

Words from the Wise

Alma 36–39 through the Lens of Proverbs 1–9

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Mormon, the compiler and redactor of the Book of Mormon, records that during the days of Alma the Younger, around 74 BC, the people had become hard-hearted and iniquitous. He reports that Alma felt “exceedingly sorrowful” about this wickedness that prompted him to “give unto them [his sons, Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton] his charge, separately, concerning the things pertaining unto righteousness.” Mormon includes Alma’s “own record” of his teachings in Alma 36–42 (Alma 35:15, 16). These chapters offer a personal account of a father’s words of advice to his sons.¹

The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament falls in the genre of ancient Israelite wisdom literature. The first nine chapters employ the trope of a father dispensing wisdom to his son, or occasionally to his children, to form a discourse on wisdom. Though attributed to the famously wise King Solomon (Proverbs 1:1), these proverbs are not generally thought to be personal to him or his children. No son or

child is named. No personal, specific life event is referenced. It is the wisdom given by an older, wiser person to a younger, inexperienced person. In the form of advice and admonition from father to son (or children), Proverbs 1–9 offers an intriguing look at teachings, principles, and values passed from generation to generation as observed in the Israelite wisdom tradition.

Viewing Alma’s teachings to his sons in the context of Proverbs 1–9 highlights many similarities in the two texts, although the difference in their literary genres is most apparent. Alma’s writing is primarily prose,² while Proverbs 1–9 is composed of “instructions and didactic poems . . . assembled and aesthetically arranged.”³ Still there is much these two scripture blocks have in common. In this paper I will closely examine Alma 36–39 through the lens of Proverbs 1–9, suggesting that the Book of Mormon prophet Alma’s counsel to his sons was influenced by ancient Israelite wisdom themes and that recognizing these connections enriches and deepens the reader’s appreciation for and understanding of Alma 36–39.⁴

Preliminary Considerations

Wisdom defined

Before proceeding further, it is important to define, at least in a broad sense, wisdom as it is represented in Proverbs. Though called wisdom literature, the prologue in Proverbs speaks first of knowledge: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7). In this parallelism, a common feature in Biblical Hebrew poetry, knowledge is placed in synonymous relationship to wisdom and instruction. Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman, who has grappled with defining wisdom as used in Proverbs, states, “Fear of Yahweh is foundational to knowledge, which here functions as a close synonym to wisdom.”⁵ In a more recent book, Longman defines wisdom and other related words: “the concept of wisdom in particular can be difficult because

there are so many words that appear to have a quite similar meaning.” He points to other Hebrew words that translate with meanings like “discipline,” “understanding,” “insight,” “prudence,” “discretion,” and more. He suggests that “they all seem to be aspects of the broader concept of wisdom” and for the purposes of his work his “focus will be an overarching understanding of wisdom in the book of Proverbs.”⁶ Similarly, I will treat wisdom and knowledge as near synonyms and will focus as well on the “overarching understanding of wisdom” in reading Proverbs.

Was Alma familiar with Proverbs?

While the book of Proverbs was not likely compiled in its present form until, at the earliest, the sixth century BC, Proverbs reports that Hezekiah and his men “copied out” some of the proverbs of Solomon during Hezekiah’s reign as king of Judah in the late eighth century BC (Proverbs 25:1). Since Lehi did not leave Jerusalem until around 600 BC, it is plausible that some proverbs were recorded on the brass plates. If not, however, the Lehites would likely have been familiar with the broader range of wisdom literature of their day, including proverbs. They may have brought that knowledge with them to the Americas.⁷

Connections between Proverbs 1–9 and Alma 36–39

If, as suggested, the Lehites were familiar with wisdom literature, including Proverbs, traces of those influences would likely be present in their own writings. A close reading of the texts suggests they are. I will discuss similarities of format, tone, and the nature of temporal and spiritual wisdom before analyzing themes particularly related to each of Alma’s three sons—Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton. Because Proverbs and Alma’s writings share so many themes in common, this paper will not be able to highlight them all but will focus on major themes relative to each son.

Fathers speaking to sons

Although, as mentioned above, Proverbs 1–9 presents a father as a metaphor for a wise person or sage and the son or child as a neophyte, the metaphor finds its genesis in familial experience. Roland Murphy suggests, “It is true that ‘son’ can be understood in the metaphorical sense to indicate a teacher-pupil relationship. Even if this may explain the frequent appearance [of the word ‘son’] in Proverbs 1–9, it stands to reason that parents would have played a role in the training of their children. The home may be regarded as perhaps the original site of wisdom teaching before and after such teaching became professionalized among the sages.”⁸ So when reading Proverbs, it is possible to see, at its base, a real father teaching his actual son, not unlike Alma teaching his sons.

When Alma says “my son” we know he is talking to Helaman, Shiblon, or Corianton. Alma’s instructions are tailor-made for each one of them. He passes on to each of his sons the information he feels is most valuable to their well-being. It is interesting to note in Alma’s writings that the same process Murphy describes in regard to Proverbs arises. Alma teaches in the family setting of father to son, and over the centuries his instructions to Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton have taken on metaphorical qualities, allowing countless generations of Book of Mormon readers to glean wisdom from them.

When talking to their sons, the fathers involved obviously speak to them in first person. Both Alma and the proverbial father use the imperative or command form. They address their children in a possessive, warm manner saying, “my son.” Examples in Proverbs include “My son, hear the instruction of thy father” (Proverbs 1:8); “My son, if thou wilt receive my words” (2:1); and “My son, forget not my law” (3:1). The command in these examples is to “hear,” “receive,” and “forget not” important information.

Examples in Alma’s writings are quite similar to those of the proverbial father: “My son, give ear to my words” (Alma 36:1); “And now, my son Helaman, I command you” (37:1); and “My son, give ear to

my words” (38:1). As with the proverbial father, Alma has important information to share with his children. They are to “give ear,” even obey a “command.” This dynamic assumes concern and familial love from father to son and creates a similarity in tone as well as purpose present in both scripture blocks.

Wisdom, both temporal and spiritual

Because much of the teaching in Proverbs is practical advice on how to live successfully in the world and does not often speak directly to overtly theological or spiritual topics, it can appear that temporal wisdom is the goal of the book of Proverbs. Yet, the prologue in Proverbs clearly states that a relationship with the Lord is of paramount importance: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7). And near the end of chapter nine this sentiment is reiterated: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). James Alfred Loader suggests that on this basis all references to wisdom—“including all those that do not refer to Yahweh or specific religious activities—are indeed founded in religion and therefore are not as ‘secular’ as often supposed.”⁹ Expanding this concept, all words, acts, and thoughts that have their genesis in awe, respect, and deference to Yahweh/Jehovah are spiritual even when focused on the temporal.¹⁰ Wisdom is, in one sense, the infusion of God’s understanding into lived life. Thus, right acts and thoughts are nuanced variations of God’s wisdom.

Unlike Proverbs, Alma the Younger’s teachings are steeped in religious experience and are explicitly spiritual in content. His focus is on keeping the commandments of Jesus Christ and understanding his doctrines. Nonetheless, Alma also gives his sons much practical advice that sounds very Proverbs-like, such as, “Do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way” (Alma 37:46); “See that ye refrain from idleness” (Alma 38:12); “Seek not after riches nor the vain things of this world; for behold, you cannot carry them with you” (Alma 39:14). These fatherly injunctions give succinct, practical advice. Thus, although Alma’s admonitions appear predominantly

spiritual, they have a temporal dimension, and while Proverbs may appear more temporal, it is also innately spiritual. A life goal for both fathers is for their children to seek the wisdom of the Lord.

Proverbial Themes Found in Alma's Counsel to Helaman

The first theme Alma addresses with Helaman is the covenant relationship a believer has with God. This concept is prominent in the Old Testament (e.g., Leviticus 26:3–4; Deuteronomy 5:33) and also in Proverbs 1–9: “For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it” (Proverbs 2:21–22). The proverbial father expresses the most basic covenant found in the Old Testament between God and his people, or between God and a person. If the son is wise he will be “upright,” and he will “dwell in the land.” If he will be “perfect” he will “remain in it [the land].” His spiritual and temporal life will be successful. Conversely, foolishness is manifest when the son is “wicked.” He will be “cut off from the earth.” Should he be a “transgressor,” he will be “rooted out of it [the earth].” The verbs employed suggest sharp and wrenching violence against the unrighteous either from mortal enemies or from a just God. These are consequences against which a caring father warns his son.

Like the proverbial father, Alma reminds Helaman, “inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land” (Alma 36:1). Alma also warns of the negative consequences of breaking the covenant: “inasmuch as ye [Helaman] will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence” (36:30; 37:13). In Alma’s writings the disobedient are “cut off” from God’s “presence” while in Proverbs 2:22 they are “cut off from the earth.” In both cases they lose the blessings and gifts that come from God’s watchcare.

Both the proverbial father and Alma address their sons with a recitation of their own childhood experience and its importance

in shaping them. The proverbial father reminisces, “For I was my father’s son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live” (Proverbs 4:3–4). The father teaches his own father’s teachings to his son. Longman notes that the grandfather’s words “serve to bolster the father’s own appeal to the son. In essence the burden of generations is placed on the shoulders of the son in order to get him to move in the right direction.”¹¹ The proverbial father taps into the wisdom of generations and asks his son, as his father had asked him, to “retain” in his “heart” the words they are teaching, that he “keep [his father’s and grandfather’s] commandments and live.”

Alma refers to his sins and the lessons he has learned from his father to teach Helaman. He describes his misspent youth and reports that when faced with destruction at the hands of an angel sent from God (Alma 36:4–24), “[he] remembered also to have heard [his] father [Alma the Elder] prophecy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world” (Alma 36:17). It was only when Alma the Younger remembered the teachings of his father, Alma the Elder, that he was steered aright, that he called upon Christ. Alma the Younger teaches Helaman by condemning his own youthful foolishness and sinfulness, and like the proverbial father “bolster[s]” his teaching by adding the “burden of generations . . . on the shoulders of [his] son.”¹²

Alma the Younger further bolsters the ethos of his spiritual knowledge by extending its reach back to the archetypal forefathers Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Alma 36:2), Lehi (36:22), and Moses (36:28). He reminds Helaman that God has saved them from “bondage,” “affliction,” and “captivity,” because they “have put their trust in God” (36:2, 3, 28, 29). Alma reminds Helaman he will escape these woes, if like their ancestors, he will trust in the Lord. Ultimately, Alma appeals to the highest father-source of all: “And I would not that ye think that I know of myself . . . but of God” (36:4). Helaman is to understand that God is the source of all wisdom.

While there are many themes in Proverbs 1–9 that would likely be addressed by most caring fathers, some of the themes in Proverbs that are also in Alma’s writings specifically apply to Helaman’s particular needs. One of these themes is the nature of God’s wisdom and a human being’s response to it. In the prologue, Proverbs states that a wise person seeks to understand “the words of the wise, and their dark sayings,” and conversely that “fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:6–7). The Hebrew phrase rendered “dark sayings” in the King James Version is rendered in modern translations as “riddles.”¹³ Michael V. Fox, however, suggests that rather than “riddles,” the best translation for “dark sayings” is “enigmas,” which refers to something hidden or hard to understand rather than simply an intellectual competition. Thus, “a wise man’s enigmas are a form of communication rather than a contest.”¹⁴ When God communicates hidden things through a wise man, they are despised by fools.

Understanding the sometimes-enigmatic nature of God’s wisdom is especially important for Helaman as a future prophet and keeper of the Nephite records. Alma acknowledges that God’s purposes and plans can appear inscrutable. He states, “Now ye may suppose that this [the notion that God will preserve the Nephite records] is foolishness in me” (Alma 37:6). Alma recognizes that Helaman, and by extension any onlooker, could think placing eternal significance on some dusty old records is foolishness. Alma, of course, knows “enigmas” that might be termed “foolishness” are actually manifestations of God’s wisdom. Alma then reverses the meaning of wisdom when he says, “by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise” (37:7). The wise, who are actually foolish, are confounded by what appears trivial.¹⁵ Alma teaches a lesson very like that stated in the prologue to Proverbs—“a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels” and “fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:5, 7).

The actual use of the words “wise” and “wisdom” as well as their synonyms are obviously employed throughout Proverbs 1–9, particularly since the purpose of these chapters is to teach a son wisdom. Given the important role Helaman will yet fill, it is understandable

Alma would likewise stress the need for him to learn wisdom. Indeed, the words “wise” and “wisdom” are used several times in Alma’s advice to Helaman. He tells his son that the records are kept “for a wise purpose” (Alma 37:2); refers to God’s foresight saying, “it hath hitherto been wisdom in God that these things should be preserved” (37:8); reminds Helaman that the “wise purpose” for preserving the records is “known unto God” (37:12); tells Helaman God “doth counsel in wisdom over all his works” (37:12); and assures Helaman that God has and will preserve the records for yet another “wise purpose in him” (37:18).

The most heartfelt use of the word *wisdom* comes in a plea from Alma to Helaman. Alma implores: “O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God” (Alma 37:35). Alma’s concern for Helaman echoes the sentiments of the proverbial father who wants his son to accept his counsel: “Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings” (Proverbs 4:10). The vocative “O” expresses urgency. These loving fathers know their sons’ welfare depends on obedience to wise principles.

Proverbial Themes Found in Alma’s Counsel to Shiblon

Like the proverbial father, and as he did with Helaman, Alma reminds Shiblon of his covenant relationship with God and the power of generational wisdom (Alma 38:1, 6–8). Then Alma counsels Shiblon to be humble. Like the proverbial father who says, “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5), and further, “Be not wise in thine own eyes; fear the Lord, and depart from evil” (3:7), Alma understands Shiblon is susceptible to the pull of pride. He warns him, “See that ye are not lifted up unto pride; yea, see that ye do not boast in your own wisdom, nor of your much strength” (Alma 38:11). Though Shiblon is faithful and valiant, nonetheless he must guard against the tendency

to believe his wisdom or his strength are self-generated rather than gifts from an all-wise God.

Another theme found both in Alma's advice to Shiblon and in the proverbial father's advice to his son is restraint. The proverbial father advises his son, "Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left; remove thy foot from evil" (Proverbs 4:25–27). A wise son exercises self-control, minding his eyes, his feet, his ways, and his course. He also eschews evil by looking right on, straight before, neither to the right or the left.

Alma also admonishes Shiblon to practice restraint: "Use boldness, but not overbearance; and also see that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love; see that ye refrain from idleness" (Alma 38:12). In short bursts of command, and much in the tone and style of biblical proverbs, Alma reminds Shiblon of the importance of self-control and tempering of personal power. Shiblon must be bold in preaching God's word, yet not dominate others with overbearance. Alma recognizes the power of passions and reminds Shiblon to control or bridle them. Just as the son in Proverbs needs to "ponder [his] path" (Proverbs 4:26), Shiblon needs to use his time wisely, to not indulge in idleness. Both Alma and the proverbial father recognize that God's wisdom is found in self-control, in management of thought and action, and charge their sons to follow that path.

Proverbial Themes Found in Alma's Counsel to Corianton

There are too many themes in Alma's counsel to Corianton that correlate with the proverbial father's counsel to his son to discuss them all in full. Instead, a sampling of topics in paired verses, one from Proverbs and the other from Alma, is presented.

Topic	Proverbs	Alma
Following a good example	“How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof: And have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me” (5:12–13).	“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?” (39:1).
Listening to a father’s advice	“My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding” (5:1).	“For thou didst not give so much heed unto my words” (39:2).
Pride	“The fear of the Lord is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and a froward mouth, do I [Woman Wisdom] hate” (8:13). ¹⁶	“Thou didst go on unto boasting in thy strength and thy wisdom” (39:2).
Priorities	“Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold” (3:13–14).	“Seek not after riches nor the vain things of this world; for behold, you cannot carry them with you” (39:14).
Commitment	“Forsake her [Woman Wisdom] not” (4:6).	“For thou [Corianton] did forsake the ministry” (39:3).
Self-control	“Let not thine heart decline to her [Woman Folly’s] ways, go not astray in her paths” (7:25).	“Suffer not yourself to be led away by any vain or foolish thing” (39:11).
Carnal lust	“Keep thee from the evil woman. . . . Lust not after her beauty in thine heart” (6:24–25).	“Go no more after the lusts of your eyes” (39:9).

The theme of women in wisdom literature

Alma records that Corianton is guilty of sexual misconduct.¹⁷ The dangers and foolishness of engaging in illicit sexual relations is a prominent theme in Proverbs 1–9. Reading Alma’s chastisement of and counsel to Corianton in the light of Proverbs emphasizes the interaction between wisdom and women.

In both scripture blocks, the mothers of the young men are present, at least to some extent. While, undoubtedly, the father-son relationship predominates in Proverbs 1–9, there is mention of the son’s mother. Twice the proverbial father admonishes his son that he should “hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother” (Proverbs 1:8; compare Proverbs 6:20). The parallelism employed here places on similar, perhaps equal, footing the instruction of the father and the law of the mother. Though the father does not include the mother’s counsel, it is apparent that he presumes his son is familiar with it. Also, the father has confidence in the mother’s counsel, calling it law and expecting his son not to forsake it. Though the mother’s admonitions are absent from the text, they are in harmony with the father’s wisdom, and he considers them valuable for their son.

In the book of Alma and the Book of Mormon generally, there is a paucity of women characters. In Alma’s writings, he does not mention having a wife or of his sons having a mother. However, since three sons exist, Alma must have had, at a minimum, one wife who bore these sons. While any real discussion of Alma’s wife and his sons’ mother is not possible, it might be speculated that Alma and his wife shared similar values and commitments that she taught to her sons.

The wisdom of mothers may, to a real extent, account for the personification of wisdom as Woman Wisdom in Proverbs, and, likewise, femme fatales may serve as the basis for Woman Folly. Using these tropes to reinforce his teachings, the proverbial father portrays Woman Wisdom dispensing words of understanding, knowledge,

and discernment: “She is the tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is everyone that retaineth her” (Proverbs 3:18). Conversely, Woman Folly speaks words of foolishness, evil, deceit, and seduction. She is an adulterous woman of vicious nature: “Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death” (Proverbs 7:27). The path to the tree of life or to the chambers of death is determined by which woman a son chooses to follow.

Although in his writings Alma does not personify wisdom as a woman, it is possible he was aware of the metaphor. Mormon mentions that Limhi, a Nephite king, bemoans to Ammon, a Nephite explorer, that people “will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them!” (Mosiah 8:20). In Hebrew, “wisdom” is grammatically feminine, which in all likelihood feeds into this metaphor, and just as in Proverbs, Limhi personifies wisdom as “she,” as a female. This is especially intriguing because he and Ammon are near contemporaries of Alma the Younger,¹⁸ so it is probable all three were familiar with this metaphor.

Though Alma does not use the Woman Wisdom or Woman Folly metaphors, he does introduce in his text a woman who may be seen through the proverbial lens as the personification of Woman Folly. She is a harlot named Isabel. She is sinful and foolish, and Corianton has allowed himself to become entrapped by her. Alma’s primary motive is to lead his foolish son back to wisdom’s path (Alma 39:11). Alma’s writing includes three of the four elements in the woman-as-wisdom metaphor found in Proverbs: foolishness, Woman Folly/Isabel, and wisdom.

The proverbial father encourages his son to seek Woman Wisdom and eschew the “strange” woman or Woman Folly: “Say unto wisdom, Thou art my sister; and call understanding thy kinswoman; That they may keep thee from the strange woman, from the stranger which flattereth with her words (Proverbs 7:4–5). A wise son looks to benevolent female relatives, a sister or kinswoman as sources of wisdom and understanding. They are family, are familiar, and are not sexualized. Conversely, the father warns against a woman who

flatters the son. She is the “strange” woman who entices and draws in the foolish man (7:11–19).

Corianton is a prime example of a man ensnared by Woman Folly as described in detail by the father in Proverbs. Alma, a caring father, chastises him for succumbing to a “strange” woman saying to Corianton that he “did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel” (Alma 39:3). There are two points of foolishness here. First, the location of Isabel’s home “among the borders of the Lamanites” should have raised a warning flag for Corianton. Since the Lamanites were ideologically and militarily antagonistic to the Nephites, being close to their borders conjures up serious negative connotations. Corianton should not have been there.

The second point of foolishness is Corianton’s choice to indulge in a sinful, lustful relationship with the harlot Isabel. In Proverbs, the father warns his son that a “strange” woman is one who “forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God” (Proverbs 2:17). As a harlot, Isabel most certainly has forsaken the moral path laid out by society and religion. Yet Corianton, who ought to be repelled by evil, unites with it and may perhaps even be intrigued by the “strange[ness]” of Isabel. James Martin suggests how this might happen. He describes Woman Folly as “a female figure who is to be shunned by the inexperienced young man just emerging from [the] family context on to the wider stage of life.”¹⁹ Perhaps Corianton has been more susceptible to the moral dangers associated with this female figure because he has recently “emerged from the family setting” in Zarahemla to preach to the Zoramites. On this “wider stage of life” he is not moored to familial and social constraints. Thus, he does not shun but goes after Isabel. He becomes a victim of Woman Folly against whom his own father and the proverbial father have warned.

As Proverbs 1–9 was written long before the time of Corianton and in a distant land, it is remarkable how faithfully this type of folly is portrayed. A woman similar to Isabel is represented in Proverbs as

“a woman with the attire of an harlot, and subtil of heart” (Proverbs 7:10). Those who are duped by her go “as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks” (7:22). It is no wonder Alma pleads with his son, “suffer not the devil to lead away your heart again after those wicked harlots” (Alma 39:11). Perhaps, ultimately, Woman Folly is another face of the devil, present at any time in any place hoping to snare the unwise.²⁰

Both Alma and the father in Proverbs acknowledge the seductive power of Woman Folly. The proverbial father warns, “Let not thine heart decline to her ways, go not astray to her paths. For she hath cast down many wounded: yea, many strong men have been slain by her” (Proverbs 7:25–26). The son is admonished to eschew Woman Folly before she casts him down. She has wounded many and is powerful, stronger than “many strong men.” A wise son flees Woman Folly.

Alma also recognizes the power of carnal desires and reports that Woman Folly, or Isabel, did “steal away the hearts of many.” Yet Alma knows, ultimately, that Corianton is responsible for his own downfall: “But this was no excuse for thee, my son. Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted” (Alma 39:4). Corianton had a purpose. If he had upheld his responsibilities, he would not have succumbed to Woman Folly but would instead have attended to Woman Wisdom.

Both Alma and the proverbial father know their sons need to foster self-control. The father in Proverbs admonishes, “Bind them [the commandments of his father and the law of his mother] continually upon thine heart, and tie them about thy neck” (Proverbs 6:21). It is the heart that needs to align with righteous values. The imagery of action is powerful. The son must “bind” “upon [his heart]” and “tie . . . about [his] neck” the commandments and laws of his parents. The words “heart” and “neck” connote values and direction. The wise son will bind and tie himself in self-control, and Woman Wisdom will protect him.

Corianton has sinned and needs to repent. Alma challenges Corianton to “cross [him]self in all these things. . . . Oh, remember,

and take it upon you, and cross yourself in these things” (Alma 39:9). “These things” refers to his sins, specifically his pride and immorality. Alma, an anxious father, tells Corianton not once but twice to “cross” himself. This imagery is quite similar to that used by the proverbial father. To “bind” or to “tie” one’s self is not unlike crossing one’s self. Corianton must restrain himself or, metaphorically speaking, fold his arms across his passions. Self-control, self-possession, and self-restraint are all needed for Corianton to become wise.

Alma and the proverbial father both seek to impress upon their sons the destructive consequences that will befall a young man who does not master himself. The proverbial father reminds his son that Woman Folly’s “feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell” (Proverbs 5:5). The son who follows her arrives at death and hell, metaphors for a blighted life where positive growth ceases and moral decay prevails. A son ensnared by Woman Folly is blind to Woman Wisdom. He will not desire her and will not find the fear of the Lord.

Like the proverbial father, Alma wants to impress upon his son’s mind the true consequences of embracing Woman Folly. He sermonizes on the gravity of Corianton’s sin, reminds him of his defection from his ministry, decries his affair with Isabel, calls his actions “crimes” and urges him to repent (Alma 39:4–9). He warns Corianton, “except ye do this [repent] ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (39:9). Corianton has made choices that make him unfit for God’s kingdom. As a foolish son he will not inherit with those who have chosen Woman Wisdom. Rather, as the proverbial father warns, if he will not repent, he will follow Woman Folly to death and hell.

Conclusion

When seen through the lens of Proverbs 1–9, Alma’s teachings to his sons in Alma 36–39 become deeper and more meaningful. The father-son format in both scripture blocks underscores the tremendous love and care a righteous father has for his son, or for his children. Both

fathers prize wisdom as manifest in the phrases, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10), and “Learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God” (Alma 37:35). Supporting themes include maintaining a covenant relationship with God, the importance of generational wisdom, eschewing pride, overcoming lustful desires, rejecting the vain things of the world, and many more.

Corianton’s affair with the harlot Isabel underscores the power and lure of foolishness portrayed so well in Proverbs. Woman Folly “sitteth at the door of her house, on a seat in the high places of the city, to call passengers. . . . Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither” (Proverbs 9:14–16). She sits where she is visible, at her door in the high places. Those who are weak, foolish, and careless heed her call.

Woman Wisdom is also visible. She is searching for those who will follow her, who will seek God’s wisdom. She anxiously “crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: in the city she uttereth her words saying, . . . Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you” (Proverbs 1:21–23). Woman Wisdom is not passive. She earnestly seeks and cries out to all who will hear her voice. She searches in the “chief place of concourse,” in the gates and in the city. She freely offers her spirit and words. She is wisdom personified.

As readers of the Book of Mormon study and heed Alma’s counsel, they will be prompted to choose wisdom and eschew foolishness. They will seek Woman Wisdom and flee Woman Folly. Alma’s plea to his son is a plea to all of God’s children, “O, remember, my son [or daughter], and learn wisdom; . . . learn . . . to keep the commandments of God” (Alma 37:35).

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Notes

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1. Other scriptures in the Book of Mormon that have accounts of fathers speaking to sons include 1 Nephi 2:9–10; 2 Nephi 1–4; Mosiah 1:3–8; Helaman 5:6–12; and letters written from Mormon to Moroni (Moroni 8; 9). Most of these accounts are quite brief, or in the case of Mormon’s letters, are of a more historical nature. Lehi’s comments in 2 Nephi are doctrinal and broad in focus. Since the theme of this Sperry Symposium is Alma 36–42, the focus of this paper is on the teachings of Alma to his sons.
2. At first glance Alma’s writings seem very different from those in Proverbs 1–9. However, several portions of the Alma chapters appear to be poetry, as shown by Grant Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 354–64.
3. Leo G. Purdue, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Proverbs* (Louisville: Knox, 2000), 55.
4. Although chapters 40–42 play a major role in Alma’s teachings to Corianton, they are longer, theological treatments of doctrines, quite different from chapters 36–39, and do not lend themselves to comparison with the wisdom poems in Proverbs 1–9.
5. Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 100. Longman’s use of “Yahweh” represents what has become the standard vocalization of the divine name of Israel’s God. The Hebrew form of this name is typically rendered in English as “Jehovah” or “the Lord.” For further discussion, see Dana M. Pike, “The Name and Titles of God in the Old Testament,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 1 (2010): 17–31, especially 19–21.
6. Tremper Longman III, *The Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 6.
7. Taylor Halvorson, “Reading 1 Nephi with Wisdom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 279–93. Halvorson suggests that Nephi was perhaps trained in the ancient Israelite wisdom tradition and views his writings through that lens.

8. Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 3–4.
9. James Alfred Loader, *Proverbs 1–9* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2014), 52.
10. See Doctrine and Covenants 29:34, which affirms this idea: “Wherefore . . . all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal.”
11. Longman, *Proverbs*, 149.
12. Longman, *Proverbs*, 149.
13. See, for example, the New Revised Standard Version, the New American Bible, and the New English Translation.
14. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 65.
15. The use of the word “wise” to connote worldly wisdom or wisdom that is based in pride and falsehood occurs a number of times in the Book of Mormon. In such use it represents foolishness. See 1 Nephi 11:35; 2 Nephi 9:28, 42; 15:21; 26:20; 28:15; 27:26; Alma 2:1; 32:23; and Helaman 16:15. This topic is worth further discussion, but space does not allow for it here.
16. The “I” speaking in this verse is wisdom personified as a woman, commonly referred to as Woman Wisdom (e.g., Proverbs 1:20–33; 8:4–36). Foolishness is also personified as a woman frequently called Woman Folly (e.g., Proverbs 7:14–20; 9:17).
17. Alma’s first chastisement of Corianton is that he “didst go on unto boasting in [his] strength and [his] wisdom” (Alma 39:2). Note in this case human wisdom is foolishness. Perhaps, Corianton’s pride was a catalyst to the greater sin of immorality.
18. Ammon encountered Limhi and his people in about 121 BC. Alma the Elder was born around 173 BC. If Alma the Younger was born when his father was between 25 and 40 years old, that situates Alma’s birth at about 148–133 BC. He was between the ages of 12 and 27 when Ammon found Limhi, which made Alma the Younger a near contemporary of Limhi and Ammon.
19. James D. Martin, *Proverbs* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 82.
20. Particularly in Proverbs and to a lesser degree in Alma’s writings, the characterization of Woman Folly dehumanizes women. In Proverbs 7:22, for

example, Woman Folly “slaughter[s]” unwitting men, and in Alma 39:11 the “wicked harlots” are in league with the “devil.”