

Alma's Chiasmus as Transformative Vicarious Experience

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Søren Kierkegaard once related a parable about a king who sent “a royal command . . . to all the office bearers and subjects, in short, to the whole population.”¹ Instead of submitting to the monarch’s decree, however, the people produced a multitude of interpretations increasingly “more acute, more elegant, more profound, more ingenious, more wonderful, more charming, and more wonderfully charming.”² Kierkegaard declared “everything became interpretation—but no one read the royal command with a view to acting in accordance with it.”³ In other words, instead of seeing the king’s command as something to be obeyed, his subjects saw it as something to be interpreted.

This parable illustrates that one’s approach to a text will determine what stands out when it is read. For example, if scripture is studied as a historical document, the salient features are details about the author, audience, and setting of the text in question. If scripture

is studied for application, the reader will notice ways that the text makes claim on their personal life. Obviously, drawing upon a variety of ways to read helps one understand the scriptures more completely.

Sometimes, a text is known for one specific type of reading. Since the discovery of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, Alma 36 is often (if not primarily) read apologetically. The entire chapter (which consists mostly of Alma narrating his conversion story) acts as a clean illustration of chiastic form and, therefore, as evidence that chiasmus exists in the Book of Mormon. Although the arguments are nuanced and varied, the most common line of reasoning suggests that if chiasms are present in the Book of Mormon then the record has an ancient origin.

However, the power and clarity of this argument might unintentionally prevent other significant readings of Alma 36. For example, Grant Hardy argued that Alma's chiasmus is "not a dispassionate recitation of fact; rather, it is a lyrical mode of expression meant to engage his son—and whoever else might read his transcript—emotionally; he wants them to imagine themselves in his situation, to stir in them a desire to feel what he has felt."⁴ In line with Hardy's observation, I will argue in this paper that Alma's chiasmus uses unique rhetorical features that create a vicarious and transformative experience for the reader.

Vicarious and Transformative Experience

When referring to vicarious experience, I mean when a reader begins to "enter into" the world of a narrative. Often this experience is manifested as readers feel similar emotions to the people or characters in a story or even adopt similar behaviors. When discussing the transformative power of narrative, I am speaking of the ability of a story to invite the reader to change their beliefs, attitudes, or behavior. To the degree that stories in a variety of mediums (film, theater, literature, etc.) create a similar effect for the listener or reader, we can draw upon different fields of study to explore how vicarious experience can

lead to transformation. For example, Fred Craddock, a homiletician, when describing the theater's ability to deeply impact a person, said, "Through characters and lines alive with imagination and empathy, the play stirs the faculties with which I negotiate life, and by analogy and identification I become a participant."⁵ Empirical studies have shown that absorption into a story can affect one's beliefs,⁶ willpower,⁷ and behavior.⁸ In an instructional design study about storytelling, a filmmaker said that people watching a movie are "willing to put their prejudices aside, and sometimes are even willing to put their morality aside, and explore that theme fully with the characters in that story. . . . By extension they [vicariously] made those choices by becoming [emotionally] involved in the film. Those choices become part of them. And they walk away changed people."⁹

In one sense, it is not surprising that stories can have the power to influence people so profoundly because they have an "inescapable moral dimension."¹⁰ In other words, stories by their very nature create an "understanding of the world not only as it is, but as it can and should be."¹¹ For example, if a story depicts a young woman working hard through college and then landing a high-paying corporate job, the indirect message is that discipline and hard work lead to success. To the degree that people become absorbed into this story, they are more likely to adopt this stance on the world.

In what follows I will show that Alma's chiasmus in Alma 36 contains three major features that can lead to a vicarious and therefore transformative experience for the reader: narrative experience, concrete language, and an "overhearing" effect. In so doing, I will describe how these features can create a transformative vicarious experience and how Alma incorporates them into his chiasmus. I will draw upon a variety of fields of scholarship but especially on homiletics because many homileticians seek to understand how to generate vicarious transformative experiences for listeners. To what extent Alma used rhetorical features intuitively or deliberately will not be explored in this paper. Rather, the incorporation of these features in Alma's chiasmus will be discussed without speculating on

Alma's understanding of the potential vicarious or transformative nature of story.

Narrative Experience

Alma 36 is often presented as a whole in order to show its chiasmic structure. Authors or teachers diagram the chiasmus so that readers can see how the ideas in the first half of the chapter are reflected in the second half, with the middle point of the chiasmus being centered on verses 17 and 18. However, when read, Alma 36 is not experienced all at once; it is experienced as an unfolding event in time. One might be able to understand the *structure* of Alma 36, but one would not be able to fully appreciate the narrative-like experience of Alma's chiasmus unless he or she examines its *sequence*. As one professor of narrative preaching said, "Presentations whose form is lined out moment-by-moment are narrative by definition. Presentations whose form occurs all-at-once are not. Musical presentations are narrative by form. A sculptural presentation is not. The primary medium of preaching is time, moving moment-by-moment."¹² Following this insight, we will examine how the temporal nature or narrative experience of Alma's chiasmus invites a transformative vicarious experience for the reader.

Conflict

After returning from a mission to the Zoramites and observing "the iniquity of his people" (Alma 35:15), Alma gathered his sons together to teach them "separately, concerning the things pertaining unto righteousness" (35:16). It was in this context Alma delivered his chiasmic message to Helaman found in Alma 36. In verses 1–3, Alma exhorts Helaman to listen carefully to the message he is about to offer. Next, as Alma begins to recount how he and the sons of Mosiah were "seeking to destroy the church of God" (Alma 36:6), Alma creates a sense of conflict by speaking of an angel appearing to "stop [them] by the way" (36:6). The angel gives Alma an ultimatum: "If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God"

(36:9). This moment in the text is what Eugene Lowry calls “upsetting the equilibrium.”¹³ Something is thrown off balance that invites a deep engagement for the listener or reader.¹⁴ Lowry describes the ambiguity associated with an opening conflict as “existing in any phenomenon which is both vital and at risk.”¹⁵ In Alma’s case, the central conflict or risk he experienced was the “great fear and amazement lest perhaps [he] should be destroyed” (36:11). Without this initial conflict or unresolved problem, the reader may not have enough interest to continue with Alma through his problem to its resolution. However, to the extent that the listener is arrested by Alma’s situation, they begin to enter into his world and the possibility is raised that they might be transformed by means of Alma’s narrative.

Rising action

A significant portion of Alma’s chiasmus focuses on the emotions he felt both before and after his conversion. In the first half of the chiasmus, he relates the deep emotional turmoil and guilt he experienced as he “remember[ed] all [his] sins and iniquities” (Alma 36:13). Alma speaks of feeling “the pains of hell” (36:13), realizing that he had metaphorically “murdered many of [God’s] children” (36:14), experiencing “inexpressible horror” at the “thought of coming into the presence of . . . God” (36:14), and preferring to “be banished and become extinct both soul and body” rather than be “judged of [his] deeds” (36:15).

For some readers, it might seem counterproductive that Alma spent so much time describing his negative emotions and feelings. However, this rhetorical move acts as a way to create a deepening investment in Alma’s chiasmus. As O. Wesley Allen described one preaching method, “The preacher slowly takes the congregation down deeper into the painful, distressing, or confusing concern. The *descent* is less intellectual in terms of thoroughly explaining the complexity of the question. . . . Instead, it is an experiential descent. The preacher uses imagery to deepen the hearers’ existential concern with the subject matter.”¹⁶ Furthermore, seeing the depth and complexity of Alma’s emotions prevents the story from becoming saccharine. As

one film critic said, “Sentimentality is unearned emotion. . . . It comes from a lack of recognition . . . of how complex people are.”¹⁷ All this is to show that Alma’s description of the deep spiritual anguish he felt can lead the reader to vicariously experience what Alma is feeling in the narrative.

Sudden shift

After Alma’s descent into the “pains of a damned soul” (Alma 36:16), he experiences a dramatic change, or what Lowry calls a “sudden shift.”¹⁸ He described this as an event when “something happens abruptly, or decisively”¹⁹ and is “a sudden seeing.”²⁰ Speaking of a similar idea, Allen said that preachers want their congregations “to experience some kind of shift in thought, attitude, and/or behavior.”²¹ For Alma, this occurs when he “remembered also to have heard [his] father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ” (36:17). At this point in the narrative we have reached the center of Alma’s chiasmus and begin to experience a dramatic change in direction as Alma cries out saying, “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me” (36:18).

This kind of shift is evident in other scriptural stories. King Lamoni’s father, who had previously ordered his son to kill Ammon (Alma 20:14), underwent a dramatic change of heart after praying, “O God . . . if there is a God . . . wilt thou make thyself known unto me” (Alma 22:18). This conversation led to the king sending “a proclamation throughout all the land” (22:27) that allowed the sons of Mosiah to preach the gospel openly (Alma 23:1). According to the traditional reading of Acts 9, Saul’s life experienced a complete reversal after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Saul stopped persecuting Christians and became the apostle to the Gentiles. Or, in Nephi’s multiple attempts to acquire the brass plates, he experienced a shift of fortune as he found “a man, and he had fallen to the earth before [him], for he was drunken with wine” (1 Nephi 4:7). Nephi was then able to secure the brass plates and continue with his family to the promised land.

Speaking of these kinds of shifts in sermons, Lowry said, "Often there comes a resolution, a clue which feels revelatory. In it one senses the missing key which 'unlocks' the whole. . . . Such a revelatory clue is experienced by the congregation rather than simply known."²² If the reader has been vicariously following Alma through his psychological distress, his crying out to Jesus in faith is something that is experienced rather than just observed. Perhaps the reader can begin to say alongside with Alma, "I cried within my heart: O Jesus . . . have mercy on me" (Alma 36:18).

Climax

The revelatory insight that Alma received leads to a climactic moment of forgiveness and redemption. Alma tells Helaman, "I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more" (Alma 36:19). Normally, at this point, teachers might begin to explain (for apologetic purposes) how the language in the second half of the chiasmus is directly opposite to what is in the first half. However, the contrasting emotions Alma felt also invite the reader to experience vicarious cleansing and forgiveness. In the same way an artist creates bright light in a painting by surrounding it in dark colors, Alma's feelings of despair and hopelessness create a poignant moment of grace and mercy. The chart below is intended to illustrate how the first half of Alma's chiasmus leads to contrasting emotions for the reader in the second half:

Alma's Contrasting Experiences in Alma 36

First half of chiasmus	Second half of chiasmus	Vicarious Experience
"I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins" (v. 17)	"I could remember my pains no more" (v. 19)	no longer afflicted by the memory of sins

Alma's Contrasting Experiences in Alma 36 (continued)

First half of chiasmus	Second half of chiasmus	Vicarious Experience
Alma was "racked, even with the pains of a damned soul" (v. 16)	"And oh, what joy . . . yea, my soul was filled with joy" (v. 20)	the joy of receiving forgiveness
"I could be banished and become extinct . . . that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God" (v. 15)	"I saw . . . God sitting upon his throne . . . and my soul did long to be there" (v. 22)	a longing to be in the presence of God
"neither had I the use of my limbs" (v. 10)	"my limbs did receive their strength again, and I stood upon my feet" (v. 23)	physical vigor

J. R. R. Tolkien said, "It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality."²³ If the reader has taken the journey through Alma's guilt to the turn when he reaches out in faith to Christ and ultimately when he receives peace of conscience, they are more likely to experience (and maybe even seek) that same conversion themselves.

Denouement

Toward the end of the narrative portion of Alma's chiasmus, he tells Helaman that he had been "born of God" (Alma 36:23). As a result, he "labored without ceasing, that [he] might bring souls unto repentance" (36:24). As a reader, we begin to see the long-term implications of Alma's conversion. Speaking of the equilibrium that occurs at the

end of a story when things are made right, Lowry said, "We are not talking here about inactivity, the stasis born when opposing forces are made equal. We are talking about the equilibrium of a runner in stride. This stage has about it the concluding balance of energy that no longer is trapped by fighting a standoff battle. We are now ready to move into the future."²⁴ In like manner, Alma's story provides a way forward for the reader. If the reader has vicariously experienced Alma's conversion narrative, then they might also feel a desire to preach the gospel of grace so that others can "[taste] as [they themselves] have tasted" (36:26).

Concrete Language

We have just seen how the narrative flow of Alma's chiasmus invites the reader into a vicarious experience. In this section, I will attempt to demonstrate how Alma's use of concrete language creates a similar effect. Concrete language (as opposed to abstract) describes specific events that occur in time and space. It is language that avoids generalized terms or abstract principles and instead focuses on nouns, imagery, and metaphor. In a book describing the way Jesus taught, the homiletician William Brosend said, "It is an old canard, but your eighth-grade English teacher was correct: show, don't tell. The best teaching allows the listeners to see for themselves, and it does so by being concrete and vivid."²⁵

To the degree that Alma's language is concrete and specific, the reader has a chance to vicariously experience what Alma is describing. In a qualitative study on the use of story in teaching settings, a playwright said, "Here's the dichotomy, the paradox of telling stories. The more precise the details, the more universal your audience can be. . . . when you get really, really specific, you talked about a certain place, and weather, and smells, and things like that, even if the people listening have never been to that place, it's real enough that they can attach something from their life to that."²⁶ Craddock explained, "On the basis of these concrete thoughts and events, by analogy *and* by the

listener's identification with what she hears, conclusions are reached, new perspectives are gained, decisions made."²⁷

Although there are probably better scriptural examples of concrete words and images, Alma's chiasmus still shows evidence of this kind of language. When speaking of being confronted by the angel, as opposed to saying, "I was out with some people," Alma tells Helaman that he was with the "sons of Mosiah" (Alma 36:6). He specifically mentioned that he "arose and stood up" (36:8) when speaking with the angel and that his experience lasted for "three days and three nights" (36:10). Rather than use generalized language like "when I was in despair, I prayed for help," Alma recounts the specific prayer he offered: "O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me" (36:18). Alma also points the readers to a specific illustration when he says, "I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne" (36:22). In addition, Alma uses a simple and powerful simile when he says, "And behold, [the angel] spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder" (36:7). Careful readers will allow the experience of hearing thunder associate itself with the voice of the angel. Using the word *thunder* is much more experiential than choosing an abstract phrase such as "his voice was powerful." Furthermore, Alma uses concrete nouns in his description such as "angel" (36:5), "thunder" (36:7), "feet" (36:7), "earth" (36:7), "mouth" (36:10), "limbs" (36:10), and "pains of hell" (36:13). As mentioned above, the specificity of Alma's language allows the reader to connect Alma's story to their own experience, thus making it more possible for the reader to vicariously enter into Alma's narrative.

Beyond specificity, simile, and concrete nouns, Alma also uses metaphor when he speaks of being "in the gall of bitterness" (Alma 36:18), "harrowed up by the memory of [his] many sins" (36:17), and "encircled about by the everlasting chains of death" (36:18). N. T. Wright translates "in the gall of bitterness" (a phrase also used in Acts 8:23) as "stuck in the bitter poison."²⁸ The 1828 Webster's dictionary defines *harrowed* as "tortured; tormented; strained to the utmost."²⁹ Using metaphors associated with poison, torture, and chains enables

readers to connect better with Alma's experience. Alma also incorporates a rather poignant (and unsettling) metaphor when he says he "had murdered many of [God's] children" (Alma 36:14). Thomas G. Long explained, "In a simple metaphor we call something familiar by an unfamiliar name. . . . A metaphor seeks to create new meaning, to help us experience the reality of something in a new way."³⁰ Although Alma quickly explains his metaphor by saying, "or rather led them away unto destruction" (36:14), the reader still attaches the awful feelings and imagery associated with murder to the idea of Alma having led people out of the church.

In another use of concrete language, Alma seems to use a variety of images centered on the theme of *eating*. He says that his pains originally were "bitter" and now had become "sweet" (Alma 36:21). He also describes wanting to bring others to "taste of the exceeding joy of which [he] did taste" (36:24) and the great joy the Lord gave him "in the fruit of [his] labors" (36:25). This use of imagery is uniquely experiential because taste is often connected to smell, touch, and sight. Furthermore, if Alma is connecting his language of taste to the tree of life motif that runs throughout the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 8; 11; 2 Nephi 2:15; Alma 5:34, 62; 12:21, 23, 26; 33:23; 34:40–41; Helaman 3:29), then this allusion could also recall for the reader all the descriptions that Lehi felt as he partook of the fruit that "was most sweet, above all that [he] ever before tasted" (1 Nephi 8:11). As we have just seen, Alma alluded to and quoted³¹ Lehi when he spoke of him seeing "God sitting upon his throne" (Alma 36:22). Perhaps Alma is also connecting to the tree of life imagery as he invokes a number of ideas around the sensation of taste.

Alma's use of concrete language invites the reader into a vicarious experience (and therefore a potentially transformative one) because the words themselves summon the reader to feel something alongside Alma. Next, I will attempt to show how Alma creates what Craddock

calls an “overhearing” effect as another way to bring the reader into his conversion narrative.

“Overhearing”

In 1978 Craddock introduced the concept of “overhearing” to the homiletics world when he delivered the Lyman Beecher lecture at Yale University. Craddock described overhearing as occurring in communication when there is a balance between “distance” and “participation.”³² For Craddock, distance is created for the listener when they do not feel directly addressed, thus leaving them room to interpret the message for themselves without feeling attacked. This effect is often created by using first or third person examples during a sermon. Participation, on the other hand, is when the listener identifies with portions of the message in a way that challenges them to make changes to their life. The combination of these two elements (distance and participation) draws the listener into a sermon because they recognize themselves without feeling repulsed by an overbearing message. In this sense, in the words of Craddock, the listener is “overhearing the gospel”³³ because they do not feel as if the preacher is talking *directly* to them. Instead, the sermon event is much like listening to other people having a conversation that is challenging or inspiring for the listener. Both ingredients of distance and participation are essential for creating a vicarious experience for the reader. Without distance, readers may become defensive and not allow themselves to be influenced by the sermon. Without participation, the readers will not see how the message relates to their own lives. In the words of Craddock, “the speaker who wants the listeners to overhear will preserve distance in narration, but the vocabulary, idiom, imagery, and descriptive detail will be such as will allow points or moments in the process at which the listener can ‘enter,’ identify, be enrolled. Otherwise, the listener cannot overcome the distance, and the communication, if attended to, becomes nothing more than shared information or a speech on a certain topic.”³⁴

Distance

Although this paper has focused primarily on the experience of the reader, Alma also created distance (in some degree) for Helaman when relating his experience with the angel. At first Alma directly addresses and exhorts Helaman by saying, "My son, give ear to my words" (Alma 36:1) and "I beseech of thee that thou wilt hear my words and learn of me" (36:3). However, as Alma moves into his conversion experience, he stops directly teaching Helaman and thus creates distance. Beginning in verse 6, Alma does not directly address Helaman until verse 21 and does not exhort him until verse 29 when he says, "ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done."

The reader is afforded distance when encountering Alma 36 in a number of ways. First, Alma is not speaking directly to the reader as sometimes happens in the Book of Mormon. For example, Moroni addresses his readers when he says, "I speak unto you as if ye were present. . . . Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing" (Mormon 8:35). In Alma 36, on the other hand, we "overhear" a conversation between a father and his son. This allows the reader space to interpret and to be moved by the conversation without feeling directly confronted. The few places that Alma addresses Helaman or calls him "son" actually work to enhance the distance because it reminds the reader that they are not being directly addressed.

Second, when Alma speaks of his intense, emotional experiences, he does not invite the reader (or Helaman) to directly identify. Craddock argued, "No matter how much a speaker pledges sincerity, shows feeling, and swears to genuine concern, a direct disgorging of emotion does not reproduce that same experience in me."³⁵ Instead, Alma recalls his emotional turmoil without suggesting that Helaman should feel the same way.

Third, Alma's story is told in the first person. Although the reader knows that Alma is speaking to Helaman, if Alma's conversion story contained too many instances of Alma using the second person, the reader may have felt a decrease in distance. Alma's story, however,

keeps the reader squarely focused on his own experience, thus allowing the reader space to have a vicarious experience.

Participation

Craddock explained that “participation means the listener overcomes the distance, not because the speaker ‘applied’ everything, but because the listener identified with experiences and thoughts related in the message that were analogous to her own.”³⁶ As this happens for the listener, they are more likely to be challenged or transformed by a message.

Helaman may have identified with and thus have begun to relate to Alma’s story at two potential points. Grant Hardy has argued that Alma may have had “spiritual concerns”³⁷ regarding Helaman. He says, “It sounds as if Alma desperately wanted Helaman to take his words to heart, and Alma 36 is the most complete account of his conversion we have, as well as the one that focuses most intently on both the pains and joys that he felt.”³⁸ If Hardy’s analysis is correct, Alma relating his conversion story without any direct invitation to also become converted might suggest that he was hoping that Helaman would identify and thus pick up on the indirect message.

The other way that Alma may have wanted Helaman to identify with his conversion narrative is in Alma’s stated desire to “[labor] without ceasing, that [he] might bring souls unto repentance” (Alma 36:24). One potential reason for mentioning this is that Alma may have wanted Helaman to go preach the gospel. In fact, when Alma finishes counseling Helaman, he tells him to “go unto this people and declare the word” (Alma 37:47). Perhaps Alma related his intention to go and preach the gospel in his conversion chiasmus so Helaman might also gain the same desire.

It is obviously impossible to see where the modern reader might identify with Alma’s chiasmus. However, we might be able to locate some places in Alma’s conversion story that potentially connect to the lives of readers. For some readers, having a past where one was antagonistic toward God or his church (Alma 36:6) might create an

identification point. Perhaps deep feelings of despair and guilt (36:12) would ring true for many readers. Or maybe experiencing forgiveness and cleansing (36:19) or the desire to preach the gospel (36:24) would lead readers to feel a kinship to Alma. Regardless, Alma's story contains universal feelings and experiences that allow many people to start to see themselves in the story. If the reader identifies with the characters or events in the story, they are more likely to have a transformative vicarious experience.

Conclusion

The chiasmus in Alma 36 is a powerful apologetic tool in arguing for the historicity of the Book of Mormon. However, in one sense, reading Alma 36 as a vicarious transformative experience gets closer to Moroni's stated purpose for the Book of Mormon: to convince "Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God" (title page of the Book of Mormon). Ultimately, the prophets in the Book of Mormon are not only concerned with proving that the book is true (see Ether 5:3; Moroni 10:3–5)—in addition to this desire, their constant invitation is that all would come unto Christ. If the reader of Alma 36 can enter into Alma's chiasmus vicariously, they too might be led to reach out to "Jesus Christ, a Son of God" (Alma 36:17). In this way, Alma's chiasmus is a story that has the power to create a transformative religious experience. As Craddock said, "a narrative tends to *do* what it *tells*, mediating suffering and healing and salvation."³⁹

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Notes

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