



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>

Alma 13, The Quest for Self: To Know the Law of One's Own Being

Author(s): LeGrand L. Baker and Stephen D. Ricks

Source: *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?: The Psalms in Israel's Temple Worship in the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon*

Published: Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2011

Page(s): 564–572

Archived by permission of author, LeGrand L. Baker.

<http://www.legrandlbaker.org/>

Alma 13, The Quest for Self: To Know the Law of One's Own Being

It is apparent from the many and various ways Alma used the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama as a teaching tool that the principles presented in the drama were the foundation of his worldview. For us to understand much of Alma's rationale, it would be helpful to first examine that worldview and the eternal context in which he places man. It is in that context that he derives his understanding of God's purpose. That context is most readily understood through his words to Zeezrom, especially in Alma 13, where he uses the conditions of our premortal existence as his jumping off place to discuss the meaning of the Melchizedek Priesthood. In the next few pages we will examine the concepts of our premortal life, and later use that (as Alma did) to explain justice and mercy in terms of the differences between cosmos and chaos.⁷⁹⁹

We usually think of "the creation" as the time when Jehovah and the Council brought this physical world into existence. However, that was only one step in a series of events to bring about perfect harmony. The earth and all other of God's creations needed to pass through a sequence of "creations" in order to attain that perfection. The first was the spiritual creation, then the physical, and finally the resurrection. One can also describe the whole of that sequence as "the creation."

The resurrection of the earth—and all else the Lord has made—is a gift of the Savior's Atonement. However, the quality of one's resurrection is conditional upon the spiritual truth, light, and love one has chosen to assimilate along the way.⁸⁰⁰

⁷⁹⁹ For a discussion of chaos, creation, and cosmos, see the chapter called, "Act 1, Scene 3: The Creation."

⁸⁰⁰ LeGrand Baker once saw an interview on TV where a sophisticated young woman with a city accent had discovered a black woman in the South who had 19 children. The sophisticate marveled that the woman had reared such a large family and asked, "Was there one that you loved more than the others?" "Oh, yes," replied the mother, "The one that needed me just then."

Watching that mother in that conversation opens a whole new concept of love. It is this: The power of godliness is his capacity to love all his children with equal intensity, and his ability to let them know that—with each of his children also understanding that he can focus his love on just the one without diminishing his love for all the others.

In our world, families help us learn how to do that, as do Church callings, but so does our just going

In the Book of Mormon.

It appears that love, light, and truth are equivalents—they come from God and are expressions of his glory. The conclusion that they are actually the same thing is easy to come by. Truth is knowledge of eternal reality—“of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.” That is, truth is knowledge of all reality in sacred time and space. The Savior is the Spirit of Truth, and “he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth; Which truth shineth. This is the light of Christ ...which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space” (D&C 88:7-12, 93:24-26). Thus, both truth and light permeate and sustain everything in the universe. The fact that God’s love is also everywhere is a given that needs no proof. Since his light, truth, and love are everywhere and in every individual, they either occupy the same space at the same time, or else they are the same thing. If the latter is correct, then the differences we perceive are simply ways we have of describing the multiple effects of the power of his godliness. Joy is the product of truth/light/love. It is most meaningful when it is shared. The more we recognize and assimilate the truth/light/love of others, the greater the joy we and they experience. The ultimate expanse of that joy is described by the Prophet Joseph this way:

1 When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves.

2 And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy (D&C130:1-2).

Our very lives testify that this is true. As we acknowledge the eternal reality of a dear friend we become more alive. We begin to rediscover the eternal truth of who and what that friend was, is, and will be. That recognition opens a window through which we can get a glimpse of our own eternal Self. The light that emanates from the soul of one’s friend penetrates just a bit of the veil that clouds our memory of our own past eternal self. It reveals a shining new aspect of a forgotten portion of who and what we were before we came into this world. It does that by teaching us who our friend was and how dearly we loved him. As we re-experience the light that is his personality and goodness; we feel again the love we shared for each other before we came into mortality. The friendship brings more truth, light, and love that blend anew into a unity of joy. It gives new vibrance

about living ordinary lives as good, kind human beings.

Psalms of Israel's Temple Worship

to our lives and helps us overcome the loneliness of this otherwise dreary world. Thus the friendship makes both beings more complete—more of what and who we were. The friend's light seems also to extend a beckoning hand even beyond the veil of death that obscures the hope of our eternal future.

That beckoning hand and the different ways we might respond to it reflect the immortal words of Edna St. Vincent Millay:

The World Stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky, –
No higher than the soul is high.⁸⁰¹

Not everyone sees. Not everyone listens. Not everyone reaches for the hand. Not everyone is the same. Consequently, the reason there must be differences in the three degrees of resurrected glory is that there must ultimately be a place where everyone can find an absolute compatibility between the quality of his own spiritual self and the everlasting quality of his exalted physical person⁸⁰²—for the overriding object of creation is the perfection of both. To understand this, “perfection” must be defined in terms of an unimpaired harmony both within the person and between him and his environment. Thus, the “immortality” that distinguishes each of the three degrees of glory might be understood a kind of individual wholeness and qualities of cultural unity.

“Eternal life” is the perfection of both. Among the gods in the celestial world the purity of that internal unity extends beyond the reaches of one's Self. Without losing the uniqueness of one's own personality, the fullness of truth, light, love, and joy in celestial glory becomes both the product and the expression of love and eternal friendships: the “sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy” (D&C130:1-2).

In accordance with that principle, we learn from both the Feast of Tabernacles temple drama and the scriptures that creation was initiated in the Council in Heaven when Jehovah instructed the gods:

⁸⁰¹ Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Renascence One Hundred and One Famous Poems*, ed. Roy J. Cook (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 166-70.

⁸⁰² This is all explained in D&C 88:1-45.

In the Book of Mormon.

24 We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell;

25 And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them (Abraham 3:24-25).

In those instructions, Jehovah identified two kinds of incompleteness—of chaos. The first was space and matter without structure. The second was a group of intelligences without perfection. How they were organized was explained by Alma in chapter 12, but for the answer to the question of who those intelligences were, we turn first to an early Melchizedek Priesthood manual written by Elder B. H. Roberts. His concepts were originally published in the *Improvement Era*, where they were introduced by this note: “Elder Roberts submitted the following paper to the First Presidency and a number of the Twelve Apostles, none of whom found anything objectionable in it, or contrary to the revealed word of God, and therefore favor its publication.”⁸⁰³ Elder Roberts wrote:

The Nature of Intelligences: There is in that complex thing we call man, an intelligent entity, uncreated, self existent, indestructible. He—for that entity is a person; because, as we shall see he is possessed of powers that go with personality only, hence that entity is “he,” not “it,”—he is eternal as God is; co-existent, in fact, with God; of the same kind of substance or essence with deity, though confessedly inferior in degree of intelligence and power to God. One must needs think that the name of this eternal entity—what God calls him—conveys to the mind some idea of his nature. He is called an “intelligence;” and this I believe is descriptive of him. That is, intelligence is the entity’s chief characteristic. If this be a true deduction, then the entity must be self-conscious, and “others—conscious,” that is, he must have the power to distinguish himself from other things—the “me” from the “not me.” He must have the power of deliberation, by which he sets over one thing against another; with power also to form a judgment that this or that is a better thing or state than this or that. Also there goes with this idea of intelligence a power of choosing one thing instead of another, one state rather than another. These powers are inseparably connected

⁸⁰³ B. H. Roberts, “Immortality of Man,” *Improvement Era* 10, 6 (April 1907): 401-23. This introduction was also included on the first page of the priesthood manual. Roberts spells it “intelligencies.”

Psalms of Israel's Temple Worship

with any idea that may be formed of an intelligence. One cannot conceive of intelligence existing without these qualities any more than he can conceive of an object existing in space without dimensions. The phrase “the light of truth” [Doc. & Cov., Sec. xciii.] is given in one of the revelations as the equivalent for an “intelligence” here discussed; by which is meant to be understood, as I think, that intelligent entities perceive the truth, are conscious of the truth, they know that which is, hence “the light of truth,” “intelligence.” Let it be observed that I say nothing as to the mode of the existence of these intelligences, beyond the fact of their eternity. But of their form, or the manner of their subsistence nothing, so far as I know, has been revealed, and hence we are without means of knowing anything about the modes of their existence beyond the fact of it, and the essential qualities they possess, which already have been pointed out. ...

The intelligent entity inhabiting a spirit-body makes up the spiritual personage. It is this spirit life we have so often thought about, and sang about. In this state of existence occurred the spirit’s “primeval childhood;” here spirits were “nurtured” near the side of the heavenly Father, in his “high and glorious place;” thence spirits were sent to earth to unite spirit-elements with earth-elements—in some way essential to a fulness of glory and happiness (Doc. & Cov. Sec. xciii: 32-35)—and to learn the lessons earth-life had to teach. The half awakened recollections of the human mind may be chiefly engaged with scenes, incidents and impressions of that spirit life; but that does not argue the non-existence of the uncreated intelligences who preceded the begotten spiritual personage as so plainly set forth in the revelations of God.

The difference, then, between “spirits” and “intelligences,” as here used, is this: Spirits are uncreated intelligences inhabiting spiritual bodies; while “intelligences,” pure and simple, are intelligent entities, but unembodied in either spirit bodies or bodies of flesh and bone. They are uncreated, self-existent entities, possessed of “self-consciousness,” and “other-consciousness”—they are conscious of the “me” and the “not me”; they possess powers of discrimination (without which the term “intelligence” would be a solecism) they discern between the evil and the good; between the “good” and “the better.” They possess “will” or “freedom,”—within certain limits at least—the power to determine upon a given course of conduct, as against any other course of conduct. This intelligence “can think his own thoughts, act wisely or foolishly, do right or wrong.” To accredit an “intelligence” with fewer or less important powers than these, would

In the Book of Mormon.

be to discredit him as an “intelligence” altogether.⁸⁰⁴

We find a fascinating account of the story implicit in Elder Roberts’s discussion in Alma 13. Here we learn how the noble and great ones came to qualify to be members of the Council in Heaven. Alma spoke of the time when they were ordained by our Father in Heaven to the priesthood “which is after the order of his Son.” Alma did not mention that they were members of the Council, but all indications suggest that the ordinations he talked about took place at that Council, so the settings of Alma 13:1-8 and Abraham 3:22-4:1 are the same, and each is simply a different version of the same story—except that Abraham is talking about the purpose for creating the world, and Alma 13 tells us more about intelligences—and therefore, gives us much more detail about who we were before we were spirits.

In chapter 13 Alma addressed the most important mystery in the universe: the answer to the somber cry for purpose: “Why and who am I?” The ever seemingly elusive answer can only be discovered within the light of the greater question: “Why and who is Jehovah-Messiah-Jesus-the Resurrected Christ?”

As one begins to discover the answer to that question, one’s perception of eternal reality also begins to grow, and the veil begins to dissolve that separates one’s Self in linear time from a vision of the law of one’s own being in sacred time. One comes to grasp the significance of the eternal magnitude of the Savior’s Atonement, and in that understanding, one discovers the meaning of Self.

The Feast of Tabernacles temple drama offered a nearly comprehensive approach to the answer to the constantly repeated question: “Why and who am I?” In doing so, it first posed, then addressed the answer to the more fundamental question, “What physical (meaning time and space, as well as world and body) environment must have been provided for us in order that the Atonement would work?” The answer reaches through the full span of our eternities.

Alma apparently understood that the story told in the festival temple drama showed that we began before our spirit birth as cognizant beings whose primary characteristic was that we were intelligent. That is, we could think, experience emotions, and make decisions based on information we evaluated through our perceptions. We were, as John Taylor wrote, “a spark of deity, struck from his eternal blaze”—a person of light, with an

⁸⁰⁴Roberts, *Seventy’s Course in Theology*, 2:8-11. See Orson Pratt, “Great First Cause, or the Self-Moving Forces of the Universe,” *Series of Pamphlets by Orson Pratt* (Liverpool: R James, 1851).

Psalms of Israel's Temple Worship

individual personality.⁸⁰⁵ Using that simple light as a comparison, the Savior was a blazing fire. We see that in Lehi's vision where the Savior is described as having a luster "above that of the sun at noon-day," but the twelve who followed him were only brighter than the "stars in the firmament" (1 Nephi 1:9-10). That observation about the Savior's glory helps us answer the next necessary question: Why was Christ the First Born? There are three possible answers:

(1) It was a jolly good bit of luck—an answer that is completely unacceptable.

(2) God made Christ better than everyone else. That is an equally unacceptable answer because it violates all the laws of free agency. Such a notion simply takes Calvin's idea of predestination and moves it back one step from our physical birth to our spirit birth. If we teach that God created people differently rather than letting them set their own destiny—even if we put that creation back to our premortal spirit birth—that is still Calvinism. It is still predestination, and it is still false.⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰⁵ President Taylor said, "I profess to be an immortal being, as we all are. A spark of Deity, struck from the fire of His eternal blaze, dwells in us, a portion of that intelligence that dwells with the Gods; which, if we will follow out through the influence of the Holy Ghost, of which I have spoken, will bring us back again into the presence of God; and with us our wives, our children, and our associations." (John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24: 5-6.)

President Taylor used phrases like, "a spark of Deity, struck from the fires of his eternal blaze," many times. Some examples are: *The Mormon* (New York, August 29, 1857; *Teachings of Presidents of the Church, John Taylor* [Melchizedek Priesthood Manual, 2003] (Salt Lake City, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 211-12. [Quoted from G. Homer Durham, *Gospel Kingdom* (1941), 1-3.]; *The Gospel Kingdom: Selections from the Writings and Discourses of John Taylor*, selected, arranged, and edited, with an introduction by G. Homer Durham [Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1941], 63.); *Journal of Discourses*, 8:3-4, 10:131-32.

⁸⁰⁶ Because John Calvin did not believe in a premortal existence, he assumed that God created people at the time of their mortal birth. That assumption presented him with a theological dilemma. This was its rationale: (1) God is perfect, therefore his creations are also perfect; (2) However, some of his creations are bad and are going to go to hell; (3) Therefore, either God messed up when he created them (not an acceptable conclusion), or he did not err; (4) If he did not err, then he created them exactly the way he wanted them to be; (5) Therefore, he created the bad people with the intent that they should go to hell; (6) Conclusion: God created some people to go to heaven, and other people to go to hell. That is called predestination.

We have a similar dilemma if we believe intelligence is used as a synonym for spirit, and that God took a basic element, called intelligence, and used it to create the spirit bodies of his spirit children, and that the spirit creation was the origin of cognizance. That belief simply takes Calvin's predestination back one step into the previous world. It assumes that the Savior is better than all the rest, because God made him first, with more light, and therefore better. However, that same argument would also assume that Satan is bad because

In the Book of Mormon.

(3) As an intelligence, Christ never sinned. Therefore he was clean and could—by right—be born into our Father’s presence as the first one. Because of his infinite and eternal Atonement, the rest of us intelligences who had sinned by experimenting with truth and non-truth, could repent, become clean again, and thereby become qualified to be born as spirit children of our Father in Heaven. That is the only possibly correct scenario.

That conclusion insists on another: if only Christ was clean and without sin, then that presupposes it was possible for intelligences not to be clean. That is, they could sin. That is easy to understand because, as the Savior observed in the Sermon on the Mount, attitudes and motives are not lesser sins than actions. If intelligences could distinguish between “me” and “not me,” then they could also understand self-interest. They could seek to dominate others or to bless them. Therefore they could act on impure motives or on pure charity. They could hold others in contempt, or they could love them. They could sin or not sin.

If this is correct, then Alma’s sermon gives us great insight about the meaning and extent of the Atonement—about what it means to say that the Atonement is infinite and eternal. That insight is this: intelligences are represented by Alma as being self-cognizant, capable of learning and of interacting with others. They have free agency and are therefore capable of error. If they were capable of error—sin—they could become unclean while they were still intelligences. Since no unclean thing can enter into the presence of God, no intelligence who had ever made a wrong decision could enter his presence to become one of his spirit offspring. (Only Christ had never sinned, so only Christ could—by right—enter the presence of God to become his Son. Therefore Christ was the “Firstborn” and “Only Begotten.”) However, the intelligences could enter the presence of God on the same principles that one has always been able to do so. That is, because Christ’s Atonement is infinite and eternal, it has the power to reach back in time to where intelligences could be redeemed and brought into the presence of God. If we read Abraham 3 and Alma 13 correctly, some intelligences qualified to become spirit children of Heavenly Father before others qualified. Those who qualified first became members of

God made him with less light, and therefore not as good as others. In that case, that is if we assume that our personalities were not already established while we were intelligences, before God gave us spirit bodies, then it must follow that the way God made us, not our own agency, will ultimately determine whether we will go to the Celestial Kingdom or to some other place.

Psalms of Israel's Temple Worship

the Council (Satan, who was a liar from the beginning,⁸⁰⁷ qualified by knowing the requisite things and performing the requisite performances, but when he was presented with a plan that would send him to earth where he would be judged by charity rather than performance, he realized he could no longer lie his way through the system and tried to mess everything up for everyone else).

In the cosmic myth, the mentor—sometimes old, but always wiser than younger men—appears in the story just at the time when the youth, who is the hero, is old enough to begin to question who he is and why his aspirations, spiritual powers, and sense of reality are different from other people's. The mentor helps the youth understand his destiny by teaching him his origin and showing him his purpose. As the youth becomes a young man, he leans less and less on the mentor and more and more on his own sense of Self. Eventually the mentor dies, or otherwise must go away, leaving the young man alone. But he is not alone; the teachings of the mentor have become a part of him, and now he can define his Self in the same way his mentor had already defined him. It is not until after the mentor goes away that the young man can truly discover that Self. Alone, and still a bit unsure, he begins—humbly, but determined, now a dignified follower of the eternal law of his own being—to fulfill and make new his everlasting covenants and his own destiny in the cosmos. Later—seemingly much later—he and his friend will embrace again when he reaches the summit of his journey.

The ancient temple drama was like that. At first it barely parts the fog that hides the way back to one's eternal Self, affording only a small window through which the youth can see a portion of the sky as sacred space in sacred time. Then the window closes, and the initiate must go away to walk the path he had been shown. In his mind and on the stage of this heart, the drama replays itself many times year after year. It leads the youth to manhood—like the pillar of light of Moses's night, showing Israel the way through the desert, to come to the source of the cool mountain springs of the Promised Land—until the youth, now a man, reaches the top of that sacred mountain from which he can view the horizons of eternity.

⁸⁰⁷ 24 And truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come;
25 And whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning (D&C 93:24-25).