

## Engaging Gospel Doctrine (**Episodes 201.1 and 201.2**)

### LESSON 27: ALMA 30-31

#### *All Things Denote there is a God*

##### Two minute take home

- Core of lesson: Talking with those of differing beliefs (These topics are hard and unfamiliar, but so rewarding! And they don't even need to be that threatening)
- Starting with ourselves: What do we know? (great teaser for next episode on faith)
  - Experience, knowing, having faith (even "knowing" is provisional)
  - My testimony of agnosticism (the paradox of epistemic humility)
- All things denote there is a God (30:44): Belief in God (Alma is basically saying "Everything agrees with me" which simply is not a very persuasive assertion)
  - Where does our belief in God come from?
    - Experience/Relationship
    - What we are taught and where that comes from (scripture, cultural interpretation)
  - Belief in God (experience) vs. Belief in Belief in God
  - What is the outcome of your belief in God?
  - What is God?
    - God the Creator
    - God who Nurtures and Saves
  - Living with open faith in God (be open to being wrong but nurture our relationship with God)
- All things testify of Christ (This actually doesn't hold up, since you can replace "Christ" with anything you want "Thor" or "Gandalf" or "FSM" which is the whole point of the Flying Spaghetti Monster")

- Jesus, Savior or Symbol
- Our personal relationship with Jesus
- Being inspired by Jesus of Nazareth
- Salvation: Agent and outcome (whether we are saved is more important than who or what saves us)
- So you want religion do you
  - Zoramites and the religion of comfortable, certain elitism
  - Alma's vulnerability and authenticity
- Concluding thoughts, living with faith in God and talking to others (this humble, respectful openness is win-win, allows us to experience all the good of belief but also learn and correct those beliefs, draw closer and closer to the truth, gain greater light and knowledge, and also talk to those who have different beliefs, learning from each other)

Going to experiment with not returning to the reading this time, but will next episode. The scriptures are obviously the core of the podcast, and that will always be there in the full episodes. These core episodes will provide framing for you to spend time with the reading yourself.

This lesson is about talking to those of other beliefs. We read about two main confrontations: Alma vs. Korihor and Alma vs. the Zoramites.

We are going to have some quality first article of faith time and talk about God and Jesus Christ. But really, such discussions come down to the differences between experiencing, knowing, and having faith (I think faith is much stronger and more powerful than "believing". Believing is what propositions we assent to... faith motivates us to action)

My testimony of agnosticism (My greatest and even most cherished testimony involves not what I know to be true, but what I don't know. blessings of an unknown God, link to it) Agnosticism may be a scary word and sound wishy washy, but it is centered in humility and faith. Humility comes from taking seriously the fact that we as humans 1) don't understand reality very well (our senses don't give us much information, we can't assimilate most of the data we do experience, then we filter our experiences through our interpretations, biases etc, and then we don't even remember clearly. We live in a world of illusions and fictions), but even

with these limitations, we crave certainty. We need to \*feel\* that we understand the world. In sum, we humans are designed to not know much at all but feel absolutely certain about it. Part of authenticity, vulnerability, and faith is realizing what we don't know. And in a wonderful paradox, the more open we are to being wrong, the greater we can come to being right.

The ending of my "Revelation according to our Expectations" essay

If we open our minds, we can be given new myths, more perfectly corresponding to Ultimate Reality. If we are humble like children, ever seeking to learn how things are instead of projecting our desires of how we would like them to be, we can grow in light and knowledge and allow God to reveal truth and himself to us as it and he is, instead of constraining him to lovingly and patiently humor our prejudices until we are mature enough to surrender them.

If you ask if someone believes in God and they answer "Yes", that is only the beginning of the conversation. What is God? What does belief in God mean? Why does it matter?

Two approaches to God:

What conceptions of God make sense? What best fits the evidence we are aware of (yes, there is so much we don't know, but we can understand most descriptions of God based on historical context and culture, God as parent for example)

Most important: What is our \*relationship\* with God? How do we experience God? (I have felt God's voice, felt God change my nature, but thinking about God and experience God remain distinct if overlapping)

Goal	Class members will learn how to engage beyond surface readings to understand how to communicate with those of different beliefs.
Hook	In one chapter, a showdown between Alma and "anti-Christ" tackles the heavy topics of Atonement and existence of God. They aren't messing around. Round two we have Alma vs. the Zoramites in a prayer-off.
Overview	30:1-5: Narrative postlude after the terrible battle 30:6-21: Introduction to Korihor, who preaches to the Nephites and then people of Ammon 30:22-29: Korihor vs. Giddonah 30:30-55: Korihor vs. Alma 30:56-60: the end of Korihor 31:1-11: Introduction to mission to Zoramites 31:12-23: Zoramite worship 31:24-38: Alma's prayer and result (note the contrast between the two prayers)

	<p><u>Introductory Disclaimer:</u> It is very important that these lessons always be uplifting, edifying, and productive. Spiritual nourishment is my top priority. I strongly feel however that this needs to be done in a way that is relevant and takes seriously the complexity of life and human experience. So sometimes our lessons and discussions might get challenging as well as uplifting and nourishing. This lesson is one of these. Because sorry to break it to you, if you are having a conversation with a friend and say “all things testify of God” or, “all the Old Testament prophets testify of Christ”, the conversation probably won’t end there. I also need to add that this will not be a lesson that you can simply export into any ward setting. I find it better to be responsive rather than proactive when bringing up challenging issues, but since I am modeling an ideal ward, this class can handle it right? But I do think you will enjoy listening, and maybe have an idea for a comment or two.</p> <p>Faith is a powerful force in life, and therefore we need not flinch from the hard questions. The Book of Mormon can bear to be taken seriously. And sometimes hard questions can more powerful and productive than easy answers.</p>
<p>Main Points</p>	<p>A primary emphasis of this lesson is interacting with those of different beliefs. For better or worse, we can’t simply apply Alma’s approaches in our own relationships. For example, asking God to strike our friends mute is probably not a winning solution. The question of how to interact with “apostates” will play a key role in our class discussion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jesus as the Savior</li> <li>• Arguing the Existence of God</li> <li>• What can we learn from the Zoramites?</li> <li>• Learning from contrasting prayers</li> <li>• Talking to those of differing beliefs</li> </ul> <p>For the lesson, we are going to dive right into the heart of Alma’s confrontations with Korihor and the Zoramites.</p> <p>The “apostate refrain” in the Book of Mormon is “There is no Christ; no one can know that which is to come”. In addition, Korihor drives his argument home stating that there is no God (although did you notice it was an *angel* who told him there was no God? Wouldn’t you be like, “Dude, where did YOU come from then?”)</p> <p>Let’s take these one at a time.</p> <p><u>Jesus as Savior</u></p>

Much has been made of the fact that the Book of Mormon is “another testament of Jesus Christ”. BYU Professor Susan Easton Black estimated that Jesus is mentioned an average of every 1.7 verses (See Elder Nelson’s Oct 1999 Conference talk “A Testimony of the Book of Mormon”). I remember marking with a red pencil every reference to Jesus in the Book of Mormon and sure enough, every page was dotted with red.

It struck me during grad school classes how big a deal this is. Taken at face value, the Book of Mormon proves the Atonement in a way the New Testament cannot. While the message of Jesus as Savior permeates the Book of Mormon, the New Testament can be seen as a Christian commentary on the Jewish Scriptures. Let me explain how this works.

I agree that the strongest and most important witness of Jesus Christ is a personal, spiritual one. At the same time, I want to help you understand how Biblical scholarship works so that you can interact with others in an informed way. The Biblical books as we have them are out of order and reflect a complex history of composition. Though much material goes back to Jesus of course, the gospels as we have them were written decades after Jesus’ death. Therefore to understand how Jesus’ followers responded immediately after his death we need to do some detective work.

Luke 24 is one of our best windows for how Jesus’ followers responded after his death (summarize this)

Therefore, in a sense the New Testament and the core message of Christianity comes from Jesus’ followers “reading Jesus into” the Jewish scriptures. Pretty crazy right?

So this is why people outside the Church question the “pre-Christian Christianity” of the Book of Mormon. This is complicated by the fact that New Testament wording permeates the Book of Mormon but that is a topic for another time.

Let me strongly emphasize that I think New Testament scholarship allows room for faith in Christ. There are plenty of NT scholars who are also faithful believers including one of the best of the past century, a late Catholic priest named Raymond Brown. When asked whether he was going to write a book on the resurrection, he said he would rather approach that topic “face to face”.

Interestingly, the Book of Mormon supports the idea that teachings about Christ were mostly unknown. In the first chapter Lehi’s dream teaches him about “the redemption of the world” () in a way that suggests Jews of his time were unfamiliar with the idea as he understood it, and Jacob and Nephi need to have Jesus’ name given to them by revelation (2 Ne. 10:3, 25:19).

We will immerse ourselves in the power of the Book of Mormon's witness of Christ both later in this lesson and especially in next lesson when we cover Alma 32-35. But first we need to address the topic of the existence of God.

### Existence of God

I have had powerful personal experiences with God that I am deeply grateful for and have shaped my life. I will return to the idea that the most important understanding of God comes from personal interactions with our Heavenly Parents and Jesus etc, but first we need to dig into a bit of logic and philosophy to engage with Alma's discussion with Korihor.

Let me float a proposition by you: Though personal experience with God is powerful and vital, we cannot understand God's exact nature. Here are a few arguments and we will pick up this topic during the discussion:

- It would make things so much easier if the existence of God could be proved. But here is the kicker—if you can't \*disprove\* something, you can't \*prove it\* either.
- Lesser cannot comprehend greater. We cannot understand God's full nature any more than a termite can comprehend the human genome.
- Scripture teaches us that God condescends to where we are. If God speaks according to our language so we understand, does the appearance of God we perceive also follow our cultural framework?

So the question of what God is like is as important as whether God exists.

- Design/Cosmological (the universe is so awesome God must have made it)
- Ontological: If God is by definition the greatest thing that exists, God has to exist
- Anthropological: (humans are so awesome God must have made us)

At the end of the day, debates about whether God exists can prove "less effective". I personally think that respecting personal experience with God is paramount, and if you do want to debate, two topics are productive:

- 1) What conceptions of God current evidence allows for, including which are internally consistent
- 2) What beneficial or harmful consequences a particular understanding of God has (bring up Heavenly Mother)

**Korihor and Alma** (see table below)

So ah, does anyone else feel like Korihor was winning this argument? 😊 I would

	<p>gently suggest we can do better.</p> <p><b>Criticisms of the Zoramites (alma 31)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idol worship</li> <li>• Met together on the “day of the Lord” but didn’t think about God otherwise</li> <li>• A pulpit in their synagogues higher than everyone</li> <li>• A strong claim to be special, elect, the only ones with the truth; everyone else is damned to hell</li> <li>• God is a spirit</li> <li>• Everyone offered the same scripted prayers</li> <li>• Hearts were set upon gold, and upon silver, and upon all manner of fine goods (31:24) (materialism)</li> <li>• Boasting and pride</li> <li>• Puffed up with the vain things of the world</li> </ul> <p><b>Close reading of Alma’s prayer</b></p> <p><b>Dealing with Differing beliefs (see concluding points)</b></p>
<p>Other Comments/ Discussion Starters</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesson of 30:20 Don’t engage, just arrest. (problematic?)</li> <li>• “traditions of fathers” Two sources of knowledge: 1) Personal Experience, 2) Tradition/Teaching. The kicker is that even 1 is filtered through 2!</li> <li>• 17: history of ideas?</li> <li>• 18: This is very important. Even if we believe in an afterlife, we should be at peace with our lives and choices *based on this life alone*. If we knew our existence would end at death, would we still make the same decisions? I think the best decisions yield rewards in BOTH this life and the life to come.</li> <li>• 25: children guilty or not because of parents (would make good discussion point. Yes they are innocent, but destructive patterns pass down over generations)</li> <li>• 32 Cf. Paul in 1 Thessalonians</li> <li>• “pleasing to the carnal mind” would be a good discussion point.</li> </ul>
<p>Concluding Points</p>	<p>Wrap up thoughts on the role of faith and debate (critical inquiry), healthy to understand the relationship between them. It is ok if things aren’t provable (that is one point of FAITH), but our faith is also more organic and resilient if it takes into account what can be known. Finally, most productive way to engage others with a different belief is not to shut them out immediately, but try to understand where they are coming from, while also respecting boundaries (you don’t need to get into a debate on every topic with every person).</p>

Korihor	Alma
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There is no Christ. "no man can know of anything which is to come: (30:13) You cannot know things you cannot see (15)	
Traditions of ancestors and priests leads to deranged, frenzied minds	
(Use text to go through these)	
You lead away people to glut yourself on their labors	Do not.
	Why would we do what we are doing if it didn't bring us and those we speak to joy? Are we deceiving this people?
Yup.	
	Do you believe in God?
Nope.	What evidence do you have there is no God or Christ? Prove it. You don't have any evidence. I have EVERYTHING as evidence God exists. I know you believe you just have a lying, deceiving spirit. The devil has power over you.
Show me a sign.	Our testimonies and those of the prophets are signs. The scriptures and all things and creation all denote there is a God (argument from creation). Will you deny everything?
Yup. Show me a sign.	This makes me sad but so that you don't lead people astray any more I am going to ask God to strike you mute.
Ok fine. I don't deny that there is a God; I just don't know. I am agnostic not atheist.	BAM. You can't talk; I win.

Greg: it's like an old western movie "Evidence? I've got your evidence right here."

Aftermath: Korihor writes that the devil deceived him, appeared in the form of an angel, taught things "pleasing to the carnal mind", that there was no God, had success so much that he believed.