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## Abriding the Records of the Zoramite Mission: Mormon as Historian

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# ABRIDGING THE RECORDS OF THE ZORAMITE MISSION: MORMON AS HISTORIAN

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Steven L. Olsen

**Abstract:** *Since the mid-twentieth century, scholarly studies of the literary craftsmanship of biblical texts have revealed considerable insights into the intended purposes of the authors of these scriptural narratives. The present study applies the analytical methods of these studies to Mormon's abridgment of Alma's records of the Zoramite mission (Alma 31–35), revealing intricate patterns of literary conventions ranging from the most specific (e.g., diction, syntax, and figures of speech) to the most general (e.g., rhetoric, tone, and structural logic). From this perspective, Alma 31 provides a framework to distinguish Nephite and Zoramite religious practices and structure the narrative of the entire Zoramite mission, including the missionaries' teachings. More broadly, Mormon's account of the Zoramite mission sets the stage for the general degradation of Nephite society that focuses his abridgment of Nephi's Large Plates for the next one hundred years.*

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Alma's mission to the Zoramites occupies a crucial place in Mormon's record of Nephites at Zarahemla (Alma 31–35). It is located between extended accounts of relatively successful ecclesiastical and military missions (Alma 5–27, 43–62). A detailed examination of this text reveals Mormon's purposes in incorporating it into his abridgment, as well as something of the nature of the record he was creating and of the literary task he had undertaken.

Mormon divides his abridgment of this account into three parts. He identifies Alma's motivations for undertaking the mission and strategies to ensure its successful completion. He details Alma's execution of that plan. And he evaluates the success of the mission as a commentary on the moral condition of Nephite society.

### **Setting the Stage**

Mormon introduces the Zoramites in the conclusion to his narrative about the apostate, Korihor (Alma 30). The text mentions that after Korihor had confessed his iniquity and after his followers had reconverted to the gospel, he went begging for his sustenance among the Zoramites. While going from house to house, he was "run down and trodden down, even until he was dead" (Alma 30:59). By this narrative bridge, Mormon introduces the Zoramites through an action that signals the ignoble end of an individual apostate and the reprehensible moral conduct of an apostate group (see Mosiah 2). The group would ultimately prove more dangerous to the Church and more destructive to Nephite spirituality than the individual Korihor. Aware of this condition of apostasy, Alma organized a mission to reclaim the Zoramites.

Mormon attributes to Alma three motivations for his mission. The first was spiritual. The record mentions that the Zoramites had fallen into a state of apostasy and had become idolatrous (v. 1). Thus, Alma did "sicken because of the iniquity of the people" (v. 1) and was "exceeding sorrowful" (v. 2). He was, above all, concerned for the welfare of their souls. Alma's second concern was tactical. The Zoramites had physically separated themselves from the believers in Christ (vv. 2–3). As a result, the spirituality of the believers per se could not directly influence the Zoramites to return to righteousness. Their successful reconversion could result only from direct intervention. The third motivation was political. Mormon observes, "The Nephites greatly feared that the Zoramites would enter into a correspondence with the Lamanites" (v. 4). Alma's mission was undertaken partly to prevent this unholy alliance. Motivated by these concerns, Alma concluded that,

the preaching of the word [of God] ... had a more powerful effect upon the mind of the people than the sword, or anything else—therefore Alma thought ... [the missionaries] should try the virtue of the word of God. (v. 5)

Mormon's introduction lastly specifies the apostate practice to be the focus of his narrative. Although he mentions that the Zoramites "would not observe to keep the commandments of God" (v. 9) and that "they did pervert the ways of the Lord in very many instances" (v. 11)—the only point of apostasy Mormon specifically mentions is that they did not "observe the performances of the church, to continue in prayer and supplication to God daily, that they might not enter into temptation" (v. 10). By this emphasis, Mormon foreshadows "prayer and supplication" as the focus of this portion of his abridgment.

### **Reconstructing the Mission**

Consistent with his stated purpose for abridging Alma's account, Mormon develops his narrative around the apostate practices of "prayer and supplication." To do so, he cites verbatim the prayers of the Zoramites and of Alma, and he offers simple, direct, and systematic commentary on each. Mormon sets off the apostate prayer by the words "astonishment" and "astonished" (vv. 12, 19), suggesting that this prayer serves as a foil against Alma's true worship. To make this contrast more poignant, Mormon ascribes this reaction not to his own editorial voice but to the missionaries who experience the apostate practice.

Although the rest of Alma 31 is chronologically ordered, its details are structured specifically to reinforce Mormon's editorial purpose. He includes in this historical vignette only details which serve that specific purpose. Mormon emphasizes, first, the exclusivity of Zoramite worship. This worship occurred only at a specific time (v. 12) and place (v. 13). Only one person could worship at a time; the worshipper was separated from the main body of believers (vv. 13–14); and only one fixed prayer was allowed (v. 20). The exclusivity of worship is further reflected in the fact that during the rest of the week this prayer had no effect upon their daily lives (v. 23).

Mormon also emphasizes the static and elitist nature of Zoramite worship. The prayer was fixed in both its delivery and contents. The worshipper had to mount the holy stand alone, "stretch forth his hands toward heaven, and cry with a loud voice" (v. 14). The one prayer that everyone offered expressed the belief that the Zoramites were "chosen" or "elected" to the condemnation of all other people (vv. 16–17, 22) and

thanked their god that “their hearts were not stolen away to believe in things to come” (v. 22). This belief specifically refers to the coming of Christ, which had earlier been prophesied to them (see vv. 8, 17) but which, ironically, “they knew nothing about” (v. 22). Mormon thus reveals the spiritual ignorance to which apostasy had led the Zoramites.

Through the selective use of specific language, figures of speech, and historical details, Mormon represents Zoramite worship as restrictive and static. The “who,” “what,” “where,” “why,” and “how” of worship all seek to limit artificially individual and group spirituality. Mormon then identifies four consequences of this apostate practice. He indicates, that the Zoramites had become “a wicked and perverse people” (v. 24). They had become materialistic, having “their hearts ... set upon gold, and upon silver, and upon all manner of fine goods” (v. 24). Mormon also mentions their vanity and pride (v. 25). Having witnessed this gross state of apostasy, Alma was moved to lift “up his voice to heaven” in prayer (v. 26).

Mormon includes Alma’s entire prayer as a powerful contrast to the vain recitations of the Zoramites. His prayer was consistent with the “performances of the church” (v. 10), being a “supplication to God.” It sought divine assistance to accomplish a righteous purpose: “O Lord, wilt thou grant unto us that we may have success in bringing [the Zoramites] again unto thee in Christ” (v. 34). In contrast to the exclusivity of the Zoramite worship, Alma’s invocation took place in the midst of his brethren and on behalf of both them and the Zoramites. Despite the apostate practices of the Zoramites, Alma recognized that “their souls are precious, and many of them are our brethren” (v. 35).

Alma’s prayer focused on specific details and requests. He identified the points of “gross wickedness” needing correction: pride, hypocrisy, vanity, materialism, elitism, and atheism (vv. 27–29). He followed this inventory with a specific request: that the missionaries be strengthened beyond their normal capacities and comforted in their trials to accomplish their divine mission (vv. 30–33). The prayer ended with a clear declaration of the mission’s objective: “that we may bring these, our brethren, again to thee” (vv. 34–35). The prayer of Alma demonstrated his certain faith in and loving relationship with the Lord. Unlike the Zoramites who actively sought to deny the reality of Christ, Alma was anxious that both he and his companions be comforted in Christ (vv. 31–32) and that the Zoramites be brought “again unto [God] in Christ” (v. 34).



Consistent with his analysis of Zoramite worship, Mormon then identifies four consequences of Alma's prayer. Immediately after his prayer, Alma blessed his companions and "they were filled with the Holy Ghost" (v. 36). His prayer sought divine blessings for his companions, and subsequent actions demonstrated the sincerity of this request. Second, the missionaries "did separate themselves from one another" (v. 37), seeking individually to perform their collective mission to restore their brethren to the gospel. The prayer and the mission both sought to unify, not divide, and to integrate, not discriminate, by means of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Third, the missionaries were not concerned with their material sustenance and comfort but relied on the Lord who "provided for them that they should hunger not, neither should they thirst" (v. 38). He also ends this poignant analysis by commenting on why Alma's prayer constituted true worship: "Now this was according to the prayer of Alma; and this because he prayed in faith" (v. 38).

In Alma 31, Mormon selects and organizes material from the records of Alma's mission to comment on the state of Nephite righteousness. He does so by means of a simple yet direct and systematic contrast between the worship of two groups, one apostate and the other faithful. The focus of this contrast is their respective prayers, included verbatim in the text. Then through the actions and observations of the missionaries and his own selective but powerful editorial commentary, Mormon contrasts the motivations and consequences of the two forms of worship. Alma 31 not only functions as a powerful commentary on righteousness drawn from the historical narrative, but it also foreshadows the doctrinal discourses Mormon includes from the rest of Alma's mission records. For example, Mormon's declaration that the efficacy of Alma's prayer was a product of his faith (v. 38) directly precedes Alma's powerful discourse on faith (Alma 32).

Other teachings in this narrative correct apostate beliefs and practices specifically detailed in Alma 31. The missionaries taught that true worship should not be limited to a single time and place (Alma 33:4–11), that it confirms a belief in the Son of God (Alma 33:14–23), that the atonement of Jesus Christ provides the only sure hope of salvation (Alma 34:1–17), that prayers can address a wide variety of concerns and need not be fixed (Alma 34:17–27), and that true worship includes having charity for one's fellow humans (Alma 34:28–29).



### Commenting on the Mission

In Alma 35, Mormon evaluates further the state of Nephite righteousness by having Alma reflect on the mission, in terms of his three initial motivations for undertaking the mission. Based on Alma's political and tactical motivations, the mission failed. Unrepentant Zoramites join with and incite Lamanites to wage war on reconverted Zoramites (vv. 10–15). This conflict is the first in the series of devastating battles which become the narrative focus of the last half of the Book of Alma (see Alma 43–62).

In terms of Alma's spiritual motivation, the mission was also largely unsuccessful. Although many Zoramites were brought to repentance, Mormon specifically observes that,

Alma, being grieved for the iniquity of the people ... and seeing that the hearts of the people began to wax hard, and that they began to be offended because of the strictness of the word, his heart was exceeding sorrowful. (v. 15, cf. Alma 31:1)

Unfortunately, the “word of God” had not had a greater effect on the people than the sword (Alma 31:5), and Alma's righteous desires for undertaking the mission remained largely unrealized.

This portion of Mormon's abridgment thus serves as far more than a powerful moral or theological lesson. By skillfully abridging the records of Alma's mission, Mormon sets the stage for his account of the disintegration of Nephite society, which began with the wars brought on by dissent and apostasy and culminated in the natural disasters immediately preceding Christ's visit to the promised land.

Although Mormon refers to important evangelical and ecclesiastical missions during the century between the Zoramite mission and the coming of Christ (e.g., Alma 43:1–2), the historical narrative includes little specific information about the church as a force for social order and moral virtue among the Nephites. The government becomes corrupt and increasingly ineffective as an agent for public good, and the responsibility for securing the Nephite social order devolves upon the military (Alma 59–62; Helaman 1–2). The locus of righteousness in the promised land transfers from the Nephites to converted Lamanites. The efforts of these righteous Lamanites to reclaim apostate Nephites are largely rejected (Helaman 5–6, 13–15). Eventually, only famine can get the people to repent; and then when the people reject even the redeeming effect of natural disasters, those disasters destroy nearly the entire civilization (3 Nephi 8–10). After the failure of Alma's mission, only Christ's visit keeps

the second half of the abridgement from documenting one steady and certain path to total destruction. Mormon strategically locates Alma's mission within the Book of Mormon narrative to signal the beginning of this dramatic decline.

### **The Role of Structure in the Historical Narrative**

The full meaning of Alma 31 and of Alma's mission to the Zoramites cannot be comprehended solely from an examination of the contents (i.e., historical, doctrinal, geographical, biographical, social, political, military, and other details) of the records. It is essential, as well, to analyze the methods by which Mormon organized and thereby interpreted those records himself.

The organization, or structure, of Mormon's abridgment of Alma's mission to the Zoramites depends to a great extent upon literary conventions. Mormon uses the various languages of introspection, narrative, dialogue, and observation to create a sense of the dramatic crisis of the mission. Likewise, his restrained but strategically placed and powerfully worded commentary provides the reader with enough emotional distance from the events to grasp more fully the meaning of the lessons being taught. In addition, the order in which Mormon includes details in the abridgment and their juxtaposition, contrast, and harmony create greater insight into the subject than if a strictly chronological documentary had been Mormon's intent.

Through these literary conventions, the narrative reveals the degree to which the human and the divine, the historical and the spiritual, are integrated in the lives of the Nephites, as seen through the eyes of one particularly inspired literary craftsman. If Alma 31 is indicative of Mormon's writing in the rest of the Book of Mormon, we see how finely and completely the messages in this volume of scripture can be articulated. It is unlikely that this level of literary craftsmanship is accidental. More reasonable are the conclusions that Mormon consciously selected and organized material for his sacred history from the voluminous records in the Nephite archives, that he was guided in his writing by a firm understanding of God's purposes in having him abridge the "record of the people of Nephi" (Title Page), and that Mormon came to this understanding through his obedience to the call of a prophet of God to write (Words of Mormon 1:5–7; Mormon 1:1–4; 5:12–14; 6:6).

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