



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** The Word and the Seed: The Theological Use of Biblical Creation in Alma 32

**Author(s)** David E. Bokovoy

**Reference** *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 1-21.

**ISSN** 2374-4766 (print), 2374-4774 (online)

**Abstract** Alma 32 is a learned text on the topic of faith. The account incorporates creation imagery from the opening chapters of Genesis. Alma's sermon follows a theological pattern in the Hebrew Bible where creation is used to encourage audiences to exercise faith in the present by considering the primordial past. Alma compares the "word of God" unto a seed, telling his audience that they are to be involved with "planting." Thus, Alma's sermon combines the two distinct creation views in the Genesis narratives, for God speaks the divine word in order to create in Genesis 1, and he plants seeds and trees to create his garden paradise in Genesis 2-3. By invoking the miracle of creation in the past into a present context of seed growth and recreation, Alma encourages his readers to fulfill the measure of their own creation by experimenting upon the divine word. Obtaining the type of faith Alma describes is therefore the very purpose of human existence, and it has been from the beginning.

# Essays

## The Word and the Seed: The Theological Use of Biblical Creation in Alma 32

*David E. Bokovoy*

ALMA 32 IS A LEARNED TEXT. It is a highly sophisticated sermon on the principle of faith. The discourse is presented as the words of Alma, a Book of Mormon prophet who taught his people many profound truths concerning this foundational gospel principle. “Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things,” he reasons, therefore, if you have faith, you will have hope “for things which are not seen, which are true” (v. 21). Alma illustrates the correlation between hope and faith through metaphor, comparing the word of God to a seed (v. 28). Just as one must exercise faith in planting a seed that will eventually develop into a fruit-yielding tree, so must a person exercise faith by applying God’s word before experiencing spiritual transformation. The analogy relies upon a series of highly calculated literary allusions to the biblical stories of creation. As impressive as Alma’s sermon is at inspiring audiences to live in accordance with the divine will, as readers we can appreciate this learned text at an even deeper level by identifying the ways in which Alma’s discourse invokes biblical creation to encourage audiences to develop the type of faith that brings everlasting life.

To illustrate the attestation of biblical creation motifs in Alma 32, I will begin by offering a brief literary analysis of the opening chapters of Genesis. This analysis relies upon textual insights gained through

higher criticism.<sup>1</sup> I will then proceed with a consideration of the manner in which biblical authors used creation as a theological construct to encourage audiences to exercise faith in the present by considering God's creation in the primordial past. I will then show that Book of Mormon sermons generally invoke creation motifs in a parallel manner. Using this observation, I will conceptually lay the groundwork not only for recognizing the extensive use of creation imagery throughout Alma 32 but also for identifying one of the possible reasons this Book of Mormon sermon incorporates such imagery in a discourse on faith.

### Creation in the Bible

Creation appears as a prominently explored religious theme throughout the Hebrew Bible. It is the first topic addressed in the Bible's account of prehistory.<sup>2</sup> Genesis, in fact, begins with two separate creation narratives. The first account commences with the line: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). It concludes with a summary statement in Genesis 2:4a: "these are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created." The second creation story commences in the subsequent line: "In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens" (Genesis 2:4b). Many biblical scholars believe that these were originally two separate creation accounts brought together by an editor into a single literary unit.<sup>3</sup> This suggests

---

1. Higher criticism refers to a scholarly attempt to explain inconsistencies in the Bible by identifying its original sources. As an interpretive tool, higher criticism constitutes a central part of the "historical-critical method." See David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2014), 15–16.

2. The term *prehistory* is sometimes used to discuss the biblical stories that describe people and events prior to the rise of the "historical" era when the world operated according to the rules and standards of the authors of Genesis; see, for example, Tzvi Abush, "Biblical Accounts of Prehistory: Their Meaning and Formation," in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: The Process of Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller*, ed. Kathryn Kravitz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns/Jewish Theological Seminary, 2007), 1–17.

3. For a basic history and discussion of views, see Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 1–9.

the existence of multiple versions of the story of divine creation in ancient Judah, the kingdom responsible for the scribal production of the book of Genesis.<sup>4</sup>

From a historical perspective, the story in Genesis 1 may have been written by a priestly author in response to the earlier Judean creation narrative in Genesis 2–3.<sup>5</sup> Both accounts begin with a reference to God creating “the *heaven* and the *earth*,” but the narratives place the two words in an opposite sequence:

1:1: “In the beginning God created the *heaven* and the *earth* . . .”

2:4b: “In the day that the Lord God made the *earth* and the *heavens* . . .”

Comparing the two opening lines, we see that by reversing the sequence in 2:4b, “earth” and “heaven,” the first account focuses the reader’s attention on heaven as the place of God’s initial creation. The first creation story of Genesis is therefore cosmic or heavenly in its primary focus, in contrast to the second narrative, which is much more earthly in its tone. Therefore, reading the two texts synchronically gives readers the impression that the biblical God is to be credited with a fullness of both heavenly and earthly creation.

In the story told in Genesis 1, God creates through his divine word. Each creative act appears described with the phrase “And God said . . .” In contrast, Genesis 2–3 depicts creation as a planting process. God works directly with the muddy soil in order to create the first man (2:7), and he physically plants seeds that produce a garden eastward in Eden (2:8). In this study, I will follow the academic trend of referring to the first creation narrative in Genesis as P (for Priestly) and the second as J (after the divine name Yahweh or Jehovah).<sup>6</sup> Even though

---

4. See the recent analysis by Michael L. Satlow, *How the Bible Became Holy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 72–118.

5. See Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament*, 33–39.

6. Though the scholarly consensus holds that Genesis 2–3 belongs to a separate documentary tradition that scholars refer to as J, over the years, some source critics have suggested that rather than a document that told the entire story of creation and the rise of Israel, these chapters were a supplement to the Priestly story. Explaining why this

they appear linked in our current version of Genesis, these two stories present separate Israelite traditions regarding the primordial past and the beginnings of life.

To anticipate at this point what this study will show, the sermon in Alma 32 about faith combines these two dissonant ideas concerning creation. This sermon therefore functions somewhat like the redacted form of P and J in treating the two narratives (one cosmic and the other earthly) as a literary whole. Alma places the divine word (Genesis 1) into the context of planting as a creative act (Genesis 2), which allows the seed/word to develop into a tree of life. By invoking this dual imagery, Alma encourages his audience to exercise faith in God's word (as reflected, for example, in the opening chapters of Genesis and other scriptural texts) by pondering a past that can be experienced, even though not literally seen.

For biblical authors, "the beginning" was a time that merited careful consideration. Throughout its sources, the Bible features considerable diversity on this topic. God creates through speech, planting, and even divine combat with the sea. Yet the beginning consistently appears conceptualized as the moment when God put into place an impressive cosmic effort to establish himself as *the* sovereign power over the cosmos. Creation, therefore, served a significant theological purpose. Biblical authors used creation to persuade audiences to exercise faith during the historical era. "If God could subdue primeval chaos in the past," they

---

view is problematic from my perspective extends beyond the focus of the present essay. The so-called fragmentary hypothesis was inaugurated by Johann Severin Vater in his work *Commentar über den Pentateuch: Mit Einleitungen zu den einzelnen Abschnitten, der eingeschalteten Übersetzung von Dr. Alexander Geddes's merkwürdigeren kritischen und exegetischen Anmerkungen, und einer Abhandlung über Moses und Verfasser des Pentateuchs* (Halle: Waisenhaus-Buchhandlung, 1802–5), see especially 393–94. For a study that suggests that Genesis 1–11 was originally conceived as a distinct composition with its own structure and that J is an addition to P, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Creation Uncreation Recreation* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011). For a classic, although problematic, critique of the documentary hypothesis arguing that pre-Priestly material was added by a subsequent redactor, see Konrad Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible*, trans. James Nogalski (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010).

reasoned, “why not grant deity the opportunity to manage the affairs in your everyday life?”

Biblical authors did not view creation in the same way most modern people conceptualize the act. “The kernel of ancient Eastern creation thought,” writes Stefan Paas, “does not lie in the (historically motivated) interest in the origins of being but, rather, in the concern for the present.”<sup>7</sup> To quote Michael Fishbane, through creation the author “projects a certain continuity of divine power upon which humans can rely.”<sup>8</sup> One of the famous biblical texts that illustrates this trend is Job 38:4–7:

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

These verses are designed to encourage readers to accept that on the complicated subject of theodicy, those questioning the ways of the Lord should simply put their trust in him since humans cannot possibly comprehend, much less duplicate, God’s impressive creative feats.

This use of creation imagery to promote faith in Deity also parallels ideas found in the second half of the book of Isaiah. “I have made the earth, and created man upon it,” states God in Isaiah 45:12. “I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded.” This verse presents the God of Israel speaking comforting words to the exilic community regarding the restoration of the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup> According to the passage, this community

---

7. Stefan Paas, *Creation and Judgment: Creation Texts in Some Eighth Century Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 54.

8. Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35.

9. See John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–66: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005); John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40–55* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 2:3–8.

could exercise faith that God would honor his promise regarding restoration since the Lord had demonstrated his ability to work mighty miracles in the beginning of time.

These biblical texts illustrate the fundamental way in which Israelite and later Judean authors used creation as a theological construct. Since Israel's God had assumed ownership over the unorganized primordial earth and miraculously provided that chaotic base with the structure manifested in the historical era, those encountering biblical references to creation should follow the example of chaos and obey the divine will.

### Creation imagery in the Book of Mormon

As a religious heir to this tradition, the Book of Mormon relies heavily on the same thematic paradigm. For example, in an editorial statement in the book of Helaman, the author uses the biblical notion that man was created from the "dust of the earth" to illustrate humanity's constant need to obey Deity:

Behold, [the children of men] do not desire that the Lord their God, who hath created them, should rule and reign over them. . . . O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth. For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God. (Helaman 12:6–8; see also Mosiah 2:25; 4:2)

A similar use of creation imagery appears in King Benjamin's sermon found earlier in the Book of Mormon:

Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend. And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them. (Mosiah 4:9–10)

Benjamin's religious message is clear: since God created all things in heaven and earth, God possesses all wisdom and power. Therefore, humanity should not only *believe* in God, but more importantly *act* upon that belief by forsaking their sins.

In addition to using creation to sustain the thesis that humans should exercise faith in the present by remembering the past, Benjamin's link between creation and God *possessing* wisdom parallels a prominent theme in Near Eastern literature.<sup>10</sup> Humanity should have faith in Deity since from the primordial age, God "possessed" or "created" wisdom.<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 8, for instance, depicts a personified Wisdom referring to Yahweh's act of creation/possession in a way that parallels Benjamin's assertion that God has created "all things in heaven and earth" and therefore possesses "all wisdom": "The Lord possessed<sup>12</sup> me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was" (Proverbs 8:22–23). Ultimately, these texts make the same basic argument: since God created even wisdom

---

10. For studies on the "creation" of primordial wisdom in Israelite conceptions, see Gerlinde Baumann, *Die Weisheitsgestalt in Proverbien 1–9: Traditionsgeschichtliche und theologische Studien* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1996); Michael D. Coogan, "The Goddess Wisdom—'Where Can She Be Found?': Literary Reflexes of Popular Religion," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Robert Chazan et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999); Bruce Vawter, "Prov 8:22: Wisdom and Creation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 9 (1980): 205–16; Richard J. Clifford, "Woman Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs," in *Biblische Theologie und gesellschaftlicher Wandel (Lohfink Festschrift)*, ed. Walter Gross and Sean McEvenue (Freiburg: Herder, 1993); William A. Young, "Wisdom, Nature, and the Feminine: Proverbs 8 in Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Proceedings of the Central States Society of Biblical Literature and the American Schools of Oriental Research* 4 (2001): 219–35; Judith M. Hadley, "Wisdom and the Goddess," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J. A. Emerton*, ed. John Day and Robert Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 234–43; Alan Lenzi, "Proverbs 8:22–31: Three Perspectives on Its Composition," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 687–714.

11. The verb stems from the root *qnh*, meaning either to "possess" or "create"; see David E. Bokovoy, "Did Eve Acquire, Create, or Procreate with Yahweh? A Grammatical and Contextual Reassessment of הָקַן in Genesis 4:1," *Vetus Testamentum* 63 (2013): 1–17.

12. For the connotation "create," see the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2:112.

itself, people would obviously *be* wise to hearken unto his voice and obey his commandments.

While some Book of Mormon passages draw in a relatively vague manner on this broad biblical trend, certain Book of Mormon sermons can be shown to allude specifically to the creation stories in Genesis and to do so in a manner much more intricate in nature than what appears in comparable biblical sources. For instance, in the same Book of Mormon sermon cited above, King Benjamin presents a statement that features several detailed literary<sup>13</sup> allusions to the Genesis stories of creation:

I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants. (Mosiah 2:21)

---

13. Even though the Book of Mormon depicts its sermons as oratory addresses, oftentimes given spontaneously by their speakers, in my mind, the sophisticated allusions to biblical texts witnessed throughout these discourses suggest that they are literary sermons—that is, texts intended to be read by a learned audience familiar with these biblical motifs; on the issue of interpreting religious texts from this perspective, see Marc Zvi Brettler, “A Literary Sermon in Deuteronomy 4,” in *A Wise and Discerning Mind: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, ed. S. M. Olyan and R. C. Culley (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2000), 33–50. At minimum, however, Book of Mormon sermons indicate that the author(s) was/were extremely familiar with the Bible and that biblical motifs appear both intentionally, and perhaps unintentionally, all throughout the work. As Israeli scholar Moshe Seidel explains regarding the incorporation of scriptural imagery into a text, “The words a person reads and hears and repeats become his own, enter his verbal storehouse. When needed they become, even if he does not know it, the clothing for the thoughts to which he gives birth. Sacred literature, the inheritance of earlier generations, is incised on the heart of the prophets and sacred poets; it is their fount and the object of their musing, something they have contemplated many a day. Therefore the idea which appeared to them through the holy spirit finds expression in the same linguistic forms and phrases that were impressed in their hearts, became habitual on their lips and were made a part of the prophets themselves.” Moshe Seidel, “Parallels between the Book of Isaiah and the Book of Psalms [in Hebrew],” *Sinai* 38 (1955–56): 149.

Benjamin's statement encouraging his people to serve God alludes to both of the creation stories in Genesis, P and J.<sup>14</sup> References to the verb *created* and the prepositional phrase *from the beginning* reflect the opening verse of P's narrative: "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth" (Genesis 1:1). Moreover, Benjamin's reference to "day to day" reminds readers of the "day to day" creative sequence that provides the basic outline for P's creation drama. References to "lending breath" and man "serving" God draw upon J's creation story, in which the Lord breathed into man's nostrils "the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7), and man was created to "serve" God by "dressing" and "keeping" the garden (Genesis 2:15).

Thus Benjamin's use of creation imagery illustrates how subtle, yet detailed, the Book of Mormon echoes the biblical creation stories. Ultimately, these types of sophisticated literary allusions to the opening chapters of Genesis in texts such as Mosiah 2:21 still serve the same basic theological objective as their biblical counterparts. Benjamin's use of creation imagery was clearly designed to inspire faith in the present by remembering the past. In other words, God is a god of extraordinary power. He has given order to the primordial chaos that in the beginning existed in cosmic disarray, and his word, therefore, should be accepted and obeyed.

Similar theological reasoning can be seen in various Book of Mormon texts, including Alma 30:44, where Alma teaches the anti-Christ Korihor that pondering the creation creates testimony since "all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form." Moreover, from a literary perspective, this statement prepares readers for Alma's theological use of creation imagery in his subsequent discourse on faith. Alma's sermon in chapter 30 references creation in an explicit manner. Readers are therefore

---

14. "Allusion," writes Benjamin Sommer, "consists not only in the echoing of an earlier text but in the utilization of the marked material for some rhetorical or strategic end." Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15.

conceptually prepared to recognize the more implicit allusions to creation in the subsequent sermon.

After his encounter with Korihor (and an explicit biblical-like invocation of creation motifs), Alma appeals to a series of subtle allusions to the opening chapters of Genesis in an effort to encourage the Zoramites, an apostate Book of Mormon people, to believe in God. Like those witnessed in Mosiah 2:21, these allusions to creation suggest a highly sophisticated authorial intent to invoke creation imagery from the Bible directly into the Book of Mormon sermon. And, like Mosiah 2:21, Alma 32 adapts themes from the Bible's two opening creation stories (P and J) to present this lesson. I will now show that in so doing, the sermon in Alma 32 blends the two separate views concerning creation in Genesis 1–2 (one cosmic and the other earthly) into one harmonious construct designed to promote faith in Deity.

### P themes in Alma 32

In terms of a religious message, Alma 32 teaches audiences the significance of strengthening their testimony of the “word of God” (v. 29). Though often overlooked by readers, Alma's sermon on faith and the word contains a variety of advanced literary allusions to the Genesis creation accounts. In this sense, Alma's connection between *word* and *creation* parallels a long historical tradition witnessed in both Jewish and early Christian texts, which draw upon the Priestly creation formula in Genesis 1:1–2:4—that is, “and God *said*, ‘Let there be X . . .’” In P, God speaks, and by his word, creation is brought into being.

A first example of an ancient religious text linking *word* with *creation* (because of the formula in Genesis 1:1–2:4a) can be found in the prologue to John's New Testament Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” As has long been noted by commentators, John's prologue draws upon the commencement to the book of Genesis by mentioning both *beginning* and

*word*.<sup>15</sup> Reference to the Word or *logos* in this passage reflects traditional Wisdom terminology in both the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish tradition.<sup>16</sup> As one Jewish commentator has written regarding John 1:1, “The word signifies God’s power of creation and redemption; as a means of expression, reason (or truth), and grace it is identified with Jesus (vv. 9, 14, 17).”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, by combining *word* with allusions to biblical creation imagery, Alma’s sermon follows an ancient venerable tradition.

Like the prologue to John’s Gospel, Alma 32 is structured around the term *word*. Alma 32 begins with an editorial statement that prepares readers for Alma’s sermon concerning the word of God:

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. (Alma 32:1)

The narrator’s two references to the term *word* in this passage, together with repeated mention of *word* later in Alma’s sermon, suggest the attestation of a biblical-like theme word or *leitwort*.<sup>18</sup> Following the repetition of *word* in the introduction, the chapter continues with this theme. We learn that the people were prepared to hear the word (v. 6); that those who truly humble themselves because of the word are more

---

15. See the discussion provided by George R. Beasley-Murray in *John* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 10–11.

16. See Psalm 33:6; Proverbs 8:7–30; Wisdom of Solomon 9:1–9; 18:15; and Sirach 24:9; 43:26. This reminds us, of course, of the link between wisdom and creation identified earlier in this study in Mosiah 4:9 and Proverbs 8.

17. Adele Reinhartz, “The Gospel of John,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 157.

18. For an introduction to this important literary technique, see Martin Buber, “Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig; trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114–28. As literary scholar Robert Alter notes in his analysis of the convention, “This kind of word-motif, as a good many commentators have recognized, is one of the most common features of the narrative art of the Bible.” Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 92.

blessed (v. 14); that the people were invited to experiment upon Alma's word and then "give place" to a portion of it (v. 27); that Alma compared the word unto a seed (v. 28); and that in the conclusion of the sermon, Alma twice invited the people to nourish the word (vv. 40–41). The entire sermon, therefore, is structured by repetition of the leitwort *word*, a significant theme both in P proper and the later Jewish and Christian texts P has influenced.

In Biblical Hebrew, the term *word* is expressed through the trilateral root *dbr*.<sup>19</sup> As a noun, *dbr* carries a dual nuance, meaning both "word" and "thing."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, if translated into Hebrew, a text such as Alma 32:21, which uses the English word *things*, would feature a biblical-like word play between Alma comparing the "*word* (in Hebrew *dābār*) unto a seed" (v. 28), and statements such as "faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of *things/words* [in Hebrew *dēbārīm*]":

And now as I said concerning faith—faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things [words, *dēbārīm*]; wherefore if ye have faith

---

19. At the conclusion of the Book of Mormon, Moroni tells his readers that if the plates had been sufficiently large, Nephite authors would have written in Hebrew (Mormon 9:33). From this and other evidence, most LDS scholars have assumed that Nephite characters were examples of Egyptian symbols used to transliterate Hebrew words and vice versa; see, for example, the discussion provided by Terry L. Givens in *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 132–33. Recently, however, LDS scholar Brant Gardner has called this reading into question, theorizing that the underlying plate text was a Mesoamerican language, such as Zoque, rather than Hebrew; see Brant Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2011), 157–63, 165–76, 239. The arguments for or against Hebrew as the original language of the text are beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that in the present study, I am not arguing for Hebrew as the underlying language of the script. No matter what position a person holds regarding the language of the Book of Mormon—including the argument that it is simply nineteenth-century American apocrypha written in English—since Book of Mormon sermons draw upon the Bible as a source of inspiration, connecting Book of Mormon words and phrases with Biblical Hebrew can draw out hidden literary connections between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible, even if these links were not the author's original intent.

20. *Brown Driver and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 182–84. The word *dābār*, for example, is translated as "word" in Genesis 15:1, 4, and "thing" in Genesis 18:14.

ye hope for things [words, *dēbārīm*] which are not seen, which are true. (Alma 32:21)

Another interesting biblical theme might be noted in connection with the passage just discussed (Alma 32:21). Because “things” can be read as “words,” it would seem that Alma speaks of words as things that can be *seen*. That might seem odd, but it is a venerable biblical tradition as well. Seeing words appears on occasion in biblical prophetic texts, including the superscription to Isaiah 2:1 (cited in the Book of Mormon in 2 Nephi 12:1): “The *word* that Isaiah, son of Amoz, *saw* concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” While as contemporary readers, we might typically associate words with the physical act of hearing rather than seeing, as illustrated via Isaiah 2:1, it was not uncommon for Israelite and later Jewish sources to conceptualize a prophetic word as something that could, in fact, be seen.

This same trend is witnessed in the writings of the Hellenized Jew Philo of Alexandria. Concerning the Israelites’ experience at Mount Sinai, Philo wrote:

Whereas the voice of mortals is judged by hearing, the sacred oracles intimate that the words of God (*logi*, the plural) are seen as light is seen, for we are told that all of the people saw the Voice (Ex 20:18), not that they heard it; for what was happening was not an impact of air made by the organs of mouth and tongue, but the radiating splendor of virtue indistinguishable from a fountain of reason. . . . But the voice of God which is not that of verbs and names yet seen by the eye of the soul, he [Moses] rightly introduces as “visible.” (*On the Migration of Abraham* 47–48)

In his theological exploration of the Sinai experience, Philo produces a connection between *word* and *light*. Without light, the human eye cannot see; yet light, from Philo’s perspective, allows humans not only to discern physical objects, but also facilitates human ability to see that which is spiritual (cf. D&C 88:11). Thus, in Philo’s conceptualization, the word of God is seen “as light is seen.” Readers familiar with the Priestly version of creation will recognize a connection, therefore,

between God speaking the words “let there be light” and God seeing the light, declaring it “good” (Genesis 1:3).

Returning to a consideration of John’s prologue from the New Testament, clearly Philo’s connection between *seeing*, *light*, and *word* parallels the conceptual use of *word* and *light* featured in John 1:1–5:

In the beginning was the Word [*logos*], and the Word [*logos*] was with God, and the Word [*logos*] was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was *the light of men*. *And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.* (John 1:1–5)

The relationship between seeing the word and discerning spiritual light in ancient Jewish and Christian texts such as Philo’s *On the Migration of Abraham* and the Gospel of John also appears in Alma’s sermon:

O then, is not this [the enlightening of your understanding and the expansion of your mind] real? I say unto you, Yea because *it [the seed/word] is light*; and whatsoever is light, is good, because *it [light] is discernible*, therefore ye must know that it is good. (Alma 32:35)

Alma’s statement that a testimony is “light” and that “whatsoever is light, is good” clearly reflects God’s initial act of creation in Genesis 1:3–4: “And God said let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.”

Additional Priestly creation motifs appear linked with *word* in Alma’s discourse through a repetition of the term *beginneth* (vv. 28, 30, 33, 37, 41; compare Genesis 1:1),<sup>21</sup> a depiction of the seed/word as “good” (vv. 28, 30, 32, 33, 39; compare creation statements as “good” in Genesis 1), and Alma’s statement that “every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness” (v. 31), which parallels the fact that in P’s creation narrative, God commanded the earth to “bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed,

---

21. Note, however, that Hebrew verbal constructions translated with “begin[neth]” in the KJV do not derive from the word *rē’sīt* “beginning” in Genesis 1:1.

and the fruit tree yielding fruit *after its kind*" (Genesis 1:11), as well as statements that God himself created man in his own "likeness" and "image" (Genesis 1:26–27).

Continuing this pattern, Alma states that as a testimony begins to develop in our lives, we will eventually say, "*Let us* nourish it with great care . . . that it may grow up and bring forth fruit unto us" (Alma 32:37). In view of Alma's invocation of Priestly creation imagery throughout the entire course of his sermon, this grammatical form of speaking in the first person plural cohortative, that is, "let us . . ." seems to parallel the divine language of creation in Genesis 1:26: "*Let us* make man in our image . . ." In Genesis 1, the "word" of God performs the nourishing acts of creation through the formulaic expression: "God said . . ." (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29). Alma appears to invoke this creation imagery through a reversal, "if *ye* will nourish the *word*." Again, through these textual allusions, Alma appears to be saying that man was created to act like God (tending the earth's vegetation; Genesis 2:5, 15), and he can therefore fulfill the measure of his creation by exercising faith in God's word.

### J themes in Alma 32

Alma's discourse relies on the themes of knowledge, tree of life, and seed, all of which appear as prominent motifs in the two Genesis accounts of creation. The creation story in Genesis 1 presents God speaking his word, which allows the "herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is upon the earth" (v. 11). It also states that the earth brought forth "herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind" (v. 12). The story in Genesis 2–3 speaks of a "tree of knowledge" and a "tree of life" (2:9).

Theologically, Alma's invitation to begin the planting process of God's word creates a type of *imitatio Dei* since God himself appears directly linked with planting imagery in Genesis 2:8. In J's creation story, God is a gardener who literally "plants a garden eastward in Eden" and who causes "to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good

for food” (Genesis 2:8–9).<sup>22</sup> According to J’s creation story, humans were created to fulfill a similar, albeit lesser, role as God by “working” and “preserving” the garden paradise (Genesis 2:15).<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew verbs *‘ābad* “work/dress” and *šāmar* “keep/preserve” are defined by later usage in the story of the man’s “working” the cursed ground and the lesser divinities (cherubim) “guarding” the tree of life (Genesis 3:23–24).<sup>24</sup> Alma’s sermon, therefore, ties thematically to these conceptions in Genesis 2 regarding the very purpose of human creation as “gardening servant” through Alma’s invitation to “give place that a seed [as word] may be *planted* in your heart” (v. 28).

In addition to these observations, Alma 32 seems to contain at least two subtle references to the J story of creation that are apparent only in Hebrew. As a result of eating from the tree of knowledge, Genesis reports that even though the man could originally enjoy the fruit of the garden with modest effort, henceforth, “thorns also and thistles shall [the ground] bring forth” (Genesis 3:18). In light of the other more explicit allusions to the biblical creation accounts, when read in Hebrew, Alma 32:41 also echoes Genesis 3:18. According to the *Brown Driver and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, the verb *šāmaḥ* translated in the KJV “to bring forth” literally means “to spring up.”<sup>25</sup> This Genesis passage seems to be echoed in Alma’s invitation to his audience to nourish the seed, so that it may become a tree “*springing up* unto everlasting life” (Alma 32:41). As a verb, *šāmaḥ* initially appears in Genesis 2:5: “And every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb

---

22. For additional examples of Yahweh portrayed in the role of gardener, see Numbers 24:6; Psalm 104:16; and Isaiah 44:14.

23. Recent scholarly considerations of the concept *imitatio Dei* or humans “imitating God” in the Hebrew Bible include John Barton, “Imitation of God in the Old Testament,” in *The God of Israel*, ed. Robert Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35–46; R. W. L. Moberly, “Why Did Noah Send Out a Raven?” *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 345–56; Eryl W. Davies, “Walking in God’s Ways: The Concept of *Imitatio Dei* in the Old Testament,” in *In Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Honour of Ronald E. Clements*, ed. Edward Ball (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 99–114.

24. The feminine suffixes attached to the verbs would appear to correspond with either Eden or perhaps the “land” (*‘ādāmāh*) in Genesis 2:9, 19.

25. *Brown Driver and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 855.

of the field before it *grew* (*ṣāmaḥ*).” The term *to grow*, like the theme of the *word* discussed above, appears as a leitwort throughout Alma’s discourse, surrounded by allusions to words or expressions that appear in the biblical stories of creation (marked in the following quotations by italics; instances of the verb “to grow” are in bold):

But behold, as the seed swelleth, and sprouteth, and *beginneth to grow*, then *you must needs say that the seed is good*; for behold it swelleth, and sprouteth, and *beginneth to grow*. And now, behold, will not this strengthen your faith? Yea, it will strengthen your faith: for *ye will say I know that this is a good seed*; for behold it sprouteth and *beginneth to grow*. (Alma 32:30)

And behold, as the tree *beginneth to grow*, *ye will say: Let us nourish it with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us. And now behold, if ye nourish it with much care it will get root, and grow up, and bring forth fruit.* (Alma 32:37)

From a literary perspective, the repetition of this imagery of gardening conceptually associates Alma’s discourse on faith with the original purpose of human creation. In essence Alma is saying we were created to cultivate faith.

This image of the purpose of human creation reflects the ideas conveyed in J’s creation narrative in which both man and woman were created to plant and tend God’s garden. In the account, the humans begin their planting efforts inside Eden, thus imitating God’s work. They eventually take those same skills into the wilderness where “thorns and thistles” appear together with the “herbs of the field” (Genesis 3:18). In portraying this transition from planting seeds inside the garden to planting in the wilderness, J’s story concludes with the terse statement, “[God] drove out the man” (Genesis 3:24). In Hebrew, the verb translated as “drove out” (*gāraš*) literally means “to cast out” (the verb appears in the King James Version as “to cast out” in Genesis 21:10).<sup>26</sup>

---

26. *Brown Driver and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 176.

Contextually, Alma's discourse appears to play intentionally upon this subtle biblical theme, particularly through literary repetition: "I say unto you, it is well that ye are *cast out* of your synagogues" (Alma 32:12); "it is because that ye are *cast out*, that ye are despised of your brethren" (v. 12); "because ye are afflicted and *cast out*" (v. 24); "if it be a good seed, if ye do not *cast it out* by your unbelief" (v. 28); "ye pluck it up and *cast it out*" (v. 38). Thus, J's theme of casting out in its creation narrative functions as a key literary motif throughout Alma's sermon.<sup>27</sup> It provides closure to Alma's discourse as he invokes the tree of paradise theme that the first humans were told in J they could no longer enjoy because of their fallen condition. In some sense, Alma suggests that planting the seed of faith reverses the effects of the fall. For Alma, the planting and tending of God's word prevents one from being cast out and allows one to freely partake of the "fruit of the tree of life" (v. 40).

### The comparison of word and seed

Returning to observations made at the beginning of this study, we saw that Genesis opens with two very distinct views concerning creation. The first account draws attention to God creating heaven and earth through the power of the word. It then presents a creation story that is highly structured. Creation occurs over a six-day, formulaic period arranged by the constant literary refrain "God said, 'Let there be X.'" By reading P's account, men and women could have confidence in God's word, that it is "good," and that it would always be fulfilled. In contrast, J's opening narrative depicts the creation of "earth and heaven" (Genesis 3:4b). It lacks that same highly developed literary structure found in P. In J, there is no formulaic pattern emphasizing the theological view that God is a God of order. Instead, J depicts God as a gardener planting

---

27. For a previous study that links Alma 32 with Eden imagery, see Jenny Webb, "It Is Well That Ye Are Cast Out: Alma 32 and Eden," in *An Experiment on the Word*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2011), 43–56.

seeds, one who creates humans to assist in his divine labor. As a tale of etiology, J explains why humans and not animals have the unique ability to plant seeds that grow into food. P and J represent very different views concerning God and creation. Both are now found within the opening chapters of the Hebrew Bible. But readers can relate to and have faith in J's Deity in a manner that differs from P's message. For J, God is very much like one of us, and we were created to care for his creation.

In his sermon on faith, Alma wagers a "comparison" that brings the P *word* into direct relation with the J *seed*. For Alma, the word of God gives structure and meaning to human existence. We should have faith in God's word. He speaks and it is so. This parallels the theological view in P's creation story. Drawing upon themes from Genesis 1, Alma specifically compares the "word of God" unto a seed, telling his audience that they are to be involved with "planting." Thus, Alma's sermon combines the two distinct creation views in the Genesis narratives, for God speaks the divine word in order to create in Genesis 1, and he plants seeds and trees to create his garden paradise in Genesis 2–3. In a sermon filled with allusions to the two creation narratives in Genesis, Alma's combination of planting a seed with the divine word is quite profound.

Through metaphor, Alma invites his audience to ponder the miraculous way in which the power of creation (as depicted through his word in the Bible's opening stories) appears reenacted every time a seed develops into a fruit-bearing tree. He uses biblical creation imagery from Genesis 1 (the divine word) with *imitatio Dei* planting (Genesis 2–3) to encourage his audience to cultivate the type of faith that brings everlasting life. God's word is powerful from Alma's perspective. We should take that word and plant it in our hearts. By invoking the miracle of creation in the past in a present context of seed growth and re-creation, Alma encourages his readers to fulfill the measure of their own creation by experimenting upon the divine word. In other words, obtaining the type of faith Alma describes is the very purpose of human existence. And it has been, from the beginning.

## Conclusion

In view of the way creation functions in biblical texts as a construct designed to inspire ancient audiences to exercise faith in their historical age by remembering God's primordial acts, allusions to creation in one of the Book of Mormon's greatest didactic sermons concerning faith should come as no surprise. After all, the Book of Mormon is an heir to biblical literary forms and theological paradigms. When taken as a whole, the connections between Alma 32 and the opening chapters of the Bible reveal that this Book of Mormon sermon is a learned text, steeped in biblical formulas.<sup>28</sup>

By connecting the act of developing Christian conviction with the Bible's opening creation narratives, Alma defines nourishing the word of God in one's life as the very purpose of creation. In this effort, he combines the two separate perspectives concerning creation in Genesis 1 and in Genesis 2–3 and links them as a unified theological whole. Through metaphor, Alma places the divine word directly into the context of planting as a creative act that allows the seed/word to develop into a tree of life. The miracle of primordial creation is therefore brought into the present world every time a seed develops into a fruit-bearing tree. The same could be said for the process of spiritual rebirth/creation through experimentation on the divine word. Alma uses both forms of creation in the Bible's opening chapters, word and planting, to encourage his audience to exercise faith in the present through reflections upon the primordial past. Using this process, Alma instructs his audience to develop the type of faith that leads to everlasting life, thus fulfilling the measure of their creation.

---

28. This trend continues in the subsequent portion of the narrative. Following Alma's lead, Amulek's subsequent sermon shows allusions to biblical creation imagery. The following motifs appear in Alma 34: "humble yourselves even to the dust" (v. 38); "led away by the temptations of the devil" (v. 39); "no good thing" (v. 39); "one day rest" (v. 41).

**David E. Bokovoy** holds a PhD in Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East from Brandeis University. A former LDS chaplain at Harvard University, Dr. Bokovoy currently teaches courses in Bible and Mormon studies at the University of Utah.