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Three Accounts of Alma's Conversion

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THREE ACCOUNTS OF ALMA'S CONVERSION

Mosiah 27:23 "The limbs of Alma received their strength, and he stood up and began to speak unto them."

Not all readers are aware that the Book of Mormon contains three accounts of the conversion of Alma the Younger. Mosiah 27:8–37 gives a contemporary account of how Alma had agitated against the church of God and of his extraordinary conversion. In Alma 36:4–26 and 38:6–8, Alma twice recounts his conversion story as he blesses his sons Helaman and Shiblon. Interesting results come from a careful comparison of these three texts.

It is apparent that these three accounts all originated from the same man. For example, in Mosiah 27, Alma used many distinctive phrases as he described his conversion. He said, "The Lord in mercy hath seen fit to snatch me out of an everlasting burning, and I am *born of God*. My soul hath been redeemed from *the gall of bitterness* and bonds of iniquity. I was in the darkest abyss; but now I behold the *marvelous light* of God. My soul was *racked with eternal torment*; but I am snatched, and my soul is *pained no more*" (Mosiah 27:28–29). The emphasized terms here are just a few that could be mentioned.

Years later, Alma again used these same phrases. In Alma 36 he said, "God did *rack my soul*" (Alma 36:14) "*with eternal torment*" (Alma 36:12). "I cried . . . have mercy on me, who am in *the gall of bitterness*" (Alma 36:18). "I could remember my *pains no more*" (Alma 36:19). "What *marvelous light*" (Alma 36:20). "I had been *born of God*" (Alma 36:23).

THREE ACCOUNTS OF ALMA'S CONVERSION

Likewise, Mosiah 27:11 describes the voice of the angel as “a *voice of thunder*, which caused the *earth to shake* upon which they stood,” while Alma 36:7 states: “He spake unto us, as it were the *voice of thunder*, and the whole *earth did tremble* beneath our feet.” See also Alma 38:7; compare Alma 29:1: “O that I were an angel . . . and [could] speak . . . with a voice to *shake the earth*.”

There are many other such phrases that run in parallel, but not identically, through these three accounts. The repetitions show that a single person was the author of all three and suggest that Alma had told his story many times and had grown accustomed to using these characteristic words and phrases.

Furthermore, it is impressive that the specific details in the accounts remain accurately consistent. For example, all five of those present fell to the earth before the angel, but only Alma was told to “arise” (Mosiah 27:12–13; Alma 36:7–8) and to “remember the captivity of thy fathers” (Mosiah 27:16; Alma 36:2, 28–29), precisely the same in both accounts.

Even what superficially appears to be a difference is not. Alma 36:16 states that Alma was racked for three days and three nights. Mosiah 27:23, however, says the priests fasted for two days and two nights. This is because, under Nephite practice, the fast would not have begun until the morning of the next day after the decision to fast (Helaman 9:10).

Where there are differences between the accounts, they are understandable. For example, there is more emphasis in Mosiah 27:18 and 32 on the involvement of the four sons of Mosiah in the appearance of the angel than in Alma 36; this is understandable since King Mosiah is the one reporting the events in Mosiah 27, whereas Alma is speaking in Alma 36 and 38.

The psalm of Alma in Mosiah 27:24–31 bears the literary characteristics of a spontaneous utterance. These are the kind of words a person would speak unrehearsed. They are full of emotion and rejoicing; they are direct, first-person declarations.

Alma 36 and 38, however, show signs of thoughtful reflection, of years of thinking about his momentous conversion. For

THREE ACCOUNTS OF ALMA'S CONVERSION

instance, in the later accounts Alma has placed his words into the context of his religious tradition. Instead of thinking only about the deliverance of his father from the land of Helam (as the angel mentions in Mosiah 27:16), Alma now speaks of older parallels of the deliverance of Lehi from Jerusalem and, beyond that, of the Israelites from Egypt (see Alma 36:28–29).¹ And in Alma 36:22, Alma has incorporated twenty-one words that are quoted verbatim from the vision of Lehi (see 1 Nephi 1:8). He has also applied his spiritual experience to his readers' daily religious practice, drawing lessons about trusting in the Lord throughout one's trials, troubles, and afflictions (see Alma 36:3, 27; 38:5), and about living a moral, righteous life (see Alma 38:9–15).

To coincide with this thoughtful development, Alma's accounts have evolved structurally as well. The abrupt antithetical parallelisms in Mosiah 27:29–30 ("I was X, but now I am Y," repeated four times) have been rearranged into one masterfully crafted chiasmic composition in Alma 36:1–30. It centers on the turning point of Alma's life, which was when he called upon Jesus Christ for forgiveness, and groups the negative attributes from Mosiah 27:29–30 into the first half of the chiasm and their positive opposites into the second half.² Expanding on the research of John W. Welch, Lowell Tensmeyer and others have recently worked out full chiasmic analyses of chapter 36.³

Alma 38 is equally interesting. It presents essentially the first half of the chiasm found in Alma 36, up to the climactic turning point, before shifting into hortatory speech admonishing his second son. Having given the doubled version to his eldest son, Helaman, in Alma 36, Alma evidently felt no need to give the fully repeated structure to Shiblon in Alma 38.

The three accounts also consistently reflect different vantage points in Alma's life. In Mosiah 27, Alma is a young man, spontaneously overwhelmed by the power of the angel and terrified by the prospect of the day of judgment (see Mosiah 27:31). Later in Alma's life, it is clear that the older man has faithfully and successfully served his Lord and his people all the rest of his

THREE ACCOUNTS OF ALMA'S CONVERSION

days (see Alma 36:24–26) so that he now emphasizes his longing to be present with God (see Alma 36:22).

Despite the fact that Mosiah 27 is separated from the accounts in Alma 36 and 38 by the many words, events, sermons, conflicts and distractions reported in the intervening one hundred pages of printed text, these three accounts still profoundly bear the unmistakable imprints of a single distinctive person, who throughout his adult lifetime had lived with, thought about, matured through, and insightfully taught by means of his powerful and beautiful conversion story.

This October 1986 Update was based on research by John W. Welch, who has since continued his research on Alma 36. For an extensive discussion of Alma 36, approaching the text at various levels, see John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Alma 36" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1989) and a summary of that paper in "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in John Sorenson and Melvin Thorne, eds., Rediscovering the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 114–31.

Notes

1. Regarding such typological comparisons, see George Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in Neal Lambert, ed., *Literature of Belief* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1981), 246–62; Terrence L. Szink, "Nephi and the Exodus," in John Sorenson and Melvin Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 38–51; S. Kent Brown, "The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 30 (Summer 1990): 111–26.

2. See John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 206–7.

3. For a collection of these analyses, see John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in Alma 36" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1989).