will something oneself, but to allow something to happen to one. Does this correspond to the necessary humiliation that Alma has spoken of? If we extend the agrarian metaphor, Alma is asking them to break up the ground of their souls so that the seed may be planted in them.

The passive voice suggests a connection to the discussion of God's mercy in verse 22: God will plant the seed in any heart that allows it to be planted.

behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord,

The true is defined as the good rather than the accurate. Alma continues to move toward confounding the categories of the wise and learned. Korihor, for example, insisted that the true is the accurate (e.g. Alma 30:13-16) and attacked the accuracy of the Church's claims. In responding to Korihor, without denying the accuracy of the Church's claims, Alma shifted the question from accuracy to goodness; he concentrated on the moral questions (e.g. 30:33-34, 42, 46).

To cast the seed out is to resist the Spirit. This suggests that once the seed has been planted only an act of will prevents it from developing.

behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me.

Alma addresses them individually even though he addresses them in the plural. Notice that they refer to “my soul.”

Those who do the experiment will discover the goodness of the seed.

That goodness means three things: the word enlarges the soul, it enlightens the understanding, and it is delicious.

These three seem to be parallels rather than different items.

Notice how the parallel brings together feeling, understanding, and taste. This is a matter for the whole, embodied person rather than for just the mental person.

Traditionally understanding has been spoken of as enlightenment. But the enlightenment described here contrasts with what we call the Enlightenment, the belief that, ultimately, reason can explain all events and that the appeal to authority is to be avoided. This experiment begins with something that comes from authorities: from angels and prophets and testimony (cf. Alma 32:23; 33:3, 13, 19; 34:2, 7, 8).

¶²⁹Now behold, would not this increase your faith? I say unto you, Yea; nevertheless it hath not grown up to a perfect knowledge. ³⁰But behold, as the seed swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, then you must needs say that the seed is good; for behold it swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow.

Alma is here beginning more to use the word “faith” to mean “trust.” The experience described is an experience of goodness rather than of epistemic certainty. Those who plant the seed discover that it is good: desirable and to be trusted.

One cannot deny that the seed is good: “you must needs say that the seed is good. “Swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow” is epistemic.

And now behold, will not this strengthen your faith? Yea, it will strengthen your faith: for ye will say I know that this is a good seed; for behold it sprouteth and beginneth to grow.

The word strengthen strengthens the suggestion that faith is used here more in the sense of trust than of “belief in the face of and including uncertainty.” It is odd to speak of strengthening our knowledge.

¶³¹And 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. ³²Therefore, if a seed groweth it is good, but if it groweth not, behold it is not good, therefore it is cast away.

Though Alma does not focus on knowledge, strengthened faith creates surety, presumably certainty, though perhaps also safety and assurance.

³³And 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.

Alma explicitly connects the growth in faith with a growth in knowledge—moral knowledge rather than a “scientific” knowledge of facts, a knowledge of the goodness of the word.

³⁴And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; and this because ye know, for ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand.

Those who conduct the experiment have perfect or complete knowledge, but it is of only one thing: that the word of God is good and that it brings enlightenment and enlargement of soul.

They can now testify of the goodness of the word, for they have knowledge of that goodness.

¶³⁵O then, is not this real? I say unto you, Yea, because it is light; and whatsoever is light, is good, because it is discernible, therefore ye must know that it is good; and now behold, after ye have tasted this light is your knowledge perfect?

What is real is what is light; it is what is good. And what is light and good is so because it can be distinguished from the darkness. Consider John 1:5: “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”

Though obviously the metaphor of knowledge as vision is used here—what is true is what can be seen—given the previous discussion of faith (verse 21) we must be careful. For, the fact that an individual or group of individuals does not see the truth does not mean it is not true. After all, it cannot be seen by just anyone. It can only be seen by those who allow the word to be planted, those who do not reject the seed. This marks a difference between the Enlightenment and Alma’s teaching: They each propose a method by which anyone who will can come to know the truth. But the Enlightenment supposes that the method can be exercised without regard to a particular way of life and Alma, like

all Christians, does not: for a Christian, the way of life is the method for coming to know the truth.

Notice that Alma has once again identified truth, reality, with the good. We can only understand knowledge as a vision of what can be seen if we understand what can be seen as the good rather than as the “facts.” We assume, with Descartes and his philosophical children, that reality is a matter of facts that stand independent of any meaning we might find in them. Alma makes no such assumption: the facts are what they are because of the meaning in them; the good determines the real and, therefore, knowledge, not what can be seen.

The metaphor of tasting light confounds the usual categories. The knowledge that Alma is talking about is not just a matter of the intellect; it is a matter of the whole body, the whole person.

³⁶Behold I say unto you, Nay; neither must ye lay aside your faith, for ye have only exercised your faith to plant the seed that ye might try the experiment to know if the seed was good.

Though we know that the seed is good, we cannot set aside the need for faith.

Though much of our discussion of Alma’s sermon focuses on knowledge, it is interesting to note that this is the last time in this sermon that Alma mentions knowledge. Contrary to some of what we often say about this sermon, it does not seem to be a sermon about how to get knowledge. From here on, the question is, instead, how to get the fruit of the tree of life.

On the other hand, from a Christian perspective, that discussion is a discussion of how to get knowledge, for knowledge is defined by Christianity as a way of life that leads to the fullest life. It is defined experientially rather than simply in terms of content. In fact, that is the mistake of Enlightenment philosophy, to assume that the content of knowledge could be separated from the manner in which it was obtained and the character of the person who strove for it. The Christian promises that the content which the philosopher desires can be available, but Christians do not suppose that the content of the knowledge can be had apart from the life that brings that knowledge. (Socrates and Plato seem to have held a similar view, especially Socrates, as did virtually every European

philosopher until the sixteenth century, so this is not something new. It's just something forgotten.)

¶³⁷And behold, as the tree beginneth to grow, ye will say: Let us nourish it with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us. And now behold, if ye nourish it with much care it will get root, and grow up, and bring forth fruit.

That this discussion of nourishing the tree follows immediately after the comment that we cannot lay faith aside suggests that the growth of the tree requires our faith. The growth of the seed has proven to us that the tree is good, but we must continue to exercise faith (hope?) if we are going to work to have the fruit that the tree can bear.

Those who have done the experiment will say, "Let us nourish it." Alma has shifted from a focus on individuals to a focus on the people as a group. The project described is not an individual project, even if the experiment is, initially, one performed by individuals. We nourish the tree that has sprouted in the Church, in working to bring about Zion.

³⁸But if ye neglect the tree, and take no thought for its nourishment, behold it will not get any root; and when the heat of the sun cometh and scorcheth it, because it hath no root it withers away, and ye pluck it up and cast it out.

This sentence is ambiguous between reference to individual neglect and reference to community neglect. The ambiguity is instructive: either can prevent the tree from growing.

The heat of the sun is absolutely essential to the growth of the tree. It is only our failure to cultivate the tree which makes it deadly.

What might Alma intend by this metaphor? Perhaps the trials of life. Perhaps even more, perhaps life itself, including the blessings we receive from God as well as its trials. If the latter, then the point is that we will die, that life itself, the good and the undesirable aspects both, will kill us spiritually, if we do not plant the seed of the gospel and nourish it.

¶³⁹Now, this is not because the seed was not good, neither is it because the fruit thereof would not be desirable; but it is because your ground is barren, and ye will not nourish the tree, therefore ye cannot have the fruit thereof.

Since those who have conducted the experiment have already learned that the seed was good, they cannot blame the death of the tree on the seed. Only two things can explain that death from exposure to the heat of the sun: the barrenness of the ground (their souls) or their failure to nourish the tree. In either case, moral failure, not epistemological failure accounts for the loss of the tree.

⁴⁰And thus, if ye will not nourish the word, looking forward with an eye of faith to the fruit thereof, ye can never pluck of the fruit of the tree of life.

In order to partake of the fruit of the tree of life we have to continue to exercise faith/hope. Compare 1 Nephi 11, where the angel gives Nephi the interpretation of the tree of life by showing him a vision of the birth of Jesus and his ministry. Also compare Lehi's description of the tree (1 Nephi 8:10-12):

“And it came to pass that I beheld a tree, whose fruit was desirable to make one happy. And it came to pass that I did go forth and partake of the fruit thereof; and I beheld that it was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted. Yea, and I beheld that the fruit thereof was white, to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen. And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore, I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also; for I knew that it was desirable above all other fruit.”

The Book of Mormon speaks often of the tree of life. Here, as in other cases in the Book of Mormon, it is difficult to escape the implicit comparison to the tree of knowledge, especially given Eve's description of the tree of knowledge:

The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise. (Genesis 3:6)

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. (Moses 4:12)

This comparison of the tree of life and the tree of knowledge seems intended. Does the overlap of the descriptions suggest that there is some sense in which there was only one

tree? The Book of Mormon never refers to the tree of knowledge, only to the tree of life. I wonder why? Could it be because, for us and our purposes, there is only one tree of which we must partake, the tree of life? Adam and Eve have already eaten of the tree of knowledge for us. In fact, it may be that because we are among those who have, as it were, only eaten of the fruit of that tree, that we find the demand for rational certainty rather than moral knowledge so tempting.

¶⁴¹But if ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life.

We are required to be diligent as well as patient, both of which require faith. That faith, a faith founded on the knowledge of the goodness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, will result in the growth of eternal life in our souls. At this point the faith spoken of seems clearly to be trust founded on moral knowledge rather than epistemic hopefulness.

Amulek says that diligence, faith, and patience are the point of Alma's address (Alma 34:3).

Notice that Alma's rhetoric imitates the process that he describes: he begins with a seed, and as he discusses the seed, he moves from the seed to the tree to the fullness of everlasting life. His allegory swells just as the seed swells.

⁴²And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, 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.

Unlike the knowledge promised by the scientist and modern philosopher, this faith satisfies all desires rather than replacing them or dominating them. Nietzsche's interpretation of Christianity as a refusal of life and desire is mistaken. Christianity is not the rejection of desire or even the postponement of it. It is its fulfillment.

⁴³Then, my brethren, ye shall reap the rewards of your faith, and your diligence, and patience, and long-suffering, waiting for the tree to bring forth fruit unto you.

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¶¹Now after Alma had spoken these words, they sent forth unto him desiring to know whether they should believe in one God, that they might obtain this fruit of which he had spoken, or how they should plant the seed, or the word of which he had spoken, which he said must be planted in their hearts; or in what manner they should begin to exercise their faith.

Notice once again that Alma's focus is on desire, not knowledge.

The Zoramites desire a creed, a set of doctrines, first, then they also want to know how to live their lives. Given what Alma has been teaching them, that seems a reversal of things.

Clearly those to whom Alma has been speaking don't "get it." They haven't understood what he has said. On the other hand, however, they have been excited—their desire has been aroused; they are in the position described by Alma as the starting point for the Christian life: they desire to believe. Though they didn't understand Alma conceptually—doctrinally—they did understand what was needed and they are even acting on it.

²And Alma said unto them: Behold, ye have said that ye could not worship your God because ye are cast out of your synagogues. But behold, I say unto you, if ye suppose that ye cannot worship God, ye do greatly err, and ye ought to search the scriptures; if ye suppose that they have taught you this, ye do not understand them.

Finally, Alma answers their question about where they can worship once again (cf. 32:10-11). Now that they have been prepared (in chapter 32), they are ready for the answer to the question. In answer, he points them toward the scriptures (and, therefore, also to the prophets), where they could have found the answer to their question. Presumably they haven't found that answer or haven't understood it because they did not read the scriptures as part of nourishing the tree of life. The seed had not been planted and, therefore, the scriptures meant little, if anything, to them.

¶³Do ye remember to have read what Zenos, the prophet of old, has said concerning prayer or worship?

Alma identifies prayer with worship: they need not be in a synagogue to worship because they can always pray. (Amulek will emphasize this point in his response to Alma.)

Alma also makes it clear that those to whom he is speaking already have the scriptures and that he can presume they have read them.

⁴For he said: Thou art merciful, O God, for thou hast heard my prayer, even when I was in the wilderness; yea, thou wast merciful when I prayed concerning those who were mine enemies, and thou didst turn them to me. ⁵Yea, O God, and thou wast merciful unto me when I did cry unto thee in my field; when I did cry unto thee in my prayer, and thou didst hear me. ⁶And again, O God, when I did turn to my house thou didst hear me in my prayer. ⁷And when I did turn unto my closet, O Lord, and prayed unto thee, thou didst hear me. ⁸Yea, thou art merciful unto thy children when they cry unto thee, to be heard of thee and not of men, and thou wilt hear them. ⁹Yea, O God, thou hast been merciful unto me, and heard my cries in the midst of thy congregations. ¹⁰Yea, and thou hast also heard me when I have been cast out and have been despised by mine enemies; yea, thou didst hear my cries, and wast angry with mine enemies, and thou didst visit them in thine anger with speedy destruction.

Is there a progression here: wilderness > enemies > fields > house > closet > congregations > enemies? The series mentions enemies twice. Along with the reference to praying in the congregation, that fits the circumstances of the Zoramite poor well. There does seem to be a “movement” in three other terms, from the individual alone in the wilderness, to the individual in the home (presumably with a family), to the individual in the congregation of the church. But that movement is interrupted by the reference to the prayer in the closet, an individual matter.

The first five of this series of seven is separated from the last two by verse 8: God is merciful to those who cry to him, if they do so sincerely. Perhaps these should be treated as two groups, the first showing the variety of circumstances in which we can find ourselves, the second showing the two general social circumstances—in the congregation and among enemies—in which we find ourselves.

¹¹And thou didst hear me because of mine afflictions and my sincerity; and it is because of thy Son that thou hast been thus merciful unto me, therefore I will cry unto thee in all mine afflictions, for in thee is my joy; for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, because of thy Son.

Alma uses Zenos's prayer to bring together his concern and theirs: God will be merciful to them, he will answer their prayers wherever they are offered, because he has offered them repentance through the atonement of Jesus Christ.

In these verses (4-11), Alma is also answering their question about how to “plant the seed” or, as originally put (verse 28), how to let it be planted: the seed is planted by prayer; one exercises faith by praying.

¶¹²And now Alma said unto them: Do ye believe those scriptures which have been written by them of old? ¹³Behold, if ye do, ye must believe what Zenos said; for, behold he said: Thou hast turned away thy judgments because of thy Son.

If they believe the scriptures (another exercise of faith), then they must believe what Zenos said; and he said that God is merciful to us because of his Son. Alma appeals to the authority of scripture, arguing that if they believe the scriptures (which he assumes they do), then they necessarily believe what Zenos has taught. In the next verse, we will see that he does not think they could disbelieve if they have read the scriptures.

¶¹⁴Now behold, my brethren, I would ask if ye have read the scriptures? If ye have, how can ye disbelieve on the Son of God?

Alma makes his case even stronger: if you've read the scriptures, then you must believe in Christ!

Alma is not addressing those who start from zero. He speaks to those who already know, at least the content of scripture and—by implication—also that there is to be a Christ.

It isn't clear what effect this has on our understanding of the beginning experiment in 32: 27, but clearly it changes our usual understanding of what is happening in those verses.

¹⁵For it is not written that Zenos alone spake of these things, but Zenock also spake of these things—¹⁶For behold, he said: Thou art angry, O Lord, with this people, because they will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son. ¹⁷And now, my brethren, ye see that a second prophet of old has testified of the Son of God, and because the people would not understand his words they stoned him to death.

It is not misunderstanding or ignorance that caused the people to kill Zenock. It was a refusal to understand.

¶¹⁸But behold, this is not all; these are not the only ones who have spoken concerning the Son of God. ¹⁹Behold, he was spoken of by Moses;

Alma piles up references to prophets in the scripture to make his case. He clearly believes in the appeal to authority, especially the authority of scripture.

yea, and behold a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live. ²⁰But few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts. But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished. Now the reason they would not look is because they did not believe that it would heal them.

The failure to understand is a consequence of sin, particularly the sin of willfulness, rather than ignorance. Alma's claim is very strong: ultimately, those who do not believe the message of Jesus Christ do so because they refuse to believe. As in chapter 32, the issue is goodness, not epistemology.

The irony is that many will choose death rather than give up their hard hearts.

I assume that hardness of heart is pride, which is why Alma is joyous to discover that these people have been humbled.

Those with hard hearts may also be those who demand that knowledge be passive and that they have certainty. Such a demand is a kind of greed, a desire to have the world and its things as one would have jewels or other mere possessions over which one could exercise control.

¶²¹O my brethren, if ye could be healed by merely casting about your eyes that ye might be healed, would ye not behold quickly, or would ye rather harden your hearts in unbelief, and be slothful, that ye would not cast about your eyes, that ye might perish?

In addition to being a sin of pride, the failure to believe is a sin of laziness. Those who do not believe are too lazy to do what is necessary for them to believe, even though it is easy. In the circumstances, they would be those who refuse to allow the seed of the gospel to be planted in their hearts, those who refuse to do the experiment.

²²If so, wo shall come upon you; but if not so, then cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins; and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him, to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works.

Alma changes his metaphor from that used in the previous chapter. Then it was “let the seed be planted.” Now it is “look around.” Presumably, if you look, you will see; you will begin to believe, not just in this or that, but in the good news of Jesus Christ: he came to redeem his people through his suffering, death, and resurrection, and because he did, all men will be judged by their works at the last day. The only escape from judgment is that mentioned in verse 11, repentance based on the suffering of the Son, which is why the news of the Son is such good news.

¶²³And now, my brethren, I desire that ye shall plant this word in your hearts, and as it beginneth to swell even so nourish it by your faith. And behold, it will become a tree, springing up in you unto everlasting life. And then may God grant unto you that your burdens may be light, through the joy of his Son. And even all this can ye do if ye will. Amen.

Alma makes the connection between his point here and that at 32:28 explicit: the gospel is the seed that is to be planted.

If we nourish the gospel after it sprouts in our souls, God will not remove our burdens, but he will make them light.

Anyone can allow the seed to be planted and nourish the tree of life.

34

¶¹And now it came to pass that after Alma had spoken these words unto them he sat down upon the ground, and Amulek arose and began to teach them, saying: ²My brethren, I think that it is impossible that ye should be ignorant of the things which have been spoken concerning the coming of Christ, who is taught by us to be the Son of God;

Like Alma, Amulek believes that the Zoramites must know about Christ. The things that Alma has said to them, as well as the things he will say to them (a repetition and expansion of Alma's message) are predicated on that fact.

yea, I know that these things were taught unto you bountifully before your dissension from among us. ³And as ye have desired of my beloved brother that he should make known unto you what ye should do, because of your afflictions; and he hath spoken somewhat unto you to prepare your minds; yea, and he hath exhorted you unto faith and to patience—

Alma spoke in order to prepare the minds of the Zoramites; for Amulek, the point of Alma's address was the exhortation to faith and patience, faith and patience sufficient to plant the seed and to test its goodness (verse 4).

⁴Yea, even that ye would have so much faith as even to plant the word in your hearts, that ye may try the experiment of its goodness.

Amulek specifically says that the experiment was one to discover the goodness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁵And we have beheld that the great question which is in your minds is whether the word be in the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ. ⁶And ye also beheld that my brother has proved unto you, in many instances, that the word is in Christ unto salvation.

The real question that the Zoramites have, whether they knew it or not, concerns Christ. Therefore, Amulek goes on to repeat and expand on that message in his sermon. There he moves in the opposite direction as did Alma, beginning with the atonement and moving to the necessity of prayer. As did Alma, he admonishes them to stop contending against the

Holy Ghost (verse 38—compare 32:39) and, in the end, to endure patiently (verses 40-41—compare 32:28a, 43).

Amulek gives an outline of the experiment that must be conducted:

- 1) Search the scriptures (verse 2). This is how they will obtain the word.*
- 2) Pray (verses 17-27), another way of exercising faith and obtaining the word.*
- 3) Live a life of Christian charity (verses 28-29). Presumably one who does not denies the charity that has been extended to him by the atonement. Thus, not to live charitably is either to be proud (by believing that Christ has offered me salvation from my sins, but not others) or it is not to exercise faith that Christ has made an atonement (for I deny it in denying mercy and love to others).*