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Departure from the covenant path, whether due to sin or delusion (or both at once), need not lead us to despair.

Alma's Attempt to Loose Corianton's Mind from Zoramite Chains

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While Alma's youngest son, Corianton, is on his mission among the apostate Zoramites, he falls into serious transgression and falls into complex doctrinal errors at the same time the Zoramites are "perverting the ways of the Lord" (Alma 31:11). As we learn in Alma 39–42, Corianton's mind is greatly worried about many subjects relative to his soul. Apparently his confusion and doubts were aggravated because of his hostile religious environment: not only were there many contentions among the Nephites (35:15), but the Zoramites, Nephite separatists, were increasingly "angry because of the word, for it did destroy their craft" (35:3). Ultimately, it is in this environment that Corianton seeks to excuse himself (42:30), misconstruing certain "points of doctrine" in such a way that made God appear unjust for punishing sinners (41:9). In the meantime, the Zoramites have departed from "the commandments of God," neglecting their daily prayers and other "performances of the church" (31:9–10). Thus they have "enter[ed] into temptation" and may have invented or inherited local pagan practices (31:10).¹ Under Zoram, their "very wicked" leader (35:8), some Zoramites in Antionum begin "to bow down to dumb idols," while others worship God in a way "Alma and

his brethren [have] never beheld” (31:1, 12). The Zoramites’ manner of worship is theatrical, elitist, and scripted. Along with Korihor himself, and the many other anti-Christes before him, the Zoramites have rejected the coming of Christ as a “childish tradition” (31:16).

Approaches to the Zoramite mission material (chapters 31–35) and Corianton (chapters 39–42) have been varied. Recent scholarship has explored such topics as the long-term benefit of the mission² and Zoramite religious ideas.³ Elders Neal A. Maxwell and Dallin H. Oaks have employed Alma’s teachings when speaking in general conference on desire, a doctrine that undergirds Resurrection theology. The chapters in question here are rhetorically complex and yet hold together remarkably well, all of which will be demonstrated as we explore Zoramite beliefs more extensively and in context with circulating Nephite ideologies. The method for accessing the Nephite texts and Zoramite errors that have ostensibly influenced Corianton is the technique of inference and the strategy of close reading in rhetorical and narrative context. Accordingly, we will examine doctrinal offerings, problematic textual features, and subtle allusiveness within these chapters. Using these methods, it is argued that despite his temporary rhetorical and even doctrinal equivocations,⁴ Alma carefully disentangles Corianton’s mind from its Zoramite chains. To do this disentangling, he uses the scriptures and teachings available to them.

Before proceeding further, it would be helpful to briefly describe the four interrelated doubts and worries suggested by or explicitly identified in the narrative that entangle Corianton’s impressionable mind:

- Corianton worries that “the coming of Christ, . . . known so long beforehand,” may not come to pass according to the prophecies (39:15, 17).
- Corianton worries that since Christ may not come, there may not be a physical and universal resurrection for all (40:1).
- Corianton worries that if Christ does not come and the nature, number, and timing of the resurrection(s) is not known, men and women cannot be restored to God (41:1).
- Corianton worries that even if they are restored and judged it would be “injustice” for God to punish the sinner since, presumably, he made them before they fell from his presence (42:1).

Apparently, due to his sins and a resultant loss of the Spirit, Corianton has become deluded and wrapped in what Alma himself earlier calls the “chains of hell” when we first encounter him in Alma 39 (compare Alma 12:9–11; 13:30; see also 12:8–9 and 40:3). Through helping his son understand true doctrine, however, Alma hopes to help Corianton cast off his spiritual chains and reform his behavior so that he might return to his ministry.

Faith is a condition of the mind (see Jacob 3:1–2; Alma 57:19–21, 26–27).⁵ That is why those of “strong faith” are said to have a “firm mind” (Moroni 7:30) or to be of “firm hope” (Alma 34:41). Their minds are at rest because they firmly hope in the promises of God. In this spirit, Corianton was sent to “prepare [the] minds” of the people, but instead he allowed pride, vanity, and materialism to divert and weaken his mind until he had forsaken his ministry and apparently entered into sexual immorality (39:16). Alma’s counsel to his restless son is therefore to “turn to the Lord with all your mind, might, and strength” (39:13). Once in transgression, the mind suffers what Alma refers to as “remorse of conscience” (42:18), elsewhere described in the record by Alma as “the pains of hell” (14:6). Like Zeezrom before him, Corianton experiences worry, regret, torment, and fear of what is to come, including what comes in and after the resurrection of the dead. That is Corianton’s condition of mind when we meet him in Alma 39–42. He cannot rest, and he seeks relief by justifying himself, misconstruing scriptural language, and, ultimately, blaming God for his foolish and immoral actions.

Corianton’s First Worry in Alma 39

Corianton’s initial worry about “the coming of Christ” is acknowledged in 39:15. Alma says to him, “I will ease your mind somewhat on this subject” (39:17). Corianton’s worry seems to reflect Korihor’s teaching that Christ’s coming may in fact be one of “the silly traditions of their fathers” passed down to their brethren (30:31). As we learn in the narrative frame preceding chapter 39 (see Alma 31–34), the Zoramites no longer believe in the coming of Christ, even though this doctrine was “taught unto [them] bountifully before [their] dissension from among [the Nephite church members]” (34:2). In these mission chapters, Alma and Amulek persuade “the poor class of people” to accept this fundamental truth (32:2). A few items are worth mentioning in this connection. After Alma’s teachings on “faith and . . . patience” (34:3), we learn that the Zoramites “sent forth unto him desiring to know whether they should believe in one God” or whether God also had a divine son who would

come (33:1). This question is followed by a discussion about the reality of the coming of the Son of God and the implications of such a claim. Thereafter, Amulek, speaking to the same mixed group, more directly identifies “the great question” occupying their minds: “whether the word [of prophecy] be [fulfilled by] the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ” (34:5). Given these concerns among the Zoramites, it seems clear how doubt may have entered into Corianton’s mind on the same subject.

Corianton’s falling into this great but—for the time period—common error is particularly likely if we remember that while Alma and Amulek were among the more receptive portion of Zoramites, “the rest of the brethren” were elsewhere engaged with more or less receptive Zoramites (35:2). We learn that the word went forth “throughout all the land” (35:4) and that Shiblon, Corianton’s valiant brother, had suffered stoning and prison “for the word’s sake” while among them (38:4). Perhaps before or after his trouble with the harlot Isabel in the borders of the land, Corianton had been among the more hardened Zoramites too, either alone or as companion to his slightly older but much wiser brother, discussing just such a doctrine as the promise of the coming of Christ. It is even likely that this very young missionary had contended for the word among the “more popular part of the Zoramites” (35:3) because when the missionaries arrived, they entered “into their synagogues, and into their houses; yea, and even they did preach the word in their streets” (Alma 32:1). And before ever achieving success among the poor, these missionaries had labored much among all sorts of other Zoramites, many of whom shared to a degree their ideological views and yet were less receptive (32:2).

Apart from this general disbelief in and disregard for the coming of Christ among the Zoramites and the confusion and doubt in Corianton’s troubled mind, he specifically marvels, or wonders, “why these things should be known so long beforehand” (39:17). His question, perhaps masking his underlying concerns about the condition of his soul before God, is about God’s timing and his choice to make known “the plan of redemption” in Corianton’s day (39:18).

To answer, Alma reminds his son of the worth of a soul in all periods of time and of the necessity of living revelation when salvation is administered: “Is not a soul *at this time* as precious unto God as a soul will be *at the time of his coming*?” he asks (39:17; emphasis added). Alma’s cumulative logic, manifest by means of inspired questions, suggests the issue plaguing Corianton’s mind: due to his sins, he has begun to lose faith in the spirit of prophecy.

Hence, Alma asks, "Is it not as necessary that the plan of redemption should be made known *unto this people* as well as *unto their children*?" (39:18; emphasis added). Continuing in this same vein, Alma further inquires, "Is it not as easy *at this time* for the Lord to send his angel to declare these glad tidings *unto us* as *unto our children*, or as *after the time of his coming*?" (39:19; emphasis added). Alma reminds his son that he was called to prepare others for the coming of Christ.⁶ The reality is, however, that instead of doing this, Corianton's mind is apparently troubled, and he searches for a way to justify his choices. Corianton's choices have jeopardized his relationship to the spirit of prophecy and Christ. By reasoning this way, Alma has begun to loose the chains that bind his son's mind.

Corianton's Second and Third Worries in Alma 40

Corianton's next two worries concern the nature, number of times, and timing of the Resurrection—"thy mind is worried concerning the resurrection" (40:1; emphasis added)—and the concept of restoration—"thy mind has been worried also concerning this thing [restoration]" (41:1; emphasis added), including a final accounting before God (see 40:21, 26). On these subjects there are apparently many erroneous ideas circulating among the Nephites—including among the religiously minded Zoramites (see 35:15), and, as a result, "some have wrested the scriptures, and have gone far astray because of this thing [restoration]" (41:1). Alma's ambitious attempt to take the issues head-on eventually becomes more challenging for him than he may have supposed it would. In Alma 40, a chapter in which Alma lumps together associated doctrines under the umbrella term of "the resurrection" (40:1), we find noncommittal explanations in this intense ideological context. It appears that some Zoramites, even though they do not believe in a physical and universal resurrection (their God is a Spirit, and they are a favored few), have used prophetic teachings on sequence in the plan of redemption to raise academic questions for the missionaries, for which Alma does not have easy answers (see 40:15–16, 19, 22, 24; 41:1, 10).⁷ If this is not the case, perhaps these questions have come to Corianton as he has studied the prophets himself or held in-depth discussions with his associates,⁸ for Alma says to him, "I perceive that thy mind is worried" (40:1). Due to Corianton's sins and his disbelief in Christ's coming, Alma seeks to clarify true doctrine as well as offer correction and encouragement by teaching his son what he knows, even as Alma attempts to disentangle Corianton's mind from those

ideas to which it has been exposed. What is most likely is that the Zoramites have shaken Corianton's faith in Christ and in the word of prophecy at a time when Corianton is vulnerable, so that now when he considers prophetic teachings, he doubts. His questions and worries have multiplied as they have gone unresolved in this dangerous environment. He is yet in chains. Thus Alma attempts to demonstrate that because Christ will come, there will be a restoration through the Resurrection: "he [Christ] bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead. But," he adds, ". . . [it] is not yet" (40:3). This "mystery," the Resurrection, he implies, is not fully understood in all its temporal dimensions (39:3–5).

In the following passage from Chapter 40, we see Alma reluctantly acknowledge a less familiar definition of the Resurrection for Corianton's sake. He apparently feels it necessary to acknowledge in a sensitive way that some in the Nephite Church have used the phrase *first resurrection* and the word *resurrection* differently than how he now wishes to use them. The passage comes on the heels of Alma having made known to his son his knowledge of "what becometh of the souls of men from this time of death to the time appointed for the resurrection" (40:7). For Alma, this last doctrine, however much it is highlighted in the narrative, is theoretically merely a subset of the larger doctrine he has been discussing. The following passage suggests remarkable complexities in the background of this exchange. Here is Alma's summary of the situation with commentary in bold and brackets:

Now, there are some [previous teachers] that have understood that this state of happiness and this state of misery of the soul, before the resurrection, was a first resurrection [here we learn from Alma that the spirit world has been discussed among the Nephites before Alma 40's events]. Yea, I admit it may be termed a resurrection [in an attempt to build on common ground, he defers to these earlier teachers, temporarily acknowledging their recent usage of the term *resurrection*], the raising of the spirit or soul and their consignment to happiness or misery, according to the words which have been spoken.

And behold, again [also] it hath been spoken [by other teachers, including presumably Jacob and Abinadi], that there is a first resurrection, 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 40:15–16; see also Mosiah 15:20–26)

Alma's choice to acknowledge the ambiguous nature of the terms *first resurrection* and *resurrection* among the Nephites (he has acknowledged two definitions, though he favors one) adds to his credibility, for he is not skirting the issues involved but admitting that these terms are understandably confusing at this point in Nephite history in light of previous statements on the

subject by teachers, and perhaps, even prophets. From this point on, however, Alma clarifies true doctrine and moves the discussion forward on firmer footing (commentary in bold and brackets):

Now, we do not suppose that this first resurrection, which is spoken of in this [confusing] manner, can be the resurrection of the souls and their consignment to happiness or misery [or their entering into the spirit world]. Ye cannot suppose that this is what it meaneth.

Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but it [the word *resurrection* as we use it] meaneth the reuniting of the soul with the body, of those from the days of Adam down to . . . Christ [Alma favors the second definition]. (Alma 40:17–18)

Alma clarifies for his audience of one that, regardless of what has been taught by others, this is the doctrine as it should be taught going forward. This is part of what lies behind his final directive to his son to “declare the word with truth and soberness” (42:31). For Alma, the Resurrection involves the raising of the spirit *and body*, not just the spirit, to a new state. Alma ostensibly implies that since the time of Jacob, Nephi’s brother, and Abinadi some instructors have misunderstood the teachings of the prophets, and this has led to errors on this point among the Nephites, including among the Zoramites.⁹ In response to these hard issues, Alma has sought for answers and has apparently found for himself that the teachings of Jacob about “the paradise of God” (2 Nephi 9:11–13), of Enos about “the place of my rest” (Enos 1:27), and of Abinadi about “the first resurrection” (Mosiah 15:20–26) are true, though he admits, much is not yet well understood (see 40:3).¹⁰

The backdrop to this father-son conference has complicated the rhetorical moment only because Corianton has been involved in sin and intense gospel discussions recently and does not feel entirely sure of whether or not Christ will come to raise humankind from the dead and, presumably, whether or not he will hold them to account for their works. This final concern emerges near the end of chapter 40 and comes to the forefront in the next two chapters. These basic doctrines are all in question for Corianton because fissures have formed in the rock of his faith.

Alma’s dilemma becomes apparent when he veers from his recent doctrinal statement at the end of 40:18 into less-familiar territory in an effort to explain the Resurrection further in terms of what must have been on Corianton’s mind: When is the Resurrection? And who will it involve? (see 40:19–26). As stated, Alma had assured him earlier in his presentation that “the resurrection is not yet” (40:3), but because it springs out of Christ’s coming

and because final judgment follows it, Corianton seems concerned that he will “be brought to stand before God” sooner than he desires (40:21). Alma has already spoken of the “the wicked” in “a state of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them” (40:14) and will soon speak of the depths of the second death in contrast to the “righteous [who] shine forth in the kingdom of God” (40:25). The following passage, though it contains some fundamental truths, is unfortunately riddled with hesitancy and confusion as Alma seeks to move beyond his previous comments toward a clearer understanding of what the prophets such as Jacob and Abinadi (and more recently, Amulek) had taught about the Resurrection being the impetus for a full restoration. Structurally, the passage (see 40:19–20) transitions the reader from a clear statement of truth (40:17–18) to a spot where Alma seemingly hedges—“I do not say; let it suffice,” and again, “or in other words” (40:19)—and then apparently momentarily loses his way (manifest by the passages’ pronoun shifts), recovering only near the end (40:20). After providing his earlier and plainer definition, Alma seems compelled to explain the Resurrection’s nuances (emphasis added; commentary in bold and brackets):

Now, whether the souls and the bodies of those of whom has been spoken [by former teachers] shall all be reunited at once, the wicked as well as the righteous, *I do not say; let it suffice* [here, Alma frames his argument, presumably so as not to go too far afield], *that I say* that they all come forth [here, he teaches the true doctrine of the universal resurrection, while wisely avoiding the issues around the nature and timing of the resurrections];¹¹ *or in other words* [this phrase seems unnecessary given the last phrase’s clarity], their [is Alma here still referring to “the wicked as well as the righteous” or just “the righteous”?] resurrection cometh to pass before the resurrection of those who die after the resurrection of Christ [here, Alma, ostensibly to help his son, gets into the subject of the sequence of the resurrections, which he did not initially intend to do. However, it is now unclear to whom Alma refers, though one may surmise]. (Alma 40:19)

Alma apparently now seeks to unwind his inadvertently complex attempt at clarification because he senses that it may not have been as helpful as he had hoped,

Now, my son, *I do not say* that their [“those who die after the resurrection of Christ,” or “the wicked” or “the righteous” to whom he has alluded] resurrection cometh at the resurrection of Christ; but behold, *I give it as my opinion* [having just stumbled, Alma seems to not wish to appear too dogmatic on this point, even though he states in his next line a fundamental truth that is not disputed by the prophets], that the souls and the bodies are reunited, of the righteous, at the resurrection of Christ.

But whether it [**the universal resurrection?**] be at his resurrection or after, *I do not say*; but *this much I say*, that there is a [**state or place of waiting for all the spirits of the dead before their appointed times of resurrection and judgment**].
(Alma 40:20–21)

This difficult passage has at least three defining textual features that render it confusing yet curious: (1) Alma's use of pronouns such as "their" (40:19–20) and "it" (40:21) seems to be problematic because they do not have clear antecedents. The cause is uncertain. Perhaps he simply momentarily struggles for expression, given the rhetorical situation's complexity and the questions in Corianton's mind. In any case, Alma ironically complicates his communication in verse 19 just as he seeks to clarify his already sound statement using the phrase "or in other words" (40:19). (2) Alma's desire to restate his initial claim that "they all come forth" takes him into an area that earlier in the chapter he largely wished to avoid—God's exact timing in raising the dead. However, though it is unclear why he does so, Alma again begins to use words suggestive of chronology such as "before" and "after" and "at the resurrection of Christ" (40:19–20). Alma's stumble into time is perhaps the weakest and most scrambled part of his presentation, which is interesting given his tendency to teach doctrine sequentially earlier in his book. Lastly, (3) Alma seems to demonstrate inexplicable restraint even as he stumbles and seeks to find his footing again. His effort at restraint, "this much I say," handled more convincingly in the beginning of the chapter, now gets away from him, and he walks back his claims using such phrases as "I do not say" or, in cautious understatement, "I give it as my opinion" (40:19–21). In the case of the last phrase, rendering his true statement, "the souls and the bodies are reunited, of the righteous, at the resurrection of Christ," as an "opinion," may be an attempt to modify his tone, or, as we have said, suggests that he senses that he has stumbled and desires to be even more cautious than before.

This interpretation represents my own exegesis, but it in no way diminishes what we should think of the great prophet Alma. It is merely a momentary portrait of what can happen when divine light passes through the human mind in a difficult setting. Further, the undeniable complexities may in the end simply be the product of a corrupt text and not evidence of Alma's keen conscientiousness toward doctrinal nuance and his habit of making connections to his predecessors. In any case, what seems clear from the above passage (and its immediate context) is that in it Alma emphasizes the universal resurrection of the spirit and body, attempting to "unfold . . . a mystery"

to Corianton (40:3) to clarify a misconception about the Resurrection that involves sequence (40:16–17), and this has compelled him to comment on the timing of the general Resurrection and its stages (40:19–21). This is where we become lost in the pronouns. However, chapter 40 fortunately ends with Alma describing in plain and powerful terms the restoration that comes through the Resurrection. In this chapter, despite his challenge, Alma lays out for his worried son what he knows, while setting aside, at least initially, what he believes will not be helpful because it is not fully understood by anyone. Alma explains to Corianton that he has learned what he knows by “inquir[ing] diligently of God” (40:3). He shares his own search for truth with Corianton because he desires Corianton to do the same for himself on all matters in which he has further unresolved questions.

With the foregoing challenges in mind, it is worth noting that Alma works from what he knows to add to his knowledge of what he may not fully understand (see also 7:8). He knows, for instance, that there is a “time of death” and a “time of . . . resurrection” (40:6) and that “all shall rise from the dead” (40:5). He knows that there is a universal resurrection involving the righteous and wicked. But Alma is not ultimately concerned about the number of resurrections, nor about the appointed times for each, only about the universality, physicality, and reality of the Resurrection. Alma does not concern himself about “whether there shall be one time, or a second time, or a third time, that men shall come forth from the dead” (40:5). These issues, he says, “mattereth not” (40:5). Instead, Alma emphasizes his confirming and clarifying revelation on the state of spirits “between death and the resurrection” (40:21). As mentioned, what he teaches is consistent with that of earlier Nephite prophets. Unlike his son who is struggling with doubts and fears, Alma trusts God’s wise timing and eternal purposes: “It sufficeth me to know that . . . there is a time appointed that all shall rise” (40:5). Alma rests in God’s omniscience and believes that “there are many mysteries which are kept [by God], that no one knoweth” (40:3). The implication is that Corianton should not only seek to unfetter his own mind as his father has modeled, but also trust in God in matters where truth is only partially or imperfectly revealed. In modern terms, he should “doubt [his] doubts before [he] doubt[s]” what he knows.¹²

Corianton’s Fourth Worry in Alma 41–42

As Alma makes clear near the end of his teachings on the Resurrection, the prophets have spoken of this “restoration” (40:22, 24): “The soul [or spirit]

shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul; yea, and every limb and joint shall be restored to its body" (40:23), "according to the power and resurrection of Christ" (41:2). In addition, "the plan of restoration" (41:2) "bringeth back men into the presence of God" (42:23). This restoration of the person to the presence of God, Alma authoritatively asserts, "is requisite with the justice of God" (41:2).

In this context we learn of Corianton's final worry. After Alma explains the plan of restoration to his son in context with the doctrine of desire and after clarifying at length the disputed word "restoration" (41:1–15), Alma says again to his son, "I perceive there is somewhat more that doth worry your mind, which ye cannot understand—which is concerning the justice of God in the punishment of the sinner" (42:1). This concern about God's punishment is linked to Alma's recent teaching on the spirit world (40:11–18). He continues, "For ye do try to suppose that it is injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery" (42:1). The word "consigned" and the phrase "state of misery" take us back to Alma 40:15 and Alma's explanation of what happens with the dead between their death and their resurrection. What Alma has said about the second death and of "drink[ing] the dregs of a bitter cup" (40:26) has begun to "trouble" his son, so Corianton seeks, as before, to "excuse [him]self [on this] point" and to deny "the justice of God" in punishing the sinner (42:30). Alma therefore spends the rest of his time in justifying the ways of God to Corianton in something of a sermonic theodicy. This error—that God would be unjust to punish a sinner—perhaps can be traced as far back as Nehor (eighteen years earlier), who believed that "all mankind should be saved" and that "they need not fear or tremble" before God since he "created all men" and would "redeem all men" (1:4) and as far forward as Korihor, who believed that "whatsoever a man did was no crime" (30:17), implying that punishment before the law is neither justified on earth nor in heaven. Alma underscores that "wickedness never was happiness" (41:10). Alma emphatically proclaims three times to his son near the end of his fatherly admonitions that this denial of God's justice cannot stand, else "God would cease to be God" (42:13, 25; see also v. 22).

Alma's doctrinal response to Corianton's final recorded worry is a theological tour de force and pulls together all parts of his presentation. To begin, Alma says "our first parents" (42:2) brought the Fall "upon [them] selves because of [their] own disobedience" (42:12), describing the expulsion from Eden and how, by falling, they became "as God, knowing good and evil"

(42:3). Through the expulsion, “our first parents were cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord” (42:7, 9, 11, 14). And in this state, according to the prophets, “as soon as they were dead their souls were miserable, being cut off from [his] presence” (42:11; see also 2 Nephi 9:9). Alma explains that in this fallen state they were mercifully granted time to “repent and serve God” (42:4). It was a space of time to prepare to meet God in judgment. Alma clarifies for his son that in this fallen estate, “they became subjects to follow after their own will” (42:7). “Repentance [was] granted” that they might be “restored into his presence,” from which they fell by their transgression (42:22–23). Accordingly, repentance is that unifying principle by which Alma harmonizes God’s justice and mercy with human moral agency in context with the Resurrection and plan of restoration.¹³ Thus God is justified “in the punishment of the sinner” (42:1) because he has mercifully given man the power to act for himself, a space of time in which to repent, and Christ’s Atonement, which “bringeth to pass the resurrection” (42:23). The Resurrection is followed by a restoration, which “bringeth back men into the presence of God,” assuring that all men enter God’s presence to be judged “according the law and justice” (42:23). Importantly, the harmonizing “conditions of repentance” (42:13), possible only through Christ’s Atonement—the willing punishment of “God himself,” who was to come (42:15–16)—can be granted only to “the truly penitent” (42:24). As stated, Christ’s Atonement by definition is that “God himself” (here Alma employs Abinadi’s emphatic reflexive phrase) would come down to earth to face the full fury of “the demands of justice” (42:15), that mercy might claim “all which is her own” (42:24). On Christ, who should come according to the spirit of prophecy, “the law inflicted the punishment,” satisfying the ends of eternal law (42:22). As Lehi understood, divine law is the foundation on which Christ’s Atonement (punishment), righteousness, and human happiness rest (42:17–23; see 2 Nephi 2:13). With these words, and the few that follow, God’s justice is defended, and Corianton begins to understand his errors. The chains fall.

Conclusion

During Corianton’s time among the Zoramites, he enters into serious sin. Guilty of sin and in a hostile environment wherein “the people began to wax hard, and . . . began to be offended because of the strictness of the word” (35:15), the young son develops doubts and falls into many errors. I

have inferred there were general errors in circulation among these dissenting Nephites, causing Corianton to fret about his soul's destiny. The following general teachings describe Alma's inspirational and reasoned attempt in chapters 39–42 at loosing Corianton's mind from the chains binding his mind:

- According to the spirit of prophecy, Christ, the Son of God, will come “to declare glad tidings of salvation” (39:15–19).
- Because Christ will come, all will be raised by God in their bodies at an appointed time (40:1–10, 18–20).
- The spirits of men and women will dwell in a state of peace or fear before that appointed day arrives (40:11–14).
- Through the “power and resurrection of Christ,” men and women will be restored to the presence of God to be judged (40:21–25; 41:2–3).
- God is justified in “the punishment of the sinner” because God himself has mercifully allowed for agency and provided time to repent and a way of escape from “the demands of justice” (42:1–28).

In contrast to these truths are the Zoramite attempts to pervert the ways of the Lord with elusive questions and personal concerns too numerous to reiterate here (31:1). Although some of Corianton's confusion apparently results from how he understands previous pedagogical and prophetic statements, much of his confusion has developed from the Zoramites “wrest[ing] the scriptures” from their intended meanings (41:1). Therefore, Alma does what he can to loose Corianton's mind from the chains that bind him. However, in doing so, he momentarily struggles to communicate clearly while attempting to clarify the physicality of the universal Resurrection. As part of that larger discussion, we learn that Alma has also sought to more perfectly understand what other prophets have taught before him about the spirit world. This understanding he teaches with confidence and without vacillating. In his teachings to Corianton, Alma draws on prophets such as Jacob and Abinadi. Whatever was taught in the interim between Alma and these former prophets by well-meaning gospel teachers, Jacob and Abinadi had taught correctly the doctrine of the Resurrection, including the First Resurrection (see Jacob 4:11; Mosiah 15:21–23). Despite his imperfect language and understanding in the middle of his presentation, Alma speaks with power and authority both initially and finally. Alma is sure-footed in all but his reluctant discussion of the timing of the Resurrections and of who rises in each.



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The material in Alma 39–42 reminds us that the efforts of parents and teachers may not always be perfect, but if they are sincere and based on doctrinal truth, they can yield the fruits of the gospel.

These rhetorical and doctrinal problems occur presumably because Alma investigates what is of interest to Corianton and others (not so much to himself) in a setting with a complicated backdrop. To him, as stated, the unresolved questions about the timing of the Resurrection “mattereth not” (40:5, 8). His final exhortation to Corianton, “O my son, I desire that ye should,” centers on “the conditions of repentance” and on obtaining God’s mercy, by seeking not to “excuse [him]self in the least point because of [his] sins” (42:30). Alma hopes that allowing these realities to settle on his son’s mind will enable Corianton to cease to worry; thus his son may enter into the rest of the Lord. The hope is that Corianton will let his worries and doubts trouble him “no more, and only let [his] sins trouble [him], with that trouble which shall bring [him] down unto repentance” (42:29). For Corianton to repent, he will need to cease to “risk one more offense . . . upon those points of doctrine, which [he has] hitherto risked to commit sin” (41:9). He will himself need to cease “wrest[ing]” the former teachings from their intended meanings as others have done (41:1). He must learn to be honest with himself, face up to the gravity of what he has done, and no longer fault God for his own irresponsible actions. Finally, Alma commands Corianton to resume his missionary responsibilities and remember his purpose: preach that Christ “surely shall come to take away the sins of the world” (39:15), for “this was the ministry unto which ye were called” (39:16).

We learn from isolated passages later in the Book of Mormon that Alma’s imperfect yet sincere efforts to address Corianton’s complicated questions and concerns paid off (see Alma 43:1–2; 49:30). Once Corianton was worthy to act on his father’s final exhortation, “Go thy way, declare the word with truth,” he did so (Alma 42:31). He returned to the preaching of the word. No doubt he returned to his responsibilities with greater personal perspective, focus, and resolve. Marilyn Arnold summarizes what we know of Corianton’s later adventures: “After the reestablishment of peace [among the Nephites] and the passing of Helaman₂ [Corianton’s eldest brother and Nephite military leader] and Moroni₁ [Nephite military leader], Corianton is said to have left to carry provisions to the Nephites who emigrated north by sea” (Alma 63:10).¹⁴ The eternal truths that Alma explained to his son certainly have application to parents and teachers in our day. The material in Alma 39–42 reminds us that the efforts of parents and teachers may not always be perfect, but if they are sincere and based on doctrinal truth, they can yield the fruits of the gospel. Departure from the covenant path, whether due to sin or delusion

(or both at once), need not lead us to despair. A wayward adolescent, or any other person, can choose to return to the Lord. If there is a glimmer of faith, there is hope that through Christ, repentance from sin can change the heart and make any person's ending greater than the beginning.

Notes

1. Hugh W. Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 542.

2. Michael F. Perry, "The Supremacy of the Word: Alma's Mission to the Zoramites and the Conversion of the Lamanites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 119–37.

3. A. Keith Thompson, "Apostate Religion in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 191–26.

4. St. Augustine, in his chapter on "intervals of time," book 11, in his famous work *Confessions*, draws a contrast between what he calls the language of "investigating" and the language of "asserti[ng]" (233). Interestingly, St. Augustine's book uses many rhetorical moves that remind one of Alma's own sometimes investigative and, presumably, equivocal or much-qualified style in this part of the Book of Mormon (see 233–39). Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

5. Joseph F. Smith, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 57.

6. It is worth noting that in this passage Alma seems to refer to two comings of Christ: Christ's coming "unto his people" (39:15) and "the time of his coming" among the Nephites (39:16). Alma 7:8 suggests that the coming of Christ may not be well understood at this time among the Nephites. If Alma refers to Christ among the Nephites, it may explain why he moves from the spirit of prophecy to the Resurrection, particularly the time before the Resurrection.

7. The prophetic teachings on sequence in the plan of redemption referred to may include prior phrases such as these: "first judgment" (2 Nephi 9:7); "first resurrection" (Mosiah 15:21–24); "second trump" (Mosiah 26:25); and "last death" (Alma 12:36). As for the "academic questions for the missionaries" that may have been circulating, these seem likely given the broad contours of the narrative and teachings: How many resurrections are there? When do these resurrections occur? Do the wicked arise along with the righteous? What about those before and after Christ?

8. The Zoramite mission was formed precisely to engage Zoramite heresy. It was "for this cause" that Alma and his companions embarked, two of whom were very young (Alma 31:11).

9. Although admittedly it is not certain, this reading of Alma's allusive teachings seems reasonable given the frequent markers in the text that suggest that Alma is conscious of previous speakers and writers even as he proceeds through his doctrinal discussion (see Alma 40:15–16, 24; 41:1). Jacob's record would have been included among the records that Alma inherited from those before him. Abinadi's teachings would have come to Alma by means of his father, who is the source of those teachings to later generations (see Mosiah 17:4; 18:1–2).

10. It cannot be confirmed that Alma had these particular prophets and phrases in mind as he spoke with Corianton. The phrase “paradise of God” appears four times in the Book of Mormon, the earliest example of which is in one of Jacob’s sermons (2 Nephi 9:13; Alma 40:14; 4 Nephi 1:14; and Moroni 10:34); the phrase “place of my rest” appears only once in scripture and is located in Enos 1:27; and the phrase “first resurrection” is used by only three persons in the Book of Mormon. The earliest person to use the last phrase is Abinadi (see Mosiah 15:21–22, 24, 26; Alma 40:15–17; and Mosiah 18:9). The infrequency of these phrases (or the infrequency of those who actually used them) leads me to believe that Alma may have borrowed them from Jacob and Abinadi, if not also from Enos (the idea of the spirit world as a place of rest may come from Enos). In any case, it seems likely that Alma had a general memory of such teachings in mind when he answers his son’s worries. Alma was a serious student of the scriptural tradition and of the teachings of his time. However, which records Alma possessed is not entirely clear. He had access to the writings of Lehi and Nephi (or copies of those writings) because he directly quotes from them in his own record and also likely had all those records that came to King Benjamin because they were roughly contemporary, about fifty years separating the two of them. King Benjamin is the figure in whom the writings of the kings and the writings of the prophets converge (see Words of Mormon 1:10–11; Mosiah 1:2–7). Further, we know that Alma, in a significant chapter on the subject of sacred records and their transmission, passes the brass plates of Laban and the twenty-four gold plates (or the record of Ether’s people) to his son Helaman (see Alma 37). In Alma 37:5, we hear Alma also refer to “all the plates which do contain that which is holy writ.” It is not hard to believe, therefore, that Alma has Jacob, Abinadi, and other subsequent teachers in mind when he teaches his son about these spiritual matters.

11. The universality of the resurrection of the dead receives much emphasis in the chapter. The expression, “there is a time appointed that all shall come forth from the dead,” or a variant of this expression, gets repeated at least four times (40:4–5, 9, 19). Importantly, Alma also emphasizes the corporeality or physicality of the Resurrection, apparently to offset the Zoramite belief that God—though he is holy, eternal, and unchanging—is for them a spirit (Alma 31:15). Once the Resurrection is thrown out, the doctrine of God’s reemodiment is discarded too. No one rises with a body in such a Zoramite theology. Their central tenant is transcendent ineffability and holiness, which they assign to themselves (see 31:15–18). They make a great deal of their separate, holy, and transcendent status among humankind to Alma’s disgust and sorrow.

12. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign*, November 2013, 23.

13. D. Todd Christofferson, “Free Forever, to Act for Themselves,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 16–19.

14. Marilyn Arnold, “Corianton,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 214–15.