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Alma 13:1-9, Premortal Responsibilities and Opportunities to Bless Others

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Alma 13:1-9, Premortal Responsibilities and Opportunities to Bless Others

In chapter 13, Alma began with those same premises. If one can define one's Self as unique and individual, then the beginning of the answer to the question "Why and who am I?" will be found "in the first place"—at the dawn of one's Self-definition. That is where chapter 13 begins. Alma said:

1 And again, my brethren, I would cite your minds forward to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children; and I would that ye should remember that the Lord God ordained priests, after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son, teach these things unto the people (Alma 13:1).⁸⁰⁸

Because the verb in the part of the sentence that reads "that the Lord God ordained priests" is in the past tense, the word "forward" presents an interesting challenge. But when one goes to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that challenge melts away. The first *OED* definition of "forward" is to project our thoughts backward to the first or earliest part of a period of time.⁸⁰⁹ So even though Joseph Smith's translation does not use the

⁸⁰⁸ The word "order" is repeated so many times in Alma 13 that one gets the impression that Alma's intent is to focus Zeezrom's attention on the eternal nature of the priesthood. An interesting exercise is to highlight all the words "order" in the chapter, then read just the verses with the highlighted words.

⁸⁰⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*: The first definition of the word "forward" reads: "The front part of (any thing material); the first or earliest part of (a period of time. etc.)." It means toward the beginning, like the forward of a book is at the beginning. In verse 2, we find "forward" again, but this time it has the more common meaning, projecting our attention into the future.

While one of the authors (Stephen Ricks) was attending a class offered by Avraham Malamet at the

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phrase “in the beginning,” it does use the correct word to take us there. As in Abraham 3, the setting of our story is the time and place when the Father—the Lord God, Elohim—chose his “rulers” (Abraham 3:22-13) and ordained them to be high priests (Alma 13:1).

We know Alma was talking about our Heavenly Father because Alma explained, “the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children,” then “ordained priests, after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son.” In Abraham 3, we are told that the Father chose the “noble and great ones” who were “spirits.” To be a spirit one must have received a spirit body from heavenly parents. Thus, they were, as Alma says, “his children.” So Abraham 3 (“and he said: These I will make my rulers”) and Psalm 82 (“God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth [chooses] among the gods”) each tell the same story as Alma 13.

Alma said that the purpose of their ordination was so the “children” could “teach these things unto the people.”

Now the question is, Who were the “people,” and why were they not also called “children”? The answer seems straightforward enough: if “people” are different from “children,” and the children are those who had already received spirit bodies from their heavenly parents, then the “people” must be intelligences who were individuals but who had not yet been born into spirit bodies. If that is so, then the purpose of the teaching would have been to prepare the “people” to enter the presence of God and be born as “children.” That interpretation is substantially strengthened as we continue in the passage:

2 And those priests [the “children’] were ordained after the order of his Son, in a manner that thereby the people [intelligences] might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption (Alma 13:2).

Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Professor Malamat observed that in Biblical Hebrew (unlike the Western European languages) one looked “forward” to the past and “back” to the future. John Tvedtnes, in a personal communication, notes that “regarding citing minds forward (Alma 13:1), if we take ‘forward’ to be a translation from QEDEM, the word means ‘before’ in both a temporal and a locative sense. This would suggest that, in the Alma passage, it would have a temporal meaning and hence refer to the past, i.e., that which had gone before.”

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To be redeemed is to be brought into the presence of God,⁸¹⁰ so children were to teach the intelligences how to look to the time when they could—by the blessings of the Atonement—come into the presence of Heavenly Father as his children.

Abraham 3-5 tells about the Father’s spirit children who, with the Savior, created the heavens and the earth. Of those members of the Council, Abraham had written simply that “God saw these souls that they were good.” Alma chapters 12 and 13 tell about the Father’s spirit children who were ordained to teach the unorganized intelligences. However, about their qualifications, Alma is much more explicit. He tells us how and why they were “good:”

3 And this is the manner⁸¹¹ after which they were ordained—being called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God (Alma 13:3a).

Alma then says that “foreknowledge” was a projection of the past into the future—that is, God knew their works in the past; he knew their integrity, and he knew their future worth:

[they,] being called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works (Alma 13:3b).

They were called and prepared because of their faith (*pistis*— the covenant, its substance or assurance, evidence, hope, and ultimate fulfillment⁸¹²), and good works (in many places in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, the word “works” refer to ordinances.⁸¹³) That should come as no surprise, because that is always the criterion God

⁸¹⁰ For a discussion of the meaning of the word “redeem,” see the chapter called, “Meaning of ‘Redeem’—to ‘Come unto Christ’.”

⁸¹¹ See Isaiah 40: 12, 21.

⁸¹² Hebrews 11:1. See the chapter called, “Meaning of Faith — *pistis*.”

⁸¹³ Mention has already been made of “holy works” in Alma 12:30. Some other scriptures where “works” refer to ordinances are: Psalms 145:17-18, all of the book of James, Alma 5:54, Alma 11:44, Alma

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uses for entering his presence. Alma continues,

In the first place being left to choose good or evil (Alma 13:3c).

In Alma's discussion, the phrase "in the first place" is used twice. Alma's care with words posits that the phrase means: "in the *first* place." Thus, the phrase introduces us to a description of the integrity of the members of the Council in Heaven in their very beginning, as intelligences, and tells why and how they qualified to be among the earliest spirit children born to our Heavenly Parents. That is, as intelligences they, and we, were free to choose good or evil. It is easy to understand that intelligences could choose, when we consider that most of the sins we subject ourselves to—like hate, avarice, contempt, anger—happen in one's mind rather than with one's body. When we act out those sins, our bodies get involved, but the root of the sins are in the mind. Intelligences could experience, even cultivate, those kinds of sins:

therefore they [the "children" when they were intelligences] having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith [in Christ] (Alma 13:3d).

In this verse these "children" are described as having "exceeding faith and good works" and "exercising exceedingly great faith." If "faith" means belief, that speaks highly of their conviction. However, if "faith" means the same as *pistis*—tokens of the covenant⁸¹⁴—that helps us understand a great deal about their environment, their abilities, and their commitment. Alma continues by saying that:

[the children] are called with a holy calling, yea, with that holy calling which was prepared with, and according to, a preparatory redemption for such (Alma 13:3e).

Those words give us great insight about the eternal nature of the priesthood.

"Preparatory redemption" is another key phrase that helps us determine the time this was happening. "Redemption" is coming into the presence of God. In terms of this life, to

13:3, Moroni 8:23.

⁸¹⁴ See the chapter called, "Meaning of Faith — *pistis*."

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be redeemed is to be brought back into his presence.⁸¹⁵ The final redemption is being brought into the Celestial Kingdom where one may reside with God.

The phrase “preparatory redemption” does not say “preparing for redemption”; rather it describes a redemption that is preparatory. It describes the preliminary redemption which prepares one for the final redemption. That is, the first redemption is bringing intelligences into the presence of God as his children, but it is “preparatory” because it is not permanent.⁸¹⁶ As his children, we must leave his presence when we come into this world. Hereafter, when we return to his presence to stay, that will be a permanent redemption. So the first redemption when we became his spirit children was “preparatory” because it looked toward to the final redemption:

4 And thus they [the “children,” spirit children who are the members of the Council] have been called to this holy calling on account of their faith [in Christ], while others [the intelligences] would reject the Spirit of God on account of the hardness of their hearts [that phrase is defined in Alma 12:9-11 as one’s refusing to know the “mysteries” of God] and blindness of their minds, while, if it had not been for this [their refusal to know] they [the intelligences] might have had as great privilege as their brethren [the “children”] (Alma 13:4).

That may be one of the most important concepts in the scriptures, because, as the next verse makes clear, the noble and great ones were noble and great not because they had some special advantages but “on account of their exceeding faith and good works”—that is, because of the way they exercised their free agency. Their advancement as intelligences was an entirely individual matter. (Abraham 1:1-4 and 3:18-21 confirm that):

5 Or in fine, in the first place [“In the first place”—when they were intelligences] they [the “people”] were on the same standing with their brethren [the

⁸¹⁵ Ether 3:13-14, Helaman 14:17, 2 Nephi 2:2-4, 2 Nephi 1:15. For a discussion of the meaning of the word “redeem,” see the chapter called, “Meaning of Redeem— to ‘come unto Christ’.”

⁸¹⁶ Preparatory is defined as “1. That prepares or serves to prepare; preliminary; introductory, 2. Undergoing preparation, or preliminary instruction.” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language* [Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1959])

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“children”] (Alma 13:5a).

That is, at some point in time—in the very distant past—the intelligences whom Alma identified as the “people” were on the same standing as the intelligences whom he identified as God’s “children.” There was nothing arbitrary about the selection of the noble and great ones. They were not noble and great because they were among the first to be born to our Heavenly Parents, but they were among the first to be born to our Heavenly Parents because they were noble and great:

thus this holy calling [the calling and ordination mentioned in verse 1] being prepared from the foundation of the world [that always means at or before the Council] for such as would not harden their hearts [when they were intelligences], [this priesthood calling] being in and through the Atonement of the Only Begotten Son, who was prepared—(Alma 13:5b). This passage says that in the very beginnings of our beginning we were free to choose. Those who chose to have faith in Christ and follow him did so; those who chose not to, did not do so. To accept that notion, one must also accept the idea that the Atonement reaches back forever (“Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be” [D&C 93:29]) and it continues forever into the future. Our origin is not so two dimensional that our choices were limited to only accepting Christ or not accepting him. By the time we had matured sufficiently as an “intelligence” to be ready to be born a child in the world of the spirits, we had not only developed an inclination to love the Lord and his children but we had also fully, or very nearly, developed the whole complex system of preferences and non-preferences that we call personality. All the other attributes of personality were subsets of the most important one, which was (still is) the quality of our charity—the extent of our love for the Father and his children.

That would mean that intelligences are individual, cognizant entities who are capable not only of thought but also capable of love and decision making. Therefore, they are capable of hate and of making wrong decisions, and therefore they are in need of repentance. Since no unclean thing can enter the presence of God, they could be born as spirit children of God only when they were cleansed by the Atonement—which gives an endlessly expansive meaning to the phrase that the Atonement is “infinite and eternal.”

When the intelligences became spirit children of our Father in Heaven, they were

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given spirit bodies. It must be so that in those spirit bodies the intelligences would have had experiences that would give them opportunity for additional growth. There, we were confronted with the great question: “Will you obey?” (“And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” [Abraham 3:25].) Our positive response to that question qualified us for still further blessings of the Atonement. So again, after repentance and being cleansed through appropriate ordinances, we were born as innocent babies into this world.

That is consistent with the scriptures: the Lord explained to the Prophet that we are innocent twice by virtue of the Atonement: first as spirit children of our Father in Heaven, then in our “infant state” in this world:

38 Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning; and God having redeemed man from the fall, men became again, in their infant state, innocent before God (D&C 93:38).

And Joseph Fielding Smith quoted Paul to show that there were sacred ordinances performed in the spirit world before we came here.⁸¹⁷

In this world, the question is different from the one we were asked before. That one had been, “Will you obey?” Even though obedience is necessary in this world, it is apparent that if this world were designed to ask only that question, then one must conclude it was very poorly designed. The reason is that most people never have an opportunity to know what to obey, neither do they have the political, social, or religious freedom to obey even if they did know. So, for them, the question “Will you obey?” can have no rational response. Of course, it is necessary to teach a child to obey or he would run out into the street and get hurt. In this world, obedience required by culture is taught by culture, but obedience to cultural norms does not bring salvation. The Savior said:

15 If ye love me, keep my commandments.

16 And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;

17 Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you.

⁸¹⁷ Smith, *Way to Perfection*, 50-51. Quoted above.

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18 I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you (John 14:15-18).

The kind of obedience he means is a natural consequence of love, not a conformity imposed by culture. Even though this world is not designed to give everyone an opportunity to even know what to obey, there is another question that this world (including the spirit world that follows this one) is perfectly designed to ask and to answer. In this world, the question is “Why did you obey?” Our experience here in limited and linear time is perfectly designed to answer that question. If the answer is that one obeyed as an intelligence and in the spirit world because one could see the advantages that would come through obedience, then that person in this world (having forgotten the advantages he sought there) will be apt to seek advantages such as power, money, expensive toys, or any other sort of authority that gives one advantage over others. Or in this environment he may discover that he can still repent.

But if the answer is that we obeyed as an intelligence and in the spirit world because we loved God and his children, then that love will inform our motives and actions in this world. If not, then this world is an opportunity to repent. Here, the first commandment is to love the Lord. The second is to love our neighbors. If the experiences of this physical life are designed to see if we will love while in this environment that is not at all conducive to love, then it was designed very well indeed. The farmer who beats his dogs and children, and indiscriminately uses his chickens for a football is, at his core, not substantially different from the tyrant who overtaxes his people and oppresses them with unjust laws. Similarly, the impoverished housewife who has never heard the gospel but who cares for the needs of others is not substantially different from the middle class Latter-day Saint sister who looks after her sick neighbor because she chooses to rather than because she feels it is her duty. Our experience in this world was designed not to show if we will obey but to show why we obeyed—that is, so we can have sufficient opportunity to confirm to ourselves and all creation whether we obeyed in the spirit world because we knew which side our bread is buttered on, or whether we obeyed because we truly love the Lord and love his children.

In the Gospel of John, the beloved disciple quoted the Savior as saying:

34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

35 By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (John 13:34-35).

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This does not imply that the command to love one another was never given before that time. In his letters, John explains that the commandment is “new” because it is renewed in this world, but it was first given in the premortal existence. He used the phrase, “from the beginning” four times in these few verses:

4 He that saith, I know him [God], and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.

6 He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked.

7 Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you, but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which ye have heard from the beginning.

8 Again, a new commandment I write unto you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness is past, and the true light now shineth.

9 He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.

10 He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him (1 John 2:4-10).

1 The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth; and not I only, but also all they that have known the truth;

2 For the truth’s sake, which dwelleth in us, and shall be with us for ever.

3 Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.

4 I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father.

5 And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another.

6 And this is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it (2 John 1:1-6).

If the object of our earth-life experience was designed to achieve that end, then

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human and individual history takes on a whole new meaning. Whether in the extreme of poverty and utter obscurity or in great wealth and reputation (or somewhere in between) the purpose of life is the same for everyone. Only the specific assignments are different—in this life and in the spirit world that follows. Since “where much is given, much is required” is a true principle for the rich and the poor, the well educated and the poorly educated, the opportunities for doing good in this life (and in the next) are ultimately worked out on a level playing field.

An example is a deeply moving autobiography of an obscure Mormon pioneer. Martha Cox’s parents were among the first settlers in St. George, Utah. All of her life Martha was very poor. Near the end of her autobiography she wrote something like this: “I have always been grateful to the Lord that I had no money. I have noticed that rich people cannot give to poor people without the poor people being reluctant to accept, because they think the rich people are being condescending. But I have always been so poor that I could help whomever I wished, and they were always able to accept and appreciate whatever I had to give.”⁸¹⁸

It appears that one’s charity (in combination with other personality attributes) and one’s priesthood authority, as they are described as a single unit in Abraham 1:2-4, constitute the law of one’s own being.⁸¹⁹

⁸¹⁸ Paraphrased from the autobiography of Martha Cragun Cox, 1852-1932. Original is in the Church Historical Department in SLC; a xerox copy is in Special Collections at BYU library. MSS SC 319 I.

⁸¹⁹ As we consider it, the phrase “priesthood authority” is the right concept there, but as we use the words it probably not the right phrase—though we have no idea what a better one would be. Considering the grand sweep and eternal scope of Abraham’s statements, we think the concept is far too big for our phrase “priesthood authority” to say all that is necessary to say. But as we observed, we haven’t the foggiest idea what a better phrase would be.