

Alma 32 Seminar—Summary Report

Question 1—What does Alma 32 teach us about exercising faith?

Throughout Alma 32, Alma characterizes faith as an affirmative response to the word of God as delivered by a divine messenger. Faith is exercised by “giving place” to the seed of God’s word, by refusing to cast out that seed, and by allowing that word to grow within us, transforming us from the inside out. Faith is a willingness to say, in response to the changes wrought upon us by the word of God, that the word is good.

In this way, faith is exercised as a kind of active restraint or affirmative letting-be. Faith does not plant the seed, it does not cause the seed to grow, and it is not responsible for the transformative effects that follow from the seed’s taking root in our hearts and minds. God’s mercy and grace, extended through his Son, accomplish these acts. We exercise faith through an active and affirmative cultivation of restraint that grants sufficient room for the word to work. Faith affirms without compulsion the necessity of both our humility and God’s mercy. Faith openly and persistently acknowledges that only God can transform us and that the work of the word upon us is to be welcomed rather than feared.

The specific phrase “exercise your faith” occurs only once in Alma 32 and once more as a variant (see verses 27 and 36 respectively). Interestingly, these occurrences frame what is often considered to be the heart of Alma’s discourse: his description of the experiment that he desires the Zoramites to perform. Until verse 27, Alma has focused his attention on humility, signs, and the relationship between faith and knowledge. However, verse 27 begins with a call to action: “But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith. . . .” This call to action is explicitly intertwined with desire and this desire is expressed through an act of humility that gives place in our hearts for something other than ourselves: “yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words.”

Alma then outlines the process of the experiment in verses 28–35. The result of the experimental process is that the subject who makes room for the

seed/word and allows it to follow its natural course without casting it out through unbelief will be able to gain a perfect knowledge that the seed/word is, in fact, good. However, in verse 35, Alma makes clear that the resulting knowledge is no end in itself. Rather, it is only part of the required journey: “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” (emphasis added). In other words, verses 28–35 relate a specific, limited example of exercised faith.

Crucially, these verses imply that, even in light of the received knowledge, we must choose to *continue* to exercise faith. Though, as Alma says in verse 34, faith may become “dormant” with respect to a specific object, it endures in and beyond the perfection of knowledge. Having exercised faith and experimented upon the word, and thus having discovered without a doubt the goodness of the word, we must continue to actively affirm through all eternity that the word’s work is good and desirable. We must continue to say that we *want* the word. Indeed, rather than faith passing away with the arrival of a perfect knowledge, we might better say that only faith’s continued affirmation of God’s word can perfect the knowledge that the experiment reveals.

Question 2—What does Alma mean by “the word,” and why is it so central to faith?

“The word” is arguably the central theme of Alma’s discourse to the Zoramite poor. In fact, Alma explains in 31:5 that the entire mission to the Zoramites is undertaken because “the preaching of the word . . . had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them.” The word, Alma contends, wields a kind of power and this unique power must be understood as fundamentally different from the strength of the sword.

In one sense, the whole of Alma 32 might be read as an extended meditation on this relationship between the word and the sword. This is particularly clear in the passage where Alma uses the phrase “the word” for the first time in his discourse to the Zoramite poor. It initially occurs when he makes a distinction between those who are “compelled to be humble” because of their circumstances and those who “truly humble themselves *because of the word*” (Alma 32:14, emphasis added). Here, while the word effects a “true” humility,

the sword (or power of compulsion) can produce only a forced humility. Any clear understanding of “the word” in Alma’s teachings must be tied to a clarification of these two kinds of humility and the principles that differentiate them.

Of particular interest is the way that these two kinds of humility complicate what might otherwise be regarded as a straightforward, binary opposition between pride and humility. If there are two kinds of humility—one forced, one “true—then humility cannot simply be the opposite of pride. Moreover, because the second, “more blessed” variety of humility is caused by “the word,” it would seem that it is precisely the word that complicates the difference between pride and humility. For Alma, the word adds something to the situation that can reconfigure its basic coordinates in a potentially liberating way.

The situation in which Alma delivers his message to the Zoramites, then, can be seen as an unsupplemented situation in which the simplistic opposition holds sway. The Zoramites have divided themselves into two classes: a ruling class of the wealthy (those who are proud) and a poor, working class (those who are compelled to be humble). How, then, does the word supplement this ordinary division of the situation in a transformative way?

Alma explains in 32:22-23 that: “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. And now, he imparteth his word by angels.” Faith (used synonymously with “belief” throughout Alma’s words to the Zoramites) is said to be a question of the word: to have faith is to “believe, yea, even on his word.” The content of this word is God’s promise of mercy. Moreover, the source of the word is provided: “he imparteth his word by angels.” Faith, in other words, is a question of one’s belief in or fidelity to an angelic message that, precisely *as* angelic, is supplementary to the situation in which one otherwise finds oneself.

It is through this angelic reconfiguration of the situation that it becomes possible to speak of an additional kind of humility. On the one hand, there is a humility before (or without) the advent of the angelic word, a kind of humility that amounts to humiliation. On the other hand, there is now the possibility of

a humility that unfolds as fidelity to the angelic word. The advent of the angelic word allows the situation to be rewritten through faith so that one's humiliation can be remade as a willing and saving dependence on God's mercy.

If all of this clarifies the relationship between the word and *faith*, it is only in the culminating second half of Alma 32 that Alma clarifies the relationship between the word and *knowledge*. Here, Alma develops an extended comparison of the word to a seed that intertwines the meaning of this angelic supplement with Edenic themes. These Edenic themes highlight a basic difference between faith and knowledge, a difference that precisely mirrors Alma's previously discussed distinction between a willing humility and a forced humility. Alma, for instance, is critical of those who would demand signs specifically because knowledge *without faith* can produce only a forced humility, not the willing humility that is an effect of the word (cf. 32:17-18). In order for humility to be "blessed," we must not be "compelled to know" by a sign (32:16). The knowledge imparted by such signs, unsupplemented by faith, can only *remove* cause for belief: "for if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it" (32:18).

It is no surprise, then, that in the second half of the chapter Alma focuses exclusively on the tree of *life* as opposed to the tree of *knowledge*. Already acquainted with death and suffering (i.e., the fruit of the tree of knowledge), the Zoramite poor, figured as Adam and Eve, receive from the divine messenger a seed/word from the tree of life. Their faithful cultivation of this seed results directly in eternal life: "if ye will nourish the word, year, 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" (32:41).

Question 3—What is meant by "experiment" in Alma 32:27?

The word "experiment" occurs only five times in LDS scripture: three times in Alma 32, once in Alma 34, and once in 2 Corinthians 9:13. The Greek term used in 2 Corinthians, *dokime*, means something like "proof" or "test." In the Old and New Testaments, these and related terms are often used in connection with God's work of proving or testing humankind. However, humankind is also described as testing or proving God. Typically our "testing"

God has negative connotations (e.g., Israel testing God’s patience during the provocation—see, for example, Psalm 95:8-11), but it sometimes has a positive resonance (e.g., Elijah “proving” God by setting the altar sacrifice on fire in 1 Kings 18:22-39, Ahaz being invited by the prophet to ask God for a sign in Isaiah 7:11-12, and God inviting Israel to “prove” him by paying their tithes in Malachi 3:10).

In Alma 32, the term “experiment” is used to describe a similar, positive testing of God, while “sign-seeking” is used to describe its negative valence. The differences between these two attitudes of testing or proving are important for understanding Alma’s sermon. The problem with sign-seeking is not that a *request* has been made, but that a fulfillment of the request has been *demand*ed. Further, sign-seekers threaten withdrawal from the relationship if their demands are not met. This attitude is not conducive to a saving relationship because, rather than responding to God’s proffered mercy, the sign-seeker’s posture of demand effectively refuses to acknowledge God as God.

Reading Alma 32 from a modern perspective, this distinction between experimenting and sign-seeking is helpful in grappling with the now-scientific connotations of the word “experiment.” On the one hand, there are many useful parallels between scientific experimentation and the way Alma advocates interacting with the word. For example, in scientific experiments, it is important that the scientist be open and receptive to the results of the experiment. If, in contrast, one is looking simply to confirm a preconceived notion about what the experiment will yield, then this is bad science. Similarly, if one approaches the word of God with a preconceived notion about what the word is going to produce, then this is bad faith. In science and in reading God’s word, one must be willing to go wherever the experiment leads, no matter how surprising this path might seem.

This is precisely the problem with the apostate forms of worship prevalent among the Zoramites: they are not really experimenting with God’s word. As Alma 31:1 puts it, Zoram was “leading the hearts of the people to bow down to dumb idols.” The dumbness of the idols is echoed in the fixed prayers of the Zoramites which declare what their beliefs are and, without leaving room for God himself to speak, effectively tell God what they are willing to believe about him. This non-experimental attitude of holding to fixed beliefs without

seeking to learn God's will is also the problem with the sign-seeking attitude that Alma describes. The sign-seeker refuses to recognize the signs that God has already shown—like the earth itself and the motion of the planets (cf. Alma 30:43-44)—and instead insists that God meet the sign-seeker's demands regarding when, where, and how appropriate signs are to be revealed. Rather than responding to God's revelations, these cases reveal a self-centered and self-imposing mode of worship that is antithetical to the spirit of genuine experimentation.

On the other hand, even a model of open-minded scientific experimentation can lead to an improper understanding of what Alma means by the term "experiment." For example, Alma advocates *internalizing* the seed/word of God so that the experiment has a direct effect on the person conducting the experiment. In scientific experimentation this is unacceptable. Rather, the scientist must take a detached approach and merely observe the outcome of the experiment. Being subjectively invested in the way that Alma advocates breaks with the scientific method. In this sense, the common root with the word "experience" comes to the fore in the Book of Mormon usage of the term "experiment": to experiment upon the word is to experience the word. Whereas a direct mode of experiencing the process of experimentation is something that science eschews because it would compromise objectivity, for Alma, this direct, personal mode experimentation comprises a crucial part of the process. Only by giving place in one's own heart for the word can the growth and eventual fruit be experienced.

Internalizing the word also underscores the importance of the listener's role in yielding space to the seed in order for the conversion process to take place. Once the word presents itself, a subjective choice must be made. Understanding this helps explain why Alma uses three active verbs in conjunction with *experiment* to describe the experimenting process in verse 27: "if ye will *awake* and *arouse* your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and *exercise* a particle of faith . . . let this desire work in you." And, in the end, the subject must make a subjective judgment about the *value* of the seed/word —"you must needs say that the word is good"—in order for the experiment to be efficacious.

By giving place to the seed, a genuine change is thus made possible. And, because of this change, a mutual relationship with God can develop. The

proving work of the seed is a two-way street: the listener proves the seed, and the seed proves the listener. Through this mutual proving, God and the faithful listener are able to give place to each other and genuinely respond to one another. If the listener proves himself by responding to God's word, then God will further prove himself by responding with additional generosity: "And when he shall prove himself faithful in all things that shall be entrusted to his care, yea, even a few things, he shall be made ruler over many" (D&C 124:113). The experiment, then, for Alma, should be understood as an invitation to begin an ongoing relationship in which God and the faithful listener are given a chance to try one other and establish a proven relationship that can be trusted to continue through whatever difficulties may come.

Question 4—How might paying close attention to the textual, historical, and political contexts of Alma 32 shape or re-shape our understanding of Alma's treatment of faith?

Faith has the last word in Alma 30-31, quite literally: the word "faith" does not appear in these two chapters until the very last word of the very last verse of chapter 31. That the word appears in chapters 32-34 over two dozen times highlights the unusual nature of this single appearance in chapters 30-31. Its placement as the final word of these otherwise "faith-less" chapters suggests that Alma 30-31 not only can (in light of chapter 32's heavy emphasis on faith), but also ought to be read as working toward the question of faith. Because 31:38 ties faith to "the prayer of Alma" specifically, faith might be understood as emerging through a contrast of prayers: Alma's prayer with that of the Zoramites.

Note that the Rameumptom prayer frequently employs the verb "to believe," while Alma's prayer never uses it. Instances of "to believe" in the Zoramite prayer are all in the first personal plural: "we believe" four times, and "we do not believe" once. This confessional flavor, combined with the mantra-like repetition of the phrase, gives the Rameumptom prayer a kind of creedal spirit. Perhaps, then, the distinction between the prayer of faith and the faithless prayer can be said preliminarily to be grounded in a difference in attitude towards creeds. Moreover, the five creedal statements here are all statements about transcendent *facts*: whereas Alma simply talks in his prayer about what he has seen immediately before him, the Zoramites make claims

about things that have not been—indeed, cannot have been—experienced personally. Where the creedal prayer lays a heavy emphasis on the communal or collective, Alma’s prayer has a manifest focus on the individual.

The concept of "place" is multivalent and crucial to the meaning of faith in Alma 32. Note that when the Zoramite poor ask Alma what to do about having been cast out of the synagogue (see Alma 32:5), Alma responds with a discourse on faith (Alma 32:8-43). But when they ask him about faith (Alma 33:1), he tells them what to do about having been barred from the synagogue (Alma 33:2-23). Thus, location and faith are linked. The Zoramite poor are operating under the misunderstanding that they need access to a certain place to worship, but Alma teaches that the only “place” they need is the place they must make in their hearts for the seed to grow. And, here, Alma’s call to “give place” echoes his description of Korihor as someone who had “put off the Spirit of God that it may have no *place* in you” (Alma 30:42, emphasis added).

Thus, the primary location for faith is the heart of the worshipper. At the same time, physical, exterior locations carry symbolic weight. While Zoramite praying occurs in “a place built up in the center of their synagogue, a place for standing” (Alma 31:13), Alma preaches from a hill (Alma 32:4). Both Alma’s hill and the Rameumptom have the superficial similarity of being “high places,” but Alma’s is natural (or: God-created) and out of doors while the Zoramites’ is man-made and contained within a synagogue. While Zoramite worship is surrounded by the man-made (synagogue, Rameumptom, fine clothing, and jewels), Alma is in nature with nothing artificial mentioned and he preaches a parable that is nature-focused. Alma sees that not only were the Zoramites’ bodies lifted up, but that “their hearts were lifted up” (Alma 31:25) as well.

Zoramite worship (31:13) uses physical space symbolically to: (1) suggest the superiority of one person above the others (contrast Alma 30:7, where we learn that the motivating principle behind Nephite law was to be sure that people were *not* placed on “unequal grounds”), (2) make worship into an exterior, public performance (contrast the interiority of the experiment upon the word in Alma’s parable), (3) present worship as unchanging instead of growing (unlike the seed of Alma’s parable), and (4) make worship into a discrete event instead of a continual process (contrast Amulek’s admonition in Alma 34:27 that they pray continually).

Contextually, the contrast between Alma's and Korihor's conversion experiences also functions as an immediate backdrop to Alma's parable of the seed. Korihor's experience with the devil's angel is strikingly similar to Alma's conversion experience with an angel of God. One could say that while chapters 30-31 are a case study in distinguishing true from false messengers, chapter 32 is a theoretical elaboration of how to prove the goodness of a messenger's word. While Alma cultivates the word through extensive fasting and prayer (see Alma 5:46) in order to obtain a spiritual witness of the word he receives, Korihor simply accepts the message without any personal verification or experimentation. The parable of the seed makes clear that one can and must test the "seed" of an angelic visitation to determine its goodness.

Further, it is important to note that geopolitical concerns motivate Alma's mission to the Zoramites. He explicitly tells us that he has chosen to preach to the Zoramites in order to prevent them from joining with the Lamanites and thus threatening the peace of the Nephites (see Alma 31:3-5). Of course, that is exactly what happens as a *direct* result of his mission (see Alma 35:8-10), an irony which may suggest that the Lord's purposes for Alma's mission were larger than Alma's.

Finally, the theme of being "cast out" is prominent throughout Alma 30-35: Korihor is cast out, the poor are cast out of the synagogue, and Alma encourages the Zoramite poor *not* to cast out a good seed. The text reminds us that, although the Zoramites have been cast out of their synagogue, they may still choose to plant a seed that no one else can cast out. Here, we also have a kind of thematic link forged between the Zoramite poor and the word/seed itself. This link encourages us to identify the poor with the seed: the Zoramite poor are a potentially good seed that, in order for faith to grow, must not be cast out. To cast out the poor—as the wealthy Zoramites do—is to cast away the opportunity to develop saving faith in God's word. When Alma urges the poor to resist "casting out" the seed, when urges them to "give place" to something other than themselves, his exhortation must have pointedly resonated with the difficulty of their own current circumstances.