

Alma, Ambiguity, and the Development of Doctrinal Understanding

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Righteous parents have an inherent desire to help their children learn, grow, and progress. Because of decisions he had made and probable doctrinal misconceptions, Corianton was worried and anxious about his future. Such anxiety appears to have stemmed, at least in part, from a fear of the unknown. As finite beings, we seem to be innately averse to suspense, loose ends, and ambiguity. Like a child who cannot watch a suspenseful movie without asking what happens next, “we adults also want our most pressing questions answered, not multiplied. So it is not surprising that we look to religion, the great comforter, to ‘resolve [us] of all ambiguities’ . . . But perhaps conclusive answers to all our questions is not the point of true religion.”¹ While Alma, as a caring father, chooses to provide a degree of clarity in addressing an immediate doctrinal misunderstanding, he also serves as an example of how a benevolent *Heavenly* Father, in his wisdom, sometimes chooses to allow his children to wrestle with ambiguity on

the pathway of discipleship. Alma's experiences illustrate how learning and growth can come, even in the midst of uncertainty.

Alma's words to his son Corianton provide a kind of case study into this revelatory process. He demonstrates current doctrinal understanding and then recounts how he sought after and gained broader understanding. In this way Alma is somewhat like Abraham. He had been "a follower of righteousness" and gained great knowledge, but he continually desired "to possess a greater knowledge" (Abraham 1:2). This paper has two purposes: First, I will look at what Alma taught his son Corianton about the spirit world, resurrection, and restoration as contained in Alma 40–41. Second, I will focus particularly on the manner of *how* Alma came to understand these concepts himself and, in the process, how he provides a model for all of us who seek understanding on ambiguous topics.

Doctrines Emphasized in Alma 40–41

While there were many ideas that Alma was still learning and thinking about at the time he spoke to Corianton (see Alma 40:3–5, 8, 19–20), there are several points of doctrine that he *did* understand regarding the life after death. This article will address Alma's understanding of three doctrinal topics: (1) the spirit world, (2) the resurrection (particularly his understanding of the first resurrection), and (3) restoration.

The spirit world

Alma understood the necessity of a "space betwixt the time of death and the time of the resurrection" (Alma 40:6), but it was regarding "what becometh of the souls of men" during that space that he "inquired diligently of the Lord to know." The answer came in such a clear revelation—made known unto him by an angel—that he could tell Corianton with confidence, "this is the thing of which I do know" (40:9). From an authoritative source, the angel, Alma had learned that "the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal

body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life” (40:11).

When analyzing Alma’s teachings, it is important to read his words in the time period in which they were written (74 BC). For example, many have wondered what Alma meant by spirits—both good *and* evil—being taken home to God. Do they immediately see the face of God when they pass through the veil? Can wicked spirits withstand the presence of God? Does his reference simply imply that they are taken home to the world of spirits? While there are several insightful prophetic commentaries on what this phrase might mean in our modern context,² students of the Book of Mormon can gain much by reading these passages exegetically and looking at what they likely meant to the original author. A few examples will help illustrate this point.

Example 1: Taken home to that God who gave them life. For whatever reason, Alma doesn’t elaborate on what he meant when he said they “are taken home to that God who gave them life” (Alma 40:11). Was he, as some have suggested, being brief in his commentary on the spirit world because his specific comments to Corianton were a small part of a larger discussion on the resurrection and he didn’t want to distract from that? If he were giving an exposé on the spirit world, would he “*undoubtedly . . . have expanded his remarks and answered some of the questions that have since been clarified by latter-day revelation through modern prophets of God?*”³ *Could he* have answered such questions as “What is the spirit world? Where is it? Are there divisions in the spirit world? If so, what are they? Who are the righteous spirits? Who are the wicked spirits? Is it possible for the wicked spirits to escape from their prison?”⁴ Perhaps. Indeed, it may well be that Alma knew much more than he chose to say on the subject. He may have even understood that those in spirit paradise are those who have accepted the gospel and the vicarious ordinances of salvation.

But is it possible that he did not? Could it also be true—and, for that matter, would we be comfortable if it *were* true—that Alma’s understanding was limited to that which he chose to share with his

son? Furthermore, what if his understanding didn't line up exactly with how we currently view the spirit world? Remember that Alma is teaching about the spirit world prior to "the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world" (Doctrine and Covenants 138:16) and prior to Joseph Smith's and Joseph F. Smith's clarifying visions on the life to come (see, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 76, 137, and 138). Remember also that he is a real person dealing with a real question. In seeking to understand teachings on the spirit world—or any other principle for that matter—we are instructed to follow the example of Christ in studying and teaching "all the scriptures in one" (3 Nephi 23:14) by drawing from and cross-referencing each of the standard works and words of the prophets. However, in this process we need to be careful not to dogmatically force doctrinal understanding upon past prophets simply because we have that understanding now. When Joseph Smith left the Sacred Grove in 1820, he had learned several things with absolute clarity. However, the Lord allowed the restoration of doctrinal understanding to unfold line upon line over an extended period of time, even to the present day.

Example 2: Soul. Another example of reading scriptural text exegetically is contextualizing Alma's understanding of the word *soul*. The word *soul* appears 176 times in the Book of Mormon. While one would anticipate a large number of those references to be found in the book of Alma (it is the largest book, after all), a surprising 41 percent appear in the book of Alma. Moreover, of the 72 references found in Alma, 31 (or 43 percent) are in Alma's writings to his sons in Alma 36–42. Alma uses the word *soul* a disproportionate number of times in these chapters when compared to the frequency in the rest of the Book of Mormon.⁵ Additionally, Alma uses *soul* in a number of ways. Interestingly, his patterns follow the Hebraic use of *soul* in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word *nephes* (נֶפֶשׁ) is the word that is translated as "soul" the majority of the time in the Old Testament. This translation is used in a very broad manner as it may refer to the spirit, heart, mind, life, and many other applications. We see Alma likewise using the word to mean many different things.

For example, in many instances Alma's references to *soul* seem to be synonymous with a person's core, or the center of their emotions. In his prayer offered on his mission to the Zoramites, Alma expresses how "the wickedness among this people doth pain [his] soul," while also praying that God will "comfort [his] soul in Christ" (Alma 31:30–31). He seems to imply that his very being is affected by this situation. Another reference provides additional insight into Alma's understanding of *soul*. When thinking of the success of the sons of Mosiah, he cries out that his "soul is carried away, even to the separation of it from the body, as it were" (Alma 29:16). While Alma is commenting specifically on how great and profound his joy was, his wording is curious. The antecedent of the word *it* in that passage is *soul*. Alma seems to be using the words *spirit* and *soul* synonymously as in, "my spirit is carried away, even to the separation of it from the body."

This case is further strengthened when Alma mentions "the raising of the spirit *or* the soul" (Alma 40:15; emphasis added throughout). In this passage he seems to be saying, "the spirit or (in other words) the soul." Additionally, in his writings he sometimes uses *spirit* and *soul* interchangeably and consistently speaks of the body and the soul (or spirit) as being separate:

- "the reuniting of the soul with the body" (40:18)
- "whether the souls and the bodies" (40:19)
- "the souls and the bodies are reunited" (40:20)
- "both soul and body" (40:21)
- "soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul" (40:23)

It is clear at this point that Alma's understanding of the word *soul* (in 74 BC) is somewhat different from the definition that was revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith (in 1832): "And the spirit and the body are the soul of man" (Doctrine and Covenants 88:15).⁶ We should, of course, be comfortable with this because in the ever-evolving landscape of the Restoration, new "light and knowledge" often comes and erases previously "limited understanding."⁷

Example 3: Paradise and prison. When asked to comment on doctrinal misconceptions or potential pitfalls in teaching about the spirit world, Brent L. Top, former dean of the college of religion at BYU, wisely responded, “Teach what the scriptures say, not what they don’t say.”⁸ Because Alma taught definitively that there is a waiting period from the time of death until the resurrection, there is no room for misinterpretation (see Alma 40:11). However, Top suggested that it is the next part of the passage that is sometimes misinterpreted:

And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow.

And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of the wicked, yea, who are evil—for behold, they have no part nor portion of the Spirit of the Lord; for behold, they chose evil works rather than good; therefore the spirit of the devil did enter into them, and take possession of their house—and these shall be cast out into outer darkness; there shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth, and this because of their own iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil.

Now this is the state of the souls of the wicked, yea, in darkness, and a state of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them; thus they remain in this state, as well as the righteous in paradise, until the time of their resurrection. (Alma 40:12–14)

This passage is often cited to try to capture the division between the righteous spirits in paradise and the wicked spirits in prison. However, Alma does not actually use the phrase *spirit prison* in his wording. He talks about a *paradise* for those spirits in a state of happiness and then talks about “the state of the souls of the wicked” (Alma 40:14), which many equate with our idea of spirit prison. Elaborating on this misunderstanding, Top said,

We often make our own assumptions and say, “Well, those are members of the Church, and it is only members of the Church that can be in paradise.” But Alma doesn’t say that. The point I want to make here is that the words we use a lot when we talk about the spirit world in the context of Latter-day Saint doctrine are *paradise*, *prison*, and *hell*. We create in our own minds clean, clear, and concrete definitions of and delineations among those terms, but the scriptures don’t. Scripturally, all three of those terms can be applied to any or all of the spirits in the spirit world, depending on the specific context of how the scriptures use them. . . .

We shouldn’t take these or other passages to say something the author isn’t necessarily saying. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 138 gives revelation on the spirit world, but President Joseph F. Smith is focusing on the redemptive work of the spirit world, not giving us a definitive declaration of who is there, where they are, or if all the wicked spirits are in the northern hemisphere and the righteous are in the southern hemisphere or vice versa. The scriptures don’t do that. Alma chapter 40 does not give us everything there is to know, and neither does Doctrine and Covenants 138. It takes modern revelation—and modern prophetic commentary—to teach that.⁹

What then *can* we take from Alma 40:12–14? Recall that Alma introduced these verses by speaking of “the *state* of the soul between death and the resurrection” (Alma 40:11). Alma uses the word *state* more than any other speaker in the Book of Mormon, and he uses it differently than most.¹⁰ Additionally, his use of the word *state* appears in clusters with 28 percent of the times the word is used by anyone in the entire Book of Mormon being found in Alma 40–42. In this context, his use of *state* seems to imply a condition, as in “a state of happiness,” “a state of rest,” and “a state of peace.” In this state, Alma says, the righteous will be able to “rest from all their troubles and

from all care, and sorrow” (40:12). From this passage we also learn that the righteous somehow receive this state and that this condition is indeed called paradise.

In his critical text project, Royal Skousen highlighted that the original wording of Alma 40:12 includes an instance of *etc.* Speaking of those in paradise, the original text read, “where they rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow, *etc.*” Skousen suggested that the appearance of *etc.* is necessary to the original meaning. Restoring *etc.* to the text shows that Alma was teaching that “in the state of paradise the righteous spirits will rest from everything: their troubles, cares, sorrows, and anything else (such as labors, trials, afflictions, mourning, lamentation, grief, and pain). The *etc.* ensures that all the possibilities are covered. The 1920 Latter-day Saint edition removed *etc.*, as if it were unnecessary. The critical text will restore it.”¹¹

With that increased understanding of the paradisiacal state of the righteous, consider the discussion in Alma 40:13–14 of the contrasting condition of “the spirits of the wicked.” While Alma never defined *righteous* in the previous passage, his definition for *wicked* is those who “chose evil works rather than good” and in whom “the spirit of the devil did enter into.” These, he explained, are “cast out into outer darkness,” where there will be “weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth” (Alma 40:13). He makes clear that such an undesirable condition will come “because of their *own* iniquity, being led captive by the will of the devil” (40:13). And thus their state is one of darkness and “of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them” (40:14).

If, in an effort to interpret Alma 40 in light of more recent revelations of the Restoration, Alma’s words are read and taught to be referring to the state of the souls in spirit prison, then it must somehow be reconciled with other passages from the same time period. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 76:71–80 details what Joseph Smith saw in the terrestrial kingdom. He writes of those “who are the spirits of men kept in prison, . . . who received not of Jesus in the flesh

but afterwards received it. These are they who are honorable men of the earth, who were blinded by the craftiness of men” (Doctrine and Covenants 76:73–75). That does not sound like Alma’s description in Alma 40:13–40. Of course, Joseph F. Smith’s vision taught that those in spirit prison include “those who had died in their sins, without a knowledge of the truth” *as well as* those “in transgression” who rejected the prophets (Doctrine and Covenants 138:32). Could it be that Alma is only talking about that second group? Sure. Might his language about “outer darkness” and the soul remaining “in this state . . . until the time of their resurrection” (Alma 40:13–14) suggest he is talking about sons of perdition? Maybe. But this is the only time anyone in the Book of Mormon uses the term *outer darkness*, so it is impossible to demonstrate that.

My assertion is that Alma’s understanding of the spirit world at this point was binary (good or evil, righteous or wicked, Spirit of the Lord or spirit of the devil, etc.). This suggestion is supported by Alma’s previous instruction to the people of Zarahemla when he referenced a group not having place in “the kingdom of heaven” but being “cast out for they are the children of the kingdom of the devil” (Alma 5:25) and being either the “sheep of the good shepherd” or having “the devil [as] your shepherd” (Alma 5:38–39).¹² This concept seems substantiated when Alma speaks of the restoration of everything to its “proper order, everything to its natural frame—mortality to immortality, corruption to incorruption—raised to endless happiness to inherit the kingdom of God, *or* to endless misery to inherit the kingdom of the devil, the one on the one hand, the other on the other” (Alma 41:4). Alma likely had no concept of degrees of glory or salvation for the dead since these principles were revealed over nineteen hundred years later. If Alma had presented a clear understanding of these things, then there would have been no need for a later revelation to Joseph Smith or Joseph F. Smith. Thus, if Alma 40 *is* talking about spirit prison, it looks very different from that which is revealed in Doctrine and Covenants 138. This should not alarm anyone since the insights gained in this section did not come until 1918 (and would not even

be canonized until April of 1976).¹³ This is another situation where the light revealed to latter-day prophets provides greater illumination and understanding than was previously held.

The resurrection

Alma's message on the spirit world transitioned into a few comments on resurrection as some evidently "understood that this state of happiness and this state of misery of the soul, before resurrection, was a first resurrection" (Alma 40:15). Before addressing the notion of first resurrection, he, almost in passing, suggested that the idea of a spirit being raised to happiness or misery could be termed a resurrection of sorts. However, he quickly corrected this misunderstanding by defining resurrection as "the reuniting of the soul with the body" (40:18) and would later say that the resurrection is a restoration wherein "the soul shall be restored to the body, . . . and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body; yea, even a hair of the head shall not be lost; but all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame" (40:23). In chapter 41 he summarized this concept by saying that when the "soul of man should be restored to its body, . . . every part of the body should be restored to itself" (Alma 41:2).

Speaking of the first resurrection, Alma's understanding seems to be that the first resurrection is "a resurrection of all those who have been, or who are, or who shall be, down to the resurrection of Christ from the dead" (Alma 40:16). A few verses later he reinforces this definition, saying that first resurrection "meaneth the reuniting of the soul with the body, of those from the days of Adam down to the resurrection of Christ" (40:18). Alma's efforts to define *first resurrection* seem to differentiate between those who lived and died before Christ would be resurrected and "those who die after" (40:19–20). Alma is very careful not to make a definitive statement here. In fact, he deliberately states, "I do not say," when considering whether the righteous *and* wicked who lived and died before Christ would be resurrected before those who came after. He then gives what Elder Christofferson would call a "personal, though well-considered, opinion"¹⁴ that the

“souls and the bodies [of the righteous] are reunited . . . at the resurrection of Christ, and his ascension into heaven” (40:20).¹⁵

When introducing the idea of a first resurrection, Alma acknowledges that “it hath been spoken, that there is a first resurrection” (Alma 40:16). Significantly, Abinadi is the first person to use the phrase *first resurrection* (mentioning it six times in Mosiah 15:21, 22, 24, 26), and the only other speakers to use this expression are Alma and his father, Alma. As John Hilton observed, “it seems likely that Abinadi’s use of this phrase influenced these later prophets. Alma the Elder was obviously touched by Abinadi’s words and recorded them (and later used them in his own teaching),”¹⁶ and, as was just mentioned, Alma the Younger overtly tells us that he is building on the work of others. It is important to note that Alma does not just recite what he has already learned about the *first resurrection*. Rather, like a true seeker, Alma asks questions and explores implications leading to “an evolution in understanding the resurrection, and in particular the meaning of the first resurrection.”¹⁷ Because we find evidence of doctrinal development from one prophet to another even within the pages of the Book of Mormon text itself, it should logically follow that Alma may not have had a full knowledge of these principles during his lifetime.

A restoration

Alma taught that the resurrection is a restoration. He said, “the soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, every limb and joint shall be restored to its body; . . . all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame” (Alma 40:22–23). It is this definition of restoration that Alma said had been established by “the mouths of the prophets” (40:24).¹⁸ This is precisely what was previously taught on his mission to Ammonihah when Amulek said that the spirit and the body would be “reunited again in its perfect form” and that “this restoration shall come to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous” (Alma 11:43–44). Having established prior prophetic use and

understanding, Alma has more “to say concerning the restoration of which has been spoken” (Alma 41:1).

Corianton’s understanding and worry about this subject may be influenced by an ideology stemming from some who “have wrested the scriptures” (Alma 41:1). Nehor, for example, “testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4). *That* type of restoration, one that allows people to be “restored from sin to happiness” (Alma 41:10), is “contrary to the nature of God” (41:11). Indeed, Alma taught that this kind of theology would destroy the work of justice and, “if so, God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:13). Thus “the plan of restoration” involves more than a restoration of spirit and body—it requires that “all things should be restored,” including one’s works (Alma 41:2).

Building on this idea, Alma taught that “if their works were good in this life . . . that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good. And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil. Therefore, *all things* shall be restored to their proper order” (Alma 41:3–4). While the concept of restoration had been taught throughout the Book of Mormon, Alma is adding fresh theological insight (at least as far as the Book of Mormon is concerned). His concept of restoration resembles an ancient legal principle known as talionic justice.

John W. Welch explained, “Talionic justice achieved a sense of poetic justice, rectification of imbalance, relatedness between the nature of the wrong and the fashioning of the remedy, and appropriateness in determining the measure or degree of punishment.”¹⁹ This restoration is not taking “a thing of a natural state and [placing] it in an unnatural state” (Alma 41:12). Rather, it “is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish—good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful” (41:13). Alma made

clear that the law of restoration ensures that our works will follow us into the next life, thus “more fully condemn[ing] the sinner, and justif[ying] him not at all” (41:15).

While one application of Alma’s statement “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10) could certainly be that sinful action does not bring true happiness (a principle often taught in the Church), the broader and more theological application Alma is making is that wickedness will not bring happiness here *or* in the next life.²⁰ Similarly, those who live “without God in the world” (41:11) will not desire to live with God in the next life. This is another nuance Alma provides.

When he taught that men and women are judged according to their works he also added, if “*the desires of their hearts* were good, that they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good” (Alma 41:3). He talks about how one is “raised to happiness according to his desires of happiness, or good according to his desires of good.” Conversely, others will be raised to “evil according to [their] desires of evil” because they had “desired to do evil all the day long” (41:5). Those who *desire* righteousness will be “rewarded unto righteousness” (41:6). Alma taught plainly that, in addition to a resurrection and judgment based on works performed in this life, the law of restoration includes the desires of one’s heart, thus allowing them to be “their own judges, whether to do good or do evil” (41:7). In this way, Alma teaches Corianton, “the way is prepared that whosoever will may walk therein and be saved” (41:8). In other words, Corianton—and everyone else—can act as his or her own judge, free to choose happiness and salvation if that is what he truly desires. Perhaps this is why Alma pled with his son to “not risk one more offense against your God upon those points of doctrine” (41:9) but to be merciful and to “deal justly, judge righteously, and do good continually” (41:14).

A Living Church—Line upon Line, Precept upon Precept

Alma's experience with Corianton provides an example of how to deal with doctrinal ambiguity. One of the primary tenets of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is that we believe in a God that has, does now, and will yet "reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God" (Articles of Faith 1:9). These revelations come out of "real situations involving real people"²¹ who face questions and challenges and who seek clarity and direction from the Lord. The Book of Mormon contains myriad examples of mortal men and women who sought greater understanding regarding matters of doctrine and practice and who strived to live in accordance with the light and knowledge they were given.

Like most experiences with revelation, direction given to prophets often comes "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little" (2 Nephi 28:30). In many instances, the proverbial water may seem muddy as questions are asked, ideas are explored, and clarity is sought. Perhaps this is why the Lord invited the Saints to receive his word through the prophets "in all patience and faith" (Doctrine and Covenants 21:5).

Consider, for example, the Word of Wisdom. A concern was raised, ideas were discussed, and a "principle with promise" was given that was to be "adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints" (Doctrine and Covenants 89:3). While this revelation was given in 1833, the Saints were given an incubation period, and it was not until 1921 that President Heber J. Grant was inspired to command the Saints to "live the Word of Wisdom to the letter."²² Consider also matters of church government and administration pertaining to the evolution of the offices of the Aaronic Priesthood,²³ the roles and responsibilities of a bishop,²⁴ the previous functions of a Patriarch to the Church,²⁵ and the development of the office of Seventy.²⁶ Even as recently as 2018, home and visiting teaching were retired along with a complete restructuring of

Melchizedek Priesthood quorums.²⁷ One of the implications of a “living church” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30) is that revelation is an active process where current understanding and practice evolve as situations arise and questions are asked. One such situation for Alma came as Corianton was “worried concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Alma 40:1). In his conversations with Corianton, Alma demonstrates a few principles that can be helpful in dealing with ambiguity: (1) start with what we know, (2) remember there is “no democracy of facts,” and (3) trust in the Lord and continue seeking.

How Alma Handled Doctrinal Ambiguity

Start with what we know

While there are likely several reasons why Corianton’s understanding of the concept of revelation was causing him trouble, Alma’s approach seems to indicate a concern with timing as he tells him “that there is no resurrection . . . until after the coming of Christ” (Alma 40:2). Alma reinforces this point when he confirms that Christ “bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead” and, consequently, “the resurrection is not yet” (Alma 40:3). Did Corianton believe that the resurrection was imminent and that he would not have “space for repentance” (Alma 42:5)? Maybe, prior to forsaking the ministry, he had heard his father say to the Zoramites that because of the resurrection “all men shall stand before [God], to be judged at the last and judgment day, *according to their works*” (Alma 33:22). Whatever the specific concerns were, Alma provides the clear declaration that Corianton need not obsess over the imminence of the resurrection, because he understands that it will not happen until after Christ’s coming (Alma 40:2–3). Alma provides similar clarity throughout this chapter as he references what has already been taught and established through prophets in the past (Alma 40:16, 22, 24).

Remember there is “no democracy of facts”

After clarifying this point with Corianton, Alma broadens the picture by talking about the mysteries of God. There are things that God knows but “which are kept,” he says. “But,” he continues, “I show unto you one thing which I have inquired diligently of God that I might know” (Alma 40:3). This suggests that even though some of these mysteries are kept, a diligent inquirer can seek further understanding. Alma’s words here are reminiscent of the language he used with Zeezrom just eight years earlier when Zeezrom was in the middle of his own struggles. He taught that the mysteries of God *can* be known, “nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only . . . according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him” (Alma 12:9). The writings of Alma in Alma chapters 12 and 33 demonstrate his basic understanding of the resurrection as it had been previously taught in the Book of Mormon, while his direction to Corianton in Alma 40–41 captures his exploration and insights that came through diligent seeking and probing into the mysteries.

Upon diligent inquiry regarding the resurrection, Alma learned that “there is a time appointed that all shall come forth from the dead” and that nobody knows when that time is, except only God (Alma 40:4). When seeking greater doctrinal understanding, one quickly learns that there are often things that are known yet other things that are not. Furthermore, there is “no democracy of facts.”²⁸ Alma shows that there are some things that are simply more important than others. After declaring that there is a time appointed for men and women to rise from the dead and God knows the time (the thing of greatest importance), he notes that “whether there shall be one time, or a second time, or a third time, that men shall come forth from the dead it mattereth not” (40:5). Underscoring his point, Alma says that “God knoweth all these things” (including his specific question at hand regarding a time appointed that all shall rise from the dead) and that “it sufficeth [him] to know that this is the case”

(40:5). The truth that there is a time appointed that all would be resurrected is significantly more important in his eyes than an order of resurrection.

Trust in the Lord and continue seeking

After making this point, Alma tries to move on to discuss the “space betwixt the time of death and the time of resurrection” and “what becometh of the souls of men from this time of death to the time appointed for the resurrection” (Alma 40:6–7). However, throughout his discussion with Corianton, Alma’s mind seems to continually drift back to this idea of timing. He already told us that “it mattereth not” and could logically move on to his message regarding the spirit world. Indeed he has already introduced the subject and could now make a natural transition. However, he interjects another thought regarding timing. “Now whether there is more than one time appointed for men to rise *it mattereth not*; for all do not die at once, and *this mattereth not*; all is as one day with God, and time only is measured unto men” (40:8). This begs the question that if timing doesn’t matter, then why does Alma come back to it here, and why does he return to it again later in this same chapter (see 40:19–20)? Is it because Corianton’s initial concern seemed to be regarding timing? Or is it because he simply thinks that this approach is the best way to set up his discussion of the spirit world? Another possibility is that, as was previously alluded to, Alma is a seeker. Although he understands that the reality of the resurrection is more important than the order of the resurrection, he, like Moses, has “other things to inquire of [God]” (Moses 1:18) in seeking a fuller understanding.

Speaking of this quest for greater knowledge, Truman Madsen once wrote that he could find “nothing in the scriptures . . . to excuse anyone from brain sweat and from the arduous lifetime burden of seeking ‘revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge.’”²⁹ Fortunately for readers of the Book of Mormon, Alma is relatively transparent about his search and open about the ambiguities. After discussing what was revealed to him regarding the spirit world (see

Alma 40:9–14), he *again* returns to this issue of timing and resurrection. What is particularly interesting is that he is not approaching the topic with any sort of conclusive dogmatism. Rather, we see phrases such as “there are some that have understood,” “yea, I admit it may be termed . . .,” “it hath been spoken,” “we do not suppose,” “I do not say,” “let it suffice,” and, perhaps most telling, “I give it as my opinion” (40:15–20). Clearly Alma is engaged in his own “brain sweat” as he thinks out loud regarding the timing of resurrection. Indeed Alma exemplifies the sentiment of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland when he said, “this is a divine work in process, . . . so please don’t hyperventilate if from time to time issues arise that need to be examined, understood, and resolved. They do and they will.”³⁰ For Alma, one of these issues being examined was the timing of the resurrection.

Conclusion

It has been said that “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”³¹ As readers of ancient scripture, we are sometimes guilty of presentism, interpreting previous events and writings using a modern-day lens. Similarly, we sometimes assume that individuals from the past understood ideas and doctrines the same way we do now. A developmental understanding and application of doctrine is one of the natural outgrowths of a living church that features continual revelation.

Throughout scriptural history there is evidence that the ancients had some understanding of the spirit world and believed in some sort of afterlife.³² However, where “we sometimes get into trouble,” Top says, “is when we try to make sense of limited scriptural information by putting it into a diagram or on a PowerPoint, thinking that it fully reflects what the scriptures teach about the spirit world. . . . So when we ask ourselves what we know about the spirit world from the standard works, the answer is ‘not as much as we often think.’”³³

Alma’s teachings to Corianton in Alma 40–41 are a great example of this need for caution. Through diligent seeking and prayer, Alma

had learned that there is a period of time between death and resurrection and that the spirits of the righteous enjoy a state of happiness, peace, and rest while the wicked are in a state of fear. He had likewise learned about the resurrection (both what it *is* and what it is *not*) and also a little more about the timing and order of the resurrection. His teachings were binary (righteous/wicked, good/evil, happiness/misery, etc.) because the added insights of degrees of glory (Doctrine and Covenants 76), salvation for those who “died without a knowledge of this gospel” (Doctrine and Covenants 137:7, 10), “the advent of the Son of God into the spirit world, to declare their redemption from the bands of death” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:16), and the righteous being organized and appointed as messengers “to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness” (Doctrine and Covenants 138:30) had not yet been given. Alma understood that he had been given insight and revelation which had not been previously understood (Alma 40:3), while he also realized that there was still more that God could reveal in a future time (Alma 40:4–5, 8, 10, 19–20).

An exegetical reading of the Book of Mormon can increase an understanding of, and appreciation for, specific individuals and their respective ministries, while also deepening faith in the overall divinity of the work of the restored gospel. Alma’s words to Corianton provide an example of how to comprehend doctrinal lessons from the past, embrace ambiguity in seeking additional knowledge in the present, and recognize that greater clarity and understanding are available in the future.

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Notes

1. Terryl Givens, *Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014).
2. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 376–77; *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 57–58; George Q. Cannon, *Gospel Truths* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 73.
3. Monte S. Nyman, “The State of the Soul between Death and Resurrection,” in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 173–94.
4. Nyman, “State of the Soul,” 173–94.
5. It should be noted that Mormon’s abridgment likely impacts the number of times we see various speakers in the Book of Mormon use specific words or phrases. However, in some ways that makes Alma’s case even more compelling. Where we do have his original voice we have an inordinate number of references to soul.
6. Interestingly, even Joseph used the word *soul* in a similar way as Alma in some of his early writings.
7. See <https://www.ChurchofJesusChrist.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood>.
8. R. Devan Jensen, “What’s on the Other Side? A Conversation with Brent L. Top on the Spirit World,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 2 (2013): 43–63.
9. Jensen, “What’s on the Other Side?,” 43–63. “For example, President Joseph F. Smith teaches in Doctrine and Covenants 138 that all departed spirits view their death as a bondage or ‘prison’ until the glorious reunion of body and spirit at resurrection. Likewise, we learn from the scriptures that all people—righteous, wicked, and everything in between—are released from many of the conditions of our fallen, mortal world. Thus, when they die, they are going to be in a state of rest. In this context, all spirits experience a degree of paradise. In fact, in the King Follett discourse, the Prophet Joseph Smith stated that when Jesus said to the man on the cross, ‘To day shalt thou be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:43), he was referring to the spirit world. So paradise can be applied to all spirits,

and prison applies to all spirits. As for the word *hell*, people can experience hell right here in mortality.”

10. Philip A. Allred, “Alma’s Use of *State* in the Book of Mormon: Evidence of Multiple Authorship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 1 (1996): 141.
11. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2017), 2404.
12. Another example of this is in Alma 41 when he talks about the restoration of everything “to their proper order, every thing to its natural frame—mortality raised to immortality, corruption to incorruption—raised to endless happiness to inherit the kingdom of God, or to endless misery to inherit the kingdom of the devil, the one on the one hand, the other on the other” (Alma 41:4). While Alma may have used binary language because he was trying to create a sense of urgency with both Corianton and the people of Zarahemla, the text provides no evidence that shows him understanding anything about repentance in the spirit world or salvation for the dead.
13. Mary Jane Woodger, “From Obscurity to Scripture: Joseph F. Smith’s Vision of the Redemption of the Dead,” in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 234–54.
14. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 88.
15. In the next verse he is a bit more ambiguous when he says, “Whether it be at his resurrection or after, I do not say” (Alma 40:21).
16. John Hilton III and Jana Johnson, “Who Uses the Word *Resurrection* in the Book of Mormon and How Is It Used?,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21/2 (2012): 30–39.
17. Hilton and Johnson, “Who Uses the Word *Resurrection*?,” 30–39: “This lineal descent of Abinadi’s use of first resurrection demonstrates the complexity and consistency of the Book of Mormon, with implications for selective, multiple author influences.”
18. Jacob talks about the resurrection as a restoration in 2 Nephi 9:12. Abinadi does so in Mosiah 15:24, and Amulek elaborates on it in Alma 11:43–44.

While Jacob and Abinadi mention restoration when discussing resurrection, it is Amulek, Alma's missionary companion in Ammonihah, who expounds on this concept.

19. John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Press and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 338–39.
20. This concept continues to trouble Corianton even into the next section of Alma's discourse. Similarly, even the concept of resurrection as a restoration and a pending arraignment before the bar of God caused Zeezrom "to tremble under a consciousness of his guilt" (Alma 12:1) and to "be encircled about by the pains of hell" (Alma 14:6).
21. Introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants.
22. See <https://history.ChurchofJesusChrist.org/article/doctrine-and-covenants-word-of-wisdom>.
23. William G. Hartley, *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2010).
24. Nathan Pali, "One Elders Quorum: How Priesthood Quorums and Church Governances Have Evolved over Time" (unpublished paper).
25. Irene M. Bates and E. Gary Smith, *Lost Legacy: The Mormon Office of Presiding Patriarch* (Champaign, IL: Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1996).
26. See <https://www.ChurchofJesusChrist.org/prophets-and-apostles/the-unfolding-role-of-the-seventy-time-line>.
27. Russell M. Nelson, "Introductory Remarks," *Ensign*, May 2018, 54.
28. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Inexhaustible Gospel," *Ensign*, April 1993, 69.
29. Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 387.
30. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lord, I Believe," *Ensign*, May 2013, 94.
31. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: New York Book Review, 1953).
32. See, for example, Ecclesiastes 12:7; Luke 23:43; Matthew 14:26; 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6.
33. Jensen, "What's on the Other Side?," 43–63.