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## The Voice of an Angel

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## CHAPTER 12

# THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL

*John A. Tvedtnes*

One of the things that makes us human is the ability to reflect on memories of the past and even to relive experiences that have shaped our lives. The events that trigger these memories can be either positive or negative, joyful or traumatic. A wedding, graduation day, an automobile accident, a heart attack—occurrences such as these create memories that we can call up at will.

When we write or speak about past events in our lives, we tailor the accounts to present circumstances, such as the audience, the point we want to get across, or the emotion we feel at the time. Consequently, the same story can be told many times over with slight variations. These subtle nuances set apart an account from memory and a recitation of something we heard or read somewhere else. What happens in our own lives is not just a collection of facts but also of emotions and senses that accompanied the event.

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For the apostle Paul, his vision of the risen Christ while on the road to Damascus was surely one of the most memorable events of his life, if not the most memorable. The basic story is told in Acts 9:3–30 and is repeated by Paul in Acts 22:6–21 and 26:12–21 and mentioned briefly in 2 Corinthians 11:32–33 and Galatians 1:15–24, though each account contains some information that is not found in any of the other recitations of the story.

Joseph Smith's first vision was similar to Paul's experience, and he even compared it to what had happened to Paul (see Joseph Smith—History 1:24). Joseph recorded the event on at least four different occasions, each time giving some information about the vision that was not included in the other accounts.<sup>1</sup> The manner in which he and Paul recounted the visit they received from Christ makes the story come alive for us, for their words are those of eyewitnesses.

We see the same kinds of things occurring in the various Book of Mormon accounts of Alma's encounter with the angel. In the initial story, told in Mosiah 27:10–32, we learn that Alma and his friends, the sons of Mosiah, were going about to destroy the church when they were stopped by an angel of God. When the angel appeared, Alma fell to the ground and seems to have fallen into a coma, which lasted for three days. When he recovered, he bore fervent testimony of Christ. When Alma later told the story to his sons, he added many details that are not mentioned in the earlier account (see Alma 36:5–24; 38:6–9; 39:19). Of particular importance in the latter testimony is his account of how he felt doomed to destruction but was spared when he called on Christ to save him (Joseph Smith makes similar remarks about when he went to the Sacred Grove to pray; see Joseph Smith—History 1:16–17).

Once when Alma was discouraged at his lack of success in preaching to the people of Ammonihah, the same angel visited him to send him back to tell the people that “except they repent the Lord God will destroy them” (Alma 8:16; see Alma 8:14–18). When he delivered his message in Ammonihah, Alma declared, “And now for this cause, that ye may not be destroyed, the Lord has sent his angel to visit many of his people” (Alma 9:25). This was the reason the angel had originally been sent to Alma and his friends. Alma then spoke of Christ’s coming in words that remind us of his earlier vision, and added, “Now behold, this is the voice of the angel, crying unto the people” (Alma 9:29; see Alma 9:25–29).

So emotionally charged were Alma’s memories of the angel’s first visit that he reflected on it when, after a fourteen-year hiatus, he was reunited with the sons of Mosiah, who had been with him during the angel’s original visit. These men had just returned safely from a lengthy mission to the land of Nephi, during which time they had succeeded in converting thousands of Lamanites. Alma’s joy at seeing them again (see Alma 17:2) led him to speak the beautiful poetic words recorded in Alma 29. He explains the reason for this joy:

And behold, when I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy; then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer; yea, then do I remember his merciful arm which he extended towards me. . . .

But I do not joy in my own success alone, but my joy is more full because of the success of my brethren, who have been up to the land of Nephi.

Behold, they have labored exceedingly, and have brought forth much fruit; and how great shall be their reward! (Alma 29:10, 14–15)

As he thought about their former association and how they found the truth of the gospel together, Alma reflected on the angel who had descended out of heaven and “spake as it were with a voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake upon which they stood” (Mosiah 27:11; cf. Mosiah 27:15, 18). In astonishment, they had fallen to the earth as the angel called them to repentance (see Mosiah 27:12, 18). The memories of this event came flooding back as Alma exclaimed:

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)

It was the angel’s “voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake,” that later prompted Alma to desire to be “an angel . . . with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people . . . as with the voice of thunder.”

One might argue that Alma was not necessarily thinking about his conversion experience. After all, angels are known to speak with a voice like a trumpet or thunder,<sup>2</sup> and the same is true of the Lord.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Nephi said of the angel who had appeared to him and his brothers (see 1 Nephi 3:29–30) that his voice was “like unto the voice of thunder, which did cause the earth to shake as if it were to divide

asunder” (1 Nephi 17:45). Surely Alma, who possessed the sacred records (see Mosiah 28:20; Alma 37:1–3), could have drawn his imagery from various sources.

There is further evidence, however, that Alma had his own experience with the angel in mind. It lies in Alma’s reference to other aspects of the angel’s visit. Some of those aspects are known not from the account in Mosiah 27, but from Alma’s later exhortations to his sons, in which he spoke of the “holy angel” who spake with “the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet” (Alma 36:7; see also Alma 38:7).

### **The Captivity of the Fathers**

The angel had commanded Alma to “remember the captivity of thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi; and remember how great things he [the Lord] has done for them; for they were in bondage, and he has delivered them” (Mosiah 27:16). Many years later, as a preface to his account of the angel’s appearance, Alma counseled his son Helaman,

I would that ye should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he surely did deliver them in their afflictions. . . .

He has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by his power into the promised land; yea, and he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time.

Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from

time to time even down to the present day; and I have always retained in remembrance their captivity; yea, and ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity. (Alma 36:2, 28–9)

Alma also referred to this subject at the time he expressed a desire to have the voice of an angel:

I remember what the Lord has done for me . . . I remember his merciful arm which he extended towards me.

Yea, and I also remember the captivity of my fathers; for I surely do know that the Lord did deliver them out of bondage, and by this did establish his church; yea, the Lord God, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did deliver them out of bondage.

Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers; and that same God who delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians did deliver them out of bondage. (Alma 29:10–12)

In this passage, Alma linked remembering the captivity of the fathers with remembering “what the Lord has done” for him—an allusion to the angel’s visit to call him to repentance.

### **Establishment of the Church**

Along with the commandment to remember the captivity of the fathers, the angel instructed Alma, “Go thy way, and seek to destroy the church no more” (Mosiah 27:16) and declared, “Why persecutest thou the church of God? For the Lord hath said: This is my church, and I will establish it; and nothing shall overthrow it, save it is the transgression of my people” (Mosiah 27:13).

In his poetic utterance, Alma also tied the deliverance of the fathers from captivity to the fact that the Lord “did establish his church” (Alma 29:11, 13).

## Agony and Ecstasy

Astonished at the appearance of the angel, Alma had fallen to the ground and become dumb (see Mosiah 27:18–19). He learned that he “was like to be cast off” (Mosiah 27:27). When he recovered, he told his father and others that

after wading through much tribulation, repenting nigh unto death, 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)

In later years, he told his son Helaman how he had been “racked with eternal torment, for [his] soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all [his] sins. Yea, [he] did remember all [his] sins and iniquities, for which [he] was tormented with the pains of hell” (Alma 36:12–13). Alma dwelt on the “expressible horror” that “did rack [his] soul” (Alma 36:14; see also Alma 36:16). As he was “racked with torment” and “harrowed up by the memory of [his] many sins,” he remembered his father’s teachings of Christ, who would come “to atone for the sins of the world” (Alma 36:17). He explains:

Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.

And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!



Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy. (Alma 36:18–21; cf. 24–25)

Similar wording is found in Alma's poem, making it clear that he was thinking about his earlier experience with the angel. "I ought not to harrow up in my desires, the firm decree of a just God," said he, speaking of life and death, of salvation and destruction (Alma 29:4). Man's desire for "good or evil, life or death" results in "joy or remorse of conscience" (Alma 29:5), as Alma knew from firsthand experience: "Now, seeing that I know these things, why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?" (Alma 29:6).

Much of Alma's poem speaks of his joy (see Alma 29:9, 13, 16). Seeing others come unto the Lord, he exclaimed, "then is my soul filled with joy; then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer; yea, then do I remember his merciful arm which he extended towards me" (Alma 29:10).

### **Instruments in the Hands of God**

Following the visit of the angel, Alma and the sons of Mosiah turned from their wicked ways and sought to redress the wrongs they had done to the church: "And thus they were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, to the knowledge of their Redeemer" (Mosiah 27:36).

These are the very thoughts expressed by Alma in his poem: "This is my glory, that perhaps I may be *an instrument in the hands of God to bring* some soul to repentance; and this is my joy" (Alma 29:9).

## Conclusions

Alma's wish to speak with the voice of an angel was prompted by the success of his friends, the sons of Mosiah,<sup>4</sup> among the Lamanites (see Alma 29:10, 14–17). They had just recently returned from a fourteen-year mission, and Alma, himself on a missionary journey at the time, received them with joy (see Alma 17:1–2; 27:16–17). They brought with them thousands of Lamanite converts who, like Alma, had been “loosed from the pains of hell” by God (Alma 26:13). “Encircled about with everlasting darkness and destruction,” they had been brought into the “everlasting light” (Alma 26:15). “And we,” Ammon exclaimed, “have been instruments in his hands of doing this great and marvelous work. . . . Our joy is full” (Alma 26:15–16; see Alma 26:13–22).

These words of Ammon are so very similar to Alma's poetic utterance that it is likely that one of the two passages is dependent on the other, explainable by the fact that it was Alma who wrote both accounts in his record. And it seems quite natural that Alma, upon encountering those in whose company he had experienced such a marvelous revelation from God, should be reminded of that earlier event and draw upon it in wishing to be a better missionary by speaking with the voice of an angel.

Much of the book of Alma comes to us in the form of Mormon's abridgment, but Mormon occasionally quotes directly from Alma's record, usually marking it with a colophon, or prefacing remarks. Thus, for example, he introduces Alma's instructions to his sons by saying, “We have an account of his commandments, which he gave unto them according to his own record” (Alma 35:16). The admonitions addressed to each son are clearly the words of Alma and are

marked as such by Mormon, who included a preface before each of the discourses (before Alma 36, 38, and 39).

Similarly, Alma 29 comprises Alma's words in first person. He calls the sons of Mosiah "my brethren, who have been up to the land of Nephi" (Alma 29:14–15). The words are hardly fitting for Mormon, in whose days the "land of Nephi" probably had only historical meaning. Other evidences of contemporaneity include verse 10 ("when *I see* many of my brethren truly penitent") and verses 13–17 (where the events depicted are clearly from the life of Alma and recounted in first person; Mormon, unlike the author of these words, had no success in preaching).

It is likely that Mormon began the quote from Alma's record in Alma 28:8–9, where we have a prefacelike colophon (both verses begin with the words "and this is the account") referring to the previous section abridged by Mormon. This view is supported by the description of bodies that "are moldering in heaps upon the face of the earth" and of the "many thousands [who] are mourning" (Alma 28:11), as well as the statement that "many thousands . . . truly mourn . . . yet they rejoice" (Alma 28:12). These statements, in present rather than past tense, imply that the writer was Alma, not Mormon. Further evidence of contemporaneity is found in the wording of Alma 28:9, where we read "and the fifteenth year of the reign of the judges is ended," rather than simply "ended," as Mormon would write, and Alma 28:10, where it reads "has brought to pass," rather than "had."

The nature of the accounts in Alma 29 and Alma 36–42 is that of an eyewitness account of an event that so impressed the writer that he recalled it with great emotion and clarity throughout his life.<sup>5</sup> This is precisely what one would expect from a man like Alma who had received an angelic visit

such as the one described in these chapters. We are indebted to Mormon for preserving the discourses as Alma recorded them.

## Notes

1. For a study of the different accounts of the event, see Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971).
2. See Matthew 24:31; Revelation 4:1; 6:1; cf. Hebrews 12:19; D&C 88:92, 94.
3. See Job 40:9; Psalms 47:5; 77:18; 104:7; Zechariah 9:14; Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 1:10; 14:2; cf. Helaman 5:30; D&C 43:18, 25.
4. For a study of the mission of the sons of Mosiah, see my article, "The Sons of Mosiah: Emissaries of Peace," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 118–23.
5. John W. Welch comes to the same conclusion from an examination of other aspects of Alma's multiple accounts of the same vision. See "Three Accounts of Alma's Conversion," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 150–3.