

PDF version of the lesson notes.

## I. Mission to the Zoramites

- Alma 32 is a continuation of chapter 31. In chapter 31 Alma begins his mission to the Zoramites. We can split chapter 31 into three parts[1]:
  1. Alma's mission to the Zoramites (1–8)
  2. The Zoramite manner of worship (12–18)
  3. Alma's prayer concerning the Zoramites (19–38)

The highlight or most memorable part of chapter 31 for many is the Zoramite worship prayer performed on the "Raemeumptom":

(15) Holy, holy God; we believe that thou art God, and we believe that thou art holy, and that thou wast a spirit, and that thou art a spirit, and that thou wilt be a spirit forever. (16) Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren, which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers; but we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children; and also thou hast made it known unto us that there shall be no Christ. (17) But thou art the same yesterday, today, and forever; and thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee; and we also thank thee that thou hast elected us, that we may not be led away after the foolish traditions of our brethren, which doth bind them down to a belief of Christ, which doth lead their hearts to wander far from thee, our God. (18) And again we thank thee, O God, that we are a chosen and a holy people. Amen.

- Alma 31 and the worship of the Zoramites is quite interesting and there is much worth discussing but since it is not part of the lesson proper I want to focus the discussion on the relation between Zoramite worship as described in Alma 31 and rest of Alma's mission describe in Alma 32–35.
- Zoramite worship and Alma 32:
  - ◆ Two main themes of Alma 32 are humility and faith. The contrast between Zoramite worship and humility is fairly evident. *However, what about the theme of faith? Do you see links between the Zoramite worship in chapter 31 and the necessity for a discourse by Alma on faith? How did the Zoramite religious system lead to a lack of faith?*

- ◆ *What about Alma's prayer that follows as a reaction to the observing the Zoramites worship? How does that material contrast or parallel Alma's teachings in Alma 32?*
- ◆ *Can you think of other reasons why it is important to bear in mind the events of chapter 31 while reading chapter 32?*

- Alma 31–35 and criticism:

- ◆ Alma 31–35 were criticized very early on as reflecting Joseph's Smith 19th century environment. For example, "in 1831, Alexander Campbell described the Zoramites as 'a kind of Episcopalians.'"[2] More recently a Joseph Smith biographer, Dan Vogel, has broadened Campbell's original criticism[3]:

More accurately, [the Zoramites] represent all formalized religion including Catholicism, Anglicism, Congregationalism, and Presbyterianism, which to Joseph's sensibilities seemed lifeless.

- ◆ *What do you think of this criticism of the Book of Mormon? How would you respond to it? Do you think the narrative can be read as a critique or rejection of formalized religion? Why might it be a bad reading? What would we miss if we read Alma 31–35 through that interpretative lens?*
- ◆ *Can we use the text of the book of Alma itself to contradict the notion that the book is suspicious of formalized or organized religion in general?*
- ◆ *Can we salvage any insights from Vogel's criticism even if we reject its implications in terms of the origin of the Book of Mormon?*

## II. Some Success Among the Poor[4]

- Read Alma 32:1–3:

(1) And it came to pass that they did go forth, and began to preach the word of God unto the people, entering into their synagogues, and into their houses; yea, and even they did preach the word in their streets. (2) And it came to pass that after much labor among them, they began to have success among the poor class of people; for behold, they were cast out of the synagogues because of the coarseness of their apparel— (3) Therefore they were not permitted to enter into their synagogues to worship God, being esteemed as filthiness; therefore they were poor; yea, they were esteemed by their brethren as dross; therefore they were poor as to things of the world; and also they were poor in heart.

- *How does verse 1 contrast with chapter 31 and the description of Zoramite worship? Are the missionary efforts of Alma and his companions meant to provide a vivid or concrete*

*counter-example of a non-corrupt organized religious group?*

- The text singles out coarseness of dress as the immediate reason why the poor were thrown out of the Zoramite Synagogues. *What elements of Zoramite theology justified this behavior? In the narrative this behavior and underlying theology seems transparently and obviously bad. However, can the justification and manifestation of this in the modern world be subtle and seductive? If so how might it manifest itself and how is it justified*

- There seems to be an interesting structure of repeated elements in verse 3:

being esteemed as filthiness;  
therefore they were poor;

they were esteemed by their brethren as dross;  
therefore they were poor as to things of the world;

- How does this structure affect the reader's focus? What does Mormon want the reader to focus on?
- *What does the structure imply about the reason or cause of being poor? Is this verse implying that because they were esteemed as filthy and dross (Webster 1828 Dictionary = Waste matter; refuse; any worthless matter separated from the better part; impure matter) that they are poor? Why or why not?*
- *Is the verse implying that it is the way that society values these people that makes them poor? Does this imply that these people are poor in only an artificial sense? Is the text defining poor in a way that is unrelated to income?*
- The phrase tacked onto the end of the verse is interesting. Mormon adds, "and also they were poor in heart." This seems to imply that they were poor in a real sense but that they were not poor in the same sense as the Zoramites thought. *What is meant by poor in heart in these verses? Does that phrase remind you of other scriptures?*
- Let's also read verses 4–5:

(4) Now, as Alma was teaching and speaking unto the people upon the hill Onidah, there came a great multitude unto him, who were those of whom we have been speaking, of whom were poor in heart, because of their poverty as to the things of the world. (5) And they came unto Alma; and the one who was the foremost among them said unto him: Behold, what shall these my brethren do, for they are despised of all men because of their poverty, yea, and more especially by our priests; for they have cast us out of our synagogues which we have labored abundantly to build with our own hands; and they have cast us out because of our exceeding poverty; and we have no place to worship our God; and behold, what shall we do?

- Do verses 4–5 give us any insight into what is meant by the phrase "poor in heart?"
- *"The man who comes to Alma says tells him that 'they are despised of all men.' Is he exaggerating?" [5] If so, why would he do so and what does it imply about this group of poor people?*
- *Why does the man talking to Alma say that he and the other poor "have no place to worship our God?" Why not just say that they "have no place to worship God?" Is the man implying that he doesn't believe or think that his God and Alma's God are the same? Or is it the opposite? Is he emphasizing what Alma and this group have in common? [6]*

### III. Humility and Belief

#### A. Worship God Once in a Week

- Read Alma 32:7–11:

(7) Therefore he did say no more to the other multitude; but he stretched forth his hand, and cried unto those whom he beheld, who were truly penitent, and said unto them: (8) I behold that ye are lowly in heart; and if so, blessed are ye. (9) Behold thy brother hath said, What shall we do? for we are cast out of our synagogues, that we cannot worship our God. (10) Behold I say unto you, do ye suppose that ye cannot worship God save it be in your synagogues only? (11) And moreover, I would ask, do ye suppose that ye must not worship God only once in a week?

- *Does verse 7 imply that the multitude was comprised of more than the poor? If so how would Alma stop speaking to the multitude and then exclusively address his continued sermon to the truly penitent? Does this detail change how we should picture the conversation that took place in the previous verse between Alma and the spokesman of the poor?*
- *What is it about Zoramite theology that made the people believe that they could only worship God once a week in a synagogue? Is Mormonism as an organized religion immune to this problem? Is there a sense in which we can have tunnel vision like the poor people in the narrative and limit are worshiping opportunities?*

#### B. Humility

- Read Alma 32:12–13:

(12) I say unto you, it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble, and that ye may learn wisdom; for it is necessary that ye should learn wisdom; for it is because that ye are cast out, that ye are despised of your brethren because of your exceeding poverty, that ye are brought to a lowliness of heart; for ye are necessarily brought to be

humble. (13) And now, because ye are compelled to be humble blessed are ye; for a man sometimes, if he is compelled to be humble, seeketh repentance; and now surely, whosoever repenteth shall find mercy; and he that findeth mercy and endureth to the end the same shall be saved.

- *What does the word humility mean? How is Alma using the word humility?*
- *What is the relation between humility and learning wisdom?*
- *Ultimately, is Alma trying to teach the crowd how to learn wisdom? Is that a fair summary of his goal or is it incomplete?*
- *What is the relation between humility and "lowliness of heart?"*
- *How do you understand verse 13? Why is being compelled to be humble a blessing? Why would the people be given mercy if humility was imposed on them?[7]*
- It is fairly common for people to suggest that "If you say you are humble then you are not actually humble." Or in other words claiming that your are humble proves that you are not.
- *What do you think about the preceding notion? Is there some truth to it? Does it go too far?*
- My first thought is that public proclamations of humility is probably best understand as a lack of modesty. We often use the word modesty in a very specific way as applying to dress in the church but its a general notion: as in your just being modest or they live in a modest home (OED =Avoiding extremes of behaviour; well-conducted, temperate; not harsh or domineering). Publicly claiming that one is humble doesn't strike me as a particularly modest.
- *What is the relation between modesty and humility? Is a humble person always modest? Is a modest person always humble? How correlated are the two attributes in general? Are they basically the same thing?*
- *Is the relation between humility and modesty similar to the relation between reverence and appropriate behavior at church? Why or why not?*
- *Is it important not to conflate humility and modesty?*
- When I think about this issue I am reminded a little of Alma 26:8–12:

(8) Blessed be the name of our God; let us sing to his praise, yea, let us give thanks to his holy name, for he doth work righteousness forever. (9) For if we had not come up out of the land of Zarahemla, these our dearly beloved brethren, who have so dearly beloved us, would still have been

racked with hatred against us, yea, and they would also have been strangers to God. (10) And it came to pass that when Ammon had said these words, his brother Aaron rebuked him, saying: Ammon, I fear that thy joy doth carry thee away unto boasting. (11) But Ammon said unto him: I do not boast in my own strength, nor in my own wisdom; but behold, my joy is full, yea, my heart is brim with joy, and I will rejoice in my God. (12) Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things; yea, behold, many mighty miracles we have wrought in this land, for which we will praise his name forever.

- *Is Ammon humble? Why or why not? Is Ammon modest? Why or why not?*
- *Can we infer a definition of humility from these verses? Might Ammon understand humility differently than Alma? Or are their views very similar?*
- *Does this notion of a relation between modesty and humility suggest that we should talk more about humility in dress rather than modesty in dress? Could humility be a guiding principle in terms of teaching our children how they should dress? Why or why not?*
- *Is modesty an important principle by itself or only because its correlated with humility and other good qualities? Is this true for modesty in dress or is the situation involving clothing different?*
- Let's read the next paragraph that continues Alma's discussion of humility:

(14 And now, as I said unto you, that because ye were compelled to be humble ye were blessed, do ye not suppose that they are more blessed who truly humble themselves because of the word? (15) Yea, he that truly humbleth himself, and repenteth of his sins, and endureth to the end, the same shall be blessed—yea, much more blessed than they who are compelled to be humble because of their exceeding poverty. (16) Therefore, blessed are they who humble themselves without being compelled to be humble; or rather, in other words, blessed is he that believeth in the word of God, and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea, without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe.

- *Does verse 16 give us any insight into how Alma defines humility? What is the link between belief and humility*

## Endnotes

1. Hardy, Grant (Editor), 2003, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, University of Illinois Press, 339–341.

2. Vogel, Dan, 2004, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, Signature Books, 237.
3. Vogel, Dan, 2004, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, Signature Books, 237.
4. Hardy, Grant (Editor), 2003, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition*, University of Illinois Press, 342.
5. Faulconer, Jim, 2004, *Sunday School Lesson 28*, Times and Seasons.
6. Faulconer, Jim, 2004, *Sunday School Lesson 28*, Times and Seasons.
7. Faulconer, Jim, 2004, *Sunday School Lesson 28*, Times and Seasons.