



KnoWhy #562
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“The Angel Appears to Alma the Younger and the Sons of Mosiah” by Caleb Williams

HOW CAN CONTRASTS TEACH US ABOUT TRUE CONVERSION?

“Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters.”

Mosiah 27:25

THE KNOW

According to the title page of the Book of Mormon, one of the main purposes of that sacred volume of scripture is “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.” As such, true conversion to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, through His Atonement, is one of the major themes throughout the Book of Mormon’s pages. Among the most powerful and enduring examples of this theme is the story of Alma the Younger. According to Blair G. Van Dyke, “the conversion of Alma the Younger provides a template for determining whether true conversion has transpired in the heart of an individual.”¹

When reading the various accounts of Alma’s experience (see Mosiah 27; Alma 36; 38),² it can be easy to focus on the miraculous intervention of the angel, and conclude that it was the angelic vision that converted him. However, Alma’s own retelling of the story, in Alma 36, uses chiasmus to centralize the focus *not* on the dramatic angelic visitation, but rather on the moment when he remembered and called upon Jesus Christ.³ Noel B. Reynolds has pointed out that the two halves of the chiasm have a “reverse polarity,” starting with Alma’s efforts to destroy the church of God (Alma 36:6), and concluding with the newly converted Alma striving to bring others to repentance (Alma 36:24–25).⁴

Van Dyke persuasively shows that the “contrast between [Alma’s] life prior to conversion and his life after his repentance” is evident in Mosiah 27 as well, and that focusing on this can improve one’s “understanding of the importance of conversion through a mighty change of heart.”⁵ Van Dyke identifies 8 specific contrasts, found already in Alma’s earliest conversion account in Mosiah 27, that polarized Alma’s behavior before and then after his conversion (see table).⁶

	faith (v. 33)
5. Hindered prosperity of the Church (v. 9)	5. Traveled extensively building up the Church (v. 35)
6. Stole the hearts of the people (v. 9)	6. Strove zealously to repair spiritual injuries (v. 35)
7. Performed evil works in secrecy (v. 10)	7. Published all the things he had seen (v. 35)
8. Intended to destroy the Church (v. 10–11)	8. Was an instrument in the hands of God (v. 36)

THE WHY

President Ezra Taft Benson warned, “we must be cautious as we discuss these remarkable examples” of conversion, like Alma the Younger. “Though they are real and powerful, they are the exception more than the rule. For every [Alma] ... there are hundreds and thousands of people who find the process of repentance much more subtle, much more imperceptible.”⁷ As such, sometimes focusing too much on the dramatic and miraculous nature of many conversions in the scriptures can distract readers from the valuable lessons these accounts provide on the *process* of conversion, and what being born of God looks like in regular, day-to-day life.

When readers focus less on the dramatic visitation of the angel, and more on the differences in Alma’s life and behavior before and after conversion, “the contrasts that emerge from the text allow us to consider *what* happened in Alma’s heart (the fruits of conversion) as opposed to *how* that change was initiated (an angelic visitation).”⁸ This “allows the reader to understand more clearly that true conversion has not so much to do with the events surrounding conversion but with our reactions to those events.”⁹

Viewed this way, Van Dyke concluded:

Alma serves as a pattern for all truth seekers. He came to Christ through repentance, was born of the Spirit, consecrated his talents and energies to building the Church of God, openly and publicly stood as a witness of Christ, and chose to be an instrument in the hands of God.¹⁰

Coming unto Christ, repenting of sins, consecrating time and talents, building up the Church, standing as a witness: as the Book of Mormon clearly and purposefully teaches, these are relatable activities that *all* disciples of Christ can strive to participate in.

Alma’s Conversion in Mosiah 27	
Prior to Repentance	After Repentance
1. Rejected Jesus in unbelief (v. 8, 30)	1. Redeemed of the Lord through repentance (v. 24)
2. Embraced wickedness and darkness (v. 8, 29)	2. Born of the Spirit and brought to the light (v. 25, 29)
3. Used language skills to flatter and misled (v. 8)	3. Used language skills to teach the gospel (v. 32)
4. Led many people to iniquity (v. 8)	4. Imparted consolation/confirmed others’

Indeed, they are among the things Latter-day Saints *covenant* to at baptism, as well as in additional ordinances in the temple. As President Benson taught, it is by living “quiet lives of goodness, service, and commitment,” on a “day by day” basis that people slowly, but surely, “move closer to the Lord, little realizing that they are building a godlike life.”¹¹

FURTHER READING

Blair G. Van Dyke, “Light or Dark, Freedom or Bondage: Enhancing Book of Mormon Themes through Contrasts,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 6, no. 3 (2005): 104–107.

Noel B. Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 279–312.

President Ezra Taft Benson, “A Mighty Change of Heart,” *Ensign*, October 1989, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

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NOTES

1. Blair G. Van Dyke, “Light or Dark, Freedom or Bondage: Enhancing Book of Mormon Themes through Contrasts,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 6, no. 3 (2005): 104.
2. On these different accounts, see Book of Mormon Central, “Why are there Multiple Accounts of Joseph Smith’s and Alma’s Visions? (Alma 36:6–7),” *KnowWhy* 264 (January 20, 2017). See also John W. Welch, “Three Accounts of Alma’s Conversion,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 150–153.
3. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why was Alma Converted? (Alma 36:21),” *KnowWhy* 144 (July 15, 2016). See also John W. Welch, “A Masterpiece: Alma 36,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 114–131; John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in Alma 36,” *FARMS Preliminary Report* (1989); John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982; reprint, FARMS, 1996), 33–52.
4. Noel B. Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” in *Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36–42*, ed. Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2019), 451–472, esp. 452–454, 462–463. For an extended version of this paper, see Noel B. Reynolds, “Rethinking Alma 36,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 279–312.
5. Van Dyke, “Light or Dark,” 104.

6. Based on the table in Van Dyke, “Light or Dark,” 107.
7. President Ezra Taft Benson, “A Mighty Change of Heart,” *Ensign*, October 1989, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.
8. Van Dyke, “Light or Dark,” 105.
9. Van Dyke, “Light or Dark,” 106.
10. Van Dyke, “Light or Dark,” 106.
11. Benson, “A Mighty Change of Heart.”