

**Dialogue Sunday School (Mosiah
25-28)**

**As you can see, like Abinadi I have
come among you in disguise.**

I would like **to begin** by expressing my
grateful **indebtedness** to three
generations of Latter-day **Saint
scholars** who have taken this **serious
book** seriously and whose **deep study**
and **reflection** have **informed** and
inspired my own study: I can't name
them all, so I'll just **mention three**
who were my **teachers and mentors**
when I first **started reading and
thinking** about the Book of Mormon:

Robert Thomas, Hugh Nibley, and
Truman Madsen.

Since **Adam Miller** began **his lesson**
with a Billy **Collins poem**, I feel
emboldened to begin mine **with one**
as well: Collins' "**Introduction to**
Poetry" which might also be called
"Introduction to Scripture":

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the
shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

What the Book of Mormon really
means is our joyful work of discovery.

I love the image of the text as a hive
with all those **words, ideas, and**
images buzzing around **inside**

Making the **Word of God** sweet as
honey.

According to **tradition** The first formal
introduction to scripture for young
children in Jesus' day was called
the ***Bet Sefer***= The **house** of the
Book—which of course is **the heart.**

"At the ages of six through twelve,
Jewish children began their **formal**
education. Both **boys and girls**
attended **synagogue school** and
learned to **read and write.** The
textbook was the **Torah** and the **goal**
was not just to read but

to **memorize** the sacred text. Can you **imagine** what this would be like? **As a child of six**, you would go to the synagogue and **the most respected man in the city** would **greet you** with a **slate** and he would put a **dollop of honey** on the slate and then he would **remove the ancient scroll** of the **Torah**. As you **sat speechless** and in awe, the **rabbi** would have you **taste the honey** on your slate and **tell you** that the **Torah is sweeter than the honeycomb** (see [Psalm 19:10](https://www.khouse.org/articles/2005/616))."(https://www.khouse.org/articles/2005/616)

It is **delightful** to think of **Jesus going** to the **synagogue** at this **young age** and having the experience of **tasting**

honey and associating it with the **words of the Torah**. It is also **pleasant** to **speculate** that that **childhood memory** came back to him when he **tasted honey** on visiting the disciples **following his resurrection**, especially since **Luke immediately** shows Jesus **associating the taste of honey** on that occasion with the **Torah and the Psalms**: " And they gave him a piece of a **broiled fish**, and of an **honeycomb**. And he took it, and **did eat** before them. And **he said** unto them, These are the **words** which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that **all things** must be **fulfilled**, which were **written in the law of Moses**, and in the **prophets**, and in **the psalms**, concerning **me**. Then **opened he their understanding**, that

they might understand the scriptures
... (Luke 24:42-45)

In the **material** I sent out, I asked,
“What does the Jewish mother say to her daughter when she comes home from Hebrew School?” One person responded, **“Is that any way to talk to your mother?”** It’s a question I ask whenever I begin a new season of what we used to call gospel doctrine class. **Invariably,** the answer I receive is, “She asks, ‘What did you learn today?’ but what she says is, **“Did you ask good questions?”** We Latter-day Saints are much **more comfortable at giving answers than asking questions,** and yet we only

learn something new when we question, probe, and ponder.

My **second question** was “**Why** Do we **Study the scriptures?** I’ll give my **full answer later**, but one good answer is, “We study the scriptures so we will **know better** how to **study the scriptures.**” Much of our **usual scripture study** is devoted to **confirming our beliefs** rather than **expanding our knowledge** and **deepening our devotion**. We should be **reading the scriptures** in order to **hear better**, see further, **think deeper**, and, most important, **to love more fully**—in **other words** to become **better disciples**.

SLIDE 1 This **illustration** by
contemporary Latter-day Saint artist

José de Faria

A Plentitude do Evangelho (The

Fullness of the Gospel) is a

marvelous **illustration** of **how** we are to **study the gospel**—the **profusion**, even **plentitude** of compasses, maps, and charts **symbolize** the resources, **explorations, imaginations**, insights, and **intuitions** that lead us to **see deeper** into the text, and that **allow us to make connections**, see **patterns**, and receive **insights** and **revelations** that **open** and **unfold** the text. It is as if in **studying** the lives of these **transplanted peoples**, their world **comes alive**. As **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** said upon reading **Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales***,

. . . as I read

I hear the **crowing cock**, I hear the

note

Of lark and linnet, and from **every**

page

Rise **odors** of **ploughed field** or

flowery mead.¹

We may **not often** get such vivid

sensual experiences in reading the

Book of Mormon but what **we do get**

helps us **come alive in Christ**.

There is **so much rich material** in the

scriptures for today that we could

spend a week on them. Before we

turn to what I consider the most

important material, let me highlight

¹ "Chaucer," <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/chaucer/>;
accessed 14 July 2011.

several questions to ponder for our further individual or family study.

- One thing that occurs to me is why, if he were intent on perpetuating a fraud in writing the Book of Mormon, as some accuse Joseph Smith of doing--why would he compose such a complex, convoluted, and at times confusing narrative? In these chapters we have Alma and his followers who have [escaped from King Noah fleeing to Zarahemla and the people of Mosiah; the records of the people of Zeniff, who had left and then returned to Zarahemla; the record of the Jaredites as discovered by the Mulekites; and the Lamanites. And

yet somehow it can all be unraveled. The question to ask is who really unraveled it in the first place?

- These chapters introduce a new form of government among the Book of Mormon peoples. Why is this significant and how does it change the trajectory of history? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both kingship and democracy?
- In both Mosiah's and Alma's time and in ours leaders faced a crisis related to the rising generation. What can we learn about how they approached their crisis that might more effectively help us address ours?

- How are Alma the Younger and St. Paul alike and how are they different?
- Why is the determiner “all” used so frequently in the Book of Mormon? What and how are other determiners used? (see especially Chapter 26:37-39 and Chapter 27:1-7 and 35-36)
- What is significant about the different records that Mosiah gathers and entrusts to Alma in Chapter 28—The Plates of Brass, the Plates of Nephi, the Plates of Gold, and “all the records” and “all the things which he had kept” including the interpreters?

I want to **share an insight** I received several months ago while **finishing**

my book on the Book of Mormon, **A New Witness to the World**: Despite more than **six decades** of reading, I **had not understood** until recently that from **beginning to end** – from **Lehi’s and Nephi’s dreams** to **Moroni’s last words** inviting us to **come unto Christ** – the **central focus**, **governing principle**, and **paramount message** of the Book of Mormon is **the importance of love**:

For the **human characters** in the book, it is about:

- The **offering** and the **refusing** of love.
- The **persistence of** and the **resistance to** love.
- The **abundance** and the **absence** of love.

- The **joy** and the **suffering** of love.

For the **divine beings** it is:

- The **unconditional gift** of love.
- The **generosity and grace** of love.
- The **patience, long suffering, and cost** of love, and
- The **unqualified endurance** of love.

In the **chapters** for this week, **we see**:

- The **long-suffering love** of Mosiah and Alma for **their sons**.
- The **love of the members** of the Church for these **wayward sons** as seen in their willingness to **fast and pray** for them for **two days**.

- The **love of Alma** and, following his conversion, the love of **Alma the younger for the Church.**
- The Love of the **sons of Mosiah** for the **Lamanites.**
- The love of **God the Father** and, even though she is absent from the narrative, Fiona's lesson last week emboldens me to declare by the logic of truth being reason, the love of **our Heavenly Mother.**
- The love of **Jesus Christ** for Alma and the Sons of Mosiah—and for the **Nephites, Lamanites, Mulekites**—and all the other peoples of the book—and for **all of us.**

In other words, **love abounds** in these chapters—as it does **throughout** the Book of Mormon.

If we **were all together** today in an actual classroom, **I would begin**--as I often begin my lessons on poetry, novels, plays, and art—by **asking**, “What is the **most important** word, phrase, sentence, or image in these chapters? It is a **fun exercise** because usually there **isn’t a clear or easy answer**.

For me, the most important **sentence** is found in **Mosiah 26:30**: “Yea, **as often** as my people repent **will I forgive** them their trespasses against me.” If the Book of Mormon didn’t convey **any other lesson** than this **one sentence** it would still be a **marvelous**

work and a wonder. Why do I say this? Because **two hundred years** ago when Joseph **walked into the woods** almost **everyone believed** in the **capriciousness of God's grace** and believed that the majority of humankind was **condemned** to an eternal burning **hell**.

Everything **falls to less importance** in relation to this **amazing promise of grace**: I repeat: "Yea, as **often** as my people repent **will I forgive them** their trespasses against me."

It is the **context in which that promise is given** that I wish to **focus** our **attention** today—the **dramatic conversion** of **Alma** the Younger and the **Sons of Mosiah**.

This **episode** is preceded by a **remarkable declaration** by the Lord to Alma's father, as recounted in **Mosiah 26**. What a great leader: Out of **concern** that he might **be misusing or abusing his authority** as the leader of the Church, **Alma prayed** for guidance, **pouring out** "his **whole soul** to God." **God's answer** comes in the form of a **beatitude**:

15 Blessed art thou, Alma, and **blessed** are they who were baptized in the waters of Mormon. Thou art **blessed** because of thy exceeding faith in the words alone of my servant Abinadi.

16 And **blessed** are they because of their exceeding faith in the words

alone which thou hast spoken unto them.

17 And **blessed** art thou because thou hast established a church among this people; and they shall be established, and they shall be my people.

18 Yea, **blessed** is this people who are willing to bear my **name**; for in my **name** shall they be called; and they are mine.

19 And because thou hast inquired of me concerning the transgressor, thou art **blessed**.

A wonderful example of biblical repetition; the multiplication of “blessed” emphasizes God’s eagerness to bestow abundant blessings on us all—The extent of Alma’s being blessed is God’s

immediate **promise**: “Thou art **my servant**; and I covenant with thee that **thou shalt have eternal life.**”

Let’s turn now to the story of the **conversion of Alma and the Sons of Mosiah**. The scene for this dramatic episode is **set earlier** in the chapter in which **we are told** that Alma and the sons of Mosiah “**were numbered** among the **unbelievers.**” **Alma** stands out as “a **very wicked** and idolatrous man, . . . **a man of many words.** . . . who . . . **led many** of the people to do after the manner of his **iniquities**” (a powerful plural that!) (27:8). These **young men** were a **threat** because they sought “**to destroy** the church, and to **lead astray** the people of the Lord” (10).

In response to the **prayers of their fathers**, the Lord sent **an angel** to confront these **wayward sons**.

SLIDE 2: Angel appears to Alma and Sons of Mosiah

"Alma and the Sons of Mosiah," **Jorge Cocco Santangelo**

The **angel came**, as angels are sometimes wont to do, with a **voice of thunder** so powerful it **shakes the earth** beneath the sinners' feet. He **singles out Alma** for condemnation and calls him **to repentance**. It is interesting that his address mentions **captivity**—one of the recurring motifs of the **Israelite history** and one of the **recurrent themes** of the Book of Mormon: "Go, and **remember the captivity** of thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi; and

remember how great things he [**God**]
has done for them; for they were in
bondage and he **delivered them**”
(16). **Alma** is indeed in **bondage** and
the **angel** wants him **to remember** the
Lord’s **liberating love** that freed them.

Why was Mormon so taken with **this**
story? He includes **four different**
versions of Alma’s conversion: Here,
in **Alma 26:17-20, Alma 36:1-30, and**
Alma 38:6-8. For **Grant and Heather**
Hardy, Mormon’s reason for these
multiple tellings is tree-fold: historical
specificity, spiritual immediacy, and
literary quality. **All valid conclusions.** I
add **two more**: **First, Mormon** seems
as **impressed** with Alma as the
compilers of the New Testament
were **with Paul**. Both were figures of

great intellect, courage, leadership, persuasive skill, and spiritual power. So **towering a figure** is Alma that the **next period** of Book of Mormon history, to use **Emerson's words**, is his **"lengthened shadow."**

The **other reason** I believe Mormon includes **so many accounts** of Alma's conversion is that he sees Alma as **an archetypical figure** and therefore a **powerful symbol** of the **cycle** of **grave rebellion**, anguished **repentance**, and joyful **redemption**. He is a kind of **Everyman or Every-saint** to which parents and prophets can point—if a sinner of **Alma's wickedness** and **rebellion** can repent and change his or her life, then **anyone** should be able to. **If Christ's love** and **mercy** can

reach into the **depths of hell** and **rescue and redeem** a sinner such as Alma, there is **hope for everyone**.

Notice Alma's language: from the "gall of **bitterness**," "bonds of **iniquity**," and the "darkest **abyss**" in which he is "**racked with eternal torment**" he is "**snatched**" by Christ. ***Snatched***: What a **powerful word** choice. The **meaning** from the 15th century is "**to lay hold of suddenly**" and especially "to take from someone's hands" with the implication doing it **to rescue quickly**. I believe what Alma intends to convey is that **at the very moment** of his impending **destruction, Christ *snatched*** him from the **hands of Satan** and the **jaws of hell. Mormon**

must have **understood** the power of a **narrative** which shows such a **dramatic shift from a person** who “**rejected** his redeemer and **denied** the gospel” to one who **through the love** of Christ is able to “**sing the song of redeeming love**” – and to sing **with such fervor** as to **inspire others** to sing it as well, **including those of us** living in the time for which the Book of Mormon was expressly written.

That allows me **to conclude** by **segueing** to something I believe the **Book of Mormon is saying** to those of us living during this **twenty-first century** divided, unequal, warring, **Covid-19** reality in which a **growing number** of people, far and near, **now need** and will **increasingly need** our

love and our **charity**. The **baptismal covenants** made in these chapters remind us of King Benjamin's address and its **radical teaching** that the way we **retain** "a remission of our sins from day to day is by **feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief**, both spiritually and temporally, **according to their wants.**" In other words, our spiritual redemption is connected to the material and spiritual salvation of **those most in need** we are called to serve. As **Elder Jeffrey Holland** said in last **April's conference**: "When we **have conquered** this [virus]—and we will—may we be **equally committed** to **freeing the world** from the **virus of hunger**, freeing neighborhoods and

nations from the **virus of poverty**.
May we hope for schools where
students are taught . . . the gift of
personal dignity for every child of
God, unmarred by **any form of racial,
ethnic, or religious prejudice**.
Undergirding all of this is our
relentless hope for greater devotion
to the **two greatest of all**
commandments: to love God by
keeping His counsel and **to love our**
neighbors by showing **kindness** and
compassion, patience and
forgiveness.¹¹ These two **divine**
directives are still—and forever will
be—the **only real hope** we have for
giving our children a better world
than the one they now know.”¹²

Sometimes **God sends angels** to remind us of these great commandments, as he did in the beginning to **Adam and Eve** and as he has done throughout history to **announce, warn, teach, and comfort** his children. Those angels sent to Abraham, Elijah, Nephi, Alma, Mary, Paul, Joseph Smith and others **were, and are, also sent to us.** They are also **our messengers** of truth, grace, and love. As country singer, **Kathy Mattea** puts it, “[**God**] **keeps sending us angels.**”

walked down to the river

Stood on the shore

Seems like the devil's always

Tryin' to get in my door

Just when I thought I couldn't

Take any more

He keeps sending me angels

From up on high

He keeps sending me angels

To teach me to fly . . .

As I stand on this mountain

Face to the wind

Amazed at the number of

Times we've all sinned

And the countless enemies

That should've been friends

Oh, here he comes again
He keeps sending me angels
Here they come a flyin'
He keeps sending me angels

To keep me from cryin' . . .
Some say that it's comin'
I say it's already here
The love that's among us

Through the joy and the fear
When I look into your eyes
Everything is so clear
My friend, here he comes again

He keep sending me angels

From up on high
He keeps sending me angels
To teach me to fly

He keeps sending me angels
Sweet and true
He keeps sending me angels
Just like you

Even if **we are** somehow **fallen angels**
or, in **Iris DeMent's words**, "**Infamous
Angels**," we can still be **angels to one
another** because, as she also sings,
for all of us, **our destination is Home.**

There are **many ways** in which we
currently have **opportunities** to act
as angels, and will have **increasingly**
as the world is affected by this **virus**

and by **global warming, warfare, displacement, and poverty.**

I know **you all** have many **ways** in which to **play the role of angels**, but, if you are looking for more, let me **suggest one** that will **give you joy** and make **an enormous difference in the church and in the world.** For the past **twelve years** a group of us associated with the **Bountiful Children's Foundation** have been working to address **moderate and severe acute malnutrition** among Latter-day Saint and other children in the developing world. We **focus** on the **first 1,000 days** which are the **most critical** in terms of **physical and cognitive** development. Although we are operating in **over 200 congregations**

in 18 countries we are still reaching **less than ten percent** of Latter-day Saint children suffering from **malnutrition**. **Currently** we are **working** with the **Church** to help more, but **we could use your help**. As I have worked among these children for the **past decade** in the Philippines, Guatemala, Peru, Colombia and elsewhere I have been **persuaded** that **if anyone qualifies** as the **least** it is certainly these children. A year ago my wife **Gloria and I** were in **Madagascar** on behalf of the Foundation. We **screened children in four areas**. The **lowest rate** of malnutrition was **55%** and the **highest was 90%**. If you want to be an angel

to these children contact me or
google **Bountifulchildren.org**.

Over my **shoulder** is **Franz Schwartz's**
painting of **Christ in Gethsemane**. As I
look at it **each day**, I am struck both
by the **deep sorrow** enveloping Christ
and the **tender compassion** and
consolation of the **angel** who
comforts him with **loving arms** and
sheltering wings. Even though I am
not such an angel, I **would like to be**
like one. **This painting** reminds that
we should try to see **everyone as**
Christ—including **not only** the lost
and least among us, but also **our**
fellow saints, including those who
have **left the Church** and, at this
difficult time for the Church, the

apostles and prophets who, though at times **may make mistakes**, I am convinced **labor with love** to lead us. **Christ's broken heart** for us should lead us to **break our hearts** for any who, through **choice or circumstance**, feel bereft **of love**.

We don't often think of it, but I see **ancient as well as modern prophets** calling us to **weep for Christ** and to **weep with him**, to comfort him in his **sorrow over our sins** and the sins of the world, over the **brokenness in the world** and the **brokenness in us all**.

Just as our **Heavenly Parents and their son** weep with and for us, so we should **weep with and for them**, easing and lifting their burdens by **surrendering our sins** and serving

others. In the **Midrash the Rabbi's** change the scripture from God saying, "**Comfort ye, O my people**" "**Comfort me, O my people.**"

We may not think of our **Heavenly Mother and Father** and their son as needing comfort, but of course they would, as **Enoch is astonished** to discover.

They **need our comfort** at this **troubled and troubling time** when we are **desecrating and destroying** the **beautiful world** they gifted to our **first parents** and to all the generations after, when **so many** of their **children** are **sick and suffering** and dying, when so many **displaced** from their families, homes, and countries are **bereft of hope**. I believe

the **Book of Mormon** calls us to **encircle and comfort** them— our **beloved brothers** and sisters of all faiths and of no faith – **encircle them with love** as this **angel encircles** and comforts Christ. As **Francisco Goldman** says, “The **great metaphor** at the **heart** of the Gospel According to **Saint Matthew** is that those **who suffer** and those **who show love for those who suffer** are **joined** through **suffering and grace** to Jesus Christ.”² That, I believe, is the **central message** of the Book of Mormon. As we struggle to find our way, it is also my fervent hope and prayer.

SLIDE 3: Frans Schwartz, "Agony in the Garden"

² “Introduction” to *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pocket Canon Bible (New York: Grove Press, 1999), xv.

As we think about being angels, let's listen to this song, "The Dream of Flight" performed by the Los Angeles City of Angels Choir.

Scripture and the Character of God

"If we study all scriptures, certain fundamentals emerge clearly. One is the character of God. Over and over again in all four scriptures Jesus and the prophets bear witness that God is our Father--just, impartial, merciful, forgiving, law-abiding, creative, and intelligent. If we believe the scriptures, we can depend on God's

integrity and love. I do not accept any interpretation of scriptural passages that portrays God as being partial, unforgiving, hateful, or revengeful. It is more important to uphold the character and will of God than it is to support every line of scripture.” —Lowell Bennion, "Learning How to Know Scriptures: Values and Limitations," *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion: Selected Writings, 1928-1988*, ed. by Eugene England.