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AN INGENIOUS AND INSPIRING LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ALMA 30–42

Blake T. Ostler

Review of Mark A. Wrathall, *Alma 30–63: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). 176 pages. \$9.95 (paperback).

***Abstract:** Mark A. Wrathall's analytic treatment of Alma 30–42 is a sheer gift that inspires insight into the theological depth of Alma's thought. His reading of Alma teases out insights not previously recognized and not easily discovered regarding belief and knowledge and their relation to faith and committed action. This extremely rewarding introduction provides a glimpse at the best any writer in the Latter-day Saint tradition has written on Alma's thoughts and goals.*

It would be difficult to overstate just how impressive I found Mark Wrathall's small and brief "theological introduction" of Alma 30–63. Wrathall brings to this introduction his considerable genius and insight. His impressive credentials in both philosophy and law are evident in this work. His immersive knowledge of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger is especially on display — though a full exploration of that issue would take a much longer introduction to Heidegger than this review allows.

The Nature of these Brief Introductions

Let me get a few things out of the way right up front. First, this is not a work addressing Alma 30–63, because Wrathall never gets beyond Alma 42. There is literally no discussion of Alma 45–63 or why the earlier chapters are set in a work that is dominated by war between two peoples who fight over the meaning of their origin traditions. This book is not a work of theology. There is no attempt to place the text in the context

of any theology other than the a-theological (and even anti-theological) approach that Wrathall sees in the text itself. There is not even a hint of expertise or discussion of ancient context — or any context beyond the text for that matter. All of the reviews of the books in this series should be called: “A Review of Texts Without Context.” Or perhaps we should call them *textum solus*. There is no attempt to situate the text in space and time beyond what the text says self-referentially.

The failure to provide any context beyond text is both a weakness and a strength of this entire series. The authors of this series are brilliant textual analysts who provide ingenious insights into the text and how it operates. None of the authors has the education or training to comment on any ancient context or even the context of Joseph Smith’s *Weltanschauung* (roughly the contextual worldviews that dominate the thought of the time). A text that is an island in a contextual vacuum exists in a void of meaning.

To be fair, Wrathall does provide some context of how particular English words were used in Joseph Smith’s time. He quotes the Oxford English Dictionary on the meaning of the word *type* and the American English Dictionary for the meanings of *proper* and *whit*. Wrathall also comments on how Alma’s discussion of death, the intermediate state, and the resurrection fills in a gaping hole in what the biblical documents tell us about those issues (without any citations to scholarly works about what the Bible does say about such issues — e.g., the status of the *rephaim* in *Sheol*). That is about as far as the discussion of context goes. One looking to understand the Book of Mormon in the ancient context of sixth-century BC Jews coming to a new world or how the text could fit into that new world in the context of the world as we know it will have to look elsewhere.

It seems to me that the Maxwell Institute has purposely steered away from any “apologetics” regarding the ancient origins of Joseph Smith’s *oeuvre* (body of work) and his claims to textual antiquity. This is a considerable loss in my opinion. The very faith that Wrathall discusses in this work shows that the issues of faith can be affected not only by misunderstanding faith but also by failing to understand the assumptions that control issues of faith. Alma’s battle with Korihor that Wrathall so ably discusses demonstrates that the evidence-based approach is the standard or default position (and especially so in our culture steeped in the fallacy of scientism regarding faith). Alma does not reject Korihor’s evidence-based approach — he merely points out that there are more kinds of evidence than Korihor has considered.

Let me be blunt: claims made about and by Mormon scripture are often empirical claims that must be addressed by assessment of evidence. There is a vacuum of this kind of approach or response to issues of faith by the Maxwell Institute. In this respect, the Maxwell Institute is a pale reflection of its predecessor. The predecessor demonstrated that the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price would be able to withstand and even foster faith in the face of such empirical challenges. The Maxwell Institute either currently lacks that faith or just wants to avoid it.

However, that recognition should not prevent us from appreciating the value and gift that this series of commentaries on the Book of Mormon represents. The text of the Book of Mormon is robustly fulfilling, complex, intellectually impressive, and inspiring even on its own terms — and these introductions drive that point home abundantly. There are several real contributions from Wrathall’s commentary. His gift of analyzing the text and how it works and what the terms used mean in that context is both impressive and enlightening. I will give just a few examples from this rich work.

Belief and Knowledge in Alma

First, Wrathall explains the distinction between belief and knowledge (where “A” stands for any person and “p” stands for any proposition):

- Belief is an attitude in which some *A* holds it to be true that *p*.
- Knowledge is an attitude in which (a) some *A* holds it to be true that *p*, (b) it is true that *p*, and (c) *A*’s holding it to be true that *p* is secured in some appropriate way. (23)

This distinction is important. These definitions are standard in the philosophical topic known as epistemology, or the study of how we know and whether we can know. Wrathall adopts the standard philosophical definition of knowledge as justified true belief (the JTB theory). Wrathall focuses on this particular definition of knowledge procured through an appropriate means of securing a belief. Almost everyone (currently) accepts that we cannot know to be true what is false and that beliefs, to constitute knowledge, must be justified in some way. However, exactly what that way of coming to “know” is has been a matter of intense disagreement.

However, it is essential to note that this definition addresses solely propositional knowledge and does not apply to an important kind of knowledge — experiential knowledge that is non-propositional in nature. I mention this distinction because it is precisely experiential knowledge that Alma (as Wrathall recognizes) actually sees as the basis

of knowledge derived by faith.¹ What is the definition of knowledge as Alma uses the term? Wrathall denies that knowledge derived by faith is a type of belief. That is the key to his entire approach. He argues that Alma believes that “faith and knowledge are fundamentally different types of attitudes and belong in different categories” (62).

This approach just leaves me baffled as to what knowledge is *per se* or what it is in relation to faith. Wrathall tells us that knowledge is not on a continuum with faith so that faith someday turns into knowledge. But that is what knowledge *is not*, not what it *is*. Why can't Wrathall just define knowledge in relation to faith as follows?

- (a) A holds it to be true that p, (b) it is true that p, and (c) A holds it to be true that p based on experiences that are produced by properly functioning faculties.²

The knowledge could be produced by experiences such as seeing God (that Alma himself claims as the basis for his knowledge³), or tasting exceeding joy in living the word (Alma 36:26), or in being born again of God (Alma 36: 26). This issue is important because Wrathall claims that Alma believes that ultimately reliable knowledge is impossible in this life except for those who have the exceptional experience of seeing God (147n8). In so reading Alma, Wrathall takes Alma to be telling us that virtually everyone who bears a testimony and who claims to know that the gospel is true are really just mistaken about what knowledge is. What they really have are mere beliefs that are not properly justified. Alma himself accepted that he knew based on his spiritual experiences and that his testimony was acceptable evidence for others such as Korihor. Indeed, Wrathall's acceptance of the requirement to “see” God as the basis of real or ultimate knowledge adopts the very definition of knowledge that Alma rejects and Korihor promotes, as discussed below.

Moreover, there are numerous ways of looking at the kind of justification needed. For example, William Alston argues that the means of justification is provided by beliefs derived from properly functioning faculties that are likely to generate a high proportion of true beliefs to

1. Experiential knowledge is sometimes referred to by philosophers as *qualia* — the knowledge that we have of, for example, what it is like to experience tasting ice cream, or seeing blue, or knowing how to ride a bike.

2. Note that this definition does not limit “faculties” solely to cognitive faculties but to every possible means by which humans discern truth and/or come to knowledge.

3. “I have seen, therefore I do know of these things” (Alma 36:26).

false ones.⁴ Thus, Alston adopts a form of *reliabilism* and would change (c) to this: A's belief that p was produced by a reliable cognitive process. In contrast, Alvin Plantinga argues that knowledge is produced by sufficient warrant that is grounded in "basic" beliefs.⁵ Plantinga would change (c) to this: A's belief that p is warranted because it is a properly basic belief where a properly basic belief is grounded in reliable support that is reasonable (not subject to defeaters) and consistent with a sensible worldview. Plantinga's view is a form of *foundationalism* because it bases knowledge on having a reliable justification as its foundation. On either of their views, spiritual experiences can be knowledge-producing.

Is Wrathall's definition an adequate definition of knowledge? Is it what Alma really intended, if he intended any consistent view of knowledge at all? Is an experience of confirmation by the spirit, or a life-changing spiritual transformation, or a vision of God an adequate basis to claim faith? Is a vision of God really the only way to know for sure?

I point out these issues because Wrathall's discussion leaves numerous important questions unaddressed and unanswered. That is more than understandable in such a brief work — but it is important to signal to the reader that there remains a lot of work to be done and further discussion regarding what Alma is addressing.

These issues are also essential to understand the exchange between Alma and Korihor. Wrathall breaks down the argument made by Korihor into its premise form:

- (1) If you cannot see X, then you cannot know of X.
- (2) No one can see things in the future.
- (3) Conclude: If X is in the future, then you cannot know of X.
- (4) Christ will come only in the future.
- (5) Conclude: You cannot know of Christ.
- (6) When Christ comes in the future he will atone for and remit our sins.
- (7) Conclude: that you cannot know that there will be an atonement and a remission of sins.
- (8) Conclude: that there will not be any atonement.

4. William Alston, *Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

5. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1993).

(9) God has never been seen.

(10) Conclude: that God never was nor ever will be.

Why does Korihor adopt the view of knowledge based on things seen found in premise (1)? It seems to be the very opposite of faith as defined in Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Faith is unseen evidence according to this definition. The emphasis is on what is not seen — so Korihor adopts the exact opposite reliance on evidence as the basis of knowledge: one can only know what is, in fact, seen. So knowledge based on sight seems to be the opposite of faith. The word *substance* here means its technical meaning: whatever stands under something as its foundation. The foundation of faith is what we hope for that we cannot see — at least as expressed in these texts.

Essentially the same emphasis on not seeing is found in Alma 32:21: “[F]aith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.” It seems likely that Moroni is reflecting on the clash between Alma and Korihor when he discusses faith and its relation to being tested: “[F]aith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith.” (Ether 12:6) It appears that in this text there is a relation between faith and a witness of the truth. But that witness comes only after faith is tested by trial — or perhaps faith is tested by a life of repentance and mercy as Alma suggests in Alma 32.

Based on the (false) assumption that one can know only what one sees, Korihor logically derives that nothing in the future can be known and therefore one cannot know that Christ will come. Korihor asserts that the sole valid basis of securing belief is seeing with one’s own eyes. That means that if one accepts Korihor’s premise, the fact that no one can know of things to come logically follows. However, it does not logically follow that God does not exist or that there will be no atonement — (7) and (10) do not logically follow from the premises. Korihor has clearly overstepped what he can validly conclude.

Wrathall observes that premise (1) is false because there are other ways of securing belief, and that is exactly how Alma attacks the argument: “Alma argues ... that knowledge can be secured not just by direct perceptual experience but also by the testimony of a witness of some other thing” (32). To demonstrate that premise (1) is false, Alma gives counter-examples of other ways to produce knowledge. These things include the orderly motion of all things and the testimony of the prophets that Christ will come (Alma 30:39, 41). Surprisingly, Wrathall asserts that

“for Alma’s immediate purposes, it doesn’t matter whether the testimony of such things is sufficient to persuade anyone to believe in God” (32). That is because all that Alma needs to do is to show that premise (1) is false to defeat the argument. Wrathall notes a long history of argument over whether the order of the world is a sufficient basis to believe in God (called the teleological argument). There is also a large body of literature on whether testimony derived from spiritual experiences is reliable.

But is Wrathall correct? It seems to me that Wrathall sets up Alma with a straw man argument. If the testimony is false or the fact asserted to support a belief is false, then there is no knowledge given the definition of knowledge. Remember, *p* has to be true for there to be justified true knowledge. It seems to me that it does matter whether the testimony is true and the facts adduced to support a belief are true. That is because Korihor could easily respond that Alma’s argument relies on false counter-examples to premise (1) and, because they are false, they do not invalidate it. That would be a logically valid response — and it takes a great deal more to show whether Alma’s observations are sound if we take him to be making the argument that Wrathall imputes to him.

Nonetheless, it is obvious on its face that premise (1) is too narrow. Seeing something is not the only way to know that something is true. All one has to do to falsify that assertion is to point to something that is known on a basis that does not include seeing, like knowing that someone is speaking because one can hear them.

However, I think that Wrathall misses Korihor’s stronger argument and Alma’s more definitive response. Wrathall does not discuss Korihor’s strongest argument — and it is a shame because it is a variant of an argument used often by critics of the Church and those who lose faith: Korihor actually argues that the faculties that produced the testimony on which Alma relies are not reliable and/or properly functioning faculties. All of these beliefs are the result of a “frenzied mind.”

Ye look forward and say that ye see a remission of your sins. But behold, it is the effect of a frenzied mind; and this derangement of your minds comes because of the traditions of your fathers, which lead you away into belief of things which are not so. (Alma 30:16)

So Korihor is adopting the particular view that the justification of knowledge is derived from properly functioning faculties and Alma’s and the believers’ minds are not properly functioning because they are frenzied. To be in a frenzy means “a state of great activity and strong

emotion that is often violent and frightening and not under control.”⁶ As it is used in Alma, the term means to be in an irrational state due to overexcited emotion. It could also mean simply that the emotional state is derived from non-cognitive faculties that do not function properly and are highly unlikely to produce true beliefs. There are two arguments here: “you believe it only because that is what your parents taught you” and “your supposed emotions are not a reliable basis of knowledge.” This is a very contemporary and, frankly, stronger argument.

Korihor follows up that argument with another argument that enjoys contemporary currency: there is no atonement because there is no sin; there is only prospering according to one’s genius and conquering by one’s own strength “and that whatever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17). So we have the Nietzschean argument that the herd mentality of the weak is a false morality and the *ubermensch* will conquer. There is no sin and thus there is no need for an atonement. Moreover, the priests who teach about the atonement are those relying on their strength and genius by getting the believing suckers to make them rich. They use these false traditions to exploit the believers — they are just wicked and greedy (Alma 30:27–28). Wrathall sums up this argument this way: “It is in virtue of our rationality and intellectual rigor that we prosper.” But Wrathall does not discuss the point of Korihor’s attack on spiritual experiences as the basis of belief because they are produced by emotions and not by reliable, cognitive faculties. He also does not discuss the point that Korihor’s arguments set up the armed and deadly conflict in the later chapters of Alma 37–63 based on the claim that the Nephites have robbed the Lamanites because of a false tradition that they received from their ancestors.

How does Alma respond to these arguments? Wrathall argues that ultimately Korihor is convinced because Alma shows him a sign by striking him dumb through the power of God (33–34). But, of course, faith cannot be based on signs, and anyone who demands a sign as a basis of belief is asking inappropriately (Matthew 16:4). The reason for that fact is that anyone who asks for a sign is wicked and adulterous. The reason that asking for a sign is automatically adulterous is that it demonstrates a lack of fidelity, a rejection of the principle of faith itself as a basis of knowledge.

The priests who are accused used the law to arrest Korihor and bring him before Alma as chief judge, even though there was no law against beliefs, but apparently there was a law against reviling (verbally arguing against) God (Alma 30:29). Alma responds to Korihor’s argument that

6. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “frenzy.”

the priests are exploiting believers by pointing out that he has never been paid a senine (a dime) for his services to the church (Alma 33:34–35). Alma then gives Korihor the very sign he demands in order to save the faith of the church’s members (Alma 30:47). Alma recognizes the real problem: Korihor “resists” the truth because of the hardness of his heart (Alma 30:46). Then we get the surprise that is the focus of Korihor’s admission: “I know that nothing save it were the power of God could bring this (muteness) upon me; yea, *and I always knew that there was a God*” (Alma 30:52).

So, it turns out that Korihor was not arguing in good faith, but he was not just lying. Korihor explains that he was self-deceived because he both knew that there was a God and also believed there was no God. How could that be? It turns out that human belief is a lot more complicated than just having an attitude toward propositions. It turns out that we have biases and things that screw with our minds. But how could he accurately report his belief that there was no God when in fact he knew that God exists? He was deceived by an angel of darkness, and “I taught these (falsehoods) because they were pleasing to the carnal mind, even until I had much success, insomuch that I verily believed that they were true; and for this cause I withstood the truth” (Alma 30:53). So the real problem is not whether Korihor’s arguments are valid. That is really a distraction — and the text presents it as a distraction to the real problem. The problem is a hard heart and the self-deception that arises from a hard heart.

The recognition that there is a cognitive failure caused by the hard heart is of imperative importance. It turns out that the one operating with faulty cognitive faculties is Korihor, not Alma. Korihor’s argument is correct; his diagnosis is wrong. The problem of spiritual knowledge is caused by a hard heart, a symptom of which is the deranged and frenzied attitude of superiority that comes from believing one’s own lies. Korihor believed his lies because he “prospered according to his genius” as he claims — he believed his lies because he deceived himself into believing a lie that, at some level, he knew was false but resisted because it didn’t serve his purposes. This is the real conclusion of Alma’s argument. It is Korihor who suffers from impaired cognitive faculties because he refused to know what he already knows.

Contra Wrathall’s assessment of Alma’s argument, Alma rejects the simplistic view that beliefs are merely attitudes holding it to be that some proposition is true — beliefs are, in fact, complicated by emotions, biases, self-deception, and competing personal interests. Human belief is a messy and complicated matter.

Faith and Knowledge in Alma

Now for the denouement. Wrathall maintains that faith, as Alma sees it, is not a species of cognitive attitude that is a form of knowledge or something that matures into knowledge at all. Wrathall defines Alma's approach to faith as follows: "Faith is a practical stance of active loyalty to and trust in God" (22). The "practical stance" needs to be unpacked. Wrathall gives us the grace of unpacking a practical stance as:

- (i) an evaluative attitude (as opposed to a cognitive attitude that evaluates propositions for their truth value) that evaluates matters for the appropriate way to respond to them;
- (ii) affective responses (feelings and moods) that guide actions; and
- (iii) purposive action directed at accomplishing the appropriate response. (21)

This definition dovetails nicely with the definition of faith as a principle of action given in the *Lecture on Faith*: "And as faith is the moving cause of all action in temporal concerns, so it is in spiritual; for the Savior has said, and that truly, that he that *believeth* and is baptized, shall be saved. Mark 16:16."⁷ "Is not faith the principle of action in spiritual things as well as in temporal? It is."⁸ This approach only makes sense if I do not have a hope of being able to accomplish a task I will never attempt, but if I believe that I have the capacity and real possibility of accomplishing a task, and if the task is worthwhile, then the hope that I can accomplish the task is empowered by this belief to take action to achieve a desired result. The motivation to take action with the hope and belief that I can accomplish it thus amounts to faith to act. But I have no motivation to act at all in the absence of the belief and hope that I can accomplish what I set out to do. Faith thus seems to be synonymous with motivation to act based upon my beliefs about what I can do and my hope to do it. It is a practical stance in relation to action. In this sense, faith is also empowerment to act. The *Lectures on Faith* recognize that faith is not merely a principle of action but also that "faith is a principle of power."⁹

7. *Lectures on Faith* 1:12. See "Theology. Lecture First on the Doctrine of the Church of the Latter Day Saints," *Doctrine and Covenants, 1835*, 7, Joseph Smith Papers Project (website), <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/15>.

8. *Ibid.*, 10, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/18>.

9. *Ibid.*

However, what permits faith in God in the *Lectures on Faith* is a correct *understanding* of the character and attributes of God so that we know He is trustworthy and always able to fulfill his word.¹⁰ The reason that *understanding* God's attributes and character is a basis for faith is that faith is an interpersonal trust; God can be known to be trustworthy just by knowing he is always truthful and committed to our best interest and has the power and knowledge to always prevail and assure the realization of his promises. Interpersonal trust requires an understanding of the facts regarding a person's character and capacities. In this sense, there is a cognitive aspect to faith as well as an evaluative attitude. Indeed, my evaluation is just based on the cognitive assessment that I make of the character and attributes of God. Thus, it seems that this kind of interpersonal faith requires a significant evaluative cognitive assessment.

In this interpersonal sense of faith as trust, Wrathall's definition and approach to faith in Alma slights the cognitive aspects of faith in favor of a merely non-cognitive evaluative attitude. "Faith in" requires a cognitive grasp of what we repose our faith in as opposed to "faith that," which only requires an evaluative assessment of capacities and hopes (or abilities and desires). Thus, faith in God includes a cognitive assessment, while faith that I can do something requires a pragmatic or practical evaluative assessment.

Wrathall is correct to focus on the non-cognitive evaluative attitude as the basis of faith in Alma 32 because one of the issues Alma addresses is the practical issue of what to do as opposed to the question of in what to believe. Alma is responding to an inquiry by the Zoramites who have been excluded from their places of worship because they are too poor (Alma 31:1). At least in part, Alma is responding to this inquiry: "And now, my beloved brethren, as ye have desired to know of me what ye shall do because ye are afflicted and cast out" (Alma 32:24). His answer is thus a pragmatic response outlining the practical stance that is called for by faith. What are they to do? The answer is to (1) repent and (2) take an action to test whether their faith actually works to achieve the results that they seek. But this is *not* an answer to a question such as, "In what or whom shall we believe?" That inquiry requires a different answer that discusses the cognitive matters of fact that must be believed in order to repose trust in a person or proposition (and even these are two different kinds of trust).

The question remains: how do I determine that my faculties (cognitive or otherwise) are properly functioning in a truth-conducive manner? How do I know that I am not self-deceived or believe as I do because

10. *Lectures on Faith* 3 on the character of God and *Lectures on Faith* 4 on the attributes of God are dedicated to proving this point.

of a deranged and frenzied mind? And what are these faculties so that we can assess them? Alma demonstrated that Korihor's cognitive and affective faculties were not properly functioning because of his admitted self-deception. But that shows us how to know when faculties do not function, not how to know when they do function. They do not function when we have a hard heart. So the answer to the question follows from understanding Korihor's problem: soften your heart enough to give faith a chance. Alma's answer is that faith must be put to the test:

If ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can do no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words. (Alma 32:27)

What are "faculties" in Alma's terms? Faculties are means of discovering or coming to the truth. In this context, Alma mentions four faculties: (1) a humble and soft heart (Alma 32:8); (2) soul; (3) *understanding*; (4) *mind* (32:34). Wrathall notes that the soft or humble heart leads to "receptive openness" (63). A properly functioning faculty of a soft heart responds to the "word" that teaches that Christ will come and atone by causing the soul to swell, the understanding to be enlightened and the mind to expand (Alma 32:34). I point this out because Wrathall interprets Alma to say that we gain "knowledge of very specific *propositions*" (64, my emphasis), i.e., I know that the seed is good because it grows in the sense that "it contains the potential to change me" (64). I know that the seed can "change my heart in good ways." I also know that my "understanding doth *begin* to be enlightened and [my] mind doth *begin* to expand" (64). However, this is not "absolute certainty" according to Wrathall because Alma points out that we still do not have a "complete" or "perfect" knowledge (64, see Alma 32:35–36). So what we gain through faith is in fact propositional knowledge that includes the mind after all and is not limited merely to a practical stance. Wrathall's approach is therefore incomplete and fails to account for this propositional knowledge.

What is being tested is specific: the truth of Alma's words. The truth will be determined by the experiment. The experiment is possible only if there is a mere particle of faith in the form of a desire to know of their truth. The experiment requires openness to the possibility that what Alma says is true. If that openness is not present, there is not sufficient faith even to conduct the experiment.

But it is not merely the practical stance that Alma addresses: it is also the truth of what he taught:

Now as I said concerning faith — that it was not a perfect knowledge — *even so with my words*. Ye cannot *know of their surety* at first, unto perfection, any more than faith is a perfect knowledge. (Alma 32:26)

Alma is not addressing merely the practical question of “what shall we do?” He is also addressing the propositional truth of what he preached: that Christ would come and atone for sins. Wrathall overlooks this double problem addressed by Alma and thus Wrathall limits faith addressed by Alma to a practical stance. But it is more than that; it is also a means of testing the truth of the propositions that Alma affirmed: that Christ would come and atone for sins. So Alma does have propositional knowledge in mind when speaking of faith in addition to the practical stance that is called for by faith.

Is knowledge — cognitive knowledge — produced through this test of faith? Wrathall says no. Faith and knowledge are incommensurate and not on the same continuum or category of meaning. But Alma says that there is a sense in which faith is related to knowledge. We do not have a “perfect knowledge” of all things, but we do have “perfect knowledge in that thing.” What thing? The truth of Alma’s words about Christ (Alma 32:28).

But is what is produced real knowledge or merely a practical stance that just happens to work? By implication Alma says what is known through faith is not merely a practical stance, but also knowledge of the truth of what he preaches about Christ:

And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; and this because you know, for ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand. (Alma 32:34)

The first thing to note is that Alma affirms that one does in fact have knowledge. The second thing to note is that when we have knowledge, “faith is dormant” because the action motivated by faith has been accomplished. The third thing to note is that the action has resulted in a limited but perfect knowledge that the faith tested bore fruit such that (1) it swelled our souls, (2) our understanding begins to be enlightened, and (3) our minds begin to expand.

It turns out that faith and knowledge are on sort of continuum after all, so that when knowledge is achieved, faith no longer has a purpose to fulfill

because it has fully fulfilled its purpose. So faith stands as a motivating power that leads to the action of experimenting or testing the truth of the belief that Christ will come and atone. The experiment is completed when it results in knowing because the outcome of the experiment was confirmed.

So what is Alma saying? That we know the truth of particular matters when our desire to know is satisfied by experiential knowledge that expands us as persons and enlightens our understanding of matters. The open heart is a properly functioning faculty. The knowledge gained is not only propositional but also experiential. It is not effective at showing merely whether propositions are true or false, but also whether our lives are in accord with the nature of happiness and joy. What is known includes the truth of certain propositions about Christ's coming and atonement and also knowledge about a practical stance in life. The means of knowing is both experiential and cognitive. However, it must be noted that the mind is caused to expand and understand, according to Alma, by the status of one's humble heart. It is the experiential knowledge sensed in the open or soft heart that is the foundation and source of knowledge.

I can give an analogy that teases out more exactly the relation between belief, faith, knowledge, and continued faith after having knowledge only in specific matters. Let's call it the analogy of the hungry man looking for a kitchen. I am hungry. I believe that there may be food in the kitchen to eat, so I am motivated to go to the kitchen to look. When I get to the kitchen, I find bread and eat it until I am filled.

Here is how the analogy enlightens regarding Alma's use of these terms in the parable of the seed. In this analogy, my hunger to know where to find food is analogous to faith; it is what motivates me to act. We can say that faith is a hunger to know. My belief is simply my attitude toward the possibility that there is food in the kitchen. If I don't believe that there is food in the kitchen then I will not look there. When I do look in the kitchen and find bread, I know that my belief is true because I found what I was looking for. Now my faith is dormant after I eat and I am satisfied because I am no longer motivated to seek food; I am full. So faith and knowledge are not in the same category, just as Wrathall says. Food is not in the same category or same type of thing as the hunger that motivates me to find food. It is not the case that hunger can mature to become food. However, they can be intimately related because it is the hunger that motivates my action to find food and eat it.

Now let's extend the metaphor to make it more exact. There is another dimension to faith that is not yet captured — the dimension of trust. Faith is a kind of trust in things. I have to have trust that the bread will satisfy

my hunger and not kill me if I find it and eat it. After all, I am going to put it in my mouth. So I have to trust that the bread is good for nourishment in order to eat it. Further, once I am full I am no longer motivated to find food but only for a while. I will be hungry again, so I must continue to seek and find food until the day that I die. The mere fact that I have eaten bread does not mean that I will forever be filled or satisfied.

What I need is a continuing source that continues to give me bread. I seek the Bread of Life. I need to know the bread maker and develop a relationship so that I continue to receive bread and be filled. Moreover, I want a really good bread maker whom I can trust to make bread that tastes good to me. I am no longer satisfied to merely address my basic hunger; I want to find food that is delicious to the taste. When we find the Bread of Life, we find the source that can continue to nourish us. Moreover, the bread is so delicious and so abundant that I want to share it with everyone.

So it is with faith. Once I have eaten, it is not a final solution to my need for food, even though I have proven that my belief that there is food in the kitchen was true. I have knowledge in that specific thing only. However, I need to continue to press forward to find more food to satisfy my hunger that will surely return.

We can say that belief is a basis for seeking to verify the truth about facts. Faith is the hunger that motivates us to find knowledge and the trust to accept it when we find it. Knowledge is the result of our search that is verified when we find what we were seeking. Continuing in faith and enduring to the end is applying our knowledge to make our lives better day by day.

Is the Justified True Belief Approach the Best Way to Assess What Alma Says?

The problem with knowledge as justified true belief is that it is circular. In order to know that I know, I must first know that what I believe is true. But the entire point of knowing is that what is true is known to be true on the basis of my justification for coming to know what is true. This circularity leads to what are known as Gettier problems: what I believe could be true even if my means of justifying my belief have nothing to do with producing that knowledge. But my knowledge would still count as knowledge, based on the definition of knowledge as justified true belief. I have beliefs. I have justification for my beliefs. My beliefs just happen to be true. It is simply that what I believe has nothing to do with my justification. The problem is that I am simply lucky that my beliefs match the truth because they have nothing to do with the reasons for believing.

Is Alma's view of faith's relation to knowledge a form of this luck that I just happen to have true beliefs and yet my reasons for believing have nothing to do with causing or producing that belief? No, Alma actually solves the Gettier problems by showing that we know that the soft heart is a properly functioning faculty because it is fecund in generating expanded understanding of matters, leading to a working and functioning life that is joyful and expanding our minds so that we can understand a greater range of matters. It is the pragmatic criteria of a functioning life and faculty that works matched with the virtue of a fecund belief that leads to greater understanding that shows that the beliefs generated were produced by truth conducive and functioning faculties.

Wrathall does not address the issue of properly functioning faculties that are truth conducive, because he does not discuss the thrust of Korihor's argument about a deranged mind and Alma's focus on showing how to know the truth of the words (i.e., propositions) that he preaches. Yes, faith is a practical stance, but it is also a means of leading to knowledge about the propositions inherently affirmed by faith in Christ.

However, Alma's approach calls into question the entire justified true belief approach to knowledge that Wrathall uses to analyze Alma. Alma adopts a different approach that focuses not merely on properly functioning faculties, but also on the pragmatic effects of a life lived in faith through repentance. The focus on a soft heart as opposed to a mind that can be self-deceived shows that Alma has already adopted what philosophers call a reliabilist theory of knowledge. Such approaches require that knowledge be produced through reliable cognitive processes.¹¹ Alma views knowledge as the outcome of a process of exercising faith that results in a particularly successful and valuable form of knowledge. This approach is very much like a virtue theory of knowledge supported by Ernest Sosa that sees knowledge as requiring a non-logical relation between belief and truth. Knowledge is experientially derived by an assessment of its results:

1. An *accurate* belief is true.
2. A belief is *adroit* if it is produced by a means that tends to produce truth in a skillful manner.

11. See, e.g., Fred I. Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

3. A belief is *apt* (or known to be true) in virtue of the believer's skill.¹²

The knowledge derived from a skillful application of tests designed to derive the truth results in both propositional and also experiential knowledge. Alma's approach also relies on the skill of the gardener to cultivate the seed, and the outcomes (growth of the seed) are the result of that skill and lead to knowledge because of the results derived from an appropriate test.

There is also a pragmatic epistemology inherent in Alma's approach — what is known to be true is what works. Pragmatic theorists adopt a pragmatic criterion to knowledge: *A knows that p if and only if A can use such knowledge as a reason for action.*¹³ The fact is that if we are told that x will occur if we do y, and we do y and x then occurs, then we have reason to know that what we were told is true because it worked as predicted. It is precisely the approach Alma adopts. However, one must have properly functioning faculties (a soft heart motivated by faith) to conduct the test. One knows from the results of the test that the promised results are good.

Given space constraints, it is more than understandable that Wrathall does not explore these alternative approaches to knowledge. However, they seem more apt to Alma's discussion of faith leading to knowledge of the truth of his words and the practical stance that leads to a better life than the justified true belief approach that he adopts.

Infinite Atonement

Wrathall also ingeniously discusses Alma's view that only an infinite atonement will be sufficient to accomplish the atonement. He interprets Alma as essentially rejecting the Penal Substitution Theory by the expression that the atonement must be infinite.¹⁴ The Penal Substitution Theory views the atonement as an economic transaction in which Christ's infinite merit pays off our debts. Alma and Amulek reject this view, according to Wrathall, because no amount of money or capital could ever suffice to pay an infinite obligation (80–81). Wrathall insightfully observes:

The pop theological interpretation [of infinite atonement] understands Amulek as invoking a kind of supernatural

12. Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

13. See, e.g., Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

14. Wrathall describes this theory without naming it as such.

power on the part of the Christ: no man can atone for another, but somehow a God can. I take Amulek's point to be different: because no one can atone for the sins of another, we need to stop thinking in terms of the payment of debts. We need to focus on how to heal relationships between us. (81–82)

This interpretation is just flat out dead on, insightful, and ingenious. I will not say more, but I urge the reader to pay careful attention to Wrathall's argument.

Justice and Mercy

Wrathall also has a very engaging and clarifying discussion of justice and mercy in Alma. What is most interesting to me in this discussion is that Wrathall interprets Alma to say that mercy overcomes justice when *we* are merciful; and not merely when God is merciful. That is, we get exactly what we deserve when we are merciful — mercy instead of justice. This approach is interesting to me because Alma is most often read as positing the conflict in justice and mercy as a conflict in God's attributes. "God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also" (Alma 42:15). How could God's status as both a just and merciful God depend on whether *we* are merciful? It seems to follow from this position that God is not just and merciful if we fail to be merciful.

Wrathall does a marvelous job of clarifying what is at issue so that we can see the genius of Alma's position. He begins by defining terms and making key distinctions. *A state of justice is a situation in which each receives what he or she deserves* (96). In contrast to the state of justice that is the goal of the law, Wrathall defines a just act: *A just act is an action where person A gives to person B what B deserves and in which A is motivated by a desire to produce a state of justice* (97). In contrast to both a just state and a just act is a merciful act: *A merciful act is an action whereby A relieves person B's suffering without regard to what B deserves, and A is motivated by compassion to relieve B's suffering* (97). Thus, merciful acts are in direct contravention of just acts and destroy a state of justice.

Wrathall ingeniously shows that Alma resolves the tension by insisting on maintaining the tension but distinguishing between God's purposes and the purposes of the function of the law. The purpose of the law is to produce a just state by executing the law and giving each what he or she deserves. In contrast, God's purpose is a state of mercy. God accomplishes both states of mercy and justice by delaying the execution

of the law — in our modern parlance, we are placed on “probation” rather than being given an immediate penalty. God gives us time before judging us to allow us to change through repentance so that we are motivated by mercy to relieve the suffering of others by showing mercy. If we change to become merciful, then by the law of restoration (taught by Alma in Alma 41) we no longer deserve punishment through execution of the law. We still receive exactly what we deserve, but we deserve mercy instead of justice because we have become merciful ourselves. Those who do not repent, however, are still subjected to the full execution of the law and receive what they deserve. Justice is not cheated because it still executes the law and returns justice for those who demanded that others receive justice. Thus, everyone receives exactly what they deserve. In this way, both mercy and justice are accomplished (105–108).

All of this is very insightful, but a few questions remain. Why is an atonement needed that requires Christ to suffer and take the pain of our sin upon him to satisfy the demands of both justice and mercy? The reconciliation of justice and mercy is accomplished by what *we* do, not by what Christ does in the view expounded by Wrathall. This approach (which I believe is essentially correct) works simply as a matter of the law of restoration based solely on what we do. We do not need anything from God except to refrain from executing justice immediately so that we have time to repent and change. We do all of the work, but what has this to do with what Christ will do? It shows how God is both just and merciful, but all of that can be done without Christ’s suffering.

This is not a question that Wrathall addresses directly. Indeed, he never addresses what the atonement is, how it is accomplished, or in what it consists according to Alma. But that is the very center focus of what Alma is explaining in Alma 34 and 41–42. Wrathall does note that Abinadi says that Christ stands “betwixt [the children of men] and justice” and can do so because he “has the bowels of mercy, being filled with compassion towards the children of men” (93, see Mosiah 15:9). Wrathall earlier merely touches in passing (upon the topic of the distinction between believing in, believing on, and knowing how) that becoming mortal enables Christ to have “the bowels of mercy,” because he became mortal and gained experiential knowledge of what he could not learn in any other way. The atonement is thus identified with Christ’s entire mortal experience. In fact, Alma expressly says exactly that Christ “will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12).

Christ's full suffering enabled him to do what could be done in no other way — to learn experientially of the fullness of human suffering so that his bowels are filled with mercy. Christ is moved with compassion for us to thereby motivate us to repent and also show mercy. Wrathall quotes this passage to demonstrate that it does not involve “a propositional form of ‘knowing that’” (23). He asserts that it is “intriguing” for Alma to suggest that “God gains, through his incarnation, a kind of know-how” (23). But this know-how is apparently essential for Christ to be able to be moved with compassion sufficiently to accomplish his atonement — and in fact it is the very means by which the atonement is accomplished. Further, it is not “God” as a generic “one God,” but specifically Christ who has this experience that makes the atonement possible.

Conclusion

Now notice what has happened here. Wrathall's ingenious analysis has caused me to return to the text in light of his careful and adroit analysis. His analysis has clarified the issues to the point that we can discuss it and tease out insights that are otherwise not visible, not assessable until they are called out by insight and care in reading. To me, that is the value of his contribution — and it is invaluable to me. I don't think that Wrathall quite captures the meaning of what Alma is up to in his response to Korihor because there is more to be said about the argument, but this is not a defect in Wrathall's work. There is, after all, always more to be said about any text.

What Wrathall's careful treatment of Alma 30–42 accomplishes is to demonstrate the incredible genius and insight that Alma brings to the issues of belief and knowledge, faith and knowledge, atonement, and justice and mercy. There is much more that is very worth considering in this brief work, but I will leave that for further exploration. I could not recommend this book more highly.

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