

Nurturing Faith

Literary Patterning in the Book of Alma

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One of the first challenges of history writing is that any account will inevitably be incomplete. It is simply impossible to discuss, or even mention, everything that happened in the past. Historians have to make choices about what to include and how to organize their data. Alma the Younger, as he was writing the book of Alma—or perhaps Mormon, as he was editing Alma’s record—met this challenge in an intriguing way.¹ As sometimes happens with particularly innovative or literary historians, Alma arranged his material so that the structure of his narrative reinforced some of the major points he wanted to make. This is one reason why reading a few verses, or even a few chapters, out of context will leave readers missing at least part of Alma’s message. This year’s Sperry Symposium is devoted to Alma’s sermons to his sons in chapters 36–42. In this paper, I want to step back and take in a wider perspective, examining how those chapters fit into Alma’s book as a whole.

The book of Alma can sometimes seem interminable. At sixty-three chapters, it is easily the longest book in the Book of Mormon, but we should probably make a distinction between chapters 1–44 and 45–62, since the latter chapters were written by Alma’s son Helaman. (It is not clear why Alma 45–62 were not made into a separate book titled 1 Helaman.) The portion written by Alma himself divides fairly easily into seven major sections:

1. Nehor and the Amlicite rebellion: ch. 1–3
2. The preaching journeys of Alma: ch. 4–16
3. The missionary journeys of the sons of Mosiah:
ch. 17–29
4. Korihor: ch. 30
5. Alma in Antionum (among the Zoramites): ch. 31–35
6. Alma’s testimony to his sons: ch. 36–42
7. The Zoramite war: ch. 43–44

At first glance, there may be a roughly chiasmic configuration here. Alma’s writings begin and end with warfare, and there are some correspondences between the preaching among the Lamanites in section three and among the Zoramites in section five. At Antionum, Alma clearly wants to replicate the success of the sons of Mosiah in winning over potential enemies, and in fact he brings three of Mosiah’s four sons along with him (Alma 31:5–6); the section concludes with Alma’s converted Zoramites joining the Lamanites converted by the sons of Mosiah (Alma 35:1–9). Be that as it may, there are even more striking parallels between sections two and six, which will be the major focus of this paper.²

Contextual and Thematic Correspondences

The first thing to notice is that in chapters 4–16 we have transcripts of sermons that Alma delivered to three cities: Zarahemla, Gideon, and Ammonihah; while in chapters 36–42 we have transcripts of sermons that Alma delivered to his three sons: Helaman, Shiblon, and

Corianton. This neat symmetry, however, is the result of conscious editing rather than coincidence, as can be seen in the fact that Alma actually preached in five cities: the three above, plus Melek (Alma 8:3–5) and Sidom (Alma 15:11–14). Whoever was responsible for the basic structure of the book of Alma decided to omit detailed accounts from the third and fifth cities Alma visited, so that we would have just three sermons in section two. And it was certainly possible for Alma to address his sons collectively with a single sermon, but he chose otherwise. Furthermore, the three city-sermons and three son-sermons match up in terms of relative length and sequence, with the following approximate word counts:

Alma 5 (Zarahemla)	2,800	Alma 36–37 (Helaman)	3,250
Alma 7 (Gideon)	1,450	Alma 38 (Shiblon)	650
Alma 9–13 (Ammonihah)	7,200	Alma 39–42 (Corianton)	3,800

In each set the first sermon is of middling length, the second is the shortest, and the third is the longest.³ And finally, we should note that each of these six sermons is marked off at the beginning by an editorial heading that was part of the original dictation, and hence appears to have been engraved on the gold plates.

Probably even more significant is the corresponding spiritual condition of each pair of audiences. The first sermon in each set is addressed to people who may be wavering in their faithfulness; the second sermon is directed to those who have been steadfast in righteousness; and the third sermon responds to the serious transgression of their recipients.

Zarahemla and Helaman

Alma conveys an expectation that the covenant-originating, preeminent city (Mosiah 5) and his first-born son (Alma 31:7) should set examples of faithfulness for others to follow, given the comparisons he later makes (7:3–6; 38:1; 39:10). His words, however, betray some anxiety as to whether they will do so. Alma's famous series of roughly

fifty questions in Alma 5 urgently implore the people of Zarahemla to remember the deliverances of former generations as well as their own conversions, to imagine the day of judgment, and to either repent or continue in the faith. The city's inhabitants include both "workers of iniquity" (5:32, 37) as well as those who are "desirous to follow the voice of the good shepherd" (5:57), and it is uncertain which faction will win out.

Helaman's case is a little more difficult to assess, though there are indications that Alma was worried about this son. He did not take Helaman to Antionum, though both Shiblon and Corianton accompanied him on that journey (Alma 31:7), and he repeatedly warns his oldest son to keep the commandments (36:1, 30; 37:13, 15, 20, 35), apparently sensing in him an inclination to "slothfulness" (37:43, 46). In addition, although chapter 37 mainly concerns transmitting the sacred records to Helaman, Alma does not actually do so until chapter 45, a year later. In fact, at 50:37–38 we learn that Helaman had not been his father's first choice to succeed him as record keeper; Helaman was only entrusted with the sacred plates because the chief judge Nephiah had turned down the task.⁴ One additional piece of evidence is that when Alma is giving advice to his rebellious third son, Corianton, he urges him to follow the example of Shiblon, who is praised for his "steadiness," "faithfulness," and "diligence" (39:1–2). Alma does not mention Helaman.⁵

Gideon and Shiblon

Both the city and Alma's second son have endured adversity and remained faithful despite hardships. Alma praises their respective moral qualities, noting the humility, prayerfulness, and blamelessness of the people of Gideon (Alma 7:3, 18) in the aftermath of the brutal warfare recounted in Alma 2, and then acknowledging the diligence, patience, and long-suffering of Shiblon when he was mistreated by the Zoramites (38:3–4). It is true that both sermons include admonitions to repent and resist temptation, but Alma explicitly declares that Gideon is in a better spiritual condition than Zarahemla (7:5–7).

And his gratitude to the people of Gideon (“because your faith is strong, . . . great is my joy”; 7:17) is matched by his delight in Shiblön (“I have had great joy in thee already, because of thy faithfulness and thy diligence”; 38:3).

Ammonihah and Corianton

The third city and third son have each willfully rebelled against established norms and doctrines of the church. Alma begins his sermon to the people in Ammonihah by calling them a “wicked and perverse generation” and sternly warning that if they do not repent, God will “utterly destroy [them] from off the face of the earth” (Alma 9:8, 12). Their subsequent actions, including imprisoning Alma and Amulek and murdering the wives and children of their converts, bear out this assessment. Corianton is not so wicked, but according to Alma he had committed a great crime when he abandoned his mission in such a way that when the Zoramites “saw [his] conduct they would not believe in [Alma’s] words” (39:3, 7, 11). (Interestingly, in dealing with Corianton as a wayward son, Alma presumably gained a deeper understanding of what his own father must have felt in similar circumstances.) Aside from his abhorrent behavior, Corianton has questions about key doctrines—the resurrection, God’s justice, and the plan of redemption—which are similar to the questions raised by the leaders in Ammonihah. Alma provides detailed doctrinal explanations in both sermons, with references to Adam and Eve, temporal and spiritual death, and a probationary state.

Verbal Connections

The sorts of parallels above are of a general nature, but the same patterns are borne out by a close examination of phrasing. Of course, the Book of Mormon is a fairly repetitive text, in which numerous verbal formulae appear regularly. This discussion, however, will focus on phrases that either appear in prominent positions, or are limited in their usage to just a few passages. In other words, these are distinctive

expressions that could indicate intentionality on the part of the author or translator.

Skilled orators take great care with their opening lines in order to set a tone and catch the attention of their listeners; people tend to remember first words. It is striking that each of the three pairs of sermons open in similar ways. Alma's speeches to Zarahemla and to Helaman both begin with an admonition to remember the captivity and deliverance of their fathers (Alma 5:6; 36:2), to put their trust in God (5:13; 36:3), and to be "born of God" (5:14; 36:5).⁶ One wonders whether Alma deliberately modeled his counsel to Helaman on his successful appeal to the inhabitants of Zarahemla many years before. His speeches to Gideon and Shiblon both open with a declaration that "I trust . . . that I shall . . . have (great) joy in/over you," because of their respective faithfulness (7:5; 38:2), and these are the only two such expressions in the entire Book of Mormon. And finally, when Alma addresses Ammonihah and Corianton, he first directs attention to their moral lapses and then calls them to repentance with nearly identical language: "except ye repent, ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (9:12; 39:9). Again, the usage is fairly limited; these are two of only four occurrences of "can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" in the Book of Mormon.⁷ Here are a few more examples of distinctive phrases or usages from the three pairs of sermons.

Zarahemla and Helaman

Each sermon features a lengthy narrative and testimony of being spiritually delivered from the "pains/chains of hell," with Alma 5 recounting the experiences of the Nephite forefathers and Alma 36 relating Alma's personal conversion (5:6–10; 36:5–21). Both also incorporate the phrase "encircled about by . . . death" (5:7; 36:18), the only two such occurrences in the Book of Mormon.

Gideon and Shiblon

In each of these two speeches, Alma testifies of Christ by drawing upon Abinadi's teachings. At Gideon, he prophesies that the Savior will "loose the bands of death . . . that his bowels may be filled with mercy . . . that he might take upon him the sins of his people" (Alma 7:12–13), which appears to allude to Mosiah 15:8–9. Similarly, Alma's testimony to Shiblon that salvation comes "only in and through Christ" because "he is the life and the light of the world" (Alma 38:9) quotes Mosiah 16:9, 13 almost verbatim. Furthermore, Alma 7 and 38 include the only instances of the phrase "temperate in all things" in the Book of Mormon, each time combined with an exhortation to be "diligent" (7:23; 38:10).⁸

Ammonihah and Corianton

These lengthy sermons in the book of Alma feature the most verbal connections, in part simply because of their length, but also because they address many of the same doctrinal issues. A few of the more distinctive correspondences are listed below, with the digits in brackets indicating the number of times the phrase appears in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon.

- 39:6 (murdereth against/transgress contrary to) the light and knowledge (9:23) [0-0-3]
- 40:13 led captive by the will of the devil (similar to 12:11) [0-1-2] (2 Timothy 2:26)
- 40:19 souls/spirit and bodies . . . reunited (11:43) [0-0-4] (including Alma 40:20, 21)
- 40:23 limb and joint . . . restored to their proper . . . frame (11:43) [0-0-2]
- 40:23 even a hair of the head shall not be lost (11:44) [0-0-2] (but see Luke 21:18)
- 40:26 die as to things pertaining to . . . righteousness (12:16) [0-0-2] (but see Alma 5:42)
- 41:4 mortality raised to immortality (similar to 12:12) [0-0-2]

- 41:7 whether to do good or do evil (12:31, with the alternatives reversed) [0-0-2]
- 42:1 consigned to a state of (endless) misery (9:11) [0-0-4]
- 42:3 tree of life . . . partake of the fruit (12:21, 23; reversed) [0-0-5] (twice in Alma 5)
- 42:4 time/space granted unto man . . . to repent (12:24) [0-0-2]
- 42:5 the word . . . would have been void (12:23, 26) [0-0-3] (compare Isaiah 55:11)
- 42:5 plan of salvation/redemption would have been frustrated (12:26) [0-0-2]
- 42:6 it was appointed unto man/men . . . to die (12:27) [0-1-2] (Hebrews 9:27)
- 42:9 spiritual death as well as a temporal (12:16 makes the same distinction) [0-0-3]
- 42:10 probationary state . . . prepare/preparatory (12:24; 42:13) [0-0-3]
- 42:13 work(s) of justice could not be destroyed (12:32) [0-0-2]
- 42:26 redemption . . . prepared from the foundation of the world (12:30) [0-0-5]

There are additional intertextual connections from elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, but the verbal parallels between Alma 9–13 and 39–42 are notable for their number and exclusivity.⁹

These sorts of studies are susceptible to confirmation bias—looking for verbal connections is likely to turn up such connections—so it is reasonable to ask if there are counterexamples, that is, phrasal parallels that cross boundaries between the three pairs of sermons. Such phrases do exist; for instance, “pains of hell” from Alma 36:13 (Helaman sermon) also appears at 14:6 (Ammonihah sermon) in the voice of the narrator; similarly, the image of a soul being “har-rowed up” occurs at 39:7 (Corianton) and 14:6 (Ammonihah), as fits the pattern, but also at 36:12, 17 (Helaman). Longer, more complex counterexamples include “partake of the fruit of the tree of life . . . and the waters of life freely” (at 5:34 and echoed at 42:3, 27), as well

as “his paths straight . . . his course is one eternal round” (at 7:19–20 and 37:12). But by and large, the preponderance of parallels tends to correlate each city-sermon with the son-sermon that appears in the same sequence. When this observation is combined with the contextual and thematic connections, it suggests that Alma deliberately modeled his sermons to Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton on the sermons he had delivered many years earlier at Zarahemla, Gideon, and Ammonihah. His choice of wording could have been worked out ahead of time, or it may have been a spontaneous reaction to the spiritual state of his sons, or it may have been the result of literary composition and editing after the fact (there having been no recording devices in the ancient world). In any case, the pattern seems clear, once it is pointed out.

Developing Ideas

Taken together, these parallel structures, thematic correspondences, and verbal connections constitute a type of literary signposting. Alma is signaling to observant readers that he would like them to compare the preaching in Zarahemla with his sermon to Helaman, and likewise for his words to Gideon and to Shiblon, as well as to Ammonihah and Corianton. The two sets of sermons were delivered ten years apart, and in making comparisons, it seems reasonable to look for development in Alma’s ideas or rhetorical strategies, or to be alert for differences in his approach to large audiences as opposed to individuals, or to see how his speeches to his sons, toward the end of his life, might represent his final legacy or an attempt to make sure his ministry continued after his departure. Taking up the first possibility—that in the second set of sermons Alma expanded and elaborated on concepts from his earlier preaching—we might notice the following sorts of features.

In chapter 5, Alma famously structures his discourse by means of some fifty questions that he poses to his listeners. He speaks of spiritual deliverance in past generations as well as in the future day of

judgment, and he briefly mentions the source of his own knowledge of spiritual things: fasting, prayer, and the manifestation of the Holy Ghost (Alma 5:45–46). By contrast, in chapter 36 Alma offers a much more personal, detailed account of his conversion, in which general concepts of guilt, repentance, and deliverance become concrete and vivid. The chiasmic structure of Alma 36 is a way of intensifying his message, and then chapter 37 discusses specific objects—sacred records and the Liahona—that can help people keep past and future deliverances in mind.

Alma chapters 7 and 38 both mention humility, but where the former simply urges the people of Gideon to “be humble, and be submissive and gentle” (7:23), Alma gives his son Shiblon more practical advice about how this particular virtue might be manifest in daily life: “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” (38:11). Alma is also aware of the complexity of humility, that there are times when submissiveness may not be the right course of action. Thus he continues, “Use boldness, but not overbearance; and also see that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love” (38:12). He warns that pride may result in idleness (38:12) and specifically steers Shiblon away from the attitude exhibited by the Zoramites, who prayed “O God, I thank thee that we are better than our brethren” (38:14; compare 31:17).

With Corianton, Alma returns to an idea that he had explored briefly in his response to Antionah at Ammonihah, when he had been questioned about the apparent contradiction between his teachings on the resurrection and Genesis 3:22–24, which states that the Lord prevented Adam from living forever. (Antionah’s question is in Alma 12:19–21; Alma answers in 12:22–37.) In his sermon to his third son, Alma brings up Genesis 3:22–24 again (Alma 42:1–3), but this time his explanation occurs within a broader theological context in which he provides much more information about resurrection, restoration, God’s justice, and the plan of redemption (Alma 40–42). It appears that during the previous decade, Alma had been thinking of how he might have answered Antionah more fully and persuasively. Indeed

Antionah may have been one of the people Alma had in mind when he complained to Corianton that “some have wrested the scriptures, and have gone far astray” (41:1).

While it is possible to find some development from the earlier to the later sermons, particularly in terms of detail and specificity, I think that a careful reading turns up more similarities than differences. My impression is that the two corresponding sermons from each set are matched in the way they respond to the spiritual conditions of their audiences, and that taken as a whole, the six sermons offer a systematic model of how we might nurture faith in different circumstances.

Nurturing Faith

Repetition is one of the primary strategies by which the Book of Mormon communicates its messages. Indeed Nephite authors regularly teach that there are recurring patterns in history, especially as they interpret events through spiritual lenses. Because God’s justice and mercy remain in effect, along with human weaknesses and the wiles of the devil, basic behaviors and outcomes will happen over and over again.¹⁰ The Book of Mormon is filled with repetitions of divine deliverances and punishments, with the preeminent patterns being the destruction of the Jaredites, followed by the destruction of the Nephites (for similar reasons), and warnings of destructions that will come upon latter-day Gentiles in the Americas unless they repent of similar sins.

So also the pairing of Zarahemla and Helaman, Gideon and Shiblon, and Ammonihah and Corianton suggests that these are not simply individual cities and sons, each unique in their own way; rather, they represent three distinct spiritual conditions, which may fit any number of cases in the future and which will have to be responded to by church leaders, families, and friends. As mentioned above, the three categories are the wavering, the steadfast, and the transgressors. How does Alma deal with the two corresponding cases from

each category? And how might his ministering be emulated by modern readers? In this exercise, we are not just searching for parallels, but rather similarities in context; that is, we are interested in Alma's attempts to reach out to people in circumstances that are roughly equivalent. And it helps that three is a manageable number, which covers all the general possibilities: the good, the bad, and the in-between.

The wavering

When we read Alma's words to Zarahemla and Helaman together, it is striking how much Alma appeals to recent examples of divine deliverance, often conflating liberation from both political and spiritual bondage. At Zarahemla he cites the experiences of the previous generation, whom his audience would have known personally (Alma 5:3–13), and to Helaman he offers a detailed recounting of his own experience (36:6–23). After having established the reality of God's power to save, he then asks both sets of listeners to imagine how they themselves might fare at the judgment day and whether they will have a share in God's plan of redemption. Alma addresses the question of how spiritual knowledge is acquired, and he draws a stark contrast between those who repent and those who continue in wickedness. In his sermon to Helaman, Alma expands on this message by discussing the power of the scriptures to document deliverances from long ago, particularly as evidenced by physical artifacts such as the plates and the Liahona.

A few of the similar elements in both sermons are somewhat subtle and might be missed unless we were looking for them, but this is precisely what Alma's structuring and verbal connections are encouraging readers to do. For example, the meaning of "can ye imagine yourselves brought before the tribunal of God" (Alma 5:18) is quite clear, though Alma's later references to being "lifted up at the last day" (36:3; 37:37) and "brought to stand in the presence of my God" (36:15) bring to mind the same scenario in a less direct way. So also the brief explanation that follows the rhetorical questions "do ye not

suppose that I know of these things myself” and “how do ye suppose that I know of their surety” (5:45) is echoed later by the lengthy personal narrative that follows Alma’s declarations that “I would not that ye think that I know of myself” and “if I had not been born of God I should not have known these things” (36:4–5). While there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the topics of each speech, it is useful to read them together, thinking of the spiritual state of Zarahemla and Helaman, as well as those in modern times, perhaps including ourselves, who are caught between impulses to do good or evil but are looking for reasons to choose the right.

The steadfast

We might assume that the faithful inhabitants of Gideon, as well as Shiblón, would need less in the way of spiritual nurturing, and indeed these two sermons are quite a bit shorter than those that precede or follow them. Yet Alma nevertheless pays specific attention to the needs and concerns of those whose faith remains strong despite difficulties. He offers praise, though perhaps not too effulgently. And while his primary responses to both Gideon and Shiblón are thankfulness and encouragement, he specifically mentions the dangers of arrogance, as we saw above. He reminds the people of Gideon of the imminent coming of the Lord and urges them to be prepared (Alma 7:7–13), and he tries to be precise about what he knows and does not know (7:8). Although these themes do not reappear in his words to Shiblón, it is nevertheless useful to think of them as part of the tool kit that one might employ to encourage others to continue in faith. Finally, Alma invokes the blessings of God upon both the people of Gideon and his son Shiblón: “may the Lord bless you, . . . may the peace of God rest upon you” (7:25, 27); “may the Lord bless your soul, and receive you at the last day . . . to sit down in peace” (38:15).

The transgressors

The sermons to Ammonihah and Corianton are relatively long and complex, but they cover similar topics from a somewhat similar

approach. In working with people (either cities or sons) who have made mistakes, Alma issues stern warnings and goes to some length to make sure that his listeners understand fundamental doctrines of the gospel. People in Ammonihah have questions about the identity of God, the resurrection, and the final judgment, while Corianton wonders about the timing of the resurrection and what will happen to spirits between death and resurrection, as well as the fairness of God's punishments.

One of the striking elements of both discourses is the time that Alma devotes to answering honest questions. Zeezrom (in Ammonihah) begins by trying to trip up Alma, but he later recognizes the error of his ways and asks sincerely about the meaning of Amulek's teachings (Alma 12:7–8). Zeezrom eventually is converted and thus escapes the destruction that will come upon Ammonihah—which is a good reminder that individuals can repent even when they are surrounded by wicked multitudes. It is hard to know whether Antionah is truly seeking truth when he asks about apparent contradictions between Alma's preaching and the scriptures (12:19–21), but Alma nevertheless responds thoughtfully. So also Alma patiently explains doctrinal concerns that seem to have been bothering Corianton for some time. Also of note, perhaps because the leaders of Ammonihah were much more hostile to Alma than was Corianton, when he speaks to the city he brings in another witness, Amulek, who was well-known to the people there and perhaps could more readily perceive and address their objections.

Because the primary material for these two major sections of the book of Alma come from Alma himself in the form of written transcripts, it is perhaps not surprising that most of the time the outcomes are happy ones. The wavering city and son both eventually choose righteousness, the faithful city and son continue on the right path, and the transgressing son returns to the ministry. This accounting, however, leaves out one of the six cases; the city of Ammonihah expels believers, slaughters their families, and then in turn is utterly destroyed. Alma provides an extended account of his preaching there,

even though in the end his efforts are unsuccessful. Many authors might be tempted to skip over their failures (it would have been easy, for instance, to replace the account of Ammonihah with one of the other two cities where Alma preached), yet perhaps there is a message in the narrative that sometimes even our best efforts may be unfruitful—even the most capable, inspired preaching cannot overwhelm the agency of listeners.

Conclusion

Brigham Young once asked a congregation in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, “Do you read the Scriptures, my brethren and sisters, as though you were writing them a thousand, two thousand, or five thousand years ago? Do you read them as though you stood in the place of the men who wrote them?”¹¹ Note that he did not simply invite the saints to imagine themselves in the historical circumstances of ancient prophets, but rather to imagine what it would have been like to *write* a sacred record. The contents of Alma’s sermons are surely important, especially since he took the trouble to transcribe his words himself, yet just as significant is the way that Alma (and later Mormon) selected and organized and shaped those accounts. Why are there so many parallels between Alma 5–16 and 36–42? It does not seem an adequate explanation to assume that Alma was simply recording history just as it happened. True, he addresses his three sons according to birth order, which might appear to be a natural progression (though this is not the order in which either Jacob or Lehi bless their sons, according to Genesis 49 and 2 Nephi 1–4), but as we have seen, the book of Alma includes sermon transcripts for only three of the five cities where he preached. A selection was made by someone, based on some sort of criteria.

When I try to read the book of Alma as if I were writing it, I am impressed by its aesthetic sense (particularly in its first half). Alma knew that his message would be important to future generations, and I imagine that it gave him pleasure to compose (and perhaps

organize) his sermons in ways that highlighted their balance and symmetry. There is something pleasing about careful craftsmanship, whether one is working with material artifacts or with words. As can be seen in the poetry of the Hebrew prophets, inspired admonitions are more memorable and striking when expressed in beautiful, evocative language.

Furthermore, in contemplating what I might have included or left out if I were writing about Alma's life, it is obvious that the Book of Mormon is more concerned with theology than with the details of history. As in the Hebrew Bible, political events and long-term social changes are given theological causes, as opposed to the economic, sociological, or environmental factors that play such large roles in modern historiography.¹² In fact, the Nephite record is primarily a work of theology, though of an unusual type. Rather than presenting religious truths through scripture commentary or systematic reasoning, it instead offers spiritual perspectives through the words and actions of historical individuals—though these accounts are selected, organized, and shaped by prophetic author-editors. These narrators have several literary tools at their disposal, including repetition and practical application. Similar ideas and doctrines are *repeated* over and over. Narratives are recounted in ways that make them seem like variants of the same story (since God and his covenants are constants throughout history). And abstract concepts such as repentance, conversion, and compassion are made concrete when they are *applied* in the lives of specific individuals whose stories are recounted in the text. Quite often, the form of the Book of Mormon follows, or reflects, or supports, its main ideas.

Returning to the general outline of Alma's writings at the beginning of this essay, we see:

1. Nehor and the Amlicite rebellion: ch. 1–3
2. The preaching journeys of Alma: ch. 4–16
3. The missionary journeys of the sons of Mosiah:
ch. 17–29

4. Korihor: ch. 30
5. Alma in Antionum (among the Zoramites): ch. 31–35
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The middle sections of Alma's record, that is, the missionary journeys of the sons of Mosiah to the Lamanites (chapters 17–29) and the preaching of Alma and his companions to the Zoramites at Antionum (chapters 31–35), are about the beginnings of faith among populations that had previously rejected or resisted belief. (And they pivot around the story of Korihor, perhaps the clearest presentation of an intellectual challenge to faith in the entire Book of Mormon.) In the mission chapters we see Ammon and Aaron offering service, gaining the trust of potential converts, and finding common ground to begin teaching the gospel. So also we read of Alma and Amulek recommending an experiment on the word and urging their listeners to pray. Both sets of missionaries experience success, though that success stirs up considerable opposition and persecution.

These episodes of reestablishing faith are framed on either side by sermons that try to maintain faith, even when it seems rather precarious. In his city-sermons and his son-sermons, Alma addresses audiences that exemplify three spiritual categories. The sequence of the pairs of sermons may also be significant. If the order had been *transgressors* to *wavering* to *faithful*, it could have seemed as if progress were destined, while the opposite order would have suggested inevitable decline. But *wavering* to *faithful* to *transgressors*, with a few in the latter group finding repentance and forgiveness, puts an emphasis on human agency. Zarahemla and Helaman faced real choices, with real consequences—choices and consequences that come to fruition, in different ways, with Ammonihah and Corianton.

Once we recognize the literary patterning that makes Alma's preaching journeys parallel to his testimony to his sons, we might ask why it matters. What could these corresponding sermons mean for readers? Perhaps the lesson is that it is not enough to read a single

chapter in order to draw out particular doctrines or principles. Book of Mormon narratives were meant to be read in context. As we read and study in depth Alma's three sermons to his sons, it is useful to imagine the personalities, family dynamics, and shared experiences that allowed Alma to teach and testify persuasively. But it is also helpful to examine these chapters from an even broader perspective, looking for connections and literary patterns within Alma's writings as a whole. The very structure of first two-thirds of the book of Alma—which appears to have been deliberately crafted—invites readers to compare and contrast roughly similar, parallel exhortations. What sorts of arguments and appeals does Alma make to people in the three types of spiritual conditions? Which strategies seem to be effective, which fall short, and why? It is this constant back-and-forth sort of analyzing and comparing that may be the most beneficial for modern readers, since we ourselves are part of the Book of Mormon story. Our lives in the twenty-first century are continuations of the narratives we encounter in sacred texts, with the same God, covenants, commandments, and promises of salvation still in operation. As we attempt to minister to others in various stages of faith, or as we find ourselves in need of ministering, Alma's multifaceted, rhetorically complex, deeply personal, coordinated sermons are still profoundly relevant.

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Notes

1. Technically, the book of Alma was edited by Mormon based on writings by Alma (ch. 1–44) and Helaman (ch. 45–62), with chapter 63 written by Mormon himself. Because the first two-thirds of the book seem so

carefully constructed, as opposed to the less tightly organized war chapters, and because we see similar literary craftsmanship within Alma's sermons, I will assume for this paper that Alma was the principal organizer of Alma 1–44. It is possible, however, that Mormon as the final editor was the one who selected and arranged Alma's sermons, and that any unevenness in the literary quality of the major sections of the book of Alma was due to differences in Mormon's source material.

2. This paper is an elaboration of a point I made in a footnote in *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 304–5. Joseph M. Spencer has proposed an alternative structure for the entire book of Alma, in which he discerns parallel halves rather than a chiasm consisting of chapters 1–44, but we both believe that Alma's sermons to the three cities correspond to his sermons to his three sons. See Spencer's "The Structure of the Book of Alma," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 273–83. It is telling that while we may have different ideas about the overall organization of the book of Alma, we independently observed the similar functions and parallel language that appear when each of the city-sermons is paired with the corresponding son-sermon in the same sequence (see especially Spencer, "Structure of the Book of Alma," 275–77).
3. The word count for Ammonihah includes speeches from Amulek as well as Alma; both were included in Alma's transcript of the preaching to that city.
4. See Hardy, *Understanding*, 142–44, for the suggestion that Helaman may have been less than diligent as a record keeper, though he had other extraordinary qualities and accomplishments (see pp. 174–79).
5. Nevertheless, Alma later urges Corianton to counsel with both of his older brothers (Alma 39:10).
6. Given its chiastic structure, many of the opening elements in Alma 36 are repeated at the end of the chapter. There we find a double repetition of "retained in remembrance" (36:29) that matches the triple repetition of the same phrase at Alma 5:6 (the only other occurrences are the single instances at Jacob 1:11 and Mosiah 4:11). And while "born of God" is a common Christian expression derived from six occurrences in 1 John, its usage in the Book of Mormon is surprisingly limited. It appears only in

Alma's descriptions of his conversion (twice in Mosiah 27 and five times in Alma 36–38), and then at Alma 5:14 and 22:15.

7. The others are at Mosiah 27:26 and 3 Nephi 11:38. There is also a close variant at Alma 5:51: "except ye repent ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of heaven."
8. "Temperate in all things" is also found at 1 Corinthians 9:25.
9. Alma's chapters of counsel to his sons are wonderfully complex, sophisticated literary constructs that appear to have drawn upon multiple literary devices and sources. For instance, John Hilton has identified connections between Alma 39–42 and Mosiah 12–17; see John Hilton III, "Textual Similarities in the Words of Abinadi and Alma's Counsel to Corianton," *BYU Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 39–60.
10. These reiterations of sacred history constitute a form of typology more reminiscent of the Old Testament than the New, where Paul's typological interpretations generally look forward to Christ. In the Hebrew Bible, various examples of God's saving acts are given equal value, as with the Exodus and the return from exile, or the establishment of covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. In the Book of Mormon, the journey of Lehi's family to the Americas clearly follows the precedent of the Israelites in the wilderness, yet one narrative is not more important than the other; rather, they represent different parts of the same story.
11. Brigham Young, "Progress in Knowledge," delivered in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, 8 October 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:333.
12. In contrast to biblical narrators, however, Mormon seems more aware that his preferred mode of historiography is a choice. There are at least two episodes in which he presents data that allows readers to understand a historical event from both secular and spiritual perspectives: the parallel narratives of Alma 9–16 and 23:4–25:1, both of which end with the same destruction of Ammonihah; and the contrasting Nephite and Lamanite explanations for the outcome of the Zoramite war of Alma 43–44 (see especially 44:1–9).