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Alma and Amulek were forced to watch the women and children die in the fire.
Amulek wanted to use the power of God to save them.

When Less Is More: The Reticent Narrator in the Story of Alma and Amulek

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“A successful book is not made of what is *in* it,” Mark Twain wrote, “but of what is left *out* of it.”¹ Though he would have never admitted it, Twain’s criterion would have made the Book of Mormon a successful book. The book is full of things that are not there, from such cultural details as what Nephite cities looked like to the far more personal—emotions, doubts, and questions. Of course, the book does offer detail at times, but often information is left out at the moment in the narrative when readers are the most curious about what happened. The text frequently shows signs of having been carefully crafted, the narrator picking and choosing what should be said and what is best left to our imaginations.

When we talk about the Book of Mormon and why a particular piece of information may have been left out, we often hear such answers as “It must not have been important,” “Because it didn’t really happen,” “There wasn’t room on the plates,” or “It’s not important to our salvation.” What Meir Sternberg writes about the narrator of the story of David and Bathsheba can also be said, at times, about the different narrators in the Book of Mormon. The narrator “presents external occurrences alone, deeds and words, leaving his agents’ inner

lives opaque—even though in a dramatic narrative of this type it is precisely the motives and thoughts of the characters that interest the reader most.”² For example, during the Savior’s visitation to the remaining descendants of Lehi, when angels descend from heaven “as it were in the midst of fire” and encircle the children, all we are told is that “the angels did minister unto them” (3 Nephi 17:24). We would love to know what the angels said to the children, what the children felt and saw, what it means for divine messengers to minister. Surely such answers are not left out of the narrative because they are not important or interesting. Perhaps the narrator withheld these important details because they were too sacred or because the narrator did not know them and only the angels and the children knew. Not only are we not told the details of this ministering, however, we are not even told why we are not told them.

Robert Alter described this “art of reticence” on the part of biblical narrators:

How does the Bible manage to evoke such a sense of depth and complexity in its representation of character with what would seem to be such sparse, even rudimentary means? Biblical narrative offers us, after all, nothing in the way of minute analysis of motive or detailed rendering of mental processes; whatever indications we may be vouchsafed of feeling, attitude, or intention are rather minimal; and we are given the barest hints about the physical appearance, the tics and gestures, the dress and implements of the characters, the material milieu in which they enact their destinies. In short, all the indicators of nuanced individuality to which the Western literary tradition has accustomed us—preeminently in the novel, but ultimately going back to the Greek epics and romances—would appear to be absent from the Bible Though biblical narrative is often silent where later modes of fiction will choose to be loquacious, it is selectively silent in a purposeful way.³

The narrators of the Book of Mormon—this Middle Eastern book first published in the West—have more in common with the writers of the Bible than with those of nineteenth century American literature. As a writer, Mormon is more of a Moses than a Melville.

Approaching the Narrator in a Book of Mormon Story

Referring to a “narrator” in the Book of Mormon begs an important question: whom are we referring to? In some portions of the book, such as 1 Nephi, it is clear that the narrator is Nephi himself. However, Mormon abridged much of the book (with Moroni doing some abridging later), so it becomes more complicated to speak of a narrator. We have the narrator who wrote the original text and the narrator who then abridged that text; often we do not know

where one’s influence ends and the other’s begins. In addition, for the entire Book of Mormon, we have the fact that the book is an inspired book, justifying the perspective that the Lord himself is, if not a narrator, then an unseen author of sorts. Finally, the entire book was translated by Joseph Smith, so he played a role in the writing of the English version of the book to some extent, and he was inspired by the Lord during that translation process, so the Lord, once again, had a hand in the shaping of the text.

For the purposes of this paper, I will use the term “narrator” to refer to the rather abstract concept of the creator of the text as it appears on the page of the Book of Mormon. This narrator is some combination of the writer of the text, the abridger, the translator, and the one who inspired the text from the moment the first word was etched into plates until it was ultimately translated. This approach suffices for this paper because I am less concerned here with identifying the author and his intent in any given passage, and more interested in the effect these narrative choices have upon us as readers. This paper will not attempt to answer the usually impossible question of authorial intent (“Did the author really leave out that information because he wanted us to think that?”) but will focus instead on what the reader may experience as a result of how the text was written and translated.

Rather than taking quick looks at brief passages throughout the book, closely reading a single subject of a rather lengthy narrative can be more fruitful if we desire to see how the narrator left important story elements to us and our hearts and minds. My approach to the text, therefore, will be to do a close reading in which I explore what the text says by studying it closely, rather than relying on others’ interpretations of the text.⁴ I have chosen the story of Alma and Amulek because it is such a powerful story, full of joy but also tragedy, that often leaves us with more questions than answers. As we study this Amulek narrative, we can see many instances of a reticent narrator.

Meeting Amulek

Our first impression of Amulek comes by way of dialogue. When Alma asks him for something to eat, Amulek says: “I am a Nephite, and I know that thou art a holy prophet of God, for thou art the man whom an angel said in a vision: Thou shalt receive. Therefore, go with me into my house and I will impart unto thee of my food; and I know that thou wilt be a blessing unto me and my house” (Alma 8:20). From this brief dialogue, we believe that Amulek is a very spiritual, probably even holy, man. He is, after all, a Nephite, and the

kind of man that is worthy enough to see an angel in a vision—not an angel who tells him to repent, but one who prophesies to him. In fact, Amulek is somewhat of a contrast to Alma the Younger. Alma had set about to destroy the Church; when an angel visited him, it was to command him to cease attacking the Church. Amulek, on the other hand, is so obedient that all he needs to hear is the angel tell him “thou shalt receive,” and he willingly opens up his home and shares his food with a man whom he has never met. He is even convinced that Alma will be a blessing to him and his house.

For the remainder of the chapter, we do not hear another word from Amulek. Alma has much to say, explaining who he is and why he is in Ammonihah. We know Alma “tarried many days with Amulek” (Alma 8:27), but we are not told what they were doing. Having read the complete story of Amulek a number of times, we may be tempted to see these days spent with Alma teaching Amulek, preparing him to help preach the gospel, but at this point such an assumption would seem erroneous. After all, Amulek is a faithful man who conversed with an angel, worthy to host a prophet of God. How much tutoring would such a man need? The narrator leaves out the details of what went on for those days. By doing so, he encourages us to continue to see Amulek as a righteous, obedient man.

The next chapter is silent about Amulek. We do not hear him speak, nor do we learn anything more about him. Though Alma brought Amulek with him to preach to the people of Ammonihah, in this chapter his new friend says nothing. In fact, even the people of Ammonihah appear to ignore Amulek, saying to Alma such things as “Suppose ye that we shall believe the testimony of one man?” (Alma 9:2) and “Who is God that sendeth no more authority than one man among this people?” (Alma 9:6). The people try to capture Alma but, insomuch as what we know from the narrator, do not even bother with Amulek.

Amulek Speaks of Himself

We finally hear from Amulek in the next chapter, when he speaks to the people of Ammonihah. Once again we are led to believe that he is a righteous man because it is obvious that his righteous lineage is important to him. He speaks of being “the son of Giddonah, who was the son of Ishmael, who was a descendant of Aminadi,” and notes that Aminadi “interpreted the writing which was upon the wall of the temple, which was written by the finger of God” (Alma 10:2). We have never heard of Aminadi before, nor will we read

anything more about him for the rest of the Book of Mormon, but he is obviously a holy man, because of his ability to interpret the writing of God. This occurrence of the writing on the temple wall is important enough for Amulek to include it about himself for the purpose of gaining credibility with his listeners, but we are told almost nothing about it. What temple is he talking about here? Why did the Lord write on the temple wall? What did the writing say? By leaving out all of this information, the narrator helps us to keep focused on the narrative and what is really important. Though we would be fascinated to know more about the writing on the temple wall, it would distract us from the story of Alma and Amulek and their message.

Amulek tells his listeners now that Aminadi was “a descendant of Nephi, who was the son of Lehi, who came out of the land of Jerusalem, who was a descendant of Manasseh, who was the son of Joseph who was sold into Egypt by the hands of his brethren” (v. 3). He is careful to draw a direct line linking himself to Joseph of Egypt, which naturally connects him to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, letting his listeners know in clear terms that he is a member of the house of Israel. We may wish to have less about the details of his lineage and more about the writing on the temple wall, but his listeners need to hear just the opposite.

Amulek continues by telling us some things about himself, but also by leaving out other things. We know he has “no small reputation” among those who know him, that he has many family and friends, and that he has become rich by his industry, but we have no idea what he has done to become rich (see v. 4). He then tells us something about himself which, for the first time in this Amulek narrative, shows us that he has a history that does not fit with our image of him as a holy, righteous man:

Nevertheless, after all this, I never have known much of the ways of the Lord, and his mysteries and marvelous power. I said I never had known much of these things; but behold, I mistake, for I have seen much of his mysteries and his marvelous power: yea, even in the preservation of the lives of this people.

Nevertheless, I did harden my heart, for I was called many times and I would not hear; therefore I knew concerning these things, yet I would not know; therefore I went on rebelling against God, in the wickedness of my heart. (vv. 5–6)

This passage is tremendously significant, changing the image we have had of Amulek since he was first introduced to us. Though he is part of an important lineage in the house of Israel and though he has spoken with an angel and obeyed his direction, we now know that—despite his having seen

God's mysteries and power—he had had a hardened and wicked heart and had rebelled against God. We have glimpsed an important part of his past and feel that we know him much better.

Or do we?

What does he mean by the mysteries and power of God? What has he seen? What does he mean when he says that he was called many times but would not hear? Called to do what? How does a man know he is being called if he does not hear? What were the things that he knew but would not know? And when he says that he rebelled against God in the wickedness of his heart, are we to take him at his word and believe that he actually was someone like Alma in his youth, in open rebellion against God? Or, is he such a humble and spiritual man that he considers the slightest weakness to be rebellion, the tiniest of flaws enough to make his heart wicked?

Rather than claiming that we do not know these details because they are not important to our salvation, perhaps it is more accurate to say that we do not know them because not knowing them may be important to our salvation. By leaving out this information, the narrator makes it easier for us to relate to Amulek. Fortunately, most members of the Church cannot relate too well to Alma the Younger; most have not purposefully tried to destroy the Church and then had to endure three days of a type of spiritual coma in order to repent. However, many members may feel that they have, at times, fallen short in how they serve. Many may believe that they have been called, but would not hear, and that they knew, but would not know. If the narrator made clear exactly what Amulek was referring to, then perhaps fewer readers would see themselves in him. But since we really do not know how far Amulek had gone in being unrighteous, the narrator leads us to ask questions of ourselves. We reflect on how well we have heard the voice of the Lord, on how hesitant we may sometimes be to admit that we know what we know. These verses tell us something about Amulek, but they invite us to learn much more about ourselves.

Amulek Bears Testimony

Amulek tells the group in a fair amount of detail about the angel telling him to receive Alma in his home: “As I was journeying to see a very near kindred, behold an angel of the Lord appeared unto me and said: Amulek, return to thine own house, for thou shalt feed a prophet of the Lord; yea, a holy man, who is a chosen man of God; for he has fasted many days because of the sins of

this people, and he is an hungered, and thou shalt receive him into thy house and feed him, and he shall bless thee and thy house; and the blessing of the Lord shall rest upon thee and thy house” (v. 7). Amulek then testifies to the people of what he knows: “I know that the things whereof he hath testified are true; for . . . as the Lord liveth, even so has he sent his angel to make these things manifest unto me; and this he has done while this Alma hath dwelt at my house” (v. 10). Apparently, this is part of what happened when Alma tarried at Amulek's house for many days. We know the details of how an angel told Amulek to receive Alma, but we have no account of what an angel taught Amulek in his home while Alma was staying with him. Perhaps this is because the details of what the angel told Amulek about Alma's coming is centered on the prophet, his needs, and his power to bless, while the details of what the angel taught Amulek in his home would have pulled the focus to Amulek.

Once again, Amulek tells us some information in the next verse, but withholds other information: “For behold, he hath blessed mine house, he hath blessed me, and my women, and my children, and my father and my kinsfolk; yea, even all my kindred hath he blessed, and the blessing of the Lord hath rested upon us according to the words which he spake” (v. 11). We now learn that Amulek is married and has children and that his father is alive, but the verse begs an important question: What did Alma do during his stay with Amulek? How did he bless Amulek and all of those other people?

Alma and Amulek Witness the Martyrdom

After both Amulek and Alma preach more to the people of Ammonihah, the people bind them and take them to the chief judge. The people cast out the men who believe in the two men's words and send men after them to cast stones at them. Then one of the most horrible scenes in the Book of Mormon occurs—and it is related to us in just one verse. “And they brought their wives and children together, and whosoever believed or had been taught to believe in the word of God they caused that they should be cast into the fire; and they also brought forth their records which contained the holy scriptures, and cast them into the fire also, that they might be burned and destroyed by fire” (Alma 14:8). The wives and children of the men who were run out of the city are burned alive for believing the words of Alma and Amulek. Not only are believers burned alive, but even those who were simply taught by the two missionaries are martyred. We are not given a glimpse into how the women or children reacted; we have no idea how they were chosen or if some

tried to be spared by denying what they had been taught. The text does not mention the terrible inner turmoil that many of the women must have felt as they saw their children burned alive and as they realized that they could save their beloved children by simply speaking up. All such questions are left to us readers to struggle with however we may, to imagine the horror of the scene, to ask ourselves if we could stand at the edge of death, with our children, and still bear testimony as we step into the fire.⁵

The people take Alma and Amulek to “the place of martyrdom” so they can “witness the destruction of those who were consumed by fire” (v. 9). In the next verse, the narrator does not say that Amulek saw the women and children being burned but that he saw their *pains*. The simplicity of the statement makes it all the more poignant. Rather than describing what Amulek saw in detail, the narrator opens up the opportunity for us to imagine the scene by giving us the least amount of information—least amount, perhaps, but also the most powerful. Amulek sees their pain, and is pained himself. The narrator writes that “when Amulek saw the pains of the women and children who were consuming in the fire, he also was pained; and he said unto Alma: How can we witness this awful scene? Therefore let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God which is in us, and save them from the flames” (v. 10). Though the narrator includes only a brief account of what Amulek said to Alma, we can sense his pain and even confusion. How is it possible that they can simply stand there and watch these innocent people die, especially since they are dying because they believed in their words? Alma refuses his pleading, though, saying that the Spirit prevents him from using that power to save the women and their children: “The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day” (v. 11). The contrast between Amulek’s plea to help the people and Alma’s faithful but very logical response heightens our awareness of the emotions Amulek is feeling. Amulek cries out in agony, but Alma responds with doctrine. Alma is right, of course, and we know he is right, but we ache with Amulek.

As painful as it is for Amulek to have to watch those women and children die such a horrible death, the fact that he knows that he and Alma have

the power of God and can stop the murdering, but do not use the power to do so, may be even more painful. By not describing this terrible scene of death—by never mentioning a word about the sounds, the smells, the heat, the crying—the narrator creates a much more experiential text for us by leaving such details to our minds and hearts.

One of the most horrible elements of this scene, however, is never mentioned. What has happened to Amulek’s wife and children? The narrator does not speak of them, but apparently Alma and Amulek watch the deaths all of the women and children who are murdered, as the two missionaries are not taken away until after “the bodies of those who had been cast into the fire were consumed” (v. 14). It is quite possible that his family is martyred before Amulek’s eyes, since the wicked people are killing those who were taught as well as those who believed and it is unlikely that his family was not taught when Alma was in their home or when the two taught the crowd. Sadly, if it is the case that his family is being martyred as he watches, Amulek is not able to save his family—not because he does not have the power, but because the Lord does not allow him to use the power.

We readers might begin to sense Amulek’s agony in his reply to his companion’s logic: “Behold, perhaps they will burn us also” (v. 12). The phrasing does not indicate any urgency in his voice; he does not seem worried that they also might be killed and is, therefore, saying this to Alma so that they might try to fight for their freedom and run for safety. It is not difficult to imagine that when he says that perhaps the people will also kill him and Alma, he might be seeing it as a release from this horrible trial. He tells Alma that they should stop the killing, and Alma says that they cannot, so perhaps Amulek replies with a hope that they too will be martyred and will no longer have to witness this scene of death inflicted upon innocent women and children, perhaps including his innocent wife and children. Once again, the narrator does not make clear the meaning behind Amulek’s words, leaving them to us to reflect on and wonder what he meant and what we might have meant had we spoken them in similar circumstances.

Alma and Amulek Saved

After the martyrdom, Alma and Amulek are put into prison in terrible conditions, staying there for days while being beaten, starved, bound, and stripped of their clothes. Alma finally cries out to the Lord: “How long shall we suffer these great afflictions, O Lord? O Lord, give us strength according to our

faith which is in Christ, even unto deliverance. And they broke the cords with which they were bound; and when the people saw this, they began to flee, for the fear of destruction had come upon them" (v. 26). The walls of the prison miraculously crumble, and the two men leave unharmed by the destruction. The Lord delivers them from their trials, but we cannot help but wonder if Amulek was troubled by the way they were delivered and the innocent women and children were not. Does he compare the afflictions he and his friend experienced in prison to those of the women and children?

Once again, the narrator includes an account of another scene which must have been tremendously difficult for Amulek, especially being as young as he was in his conversion. They eventually come across all the men "who had departed out of the land of Ammonihah, who had been cast out and stoned, because they believed in the words of Alma" (Alma 15:1). We are left to our imaginations about this reunion. Were the outcast men rejoicing when they saw their two teachers? Perhaps they had spent days praying for their welfare in gratitude for having been taught the truth by these courageous men and now they are overjoyed to see them alive and well. After all, they could reasonably assume, if the two missionaries are alive and safe, surely no harm was done to those whom they taught. Since the men were cast out of the city before their wives and children were taken, we can assume they know nothing about what happened. We can even assume that they are probably now making their way back to Ammonihah, expecting to be reunited with their families. In relating this dramatic scene, the narrator could have included more about these men and how they greeted Alma and Amulek and could have then explicitly told us how difficult it was for the two to sit the men down and explain what they witnessed—how difficult it was to speak of seeing their wives and children martyred—and then relate how they were not able to save them, though they were able to be saved themselves from the prison. Instead, all the narrator says is that Alma and Amulek "related unto them all that had happened unto their wives and children, and also concerning themselves, and of their power of deliverance" (v. 2).

Ministering to Individuals

While the narrator did not include even a single word of what Alma and Amulek said to the men about their families and their own deliverance, he gives us the details of when Alma healed Zeezrom.

And it came to pass that they went immediately, obeying the message which he had sent unto them; and they went in unto the house unto Zeezrom; and they found him upon his bed, sick, being very low with a burning fever; and his mind also was exceedingly sore because of his iniquities; and when he saw them he stretched forth his hand, and besought them that they would heal him.

And it came to pass that Alma said unto him, taking him by the hand: Believest thou in the power of Christ unto salvation?

And he answered and said: Yea, I believe all the words that thou hast taught.

And Alma said: If thou believest in the redemption of Christ thou canst be healed.

And he said: Yea, I believe according to thy words.

And then Alma cried unto the Lord, saying: O Lord our God, have mercy on this man, and heal him according to his faith which is in Christ.

And when Alma had said these words, Zeezrom leaped upon his feet, and began to walk; and this was done to the great astonishment of all the people; and the knowledge of this went forth throughout all the land of Sidom.

And Alma baptized Zeezrom unto the Lord; and he began from that time forth to preach unto the people. (vv. 5–12)

The painful irony could not have been lost on Amulek: the innocent women and children whom they taught were murdered, while the previously evil Zeezrom is miraculously healed for the very same reason—because he believed in their words. And, just as the women and children were burned alive by fire, the narrator describes Zeezrom's illness as "a burning fever." The stark and horrific contrast is almost overwhelming; the innocent women and children are killed by fire while Alma and Amulek are required to stand by and do nothing, but when the formerly wicked, contentious Zeezrom burns with a fever the two missionaries come to his aid and heal him. Amulek witnesses the death of his friends and perhaps even family, and later the rebirth of Zeezrom through baptism.

It is interesting to note what the narrator leaves out when he does provide some detail about Amulek's sacrifices. He tells us that Amulek had "forsaken all his gold, and silver, and his precious things, which were in the land of Ammonihah, for the word of God" and that he had been "rejected by those who were once his friends and also by his father and his kindred" (v. 16), but he does not tell us what happened to his immediate family. His gold and silver are mentioned, his father and kindred deserve some consideration, but there is nothing about his wife and children.

Amulek has lost all that he has owned. He has seen the martyrdom of many innocent women and children, perhaps including his own wife and children, by being burned alive, one of the most torturous ways to die. Perhaps

worse of all, he was told that he could do nothing to save them. He has been imprisoned for days and tortured, then miraculously delivered by the Lord. He has had to meet with the men whose families he had seen murdered and tell them all that had happened, including how he and Alma could not save their families but could save themselves. And he has seen one of his enemies healed because of his faith in the word and then baptized. He has lost his friends, his father, and his kindred. He may have even lost his own wife and children. Does he remember how the angel had told him that Alma would be a blessing to him? Does he remember when he testified that Alma had indeed blessed him, his wife and children, and all his family?

Conclusion

The story of Alma and Amulek is one of the most poignant in all of scripture. What begins as a joyful story of an angel directing a man to receive a prophet, and the two of them becoming missionaries who get to preach the gospel, ends with the horrible death of innocent women and children and Amulek's having lost everything. Much of the joy and pain are not directly portrayed in the narrative, however, leaving us the readers to experience both as we study the text and imagine what is between the lines.

It is no wonder that this story ends with one of the most touching sentences in the Book of Mormon about the love between two friends: "Now as I said, Alma having seen all these things, therefore he took Amulek and came over to the land of Zarahemla, and took him to his own house, and did administer unto him in his tribulations, and strengthened him in the Lord" (v. 18). And, of course, we are left to wonder just how Alma ministered to Amulek and strengthened him in the Lord. **RE**

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at an Association of Mormon Letters Conference.

1. *Mark Twain's Correspondence with Henry Huttleston Rogers, 1893–1909*, ed. Lewis Leary (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 274.

2. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 190–91.

3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 114–15.

4. See M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 10th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2011), 242–43, for a brief discussion of close reading as an approach to studying literature.

5. When those who challenge the Book of Mormon as an ancient record claim that it is instead the product of a nineteenth-century American mind, I sometimes wonder how familiar they are with nineteenth-century American literature. Think of such writers for a moment—authors like Hawthorne, Melville, Cooper, James, and Twain—and try to imagine how these authors would treat such a horrible scene in their writing. I am confident that, considering the tremendous amount of detail and drama, and even melodrama that American authors manifested in their writings at that time, if the Book of Mormon were written by a nineteenth-century American writer, it would not so sparsely describe this amazing scene of martyrdom in just one verse.