

Comments on Alma 39

This chapter starts out a rather lengthy (cf. 39-42) lecture by Alma to his youngest son Corianton. The present chapter is mainly composed of Alma's reprimand of Corianton for three particular sins: pride (v. 2), harlotry (v. 3-13), and materialism (v. 14). The subsequent chapters 40-42 deal with matters of doctrine, not personal issues.

This chapter is presented as the reverse of the preceding chapter's comments on Shiblon. Shiblon was zealous for the ministry, but had some relatively minor problems. Here, Corianton has serious problems, and he abandoned the ministry. Alma points out this contrast in v. 1.

Given Alma's own personal history (cf. Mosiah 27), Alma's position in reprimanding Corianton, of sins similar to ones he himself committed when he was Corianton's age, it seems likely Alma would have been particularly concerned about Corianton's bad behavior and bad example. But, he doesn't bring that up in the conversation, as he did with Helaman and Shiblon. Alma very much wants Corianton to have a powerful conversion experience as he himself did, cf. 42:29. Alma has to fear Corianton will not repent and reform.

The discussion on harlotry is lengthy because it is a serious sin (v. 5-10), but more so because his bad example adversely impacted the missionary labors among the Zoramites (v. 3-4, 11-13). The matter of Corianton's harlotry merits some discussion. The harlotry issue is not one dealt with in a cut and dry fashion by Alma. His accusations against Corianton's immorality are wound together with the fact he abandoned the ministry in order to pursue them (v. 3-4). His warnings in these verses focus more on the matter of abandoning the ministry (v. 3-4), and therefore potentially causing his own spiritual death as a result of his abandonment of preaching the gospel (v. 5-6), than on the matter of unchastity (v. 9). And, note, the command from the Lord which motivates Alma is one dealing not with the matter of unchastity, but with the potential impact of the bad example (v. 12). Thus, v. 7 is most likely speaking of his abandoning the ministry and not of the harlotry.

Harlotry is a serious issue, as Alma states plainly in v. 9. But, in Corianton's case, the matter of harlotry is presented as secondary to the danger of spiritual death in Corianton and his causing it in others by his bad example.

That said, it is not entirely clear from the text how immoral Corianton was. All it says in v. 3 is he "did go...after the harlot Isabel" and in v. 4 it says "she did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee". The text does little to suggest literal fornication. In v. 9 Alma says "go no more after the lusts of your eyes". It reads more like a lascivious public display as there were many who had their hearts stolen away and it involved lusting with the eyes. Had Corianton's sin involved literal fornication with a prostitute it seems likely Alma would have been much more vehement about calling him to repentance on matters of sex immorality rather than focusing more on abandoning the ministry.

It is common for us to read the text and assume the worst about him, but there is nothing in the text requiring it. The plainest reading is Corianton left the ministry to see some lascivious beautiful woman ply her trade publicly. The display was public enough for him to be seen at it and recognized, so he became a scapegoat for the Zoramite leaders who were hostile to Alma's preaching, and an impediment to those poor who were more receptive. The text does not say he solicited her as a prostitute or fornicated with her. So, perhaps, in his own mind it was easy to rationalize what he did wasn't all that bad. Hence Alma's warning in v. 9 that even entertaining the "lusts of your eyes" made him unfit for the kingdom of God. But, Alma's main point is the real damage is his implicit denial of the Lord by abandoning the ministry, and the bad example he set which turned into fodder for gainsayers.

As for Corianton's fate, he apparently repents and attends to the ministry again (cf. 43:1, 49:30), and ultimately goes with Haggath to shores unknown (cf. 63:10).

1 AND now, my son, I have somewhat more to say unto thee than what I said unto thy brother; for behold, have ye not observed the steadiness of thy brother, his faithfulness, and his diligence in keeping the commandments of God? Behold, has he not set a good example for thee?

2 For thou didst not give so much heed unto my words as did thy brother, among the people of the Zoramites. Now this is what I have against thee; thou didst go on unto boasting in thy strength and thy wisdom.

3 And this is not all, my son. Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me; for thou didst forsake the ministry, and did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel. 4 Yea, she did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son. Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted. 5 Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the

Holy Ghost? 6 For behold, if ye deny the Holy Ghost when it once has had place in you, and ye know that ye deny it, behold, this is a sin which is unpardonable; yea, and whosoever murdereth against the light and knowledge of God, it is not easy for him to obtain forgiveness; yea, I say unto you, my son, that it is not easy for him to obtain a forgiveness.

7 And now, my son, I would to God that ye had not been guilty of so great a crime. I would not dwell upon your crimes, to harrow up your soul, if it were not for your good. 8 But behold, ye cannot hide your crimes from God; and except ye repent they will stand as a testimony against you at the last day. 9 Now my son, I would that ye should repent and forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes, but cross yourself in all these things; for except ye do this ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God. Oh, remember, and take it upon you, and cross yourself in these things.

10 And I command you to take it upon you to counsel with your elder brothers in your undertakings; for behold, thou art in thy youth, and ye stand in need to be nourished by your brothers. And give heed to their counsel.

11 Suffer not yourself to be led away by any vain or foolish thing; suffer not the devil to lead away your heart again after those wicked harlots. Behold, O my son, how great iniquity ye brought upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words.

12 And now the Spirit of the Lord doth say unto me: Command thy children to do good, lest they lead away the hearts of many people to destruction; therefore I command you, my son, in the fear of God, that ye refrain from your iniquities; 13 That ye turn to the Lord with all your mind, might, and strength; that ye lead away the hearts of no more to do wickedly; but rather return unto them, and acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done. 14 Seek not after riches nor the vain things of this world; for behold, you cannot carry them with you.

v1-14 Alma levels three serious flaws in Corianton's recent missionary work, the most serious of which is his abandoning the ministry to chase after the harlot Isabel.

v1 "have ye not observed the steadiness of thy brother?", Alma is referring to Shiblon and not Helaman as Helaman did not go with them to minister to the Zoramites, cf. 31:7.

v5 "the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost", the typical reading on this is that two separate things are being presented in order of more serious sinfulness. The first being murder, as in "Thou shalt not kill", and the second being the sin of Perdition. This typical reading results in the ranking of most grievous sins as 1) perdition, 2) literal murder, 3) sex immorality. However, another reading would be to see the "or" as an equation and not a separator. As in "the shedding of innocent blood is also known as denying the Holy Ghost". The context definitely favors this reading. There is nothing in surrounding text blatantly referencing literal physical murder while the surrounding text does have numerous references to figurative spiritual murder (v. 6 "murdereth

against the light and knowledge of God", v. 12 "lest they lead away the hearts of many people to destruction", note Alma uses both "murder" and "destruction" in spiritual senses in 36:14). And, in D&C 132:27 the two are equated "The blasphemy against the Holy Ghost...is in that ye commit murder wherein ye shed innocent blood". This strongly suggests "the shedding of innocent blood" here is not a reference to physical murder, but is referring to "denying the Holy Ghost".

v6 "deny the Holy Ghost...a sin which is unpardonable", cp. Matt. 12:31, D&C 76:30-49.

v9 "cross yourself", meaning "go against, thwart, frustrate, deny" yourself. Unlike v. 11 where Alma indicates the devil is tempting him, the statement here is the desire, the "lusts of your eyes", is within Corianton. Alma understands clearly there is a natural urge out of control, and he admonishes him to deny himself those things. The underlying concept is an issue of desire and self-denial, the conflict between the spiritual self and the carnal self. This belies a rather sophisticated understanding of psychology, one we commonly don't project back into ancient history.

v10 As Alma will be leaving soon, he wants Corianton to rely on the guidance of his older brothers in his absence.

v11 "when they saw your conduct", given how hardened the Zoramites in general were, it doesn't seem likely his bad example was the determining factor in their choice to reject Alma's preaching. It seems likely Alma is referring to the smaller subset of impoverished Zoramites who were more receptive (cf. 32:1-5). Perhaps the more hardened Zoramites used this to attack Alma and undermine their efforts at preaching among the population in general as an ad hominem argument.

v12 As Alma is the high priest of the Nephites the conduct of his sons would certainly be under considerable public scrutiny. Particularly in a society where the office of high priest when from father to son. Hence the Lord's command to Alma to reprimand Corianton so as to not be a bad example to the Nephites and thus lead them into sin.

v13 "return unto them", it seems unlikely Alma would expect Corianton to return to the city of Zarahemla, given the hostilities they faced there, and the war breaking out in ch. 43. It seems more likely Alma wants Corianton to go to the poor

Zoramites who were kicked out and went to live with the Anti-Nephi-Lehis in the land of Jershon (cf. 35:1-7), and confess his faults.

"acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done", the 1st Edition Book of Mormon reads "and retain that wrong which ye had done" suggesting that by acknowledging his actions were wrong he might take back the bad example away from the Zoramites. I don't know what edition "retain" was omitted from the text and if it was present in the original printer's manuscript.

15 And now, my son, I would say somewhat unto you concerning the coming of Christ. Behold, I say unto you, that it is he that surely shall come to take away the sins of the world; yea, he cometh to declare glad tidings of salvation unto his people. 16 And now, my son, this was the ministry unto which ye were called, to declare these glad tidings unto this people, to prepare their minds; or rather that salvation might come unto them, that they may prepare the minds of their children to hear the word at the time of his coming. 17 And now I will ease your mind somewhat on this subject. Behold, you marvel why these things should be known so long beforehand. Behold, I say unto you, is not a soul at this time as precious unto God as a soul will be at the time of his coming? 18 Is it not as necessary that the plan of redemption should be made known unto this people as well as unto their children? 19 Is it not as easy at this time for the Lord to send his angel to declare these glad tidings unto us as unto our children, or as after the time of his coming?

v15-19 Alma returns his attention to the ministry which Corianton was supposed to attend to (v. 15-16), and introduces the topic of the next few chapters (v. 17-19).

v15 "he cometh to declare glad tidings of salvation to his people", missionaries are heralds of the gospel (note in v. 16 Alma says Corianton was called to be a herald of the gospel), but here Alma presents Jesus as the epitome of the messenger in Isa. 52:7.

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