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Of Conversion

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Chapter One

Of Conversion

If we want to understand what the Book of Mormon has to say about reading the Book of Mormon, it would help if we could find a place in the Book of Mormon where one Book of Mormon prophet reads another. There are at least several such places, but I would like to focus on one: Alma 36, which has been described as "the most dramatic and influential" conversion story in "all of the Book of Mormon."[1] Why privilege this text over others? Because it provides what I believe to be the most obvious, most detailed, most interesting, and most theologically productive reading of one Book of Mormon text by another.

Latter-day Saints, moreover, are generally familiar with Alma 36. It is among the Book of Mormon's most touching narratives: Alma's conversion story as he tells it to his son, Helaman. The chapter also has become famous because of its apparently chiastic structure. Even seminary students know about the massive chiasm that supposedly gives this chapter its shape. But for all the attention—devotional *and* scholarly—that has been given to it, Alma 36 has never been explored in terms of what it has to say about reading scripture.

In this chapter, then, I work in detail through Alma 36, always with an eye to what it has to say about how to read scripture. I begin with an examination of the structure of the text (which is more complicated than has been recognized) and the scriptural sources on which Alma draws. I turn then to a close reading of the first five verses of Alma 36, looking at what Alma has to say there about the role that knowledge or knowing played in his conversion experience. These introductory verses show that there is something paradoxical about conversion, about coming to know what God wants one to know. Alma

frames his words to his son in a way that suggests that the actual experience of conversion is meant to clarify and make sense of that paradox.

What is that paradox? It is that in the course of conversion one comes to know what one cannot know. As Alma puts it in words that will be analyzed in detail in this chapter: "if I had not been born of God I should not have known these things; but God has, by the mouth of his holy angel, made these things known unto me, not of any worthiness of myself" (Alma 36:5). One must be born of God to know the things of God, but one must know the things of God to be worthy of being born of God. But how, then, can one be converted? The way that Alma 36 is framed makes clear that Alma's own conversion experience is meant to answer that question, to explain the apparent impossibility of conversion.

Most of the rest of this chapter, then, focuses on Alma's actual conversion narrative, a narrative that Alma builds on a series of repetitions of two crucial words: "memory" and "thought." On the reading I offer here, it is the complex entanglement of these two terms that is meant to solve the problem of knowledge presented in the chapter's first verses. In effect, conversion is the event in which a genuinely unanticipated thought interrupts the otherwise closed economy of memory, allowing for a thorough reworking—or rewriting—of memory. And, crucially for the rest of the book, it is this complex entanglement that Alma calls "typology."

The present chapter ends when I step back from Alma's text in order to assess the importance of all these findings. This stepping back gives me the space necessary to formulate a few preliminary conclusions about what it means to read the Book of Mormon. But it also forces me to face up to the central importance of typology in reading scripture. And because Alma only gives us something like the bare outline of typology, it is necessary to ask exactly what the Book of Mormon understands by "typology." That question will lead in rather different directions in subsequent chapters.

Exegetical Preliminaries: Structure

Two classic studies pave the way for any analysis of Alma 36: John Welch's famous analysis of chiasmus in the chapter and George Tate's masterful reading of the role of the exodus theme in the Book of Mormon.[2] These two studies alone reveal the depth and complexity of the text. While

Welch's study limits itself to the content of Alma 36 alone, probing its structure, Tate's study ranges through the whole Book of Mormon to bring to light a central Nephite theme, one crucially at work in Alma 36. Within the space opened between these two approaches to Alma's conversion story, I offer my own exegetical approach.

The story recounted in Alma 36 is simple enough. Alma, son of the high priest, had joined with the sons of King Mosiah to go about, secretly "seeking to destroy the church of God." But one day a "holy angel" who spoke "as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble," suddenly confronted them. Singled out and summoned to stand forth, Alma heard the angel's message: "If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God." Alma at once "fell to the earth" and could not arise "for the space of three days and three nights." He suffered incredible turmoil—"racked with eternal torment" and "harrowed up to the greatest degree"—until he "remembered also to have heard" prophecies (spoken by his father) "concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world." Placing his desperate trust in this one memory, Alma "cried within [his] heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death." Immediately, his "pains"—before "so exquisite and so bitter"—were replaced by "joy" both "exquisite and sweet." Alma then found he could rise, and he began "from that time" to teach the gospel to enable others also to "taste of the exceeding joy" he had experienced.

The story itself is simple enough but the context of its telling in Alma 36 is complex. Alma relates the experience specifically to his son Helaman and only as part of the larger ceremonial event of passing the Nephite records and relics from father to son.[3] Consequently, questions thoroughly concerned with the passing of the records structurally frame the actual narrative of conversion. In the five verses (36:1–5) preceding as well as in the five verses (36:26–30) following the conversion narrative proper (36:6–25), Alma intertwines his conversion story with the ceremonial event (which spills over into Alma 37 as well). Importantly, the theme that connects Alma's narrativizing of his conversion experience to the ceremony is *knowledge*. Alma 36 is first and foremost about what Alma believes his son must, as keeper of the records, come to know—as well as how he must come to know it.

It is possible, in light of these comments, to make a first, broad structural point about Alma 36: the text appears to be structured as a chiastically framed narrative:

A Verses 1–5 (concerns derived from the ceremonial context)
  B Verses 6–25 (the conversion narrative proper)
A Verses 26–30 (concerns derived from the ceremonial context)

On closer analysis, this chiastic framing is more intricate than it first appears. Borrowing details from Welch's already-mentioned study, it is possible to see how tightly woven the chiastic framing of the conversion narrative proper is:

A
My son give ear to my words (v. 1)
Keep my commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (v. 1)
Do as I have done (v. 2)
Remember the captivity of our fathers (v. 2)
They were in bondage (v. 2)
He surely did deliver them (v. 2)
Trust in God (v. 3)
Supported in trials, troubles, and afflictions (v. 3)
Lifted up at the last day (v. 3)
I know this not of myself but of God (v. 4)
Born of God (v. 5)

B ← Alma's conversion narrative (vv. 6–25)

A'
Born of God (v. 26)
Therefore my knowledge is of God (v. 26)
Supported under trials, troubles, and afflictions (v. 26)
Trust in him (v. 27)
He will deliver me (v. 27)
And raise me up at the last day (v. 28)
As God brought our fathers out of bondage and captivity (vv. 28–29)
Retain a remembrance of their captivity (v. 29)
Know as I do know (v. 30)
Keep the commandments and ye shall prosper in the land (v. 30)
This is according to his word (v. 30)

Leaving theological analysis of this structure for later, what can be said of the internal structure of the central conversion narrative? Here too Welch provides a chiastic structure, but his case for a chiasm in verses 6–25 is less convincing. Despite some repetition of words and phrases—enough, at any rate, to allow for a rough chiastic reading—whole swaths of the narrative are unaccounted for. (In one place, for example, four verses from one half of the chiasm are taken together as a rough parallel to a single phrase from the other half!)[4] It thus seems best not to force a chiasm onto the *whole* of Alma 36, but rather just to take verses 1–5 and 26–30 as a tightly structured chiastic *framing* that sets off the distinctly structured central conversion narrative of verses 6–25.

Allowing the narrative's *own* structure to emerge by refusing to impose on it the chiastic structure of its frame, one must look to the recurrence of two words in particular. The core of Alma's conversion story—beginning with verse 13 and concluding with verse 22—is punctuated by the consistent repetition of (various forms of) the words "memory" and "thought":

A Yea, I did *remember* all my sins and iniquities (v. 13)
B The very *thought* of coming into the presence of my God (v. 14)
B Oh, *thought* I, that I could be banished and become extinct (v. 15)
A I was harrowed up by the *memory* of my many sins (v. 17)
A I *remembered* also to have heard my father prophesy (v. 17)
B Now, as my mind caught hold upon this *thought* (v. 18)
B And now, behold, when I *thought* this (v. 19)
A I could *remember* my pains no more (v. 19)
A I was harrowed up by the *memory* of my sins no more (v. 19)
B Yea, *methought* I saw ... God (v. 22)

There is, here, a rather strict pattern of alternating pairs (A, B, B, A, A, B, B, A, A, B). At the same time, though, the pattern imposes itself on the narrative with a rather erratic rhythm. Breaking with the almost sterile systematicity of the chiastic frame in verses 1–5 and 26–30, the structure of verses 13–22 allows the climax of Alma's conversion story to travel through the scattered points of its trajectory in fits and starts, at times moving with a kind of measured step (as in verses 13–14), at times racing like mad (as in verse 19), and at times stopping dead still (as in verses 20–22). This erratic rhythm is visually arresting when each punctuating moment of the narrative is marked in the text:

Yea, I did

remember

all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell; yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments. Yea, and I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction; yea, and in fine so great had been my iniquities, that the very

thought

of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror. Oh,

thought

I, that I could be banished and become extinct both soul and body, that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds. And now, for three days and for three nights was I racked, even with the pains of a damned soul. And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the

memory

of my many sins, behold, I

remembered

also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world. Now, as my mind caught hold upon this

thought,

I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death. And now, behold, when I

thought

this, I could

remember

my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the

memory

of my sins no more. And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!

> Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy. Yea,
>
> *methought*
>
> I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there. (Alma 36:13–22)

Of course, in the end, the alternating pairs of the narrative's central structure are only to be found within a limited part of the conversion narrative. The terms "thought" and "memory" appear only within verses 13–22, leaving verses 6–12 and 23–25 unaccounted for. However, a brief glance at the content of the narrative makes clear that there is an important distinction in terms of narrative *content* between verses 13–22 and verses 6–12 and 23–25: the material omitted from the pattern of alternating pairs recounts Alma's *external* experiences in the overarching conversion narrative of verses 6–25 (encountering the angel in verses 6–12; preaching repentance in verses 23–25), while the material structured by the pattern recounts Alma's *internal* experiences (three days of torment in verses 13–22).

The whole of Alma 36, then, might for the moment be divided as follows:

A (vv. 1–5) • Chiastic Framing: Tightly Structured
- **B**$_1$ (vv. 6–12) • External Narrative: Structureless
  - **B**$_2$ (vv. 13–22) • Internal Narrative: Erratically Structured
- **B**$_1$**′** (vv. 23–25) • External Narrative: Structureless

A′ (vv. 26–30) • Chiastic Framing: Tightly Structured

This way of understanding the broad structure of the chapter foregrounds the uniqueness of verses 13–22. The structureless narrative stretches of verses 6–12 and 23–25 separate the erratically structured narrative-within-a-narrative of verses 13–22 from the tightly structured chiastic framing of verses 1–5 and 25–30. In the end, the closest theological attention is due to the thought/memory entanglement of the narrative-within-a-narrative of verses 13–22. But an eye must also be kept on how both the chiastic framing and the structureless external parts of the larger narrative help determine the meaning of the narrative-within-a-narrative.

Exegetical Preliminaries: Sources

So much, for the moment, for structure. What textual sources lie behind Alma 36? Without pretending to undertake an exhaustive investigation of possible textual echoes, I will explore the relationship between this chapter and possible textual sources that may have influenced the construction of Alma's narrative.

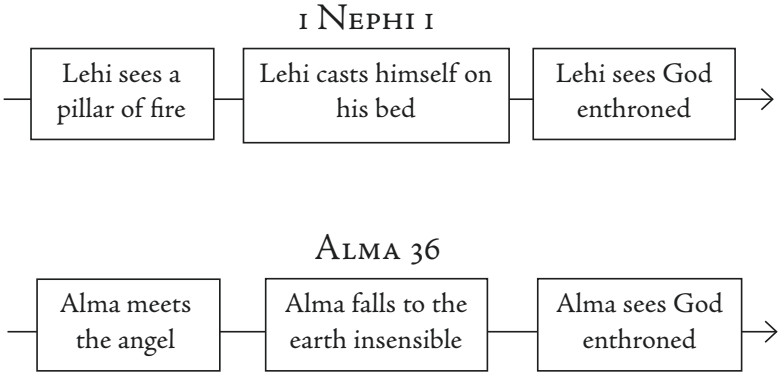
A first possible source, of course, is the one pointed out by George Tate in the article already mentioned. After discussing the presence of the exodus theme in Alma's conversion story as reported in Mosiah 27, Tate says of Alma 36:27–29 specifically that there "Alma summarizes the whole direction—individual and communal—of the [pre-Third Nephi] portion of the book [of Mormon]."[5] Alma does this, Tate explains, by explicitly comparing his conversion experience with the deliverance of his ancestors "out of Egypt" and "into the promised land" (Alma 36:28). Importantly, though, Alma draws not on the *texts* of Exodus, but on the *tradition* of the exodus—a tradition present in the Nephite consciousness long before Alma. But even if Tate therefore fails to provide a direct textual source for Alma's narrative, he does highlight the author's awareness of and entanglement with larger Book of Mormon concerns. And it is precisely an entanglement with other Book of Mormon authors that is at work in the second possible textual source to be discussed: 1 Nephi 1.

Because, as I hope to show, 1 Nephi 1 is immensely important for the literary structure of Alma 36, it is worth summarizing. There, Nephi reports two visions had by his father Lehi before the family left Jerusalem immediately prior to the Babylonian conquest. First, while away from home, Lehi sees a pillar of fire descend onto a rock before him. Second, after he returns home, the Spirit sweeps Lehi away to see, in the open heavens, God enthroned and thronged by angels. One of the angels comes to stand before Lehi and presents him with a book, in which Lehi reads of the destruction of Jerusalem.[6] After mingling his praise with the angelic chorus, Lehi goes forth among the Jews as a commissioned prophet to warn them of the impending destruction.

The sequence of events associated with Lehi's first vision from 1 Nephi 1:5–7 is strikingly parallel to that of Alma's encounter with the angel described in Alma 36:6–12. Just as Lehi "went forth," Alma and the sons of Mosiah "went about"; and just as Lehi was halted by "a pillar of fire" that came and "dwelt

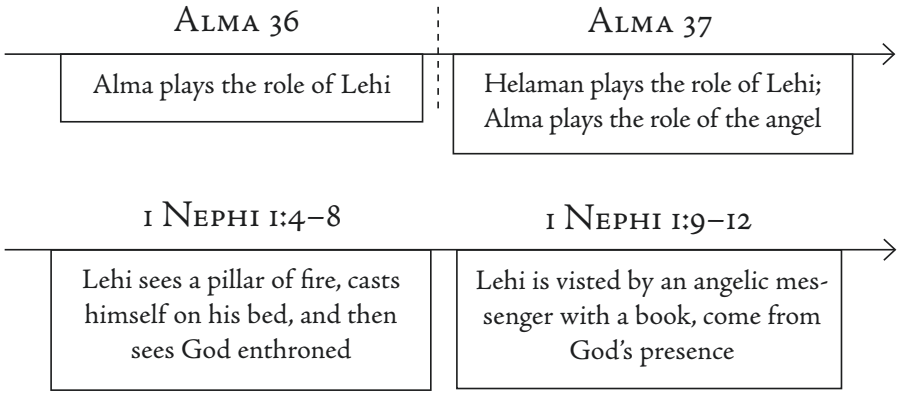
upon a rock before him," the rebellious Alma and his friends were stopped short by a "holy angel" who caused "the whole earth" to "tremble." As Lehi "saw and heard much" and hence "did quake and tremble exceedingly," Alma heard "as it were the voice of thunder" and "was struck with ... great fear and amazement." And, finally, just as Lehi "returned to his own house at Jerusalem" and "cast himself upon his bed, being overcome," Alma "fell to the earth" without power to move either his "mouth" or his "limbs."

If this series of parallels suggests, as with the exodus, only a similarity of *events* (because no undeniable textual tie appears in the foregoing), the *textual* connection emerges explicitly a few verses later when Alma goes on to offer a full-blown quotation of 1 Nephi 1:8—in fact, the longest word-for-word quotation of one Book of Mormon author by another. There can be no doubt that the source is 1 Nephi 1:8, since Alma attributes his quotation: "Yea, methought I saw, *even as our father Lehi saw*, God ..." (Alma 36:22).[7] On the grounds of this quotation especially, one might argue for an intentional point-by-point correspondence between the two texts. Alma's encounter with the angel, along with its visionary aftermath, is *supposed* to be an echo of Lehi's two visions in 1 Nephi 1.



Interestingly, Alma's conversion narrative in Alma 36 only follows the First Nephi text up through 1 Nephi 1:8, to the beginning of Lehi's second vision. If one looks, however, beyond Alma 36 to include Alma 37 as well, it is possible to see further echoes from 1 Nephi 1 in the larger ceremonial setting of Alma's passing of the records to Helaman. In Alma 37, though, the appropriation of the First Nephi text changes significantly. While in the conversion narrative of Alma 36, Alma seems to be enacting what in 1 Nephi 1 is *the role of Lehi*—it is

he who casts himself down before being carried away in a heavenly vision—in Alma 37, Alma takes up instead what in 1 Nephi 1 is *the role of the angel holding the book*, while Alma's son Helaman assumes the role of Lehi. Thus, while allusions to First Nephi carry over from Alma 36 to Alma 37, they only do so through a peculiar switching of dramatic roles: Helaman assumes the place of his father, and Alma assumes the place of the angel.



That Helaman takes Alma's place and Alma takes the angel's place in the transition from Alma 36 to Alma 37 is not surprising. Alma 36–37 records, precisely, the occasion of a crucial succession ritual. But if the switching of roles is unsurprising, Alma's creativity in handling the First Nephi text is impressive. By introducing a twist into the story from 1 Nephi 1 as he transitions from his conversion narrative (Alma 36) to the larger concerns of the ceremonial occasion (Alma 37), Alma marks the complex relationship between, on the one hand, the conversion narrative (Alma 36:6–25) and the epistemological questions it raises (Alma 36:1–5, 26–30) and, on the other hand, the ritual passing of the Nephite records and relics to a new generation (Alma 37). The twist at once differentiates and profoundly intertwines the two chapters that record Alma's words to Helaman. On the one hand, Alma 36 is the story of Alma's identification with Lehi, marked by Alma's concern about his own past conversion experience, while Alma 37 is the story of Helaman's identification with Lehi, marked by Alma's concern that his son take responsibility for the records. On the other hand, both chapters are woven into a creative reenactment of a single scriptural text, namely, 1 Nephi 1. Or again: on the one hand, the text presents Alma and Helaman as two distinct

individuals (father and son) who stage a highly ceremonial event; and on the other hand, the text presents a single identity shared by two actors who play the same lead role (Lehi).

Though this last exegetical point is subtle and complex, its implications for the interpretation of the text are crucial. Alma's handling of 1 Nephi 1, distributing the reenactment of its lead role (Lehi) between two distinct actors (Alma and Helaman), implicitly highlights the thematic importance of the chiastic framing of the conversion narrative. It is only within the conversion narrative proper (Alma 36:6–25) that Alma himself plays the role of Lehi in the reenactment of 1 Nephi 1, but the chiastic framing of that narrative (Alma 36:1–5, 26–30) sets off the reenactment as a narratological investigation of the question of *knowledge*—as much of *what* Helaman must come to know as of *how* he must come to know it. It thus becomes clear what role Alma 36 plays in its larger ceremonial setting. Because the Nephite records come to Helaman as if from an angel, it is important that Helaman recognize (1) that encounters with angels are bound up with a philosophical or theological problem of knowledge, and (2) that this problem is only to be addressed narratologically, through the reenactment of a scriptural text. Moreover, as Helaman comes to learn through Alma's careful retelling of his conversion story, the problem of knowledge comes to its solution only through an investigation of thought and memory.

Alma's Epistemology: An Impossible Knowledge

The above exegesis has worked its way to the following points: Alma 36 (1) presents some of Alma's words to his son Helaman on the ceremonial occasion of passing the Nephite records and relics from one generation to another; (2) frames its central conversion narrative with a tightly woven, contextualizing chiastic frame focused primarily on a question of knowledge; (3) distinguishes between an "external" portion of the conversion narrative, unstructured as such, and an "internal" narrative-within-a-narrative, built on a pattern of alternating pairs of the words "thought" and "memory"; and (4) sets forth its conversion narrative as a reenactment of 1 Nephi 1:5–8 (as Alma 37 sets itself forth as a reenactment of 1 Nephi 1:9–12). Compressed into a single statement, these several exegetical points might be put as follows: Alma 36:1–5, 26–30 presents a *question*—specifically, of *knowledge*—to which Alma 36:6–25 serves as an *answer*—specifically, by saying something about *thought*

and memory. Theological interpretation of Alma 36 amounts, essentially, to a theological exposition of this compact formula.

Verses 1–3 of Alma 36, through a threefold injunction repeated chiastically in verses 27–30, make clear what Alma expected Helaman to come to know. It nicely divides into three elements: (1) "inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land" (Alma 36:1); (2) only "the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" could have overcome "the captivity of our fathers" (Alma 36:2); (3) "whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions" (Alma 36:3).[8] The task of coming to know these things seems straightforward and appropriate to the event. But Alma goes on in verses 4–5 to suggest that it is *impossible* for Helaman to fulfill the task. Because verses 1–3 present Alma's invitation to Helaman to come to know certain things and verses 4–5 present Alma's assertion that it is impossible for Helaman to do so, verses 1–5 taken together appear to present an invitation to Helaman *to do the impossible*.

Verse 5 bears the heaviest burden of outlining the impossibility of the epistemological task. First, Alma there states bluntly that he could never *himself* have received the knowledge in question while unworthy: "if I had not been born of God I should not have known these things." Second, however, Alma explains that he *did* receive this knowledge while he was yet unworthy: "but God has, by the mouth of his holy angel, made these things known unto me, *not of any worthiness of myself*." (The connection between worthiness and being "born of God" is quite direct in Hebrew idiom, where the Hebrew phrase "son of," *ben*, is an expression meaning "worthy of.")[10] Alma, it seems, could not himself have come to know what he wants Helaman to learn if he had not been born of God, but, since to be born of God is to come to know these things, he could not be born of God unless he first came to know them. In effect, according to Alma, to know the things of God, one must already know them. But this, of course, is *impossible*.[9]

Alma presents this problem, not in the abstract, atemporal terms of formal logic, but in the concrete, historical terms of a past experience—in fact, of his *own* past experience. Alma gestures for the first time towards his conversion story precisely as he outlines the impossibility of Helaman's epistemological task in verse 5. Thus, in a single assertion Alma both (1) establishes the impossibility of Helaman's task and (2) states that he has himself successfully accomplished the same task. That Alma makes both of these moves in a

single assertion is crucial. Because he points out that he came to know what he could not know *only* as he points out the impossibility of what actually occurred, Alma makes clear his intention to let Helaman know that *the impossible can happen*. But Alma's complicated gesture not only announces that the impossible has happened (and therefore can happen again); it also suggests that the conversion narrative proper—of Alma 36:6–25—explains how the impossible happens. Alma thus relieves Helaman of some of the burden of the impossible. Though Helaman, it seems, will have *existentially* to pass through the impossible as his father did, the burden of *explaining* such a passage falls squarely on Alma as the teller of the conversion narrative.

One must not, though, move too quickly from verses 1–5 to the conversion narrative of verses 6–25. Verses 4 and 5 do more than point away from themselves to the story that follows them. They also provide important resources for understanding the stakes of both the difficulty posed by verse 5 and the solution worked out in verses 6–25. Detailed attention must be given to the employment, in verses 4–5, of the word "know" (in its various forms).

Alma's Epistemology: Clarifications and Complications

The word "know" first appears in verse 4: "And I would not that ye think that I know of myself." Alma only approaches the question of knowledge with a warning, driven by a concern that the nature of knowing may be misunderstood. More specifically, he makes clear that there are different kinds of knowing—one of which is "knowing of oneself"—and he wants Helaman to know which kind of knowing verses 1–3 do *not* indicate. Admittedly, the phrase "knowing of oneself" is ambiguous enough to cause some difficulty of interpretation. But Alma recognizes this ambiguity, since he immediately adds a clarification: "not of the temporal but of the spiritual." Knowing of oneself is equivalent to temporal knowing and is thus distinguishable from spiritual knowing (the kind of knowing Alma experienced in conversion). But what do "temporal" and "spiritual" mean? And how do they qualify two distinct kinds of knowing?

As with the phrase "knowing of oneself," the terms "temporal" and "spiritual" are of little immediate theological help. The words are used too loosely in everyday religious discourse to determine with any rigor how temporal knowing would differ from spiritual knowing.[11] Moreover, a *survey* of how the terms are used elsewhere in the Book of Mormon helps little. Usage in

Nephite scripture seems generally to be just as loose as in modern religious discourse. However, there may be reason to focus on how the two terms are utilized in one cross-reference in particular: Alma 37:43. Not only does this passage report more of Alma's words from the ceremonial occasion already under consideration, but it also mimics Alma 36:4 rhetorically. Both passages begin with a warning against misunderstanding, and in each case what worries Alma is the possibility that the temporal and the spiritual might be confused.

Alma 37:43 reads as follows: "And now, my son, I would that ye should understand that these things are not without a shadow; for as our fathers were slothful to give heed to this compass (now these things were temporal) they did not prosper; even so it is with things which are spiritual."[12] First, one notes that this passage employs the terms "temporal" and "spiritual" more complexly than does Alma 36:4. In 36:4, Alma seems content merely to distinguish the spiritual from the temporal; but in 37:43, he more audaciously brings these two terms into relation to one another. Both in 37:43 and, two verses later, in 37:45, Alma provides metaphors to clarify this relation. In 37:43 the temporal and the spiritual are bound together by the term "shadow," in 37:45 by the term "type." Whatever can be said, then, about the meanings of "temporal" and "spiritual" for Alma, it seems clear that they cannot be understood thoroughly without some understanding of the notion of *typology*.

Further help comes from 37:43, since this verse allows one to get a clear sense of what Alma means by "temporal." There the word has reference to the *historical* (specifically, to the historical events surrounding the journey of Alma's ancestors to the New World), and so it seems justifiable to say that, for Alma, the temporal *is* the historical. But, as Alma's emphasis on typology makes clear, such a statement calls for qualification. For Alma, the temporal is the *merely* historical, one might even say the *secularly* historical.[13] That is, inasmuch as history divorces itself from the spiritual it becomes, for Alma, merely temporal. But what is the spiritual? The most obvious interpretation would be to take the term to refer to the typological, in the sense that a "spiritual reading" of scripture was once understood always to be a typological one. Inasmuch as the temporal is, for Alma, the merely historical, the spiritual is the typological.

It would therefore be a mistake to take Alma's terms "temporal" and "spiritual" to designate two ontological realms, one material or physical realm

and the other immaterial. Rather, it appears that these terms designate for Alma two subjective or existential positions, two ways one might relate to the past. To relate to history temporally is to regard the past event as fixed, an irretrievable fact, while to relate to history spiritually is to see the past event as always still relevant, as if its meaning, implications, or live consequences are not exhausted by the passing of the event into the past.

What, then, to come back to Alma 36:4, would temporal *knowing* be? As a knowing limited by the constraints of the temporal, it would seem to be a knowing unable to draw creatively on the infinite resources of the past. Limited to a finite history, temporal knowing traps the individual within the prison of an irreparable private history. It is thus that temporal knowing is, in Alma's terms, only a knowing *of oneself*. Everything the temporal knower knows begins from or is ultimately rooted in her- or himself. This reading is confirmed when Alma goes on, still in verse 4, to equate temporal knowing not only with knowing of oneself, but also with knowing "of the carnal mind." The temporal knower, knowing only of him- or herself, is strictly limited to the capacities of the mind as it is trapped within and oriented by the (mortal, lustful) flesh.

Over against temporal knowing is Alma's spiritual knowing, a knowing that is not bounded by the closure of history. Spiritual knowing recognizes a reserve of ongoing potential in the history that the temporal knower regards as irretrievably past. To know spiritually would be to know that the implications of an event are infinite, and so that the work of faithfully drawing a genuinely revelatory event's consequences is an infinite task. It is thus that spiritual knowing, as Alma also says, is a knowing "of God"—a knowing that grows out of the unpredictable events that mark God's graceful interventions in history.

For purposes of further discussion, I will assign to the two kinds of knowing outlined in Alma 36:4 the names "historical" (Alma's temporal knowing) and "eventual" (Alma's spiritual knowing).[14] Whatever else will have to be said about Alma's accomplishing the impossible in conversion, it can already be said (1) that the impossibility identified by Alma is ultimately rooted in historical closure, and (2) that the happening of the impossible is in turn rooted in the infinite openness of the event.

So much for verse 4. The other two instances of the word "know" are to be found in verse 5. I will make only two brief remarks about them at this point.

The first remark concerns the initial appearance of the word in verse 5, which comes in Alma's already-cited claim that had he not been "born of God," he "should not have *known*" what he came to know. What deserves attention here is the curious fact that Alma attaches spiritual knowing to *birth*, specifically to *being born of God*.[15] The full significance of this knotting together of knowledge and birth will have to be explored further along. For the moment, it is enough to note that spiritual knowing is *familial* as well as *evental*.

The second remark, unsurprisingly, deals with the second appearance of the word "know" in verse 5. This appearance is found in the statement, also already discussed above, that God, despite Alma's unworthiness, "made these things *known* unto" him. What deserves attention here is Alma's grammatical construction, a construction that allows him to break what philosophers call "the epistemological circle."[16] By exchanging the "*I* know" of verse 4 and the "*I* should not have known" of the first part of verse 5 for the "*God made* these things *known unto me*" of the last part of verse 5, Alma shifts himself from the position of the verb's *subject* (nominative case) to that of the verb's *indirect object* (dative case). Again, full analysis of this point will have to come later. For the moment, it is sufficient to recognize that spiritual knowing is knowing received as a gift, in grace—that there is nothing Alma must or even *can* do on his own or of himself. Spiritual knowing is not only *familial* and *evental*, it is also *non-subjective*.

Thought and Memory: Toward Solipsism

Having dealt with the question of knowledge in verses 1–5 (and, by extension, in verses 26–30), I turn next to the conversion narrative of verses 6–25. To come quite prepared to the narrative-within-a-narrative and its double question of memory and thought, however, it is necessary to begin with the essentially structureless, "external" narrative of verses 6–12 (and, by extension, of verses 23–25).

Alma 36:6–12 traces the trajectory of Alma's retreat from the everyday way of being in the world (his conscious, if subversive, daily activities) to his desperate attempt at complete withdrawal into himself. This retreat is accomplished in a series of isolatable steps:

1. Alma is fully at home in the world, going about with his friends to fulfill his (wicked) desires (36:6).

2. Suddenly, Alma's world is violently shattered when "God sen[ds] his holy angel" to speak with "the voice of thunder" and to cause "the whole earth [to] tremble" (36:6–7).

3. Responding to the rupture of this event that thus de-worlds him, Alma can no longer stand, and he falls to the earth (36:7).

4. Despite his inability to stand, Alma is commanded to arise to "beh[o] ld" the angel (36:8).

5. Adding to the visual shock of the experience, the angel delivers a verbal message concerning destruction: "If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God" (36:9).

6. In response to this verbal doubling of the visual, Alma attempts to abandon the world completely, rendering him incapable of opening his mouth, using his limbs, or even hearing (36:10–11).

7. Finally, Alma finds himself in "eternal torment" (36:12).

This seven-step attempt at flight into solipsism brings Alma to the border of the narrative-within-a-narrative of verses 13–22, where thought and memory work out their complex relationship.

What might be said of this attempted flight into solipsism? First, it comes to Alma as a natural, instinctual response to the angel. Alma does not deliberate about his flight. Rather, the moment the angel appears, his retreat begins and he immediately falls to the earth. The flight is instinctual, then, but it is *also* interrupted. Alma indeed falls immediately to the earth, but the angel does not allow Alma, in his first attempt at flight, to retreat completely into solipsism, summoning him personally and commanding him to arise. Alma only returns to his flight into solipsism *after* he has arisen in response to the angel's summons and received part of the angel's message. It is the angel's task to *interrupt* Alma's instinctual flight into himself.[17]

Curiously, though, the angel's summons seems both to interrupt and to recommence Alma's flight. The angel interrupts Alma long enough to warn him of the possibility of destruction: "If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God" (Alma 36:9). But in verse 11, Alma suggests that his return to retreat was spurred by precisely this

warning: "when I heard the words—If thou wilt be destroyed of thyself, seek no more to destroy the church of God—I was struck with such great fear and amazement lest perhaps I should be destroyed, that I fell to the earth and I did hear no more." The angel's actual message to Alma serves as both interruption and impetus for Alma's retreat. Thus the angel does not ultimately deny Alma the option of attempting a retreat into solipsism, but he does force him to assume full responsibility for his retreat, to recognize the reality of the threat of destruction.

In the end, then, the angelic message serves primarily to *de-naturalize* or *de-instinctualize* Alma's flight. Inasmuch as Alma's retreat before the angel can be said to be a consequence of the "natural man"—of what Saint Paul as much as Sigmund Freud might call the "death instinct"—the angel's interruption was an attempt to force Alma to see the naturalness of his natural retreat into solipsism, to see that his desire to destroy *the church* veiled a deeper (but unconscious) desire to destroy *himself*. This, at any rate, seems the meaning of the angel's words: "If thou *wilt of thyself be destroyed*, seek no more to destroy the church of God."[18] Thus, finally recognizing that he had long been choosing *real* death, Alma found the angel giving him an opportunity to experience a symbolic death (sealed lips, immobile limbs, closed ears) for "three days" (36:10)—during which Alma could decide to be born again, beyond (symbolic) death. Here, Alma quickly discovered—as the dead inevitably do—that his only companions in death were his own thoughts and memories.

Thought and Memory: The Experience of Torment

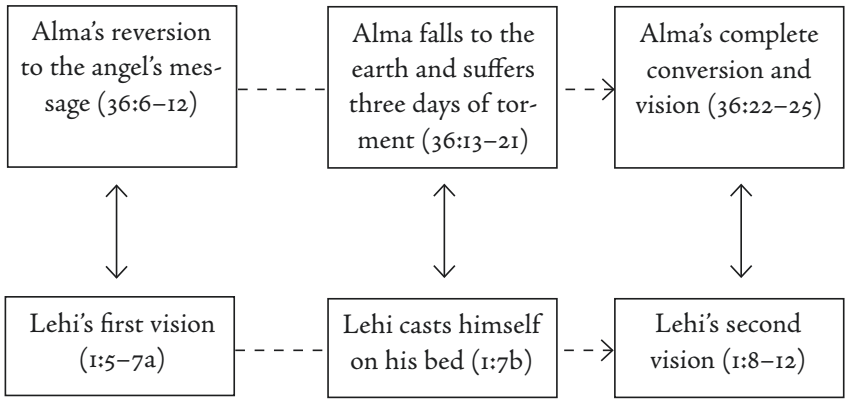
Verse 12, as it hands him over to the narrative-within-a-narrative, presents Alma as "racked" or pulled violently in opposed directions. As verses 13–14, the first two verses of that narrative-within-a-narrative, make clear, it is the tension between thought and memory that racks Alma. Verse 13 speaks of memory: "I did *remember* all my sins and iniquities." Thus from the beginning of the narrative sequence, Alma's "memory" consists of his sins, his iniquities, everything he had been doing. Verse 14 in turn speaks of thought: "the very *thought* of coming into the presence of my God." If memory is, from the beginning of the narrative-within-a-narrative, a question of *Alma's* actions, thought is a question instead of *God's* actions—namely, the imminent judgment (and

therefore destruction) described by the angel. As Alma passes from the world of everyday engagement into solipsistic retreat, he finds himself being pulled to pieces by the tension between himself in the figure of the sinner (memory) and God in the figure of the Judge (thought).

This basic tension and starting point for Alma's conversion experience clarifies the significance of the angel's interruption. Though Alma naturally tries to flee into solipsism, he cannot complete his flight because of what the angel (as the messenger of God) *gives him to think*. That is, though he allows Alma, after a brief word, to return to his retreat into himself, the angel nonetheless leaves him with an indelible scar, an irrepressible trace in the form of a *thought* that refuses to allow Alma's *memories* to form themselves into an impregnable fortress. Alma's tortuous mental state is therefore a direct consequence of this cognitive remainder, of an unshakable thought that, Alma confesses, "did rack [his] soul with inexpressible horror" (36:14). In Freudian terms, the primal scene of Alma's encounter with the angel comes back again and again during Alma's three-day nightmare to haunt him. Forced to face up to what he wants to forget, Alma finds that—if he wishes to regain his sanity—he must work all the way through his violently neurotic relationship to God.

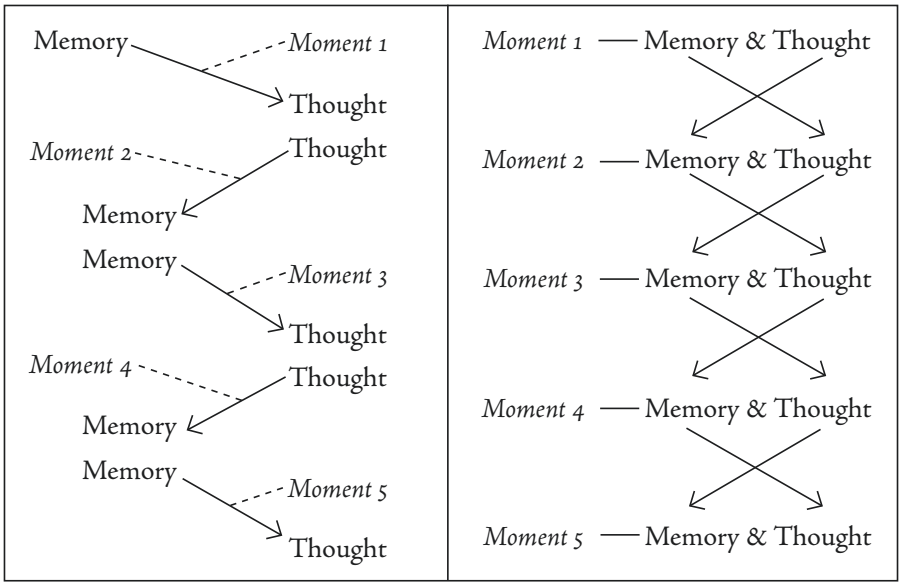
Taking a clue from verse 4, one might initially approach this tension between memory and thought in terms of the tension between history and event. Alma's memory—his private history of sin—is ruptured by a thought deriving from an event (the angelic encounter), the occurrence of which Alma cannot deny. Alma's suffering thus appears to be rooted in his refusal to allow that event to call his history *fully* into question. Rather than taking the event as an impetus to rewrite his history, as a call to repent, Alma at first attempts to fold the event into his own irreparable history. In other words, rather than allowing the event to transform his unfortunate temporality into something spiritual, Alma avoids the spiritual at all costs—even at the cost of "historicizing" the event. Alma's flight thus marks his reversion from the eminently spiritual event of meeting an angel to his own merely temporal history. Thus, before his *con*version, verses 6–25 trace Alma's *re*version to history and his *a*version to the event.

These two movements—*re*version and *con*version—map onto 1 Nephi 1 in an interesting way. Lehi's *first* vision (1 Nephi 1:5–7) parallels Alma's eventual encounter with the angel, which he subsequently attempts to repress in his *re*version by falling to the earth in a curious enactment of Lehi's casting



himself on his bed. But Lehi's *second* vision (the thronged throne of God) corresponds to Alma's eventual *con*version, his coming to see the world spiritually as he is reborn. The shift from *re*version to *con*version in Alma 36—worked out between verse 13 and verse 22—thus positions itself, in the reenactment of 1 Nephi 1, uncomfortably *between* Lehi's two visions. That is, the narrative-within-a-narrative of Alma 36:13–22 amounts to a staging of Lehi's short, tormented sleep between visions, a nap from which Lehi awakens in order to witness his vision of the open heavens. The entire drama of thought and memory in Alma 36 is thus, as it were, played out in the space between Lehi's two visions.

As already noted, an erratically distributed pattern of alternating pairs (of the central terms "memory" and "thought") undergirds the narrative of Alma's three days of torment. In the end, this pattern can be understood in two ways. First, the pattern might mark the narrative's exploration of how each iteration of one of the terms recasts the meaning of the other in a dialectical unfolding of the narrative (thus: memory determining thought's significance, then that thought re-determining memory's significance, and then *that* re-determined memory re-determining thought's significance yet again, etc.). Second, the pattern might be understood to trace a series of reversals of the significance of the coupled terms "memory" and "thought" taken together ("memory and thought" always being followed by "thought and memory" and vice versa). These two approaches might be diagrammed as follows:



Neither of these approaches, I believe, should be privileged. The best strategy may be to allow both approaches to intermingle. In the analysis that follows, I will take verses 13–22 as a dialectic dissectible into five consistently self-reversing moments (second approach), but I will also look at those reversals locally in each case in terms of the way the text traces the effects of memory on thought or of thought on memory (first approach). Each moment will be considered in turn.

Conversion: Moment by Moment

I have already analyzed the first moment (verses 13–14) in outline. When the dialectic begins, memory (consisting entirely of what Alma remembers of his own sinful past) and thought (the idea of a future judgment) interlock in a harrowing tension. Moreover, thought first takes its bearings from memory. The horror associated with the thought of judgment derives immediately from Alma's taking his miserable memories to be irreparable and fundamental. As Alma himself puts it in the text: "I did *remember* all my sins and *iniquities*, … [and] *so great had been my iniquities*, that the very *thought* of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with *inexpressible horror*" (Alma 36:13–14).

In the second moment (verses 15–17a) of the dialectic, Alma radicalizes his response to the thought of verse 14. Not only is the idea of judgment inexpressibly horrible; it drives Alma to desire (impossible) annihilation: "Oh, *thought* I, that I could be banished and become extinct both soul and body, that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds" (36:15). What in verses 6–12 was an implicit "death instinct" here becomes a full-blown "annihilation instinct." Willing to obliterate the very possibility of being, Alma wishes that his flight into *pure* solipsism—that is, into absolute nothingness—were actually completeable. But Alma thus gives himself to pure fantasy and finds himself tormented by an inevitable lack of satisfaction: "And now, for three days and for three nights was I racked, even with the pains of a damned soul" (36:16).

Nonetheless, this radicalization leads in the same moment to the first hint of a change in Alma's memory. The second moment of the dialectic oddly ends in the middle of a sentence (the remainder of the sentence marks the third moment): "And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the *memory* of my many sins ...." The suspended, anticipatory nature of this second mention of memory shows that already—with the radicalized response to the thought of judgment—Alma's memory *begins* to crack. After so much torment, his memory finally opens onto something, as yet unnamed, besides his sin—onto something besides himself.

In the third moment (verses 17b–18) of the dialectic, the tiny crack in Alma's memory splits wide open: "And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins [*end of second moment*], behold [*beginning of third moment*], I *remembered* also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world" (36:17). Before this point in the narrative, Alma remembered only a fixed historical past, his already-committed sins. But as this memory of his father's prophecy comes suddenly into his consciousness, Alma grapples, for the first time, with the memory of an event that outstrips the merely historical: his father prophesied, *back then*, of something *still to come*, of something still future at the time of Alma's torment. Thus in the third moment, Alma comes up against something historical whose significance cannot be definitively temporalized. Stumbling on this memory, Alma discovers the consistency of his memory—made up, before, only of his own sinful actions—effectively shattered, and he comes face to face with the possibility that, in the course of his own private history, *an event occurred*.

With the consistency of his memory questioned, Alma alters his response to the thought introduced by the angel: "Now, as my mind caught hold upon this *thought*, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death" (36:18). With this move, though his thought remains oriented to the future, Alma for a moment does not regard the future as threatening. Abandoning his desire for annihilation, he rivets his newfound hope to a future defined by the coming of Christ, to a future characterized less by fiery judgment than by the revelation of grace. Giving names to both the past event of his father's prophecy and to the future event of Christ's advent ("my mind caught hold upon this thought"), Alma abandons the historical for the evental.

But if the third moment of the dialectic is evental, it is also both *non-subjective* and *familial*. First, the singular memory on which Alma places his hope outstrips Alma's subjectively constituted memory, since the event happened in the first place and comes to mind in the second place regardless of—or even against—Alma's subjective desires. Second, the event Alma suddenly remembers is doubly a question of family. Not only does the memory feature Alma's father as the prophet announcing the future, but it offers the prophecy of Christ only by labeling him "a son of God." Thus, precisely as anticipated in verses 4–5, an evental, non-subjective, and ultimately familial knowing paves the way toward full conversion.

The fourth and shortest moment (verse 19a) of the dialectic then follows: "And now, behold, when I *thought* this, I could *remember* my pains no more" (36:19). Here, for the first time, the narrative brings thought and memory into syntactical proximity (only three words separate them). This signals that the crucial third moment of the dialectic has released the original tension between thought and memory. And this release of tension derives from the fact that only in the third moment has Alma been able to give *both* his thought *and* his memory to *one and the same thing*, namely, the prophecy of Christ. Moreover, by putting the work of both remembering and thinking to the single task of being faithful to the prophetic event, Alma, for the brief duration of the fourth moment, exchanges the (inerasable) memory of sin for the (now-erased) memory of pain.

Finally, then, comes the fifth and last moment (verses 19b–22) of Alma's conversion experience. Here, Alma's memory—which, for a moment, had been a question of (forgetting) his history of *pain*—becomes again a ques-

tion of (remembering) his history of *sin*. But that history, now oriented to and restructured by the grace of the prophetic event, is no longer a source of torment: "yea, I was harrowed up by the *memory* of my sins no more" (36:19). Moreover, as the agony of the memory disappears, Alma's relationship to his past becomes an occasion for joy:

> And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy. (36:20–21)

Still more, Alma goes on immediately to reveal that the final moment of conversion consists in a re-envisioning of the thought of judgment. Thus, in the climactic final verse of this narrative-within-a-narrative, Alma witnesses the heavenly court preparing their judgment, but he now expresses his desire to join the angelic throng: "Yea, m*ethought* I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there" (36:22).

Rewriting History

The preceding discussion of Alma 36:13–22 focuses primarily on the turning point of moment three. It must not be missed, however, that the last moment of the dialectic marks a full return to the first moment. The definitions of "memory" and "thought" change moment-to-moment in the course of the narrative-within-a-narrative, but these definitions come full circle in verses 19–22. Thus, while memory (1) first comprises an internally consistent collection of remembered sins, it (2) proceeds through a fracturing of sorts so as (3) to come to include an essentially inconsistent memory of a prophetic event; and whereas, as a result of this splitting open, Alma's memory (4) ceases even to be memory of sins (becoming instead only a dispelled memory of pain), Alma's remembered history (5) becomes again, at last, solely the memory of sin.

Similarly, thought, (1) defined first as the idea of an imminent judgment, (2) passes through a radicalized desire for complete annihilation only (3) to become the thought of Jesus Christ's coming into the world; but, whereas

Alma's thought (4) stays fixed on the prophesied Jesus for a moment, it (5) definitively returns, in the end, to its original definition as the thought of the day of judgment.

This movement of return, however, does not imply that Alma has, in the end, gotten nowhere. Rather, it indicates precisely that he has experienced conversion or *con-versio*, literally (in Latin), *a complete cycle*. Conversion appears here to be less a complete changing out of the elements making up a situation than a reordering of those elements among themselves—a reordering accomplished through a supplementation of the original situation. Conversion is, in other words, the process of allowing the new to reorient the old without replacing it. Thus, at the beginning of Alma's three day passage, the newly introduced thought clashed violently with his memory, but by the end the two terms came to complement each other perfectly. In effect, the addition (or re-remembering) of something that had been excluded (the prophetic event) allows polar opposites (thought and memory) to be reconciled. Alma is left, in the end, with the same past history of sin and the same idea of future judgment, but the conversion process has, by way of typology, brought him to see the relationship between that history and that idea in a novel way. This novel point of view, it seems, is Alma's spiritual knowing.

In light of this understanding, it is possible to clarify the impossibility of the task outlined in verses 4–5. Spiritual knowing is only impossible *from the temporal point of view*. Wherever the passage of time—the creation of history—is taken merely as the irreversible process of transforming the undetermined future into the foreclosed past, genuine change (conversion) becomes impossible. But where past history can be ruptured by new or unexplored events, all things remain possible—even and especially conversion. Thus, what made knowing the things of God impossible at the beginning was Alma's belief that his history could never be *gracefully* reconciled with a final judgment. Before conversion, Alma believed that history and judgment could only be reconciled through *punishment*. But when Alma stumbled, almost haphazardly, on an event he could not have anticipated and the occurrence of which he did not earn, he found himself joyfully able to reconcile history and judgment through a typological reinterpretation of his own past. Conversion is thus rendered possible only by the unanticipated and unearned—that is, *only by grace*.

Reading Lehi, Reading the Book of Mormon

The great majority of the discussion to this point has centered only on what Alma 36 has to teach us about conversion. But it must not be forgotten that this whole investigation into Alma 36 began with a different question, namely, that of reading. Alma 36 is as much a reading of a text—specifically, of 1 Nephi 1—as a relating of a narrative. How does Alma 36 function as a model for reading the Book of Mormon?

Poignantly, Alma 36 offers a reenactment of, not just any text, but a text that *itself* concerns reading: 1 Nephi 1 recounts the story of Lehi's reception and reading of the heavenly book. It thus appears that Alma 36 is doubly evental. Not only does Alma tell a story in which history is reconciled with a revelatory event, he also relates that story—as a fragment of history—to *another* revelatory event, namely, that of 1 Nephi 1. While the prophetic event remembered within the narrative spiritualizes Alma's past history of sin, the visionary event reenacted in Alma's telling of the narrative spiritualizes Alma's past history of conversion. The interweaving of Alma's conversion experience with 1 Nephi 1—in which 1 Nephi 1 is taken *as evental*—keeps that very conversion experience from itself hardening into an irretrievable past.

But there is something different about this second evental aspect of Alma 36. Rather than simply a past event, it is here an evental *text* that recodes history. If Alma's return to the event of his father's prophecy can be called typological in a broad sense, his return to the event of 1 Nephi 1 can be called typological in a narrower, ultimately more appropriate sense: he is dealing with texts and interpretation. Moreover, the act of interweaving a scriptural text with a historical experience allows both to breathe life into each other. The scriptural text, on the one hand, comes to life and reveals its latent universality. The historical experience, on the other hand, refuses to ossify into a mere historical fact and reveals its relationship to authoritative scripture. If the typological moment *within* Alma's conversion narrative marks a graceful re-envisioning of an otherwise tormented memory, the typological moment *of* Alma's telling his conversion narrative marks a graceful resurrection of scriptural events in the present, an "eventalization" (and therefore de-historicization) of one's life. Alma's instantaneous and once-in-a-lifetime gift of spiritual renewal during his three days of torment opens onto the constant, lifelong work of spiritually resurrecting scriptural texts—of living through and giving life to the scriptures.

Thus, though some kind of conversion experience precedes every genuine reading of scripture, one lesson of Alma 36 is that conversion has to realize itself again and again, *and precisely in the act of reading*. There are two distinct notions of conversion here: (1) conversion as the inaugural, graceful, de-historicization of an individual's past history of sin; and (2) conversion as the unending work of de-historicizing the whole of world history through typological engagement with scripture. But the very fact that Alma refuses to disentangle these two notions of conversion—the very fact that he weaves them into a single typological narrative—suggests that they cannot be cleanly separated. If the first kind of conversion does not give way to the second, or if the second is not predicated on the first, conversion has not actually taken place. In the end it might be said that the *second* kind of conversion is the "more important" of the two. Where the second kind of conversion lapses, one's experience of the first kind of conversion hardens into a past, historical fact—a fact that can only be de-historicized and revivified through a return to the typological reading of scripture. In the end, scripture reading—serious, typological reading of scripture—*is* conversion.

It is perhaps this that is most deeply meant when Latter-day Saints speak—quite commonly—of the Book of Mormon as the "missionary tool for conversion."[19] It does not mean that scriptural texts are means to an end, but ends in themselves—or perhaps *means without end*.[20] It is a tool of conversion indeed, but the work of conversion is not therefore *outside* or *beyond* the task of reading the book; conversion is, rather, *the work of reading the book itself*, of reading the book in a certain way—on its own terms or in the way it itself prescribes. The Book of Mormon thus comes, as every graceful thing does, announcing only itself. It asks its reader nothing more than to read it, nothing more than to be converted *in* reading it. The Book of Mormon comes into one's hands, in a word, *with the force of an event*.

This implies, moreover, that *every* reader of the Book of Mormon lives out—like Alma and Helaman—a reenactment of Lehi's visionary experiences. One is without warning and while about one's own business unexpectedly confronted by a messenger who proffers a book and bids one to read. Whether the messenger is a friend, a parent, or two missionaries from halfway around the world, the experience is the same. The Book of Mormon comes as an unanticipated, unearned *gift*, a dispensation one has the freedom to reject, but that comes with a very real demand (something Alexander Campbell ironically made clear in 1831: "I would ask them how they knew that it was

God's voice which they heard—but they would tell me to ask God in faith. *That is, I must believe it first, and then ask God if it be true!!*").[21] But if one accepts the gift as a gift—as a grace—one is already converted as one begins to read it, precisely in that one begins to read it. The reader inevitably finds the book startling, a surprising *event* that rewrites all of history by orienting it to the day of judgment when one will be judged out of the things written in the very book being read.

Importantly, this idea—namely, that the Book of Mormon is eventual—has been argued before, and by a non-Mormon. Jan Shipps, in her study *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, describes "the profound historylessness of early Mormonism," effected precisely by the appearance of the Book of Mormon.[22] At some length, she analyzes that rupture in history, brought about for the believer: "Since [the Book of Mormon] was at one and the same time prophecy (a book that said it was an ancient record prophesying that a book would come forth) and (as the book that had come forth) fulfillment of that prophecy, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon effected a break in the very fabric of history."[23] Latter-day Saints are thus, according to Shipps, "suspended between an unusable past and an uncertain future," giving themselves to a "replication" (an eventual resurrection) that amounted to an "experiential 'living through' of sacred *events* in a new age."[24] Mormons are, for Shipps, a thoroughly typological people.

I believe this analysis clarifies the problem of the Book of Mormon's historicity. On my argument, the Book of Mormon must be regarded as neither historical nor unhistorical, but as *non-historical*. This is not to suggest that the events it records did not happen. On the contrary, it is to claim that it must be subtracted from the dichotomy of the historical/unhistorical because the faithful reader testifies that the *events*—rather than the *history*—recorded in the book not only took place, but are of infinite, typological importance. Any enclosure of the Book of Mormon within a totalized world history amounts to a denial of the book's unique claim on the attention of the whole world.[25] In the end, then, to take the Book of Mormon as *either* historical *or* unhistorical may be to miss the nature of the book entirely. Both positions in the debate about Book of Mormon historicity—whether critical or apologetic—are founded on a common, backwards belief. The historicity *of the Book of Mormon* is not in question. Rather, as Alma makes clear, it is the Book of Mormon that calls the historicity *of the individual* into question.

Granted the above, what, then can be said about the methodology of a typological reading? What does typological reading look like in practice? Instead of mining Alma 36 further for preliminary answers to this question, I would like to turn elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, and for two reasons. First, while Alma 36 does a beautiful job of intertwining the problems of conversion with the complexities of reading, it has little to say explicitly about methods or models of typology. Other Book of Mormon texts, however, are explicit and detailed on this point. Second, there are arguably *two* models of typological interpretation to be found in the Book of Mormon—models of typology that prove to be echoes of the two models of conversion outlined in Alma 36.

Notes

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 108.

2. John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 114–131; George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in Neal A. Lambert, ed., *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience* (Provo: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–260.

3. Note that there is a second account of the passing of the records and relics from Alma to Helaman in the Book of Mormon, to be found at Alma 45:2–19.

4. See more detailed critiques of Welch's chiastic reading of verses 6–25 in Earl M. Wunderli, "Critique of Alma 36 as an Extended Chiasm," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38.4 (Winter 2005): 103–106. See also the discussion in Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical & Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:497; as well as in Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 137–142, 303–304.

5. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," 254.

6. The similarities between Lehi's second vision and the vision of John in Revelation 4–5 are unmistakable.

7. All emphases in scriptural texts are my own throughout this book.

8. These three elements of knowledge might be connected with the records and relics themselves: the brass plates (which contained the commandments to be obeyed),

the sword of Laban (retrieved in a deliverance only God could have performed), and the Liahona (the physical sign that God supports those who trust him).

9. I draw the theme of "the impossible" more or less directly from John Caputo's readings of Jacques Derrida. See especially John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997); and John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997). Obviously, however, because I see Alma as suggesting that the impossible can happen, I part ways with Caputo/Derrida.

10. See, for instance, Deuteronomy 25:2, where "if the wicked man be worthy to be beaten" translates what in Hebrew literally says "if the wicked one is a son of the beating." See also 1 Samuel 26:16.

11. Brant Gardner provides what is perhaps the usual interpretation of Alma's words: "'To Alma ... 'know[ing] of myself' seems equivalent to 'know[ing] by thinking it out.' ... His ways of knowing are not personal, temporal, or intellectual but spiritual and 'of God.' I would rephrase this statement, in moderately modernized language, as: 'I would not want you to think that I know these things by study or temporal learning; rather, I know them by spiritual learning from the mind and teaching of God.'" Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:498. That more philosophical rigor is called for here seems to me clear.

12. The compass mentioned is the Liahona.

13. Both "temporal" and "secular" come from etymological roots meaning "to cut" or "to cut off."

14. So far, I have used the word "event" in a non-philosophical way. Hereafter, however, I will use it in a more strictly philosophical sense. Though I hope the way I use the term is relatively straightforward, it is worth mentioning its philosophical genealogy: the theme of the "event" is a staple in twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy, something inaugurated by Martin Heidegger, but more recently exposited in various ways by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, Gilles Deleuze, and Alain Badiou among European philosophers, and by David Lewis, W. V. O. Quine, Donald Davidson, and Jaegwon Kim among Anglo-American philosophers. If any particular philosophy of the event informs my interpretation, it is unquestionably that of Alain Badiou. See especially Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2006); Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009); and Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

15. The echo, in the phrase "being born of God," of verse 4's "knowing of God" should not be missed.

16. The epistemological circle was first articulated by Plato in the *Meno*, 80e: "Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up," Socrates asks Meno, "that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not

know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for." The translation here is G. M. A. Grube's, to be found in John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 880.

17. Awkwardly, at least one commentary denies that it is the actual visit of the angel that is at the root of Alma's ultimate change: "When we read Alma's declaration that he had been 'born of God,' it is imperative that we understand that his new birth was not occasioned by the manifestation of an angel but rather through his suffering for his sins and his willing acceptance of Christ." Joseph F. McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987–1992), 3:263–264. There is little to recommend this interpretation of Alma 36.

18. The echo here of "knowing *of oneself*" in verse 4 should not be overlooked.

19. See especially Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62–88. FARMS's 1996 *Comprehensive Annotated Book of Mormon Bibliography* lists over two hundred books and articles that discuss the Book of Mormon as an instrument for proselytizing efforts. Donald W. Parry, Jeanette W. Miller, and Sandra A. Thorne, eds., *A Comprehensive Annotated Book of Mormon Bibliography* (Provo: FARMS, 1996), 618, 629. The actual phrase "missionary tool for conversion" comes from a more recent article by Joseph B. Wirthlin, "The Book of Mormon: The Heart of Missionary Proselyting," *Ensign* (September 2002): 13–17.

20. I draw the concept of "means without end" from the work of Giorgio Agamben, though I believe I use it with a somewhat distinct nuance. See Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

21. Alexander Campbell, "Delusions," *The Millennial Harbinger* 2 (7 February 1831): 94, emphasis in original. This same point is made in Moroni's famous "promise" at the end of the Book of Mormon: one is to ask if these things are *not* true, thus beginning from the assumption that they *are* true. (Ironically, Moroni's "promise" is generally reversed so as to render it more comfortable and less paradoxical. Missionaries usually invite their investigators to pray to know if the Book of Mormon *is* true, thus beginning with the assumption that the book is *not* true. Brant Gardner presents an interpretation somewhat similar to but ultimately distinct from my own: "[Moroni] phrases our responsibility in an interesting 'negative' formulation. He doesn't ask that we pray to see if they are true but rather to ask if they are *not* true. Why this unusual request? Moroni is testifying to something that he knows is true. This truth is so obvious that the only reason for asking is if his future reader does not yet know the truth. For Moroni, the only person who would ask would be one who did not yet know it was true." See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 6:408.)

22. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 51–52.

23. *Ibid.*, 52.

24. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

25. On this point, I recommend both Richard Bushman's interpretation of the Book of Mormon as calling for a reworking of sall of world history and Adam Miller's philosophical analysis of the Book of Mormon's essential anachronicity. See Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History," in Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, eds., Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 74; and Adam S. Miller, "Messianic History: Walter Benjamin and the Book of Mormon," in James M. McLaughlan and Loyd Ericson, eds., *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 227–243.