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OH, THAT I WERE AN ANGEL!

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Alma's conversion experience was both unusual and unusually powerful, and yet he fervently wished that he could provide others with the same experience. So much so, in fact, that he actually feared that he might be sinning in his wish by seeming to oppose the will of God. Increasingly, though, I find myself sharing that wish. My involvement with the Interpreter Foundation can correctly be regarded as one manifestation of that fact. I invite others to join us.*

Readers of the Book of Mormon will remember the dramatic conversion of Alma the Younger, an apostate son of the Nephite high priest in Zarahemla, and of his four fellow apostates, the sons of king Mosiah. The Greek word ἀποστασία (*apostasia*), the obvious source of our English word *apostasy*, carries the essential meaning of “rebellion” or “revolt,” and that is precisely what they were doing.

But “as they were going about rebelling against God,” or, as Alma himself expresses it, as they were “seeking to destroy the church of God,” an angel appeared to them. “And he descended as it were in a cloud” and “spake as it were with a voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake,” and summoned them to repentance. “Doth not my voice shake the earth?” the angel asked, rhetorically, reminding them of something that they already knew quite terrifyingly well. “He spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet.” “And so great was their astonishment, that they fell to the earth, and understood not the words which he spake unto them.”¹

1. For the original account of the conversion experience of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, see Mosiah 27:10–17. And, as I’ll mention almost immediately, Alma retells the story many years later at Alma 36:6–11. I have drawn upon both accounts for my summary here.

The experience was so powerful that it fundamentally transformed the lives of all five. They became famously devoted and extremely successful missionaries, preaching the Gospel with great effect. They are, thus, powerful examples of the scriptural concept of repentance, which is the term that the King James Bible and derivative English works most commonly use to render the Hebrew word תשובה (*teshuvah*), which literally means “return,” and the Greek term μετάνοια (*metanoia*). *Metanoia*, from the preposition *meta*, meaning “after” or “beyond,” and a derivative of *nous*, meaning “mind,” suggests, very strongly, a change of thinking, a transforming change of heart (as we would say it), a repudiation of past thinking, a conversion or reformation. In some modern German Bible translations (e.g., the *Einheitsübersetzung*, which has been adopted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for its German-speaking congregations), the verb *umkehren* (“to turn back,” “to turn around”) captures the sense of the Greek and the Hebrew quite well. It also represents the reactions of Alma and the four sons of Mosiah quite well — they returned to the teachings of their devout fathers, the Nephite king and the Nephite high priest.

It was so powerful, too, that Alma evidently seems to have continued to use his conversion experience in his sermons for years afterward. So, probably, did the sons of Mosiah. We have record of one such retelling of Alma’s conversion in Alma 36, where, perhaps more than a quarter of a century after their encounter with the angel, Alma employed it to testify of his faith to his eldest son, Helaman.

But we also have clear echoes of it elsewhere.

First, though: *Intertextuality* is a word contemporary scholars use to describe ways in which various texts refer to each other, or play off of each other, often without explicitly indicating such interplay. For example, the title of the 2012 book *Seven Habits of Highly Fulfilled People*² alludes unmistakably to Stephen Covey’s famous 1990 best-seller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.³ I’m unaware of any connection between Stephen Covey and the former book’s author, Satinder Dhiman, but it’s likely that Dhiman hoped and expected that his prospective audience would be familiar with the other, older, text and that they would have it in mind when they considered purchasing his book.

2. Satinder K. Dhiman, *Seven Habits of Highly Fulfilled People: Journey from Success to Significance* (Fawnskin, CA: Personhood Press, 2012).

3. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

The Book of Mormon contains numerous examples of intertextuality, and several probably remain to be discovered. I'll suggest just a few of them here.

In his examinations of legal materials in the Book of Mormon, to take one example, John Welch has shown that the book's language regarding crimes and courts and related topics tends to be highly consistent, perhaps indicating its dependence on underlying legal materials. Royal Skousen's superb studies of the book's textual history have established what he calls its "systematic nature"; its terminology and phrasing tend to be very consistent. I offer here three non-legal examples that were first identified by Professor Welch.

In Alma 36, Alma describes his conversion. At one point, he reports, "methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (Alma 36:22). Twenty-one of these words are quoted verbatim from 1 Nephi 1:8, where Lehi "thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God." These two passages are far apart. Yet, as Professor Welch has pointed out, it seems rather unlikely that Joseph Smith asked Oliver Cowdery to read back to him what he had translated earlier so that he could ensure that the wording of the derivative passage was exactly the same.⁴ We have no record of any such behavior on Joseph's part. Moreover, if that had happened, the very astute Oliver Cowdery would probably have questioned him regarding it and lost his confidence in the purportedly "miraculous" translation process, which would have seemed merely a mundane process of composition.

Similar instances occur when, in Helaman 14:12, Samuel the Lamanite plainly quotes 21 words from King Benjamin (see Mosiah 3:8) and, very likely, when 3 Nephi 8:6–23, recounting the destruction in the New World at the crucifixion of Christ, mentions precisely the same natural phenomena prophesied by Zenos and referred to in 1 Nephi 19:11–12.

I would like to suggest an additional illustration of Book of Mormon "intertextuality" that I, at least, don't recall being mentioned anywhere else. (Perhaps my memory just isn't good enough.) This case suggests reliance upon the Old Testament story of Elijah, presumably available

4. Incidentally, since virtually all authorities agree that the book of Alma was actually dictated before the dictation of 1 Nephi, Joseph would have needed to consult Alma 36:22 before "composing" 1 Nephi 1:8.

to the Nephites via the brass plates that Lehi brought with him from the Old World.⁵

In the Old Testament we read of Elijah's experience in the wilderness (perhaps in the Sinai) during which

the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

The Lord was “in” that “still small voice.”

Compare that story about Elijah to the account of the great destructions visited upon the descendants of Lehi in the New World at the time of Christ's crucifixion: 3 Nephi 8:6–19 tells of a great “storm,” “tempest,” “thunder,” and “whirlwinds,” of fire and an earthquake that broke the rocks, ultimately followed by a “small voice” heralding the Savior's appearance. Such literary crafting strongly suggests that its author wanted us to think, while reading it, of the story of Elijah.

Now consider the story in which Alma the Younger famously expresses his yearning to reach all humanity with the message of the gospel:

O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!

Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth. (Alma 29:1–2)

Alma's expression of his desire seems plainly based upon his own personal conversion experience. All the elements that I enumerated above are present in it, and it has understandably come to rank among the most beloved passages in the Book of Mormon.

5. John Sorenson, by the way, has suggested on other grounds that the brass plates originated in the northern kingdom of Israel, where Elijah lived and prophesied. See John L. Sorenson, “The ‘Brass Plates’ and Biblical Scholarship,” *Dialogue* 10, no. 4 (1977): 31–39, https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V10N04_33.pdf.

Most English-speaking Latter-day Saints, for example, will be aware of the late Wanda West Palmer's musical setting of Alma's words in Alma 29:1.

Oh, that I were an angel,
Oh, that I were an angel,
And could have the wish, the wish of my heart,
Could have the wish of my heart.
Oh, that I were an angel,
Oh, that I were an angel
And could have the wish of my heart.
That I might go forth and speak with a trump, the trump of God!
With a voice, a voice to shake the earth!
Shake the earth!
And cry repentance,
Repentance unto every people,
To every people,
To every people.
Cry repentance unto every people,
Repentance.
Oh, that I were an angel,
Oh, that I were an angel
And could have the wish of my heart,
Could have the wish of my heart.
Oh, that I were an angel!

Her song “Oh, That I Were an Angel” was a staple of sacrament meetings and other gatherings of the Saints throughout my youth and was especially common at missionary-related gatherings. I expect that it still is, although I haven't heard it as commonly in recent years.⁶

Candidly, I didn't like it at all; I'm not really sure why. However, I've come to like it quite a bit over recent years. Again, I'm not quite sure why that should be so, except that I've begun to appreciate much more than I once did the urgency of getting the message of the Gospel and, now, of the Restoration out to humanity, and of calling people (not excluding myself) to repentance — as well as to feel more sharply than I once did a frustration at our inability to do so as widely and extensively and powerfully as we would like. I've seen too many individuals and families make choices that have led to pain and suffering, and I worry about a society that seems, collectively speaking, to be making analogous

6. For the story of the writing of the song, see R. Scott Lloyd, “‘Angel’ song written 50 years ago,” *Deseret News: Church News*, August 25, 2012, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/2012-08-25/angel-song-written-50-years-ago-50089>.

choices. How I wish that “they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth!”

Alma was perhaps a bit embarrassed by his desire to preach more powerfully than he humanly could. He felt guilty at wishing for more than God had granted to him, for not simply being content with the divine will:

But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me.

I ought not to harrow up in my desires the firm decree of a just God, for I know that he granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life; yea, I know that he alloteth unto men, yea, decreeth unto them decrees which are unalterable, according to their wills, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction.

Yea, and I know that good and evil have come before all men; he that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given according to his desires, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience.

Now, seeing that I know these things, why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?

Why should I desire that I were an angel, that I could speak unto all the ends of the earth?

For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true. (Alma 29:3–8)

I sympathize with him on this point, too. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Abraham asked the Lord among the great terebinth trees of Mamre (see Genesis 18:25). And, of course, the answer is Yes, the Lord will do what is right. He is just. In fact, he is more than just. He is gracious and merciful. If God were to give us mere justice, we would be in dire straits, indeed. In one of the most Christian passages in all the works of Shakespeare, Polonius, speaking of the traveling troupe of actors who had arrived at the castle of Elsinore, assures Prince Hamlet that he will give them all that they deserve.

My lord, I will use them according to their desert.

Hamlet, leaping to a judicial or even theological point far transcending the mere lodging and payment of a wandering theatrical troupe, exclaims in response to Polonius,

God's bodykins, man, much better. Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?⁷

Which is to say, roughly, "Good heavens, man, give them more than that! If you pay everyone merely what he or she deserves, would anybody ever escape a whipping?"

And so it is, surely, with the Lord. In exchange for a few paltry years — and maybe much less! — of imperfect and feeble efforts to acknowledge him and to follow him as our lord, he promises us blessings beyond mortal comprehension that will last throughout the eternities. He is no skinflint, but a wildly, exuberantly generous giver of inconceivable gifts to all those who make even weak efforts to do his will, provided that we're sincere. No one will be defrauded or denied.

And yet, surely, many of us can sympathize with Alma's wish for more power to do good, for a louder voice with which to proclaim the message entrusted to him. The Savior himself recognized the problem of the magnitude of the task before us compared to the relative paucity of our means to address it:

But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.

Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few;

Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest. (Matthew 9:36–38)

Obviously, the Interpreter Foundation isn't a trumpet, but it is an instrument through which a number of us seek to advocate, commend, and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the claims of the Restoration. And, unsurprisingly, we would love to reach more people, more powerfully. We would love to have more laborers join us. Still, we're grateful to those who already have joined the effort with their time, their energy, their talent, and their means.

7. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.490–93.

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