



2013

The Zoramites and Costly Apparel: Symbolism and Irony

Parrish Brady

Shon Hopkin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Brady, Parrish and Hopkin, Shon (2013) "The Zoramites and Costly Apparel: Symbolism and Irony," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 22 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol22/iss1/5>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title The Zoramites and Costly Apparel: Symbolism and Irony

Author(s) Parrish Brady and Shon Hopkin

Reference *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22/1 (2013): 40-53.

ISSN 1948-7487 (print), 2167-7565 (online)

Abstract The Zoramite narratives of Alma 31-35 and Alma 43-44 are richly symbolic accounts woven with many subtle details regarding the importance of costly apparel and riches as an outward evidence of pride. This literary analysis focuses on how Mormon as editor structured the Zoramite narrative and used clothing as a metaphor to show the dangers of pride and the blessings afforded by humble adherence to God's teachings and covenants. The Zoramites' pride—as evidenced by their focus on costly apparel, gold, silver, and fine goods (Alma 31:24-25, 28)—competes with the foundational Book of Mormon teaching that the obedient will “prosper in the land” (1 Nephi 4:14; Mosiah 1:7). The story develops this tension between pride and true prosperity by employing the metaphor of clothing to set up several dramatic ironies.

THE ZORAMITES AND COSTLY APPAREL: Symbolism and Irony

PARRISH BRADY AND SHON HOPKIN

Previous studies have focused on the historical function and nature of Nephite and Lamanite dress, particularly in times of war,¹ but none have analyzed how the ancient authors in the Book of Mormon used clothing as a literary tool. The Zoramite narrative of Alma 31-35 and Alma 43-44, in particular, contains many subtle details regarding the importance of costly apparel and riches as an outward evidence of pride woven into a richly symbolic account, but that may be overlooked by the casual reader. This literary analysis will focus on how Mormon's editing hand² structured the Zoramite narrative, using clothing as a metaphor to show the dangers of pride and the blessings afforded by humble adherence to God's teachings and covenants. This study will also demonstrate the complexity of the Book of Mormon as a religious text that continues to provide opportunities for fresh literary analysis over one hundred and eighty years after it was first offered to the world.

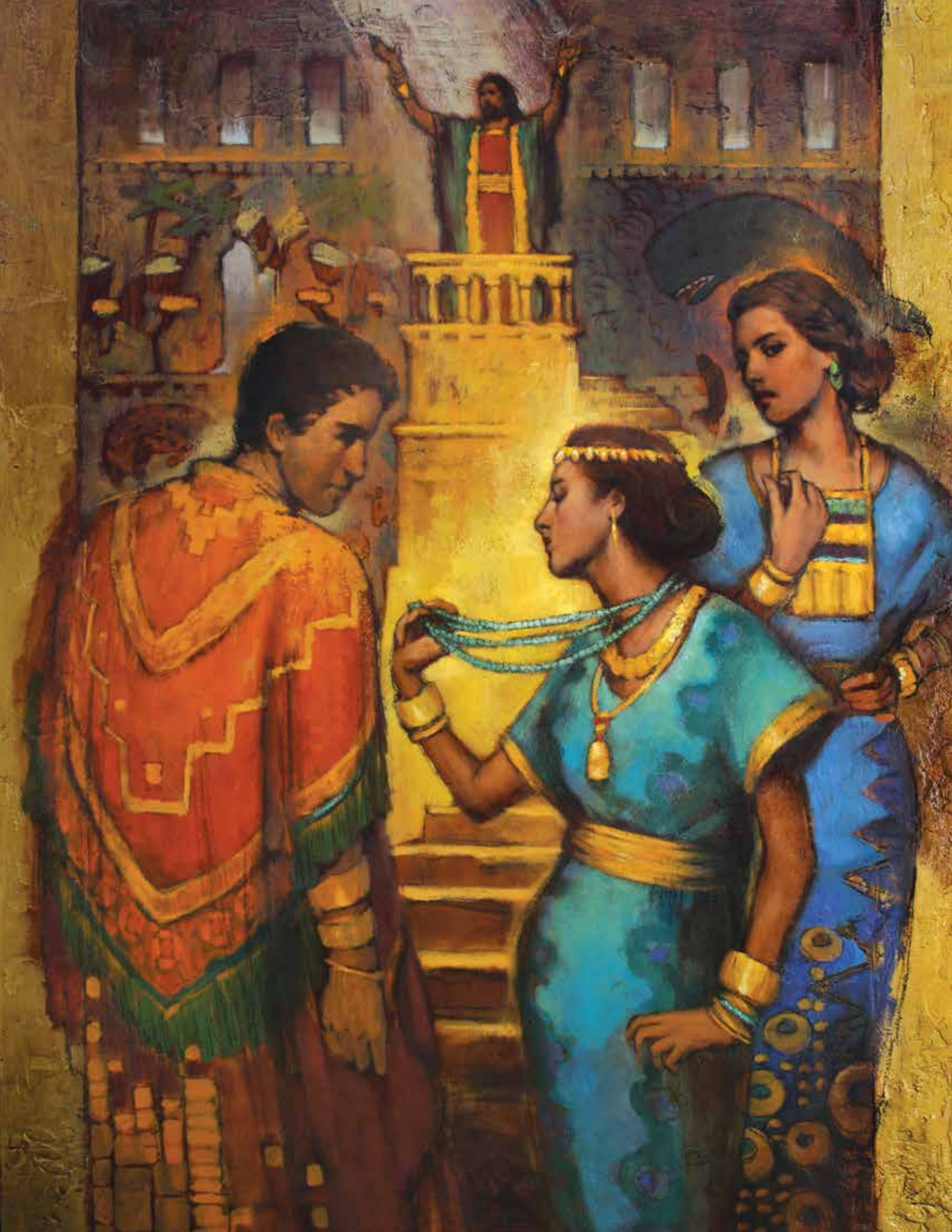
The Zoramite pride and prosperity—as evidenced by their costly apparel, gold, silver, and fine

goods (Alma 31:24-25, 28)—stand in tension in the narrative with the foundational teaching of the Book of Mormon that the obedient will “prosper in the land” (1 Nephi 4:14; Mosiah 1:7).³ The story develops this tension by using the metaphor of clothing to set up several dramatic ironies.⁴ The rich and wicked Zoramites, who had believed themselves prosperous and chosen in part because of their costly apparel and riches, eventually discover the weakness of their position when they are defeated in war by Moroni's army. That army includes the poor Zoramites (Alma 35:14), whose clothing—designed by Captain Moroni for functionality rather than for ostentation—truly gives them an edge of superiority. Mormon's editing choice to include the Zoramite battle (the battle of Zarahemnah) with the war chapters (Alma 43-63) in one sense obscures the dramatic conclusion to the story of the Zoramites and leaves the modern reader to reconnect the narrative thread of Alma 31-35, which is separated from its metaphoric conclusion in Alma 43-44 by Alma's counsel to his sons. This editorial decision will be discussed below.

This illustration of the Rameumptom emphasizes the costly apparel of the worshippers (Alma 31:24). *Set upon Gold*. © Annie Henrie 2013, mixed media, 30 x 48 inches. Used by permission.

FROM THE EDITOR:

The abridgment of the plates created by Mormon, as others have pointed out, is a sophisticated tour de force in literary composition. Beginning with John W. Welch's groundbreaking work on chiasms in the Book of Mormon, scholars have produced major and minor pieces on its literary aspects. What else is left to do? Plenty! I suspect that we have barely begun to scratch the surface of the depths of the Book of Mormon. The present article by Parrish Brady and Shon Hopkin discusses the use by Mormon of a leitmotif through multiple, though interrupted, chapters in the middle of the book of Alma. With this article I am delighted to welcome Brady and Hopkin to the pages of this *Journal*.





These exquisite gold pieces served as eye and mouth overlays on a mask. © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology numbers 10-71-20/C7679.1, 10-71-20/C7679.2, and 10-71-20/C7678 [digital file #60742552].

The Culture of the Zoramites— The Rameumptom and Extravagant Dress

Alma 31–35 introduces a Nephite splinter group known as the Zoramites, named after their leader at the time.⁵ Alma visited the Zoramites to preach the gospel to them because he had heard rumors that Zoram was leading them “to bow down to dumb idols” (Alma 31:1).⁶ From the first mention of the Zoramite people, Mormon indicates that they displayed an adoring regard for tangible objects, possibly referring to the worship of items that they had created with their own hands. Mormon never overtly describes the nature of the “dumb idols” purportedly being worshipped by the Zoramites. Instead, once Alma witnessed the Zoramite culture firsthand his concerns shifted from the worship of idols to the Zoramite obsession with “costly apparel” and their apostate religious practices.

Mormon devotes considerable space to a negative description of the Zoramites’ unique form of worship at a stand known as the Rameumptom.⁷ He records that the top of the stand would admit only one person at a time (Alma 31:13) and that the participants who came to pray would offer exactly the same prayer, with uplifted hands stretched forth to the heavens. Mormon then provides Alma’s description of the Zoramites as he prayed to the Lord for strength. Alma was “astonished beyond all measure” (31:19) by the prayer of the Zoramites in which they thanked God that they were chosen by the Lord to be his holy children, while all others would be cast “down to hell” (31:17). Thus Mormon almost immediately focuses the narrative on a form of worship that emphasizes Zoramite superiority and pride, in

which one worshipper at a time is on display before the rest of the congregation.

In his prayer, Alma reveals a defining characteristic of Zoramite culture—their extravagant forms of dress:

They are puffed up, even to greatness, with the vain things of the world. Behold, O my God, their costly apparel, and their ringlets, and their bracelets, and their ornaments of gold, and all their precious things which they are ornamented with; and behold, their hearts are set upon them. (Alma 31:27–28)⁸

While it is unclear whether Mormon purposefully connects the early mention of idolatry with the emphasis on costly apparel, the Zoramites’ adoring regard for clothing—things made by human hands that have no inherent power—is in some ways consistent with idol worship.⁹

The two salient features of Zoramite culture described by Mormon—the Rameumptom and an obsession with “costly apparel”—actually have much in common that makes them useful rhetorical devices for Mormon as he warns against the damaging

This elaborate dresslike garment painted on a Maya vase dating to around AD 700 shows off a luxurious design. Photograph K764 © Justin Kerr.



effects of pride. In Mormon’s description the rote prayer upon the Rameumptom was the only religious practice in which the Zoramites engaged (Alma 31:23). Although the prayer’s constantly repeated themes were certainly important in establishing and maintaining doctrinal focus and consistency, the position upon the Rameumptom *during* the prayer also provided a perfect opportunity for the individual at the top to show off his or her attire and adornments to the rest of his community. The ritual form of prayer—with arms outstretched to the heavens¹⁰—further maximized this opportunity, allowing precisely those ornaments that Alma had noticed—the bracelets, ringlets, and ornaments of gold—to be displayed for all to see. In the way that Mormon structures the narrative, the worship at the Rameumptom was one of the few ways in which Alma could have determined that the hearts of the Zoramites were “set upon” their adornments, because he saw them in essence parading that costly attire and elevating it upon the holy stand during their weekly worship. Alma could see that their fine adornments perfectly complemented the inflated rhetoric of their prayer and became an outward evidence of Zoramite pride.



Tomb 7 at Monte Alban in the state of Oaxaca yielded a large stock of superb jewelry. This necklace masterpiece of shell and blue stone dates to the Mixtec period, after AD 900. Courtesy of Pictures of Record, Inc.

Mormon chooses to place his description of Alma’s humble prayer precisely after the prayer on the Rameumptom. With this placement—and with Mormon’s earlier description of Alma as the leader of church members who did not wear costly apparel (see Alma 1:27)¹¹—Alma’s words and appearance act as a literary foil to emphasize the irony of the Zoramite statements. Alma’s prayer was everything that the Zoramite prayer was not. It reflected the heartfelt needs of the moment rather than the rote and complacent lack of need of the Zoramites. Alma’s words openly acknowledged his own weaknesses and then

Left: This Guatemalan woman demonstrates the laborious process of turning cotton into thread with a hand spindle. D. Donne Bryant. Used by permission. Right: An Aztec mother teaches her daughter to weave (Codex Mendoza). MS. Arch. Selden. A. 1, fol. 60r. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



focused on the needs of others. The Zoramite prayer contained none of these elements. The tension between the outward appearance of success among the rich Zoramites and the reader's awareness of their truly foolish and degraded state becomes very clear to the reader when placed side by side with the behaviors and appearance of Alma, without need for any editorial commentary, a typical Hebrew literary device.

More Evidence of the Zoramite Obsession with Clothing—the Outcast Status of the Poor

In his description of Alma's teaching, Mormon further develops the connection between the costly apparel of the Zoramites and their form of worship. Mormon reveals that the Zoramite people contained a lower class, a poor group that had been cast out of the synagogues "because of the coarseness of their apparel" (Alma 32:2).¹² Since Mormon has already taken care to emphasize the centrality of the prayer

on the Rameumptom in their worship, then according to that description the poor Zoramites were in reality being excluded from this weekly rite. Their coarse clothing—no other determining factor is mentioned in the text—demonstrated their unworthiness to participate and again emphasizes the centrality of that literary feature to the Zoramite story line.

According to Mormon's narrative, for which he accessed the records of Alma, the poor Zoramites originally "labored abundantly" (Alma 32:5) to build the synagogue, apparently anticipating their participation in the worship of the community. After the completion of the synagogue, however, the poor Zoramites found that their labors did not merit their inclusion in the community's central religious ritual. Since the form of that ritual was uniquely designed to emphasize appearances, it became clear that the poor Zoramites were not appropriately prepared. Given the Zoramites' love of fine adornments, it would have been difficult to justify their central doctrine of superiority if those who were poorly attired were allowed to be seen in the influential position atop the Rameumptom.

The decision to cast out the poor was actually consistent with the purpose of the Zoramite prayer and connected with the method of worship. The prayer solidified and reinforced the fundamental views of the community. Fine clothing and costly adornments became primary evidences that the Zoramites were chosen by God, and individuals were given opportunities on a weekly basis to demonstrate that they still deserved to be numbered with the chosen ones. Even the poor Zoramites accepted these social values, fully believing that their inability to worship appropriately was in direct correlation to their poverty as demonstrated by their clothing. Although the poor did not appreciate the worldview of the dominant culture, they had still absorbed it to the point that they no longer believed they could engage in any form of legitimate worship outside the Zoramite ritual structure as described by Mormon (Alma 32:10).

The humility of the poorly dressed Zoramites juxtaposed with the attitude of the richly attired serves as another literary foil in the text, vividly differing in appearance and behavior from each other. Mormon's emphasis on Alma's desire to teach the poor—notwithstanding their coarse attire—stands in stark contrast to his rejection of the arrogant



This painting illustrates the moment when Alma turns from the more wealthy Zoramites to the outcast, impoverished Zoramites (Alma 32:5–6). *Prepared to Receive*. © Annie Henrie 2013, mixed media, 36 x 36 inches. Used by permission.

attitudes of the rich. After the poor approached Alma to humbly ask a question, he immediately changed his focus from the sumptuously adorned to those who were prepared to listen, creating a clear image of his prophetic priorities and the lack of consideration he gave to worldly evidences of status. “And now when Alma heard this, he turned him about, his face immediately towards him, and he beheld with great joy . . . that they were in a preparation to hear the word. Therefore he did say no more to the other multitude” (Alma 32:6-7). While those who were adorned with the luxuriant trappings of the world were ironically thanking God for their chosen status, Alma’s behavior provided a visual demonstration that God favors those who exhibit humility and a desire to learn.

Theology of the Zoramites Compared with the Theology of Alma and Amulek

Alma’s and Amulek’s teachings to the poor Zoramites continued to highlight the tension caused by outward appearances compared to a true state of being chosen. First, while the rich Zoramites had built synagogues and promulgated the belief that God could only be appropriately worshipped in those sacred spaces by those who were properly attired—an idea consistent with a weak understanding of the law of Moses but completely inconsistent with the true intent of the law that they had rejected—Alma immediately emphasized that anyone, including the poorly dressed, can worship outside of these designated spaces. Not only did he proclaim to the “outside” group that they could worship “on the outside,” he also turned the Zoramite view of “chosen-ness” on its head. “I say unto you, it is well that ye are cast out of your synagogues, that ye may be humble. . . . And now, because ye are compelled to be humble blessed are ye” (Alma 32:12-13). Since it was the clothing of the poor that caused them to be cast out of the synagogues, Alma was proclaiming that the coarseness of their clothing had compelled them to be humble and was therefore directly connected to their blessed state. Ironically, by the end of the story the rich Zoramites would be placed in a similar position to the poor, having been compelled to be humble through their defeat in battle. However, unlike the positive example of the poor Zoramites, the narrative never shows the rich seeking repentance because of that compulsion. These

literary ironies are once again made possible through the contrast in appearance of the poorly and richly dressed Zoramites.

Alma explained to the poor Zoramites that though their outward appearance excluded them from worshipping inside the Zoramite synagogues, their inner humility allowed them to worship outside the confines

Alma and Amulek taught the poor Zoramites that the Son of God would suffer for the sins of the world in the greatest dramatic irony ever known: the greatest became the least; the righteous One was not “blessed in the land” but was crucified in order that mankind . . . might be saved.

of the synagogues they helped to build. He taught the poor that they could pray with great effectiveness in their fields, in their closets, in the midst of their congregations (i.e., in their synagogues), and when they were “cast out and [had] been despised by [their] enemies” (Alma 33:10), as they had been because of their coarse apparel. His quotation of Zenos provides dramatic foreshadowing of the future defeat of the rich Zoramites: “Yea, thou didst hear my cries, and wast angry with mine enemies, and thou didst visit them in thine anger with speedy destruction” (33:10). He then introduced the testimony of Zenock that led to the people “ston[ing] him to death” (33:17). Alma’s choice of Zenos and Zenock, two righteous prophets who were persecuted and outcast, was purposeful. Indeed, stoning was one of the primary evidences of being cursed and rejected in biblical societies, but in this case it was ironically used on the most righteous.¹³

By quoting Zenos and Zenock and alluding to the story of the brazen serpent, Alma paved the way for Amulek to conclude with the most important concept of their message, the centrality of faith in Christ, no matter the circumstance or physical appearance. The atoning sacrifice of Christ provided the poor Zoramites with the ultimate example that they could be chosen precisely because of the humility induced by their clothing-challenged status. According to the words of Isaiah earlier quoted by Abinadi and recorded by Alma the Younger’s father, this Christ—like the poorly attired Zoramites—had

“no beauty that [man] should desire him” and was “despised and rejected of men” (Mosiah 14:2-3). Alma and Amulek taught the poor Zoramites that the Son of God would suffer for the sins of the world in the greatest dramatic irony ever known: the greatest became the least; the righteous One was not “blessed in the land” but was crucified in order that mankind—the true sinners, the true “fallen” and “lost”—might be saved (Alma 34:8-9).¹⁴ After providing the example of Christ, Amulek directly addressed the inherent tension in the situation of the poor by challenging them to “not revile against those who do cast you out because of your exceeding poverty, lest ye become sinners like unto them; But that ye have patience, and bear with those afflictions” (34:40-41). He clearly stated that the richly attired are the sinners and that the poorly adorned, if they remain humble, are the righteous ones. He then taught them that the moral inconsistency of the wicked rich prospering and the righteous poor suffering would be resolved someday. Their afflictions would be relieved if the Zoramites would maintain “a firm hope that [they should] one day rest from all [their] afflictions” (34:41).

Throughout their discourses Alma and Amulek demonstrated that true religion is also concerned with physical or material things, such as clothing, and they never ignored the reality that God chooses and blesses those who are faithful to him. Both Alma and Amulek taught that God will grant both material and spiritual blessings to those who pray to him in faith (see Alma 33:4-10; 34:20-27). Amulek advised the poor that they must pay attention to the physical needs of others and “impart of [their] substance, if [they] have, to those who stand in need” (34:28). According to Amulek, if they did not approach material blessings in appropriate ways, then they would truly be “as dross, which the refiners do cast out (it being of no worth) and is trodden under foot of men” (34:29). With these words Amulek overtly called attention to the theme of being cast out while teaching a group who would have been very sensitive to those terms. However, in his warning to the poor he connected that state to religious hypocrisy and implicitly condemned the prayer of the rich upon the Rameumptom: “If ye do not any of these things, behold, your prayer is vain [implicitly, like the prayer of the rich Zoramites, which was the prayer the poor were familiar with],

and availeth you nothing, and ye are as hypocrites who do deny the faith” (34:28).

By directing his discourse in this way, Amulek did not indicate that clothing had no importance whatsoever but rather taught an appropriate focus on material things and the blessings of God. Earlier Alma had emphasized inward evidences that come by experimenting upon the word of Christ rather than on outward indications of elect status before God. These inward evidences—made available through humility and faith (Alma 32:16, 27)—include knowledge (32:34), feelings of enlightenment (32:34), expansion (32:34), light (32:35), growth (32:41), and sweetness (32:42). The teachings of Alma and Amulek underscore the stark contrast that has been provided in the narrative by the poor and rich Zoramites, showing that true intent and faith in Christ are at the center of a chosen status and that the evidence of God’s blessings are most importantly to be found in the joy of the inward man and in future promises of salvation.¹⁵ They teach that God does not judge according to outward indicators but instead grants chosen status according to the humility of his disciples, as would be shown perfectly in the incarnation of Christ, who would “take upon him the transgressions of his people, and . . . atone for the sins of the world” (34:8). This atonement would in turn enable the righteous, resurrected with physical bodies, to be blessed with pure and holy clothing granted by God. In a pointed statement, Amulek promised that “their garments should be made white through the blood of the Lamb” (34:36).¹⁶ Thus an emphasis on humility and sacrifice rather than on superiority and selfishness will enable the true disciple to obtain holy



During the difficult process of refining metals by fire, the impure dross rises to the top and is skimmed away, leaving the pure metal. Photo by Jennifer Hamblett.

clothing that will have lasting value, rather than the ephemeral “costly apparel” of the rich.

After describing the doctrines taught by Alma and Amulek, Mormon indicates that these teachings angered the wealthy Zoramites because they “destroy[ed] their craft” (Alma 35:3).¹⁷ While Mormon never describes precisely what the craft of the rich Zoramites was, Book of Mormon usage of the word is always negative, referring to some type of deceptive skill or manipulation, and is consistently connected with false teachings.¹⁸ When the poorly clothed Zoramites accepted Alma’s teachings, they became convinced that the societal values of the richly adorned were incorrect. Knowing that they did not need to enter the synagogues in order to pray to God, they no longer needed to curry favor with the wealthy. Realizing that their inner humility and faith, rather than their outer trappings, were the best evidence of their value in the eyes of God, they no longer worried about their acceptance by the false standards of others. Indeed, Alma’s teachings threatened to undermine the very foundations of Zoramite societal structure. The wealthy Zoramites lost their ability to exert pressure on the poor in order to get gain, and their craft was destroyed.

The Expulsion of the Poor

Mormon continues to build the Zoramite story line around the metaphor of clothing. When their craft was destroyed by the teachings of Alma, the richly dressed Zoramites chose to completely expel the poor from their society (Alma 35:6). Mormon records that the poor Zoramites were received by the people of Ammon, who “did clothe them, and did give unto them lands for their inheritance; and they did administer unto them according to their wants” (35:9). The religious teachings of the rich allowed a situation in which the poor did not have ready access to better clothing and therefore could not worship in the synagogues that they had built. However, when the poor were completely cast out of the community and should have found themselves destitute, the people of Ammon exemplified the teachings of Alma that true disciples should impart of their substance to the needy and provided those poor with exactly that which they lacked.

While the attitude of the wealthy toward their clothes had dictated their beliefs and proud behaviors, the attitude of the converted poor toward

clothes was subordinate to and constrained by their religious beliefs. The attitude of the wealthy led to increased societal controls and to final failure, while the attitude of the poor led to increased freedom and to final fulfillment and success. The poor did not have to wait until the next life for their situation to be reversed or for their hopes to be fulfilled. The initial literary tension set up by Mormon through the use of clothing at this point begins to be reversed as the obedient and humble truly began to prosper in the land, while the proud and wicked began to lose their material blessings.

The Zoramite/Lamanite Alliance

In Alma 35:10 Mormon declares that “the Zoramites . . . began to mix with the Lamanites,” after which they “began to make preparations for war against the people of Ammon” (Alma 35:11) because the Ammonites had chosen to take in the poor Zoramites. An interlude follows in which Mormon interjects the teachings of Alma to his sons. These discourses were apparently motivated by the imminent war and by the wickedness Alma saw around him. While these chapters demonstrate some of the reasons why the rich rejected the teachings of Alma, they also divide the Zoramite story into two parts and separate the main body of that story from its conclusion in Alma 43-44.

While this editorial choice obscures some of the themes and ironies in the Zoramite narrative that would have been clearer were the story line seamless, Mormon’s choice may have been motivated by another editorial decision: a desire to keep the war chapters (Alma 43-63) connected to the introduction of the main protagonist of that narrative, Captain Moroni. In addition to the break in the story line, when Mormon picks up the narrative in Alma 43 he no longer overtly discusses the theme of the Zoramites’ obsession with clothing. Instead, Mormon begins to emphasize a new—but closely related—literary theme based on clothing: the careful attention Moroni gave to arming his troops with appropriate military clothing as contrasted with the Lamanite nakedness. Beginning in Alma 43, then, the story of the rich and poor Zoramites is subsumed into the broader story of the Nephites and the Lamanites. However, although Mormon chooses to no longer emphasize the narrative of the Zoramites, he has provided all the details in

Alma 35 that demonstrate their involvement in the war of Moroni and Zarahemnah. It is left to the reader of the text to recognize the final ironies in the Zoramite story line that play out in the ensuing battle. The Zoramite war in Alma 43—connected by Mormon with the great war narrative of Alma 46-63—concludes the Zoramite story line of Alma 31-35 and brings closure to its message.

Mormon's description of that which inspired the Nephites may indicate his belief that the Zoramites and Lamanites were fighting for monarchy, power, and material gain, echoing the motivations of the wealthy Zoramites.

Alma 43:4 picks up the thread of Alma 35:10-11 by explaining that “the Zoramites became Lamanites.” The society that had prided itself on its costly apparel and that had cast the poor from its synagogues because of the coarseness of their clothing was now forced to unite with and rely on a people that Mormon describes as going into battle “naked, save it were a skin which was girded about their loins” (Alma 43:20). Mormon clarifies, however, that the rich Zoramites did not follow the Lamanite customs of war dress: “yea, all were naked, save it were the Zoramites and Amalekites” (43:20). His description of the rich Zoramites running into battle with the naked Lamanites provides a strong visual image that emphasizes the incongruence of the new Zoramite situation. Mormon indicates that “the Zoramites became Lamanites” (43:4) or that the Zoramite identity was subordinated under the Lamanite identity rather than the other way around. The people who had separated from the Nephites in order to rejoice in their superiority were now a subset of the Lamanites.

The Clothing of the Outcast Zoramites under the Leadership of Moroni

The descent of the Zoramites into a union with the Lamanites—a downward move providing evidence of the failure of their social ideology—contrasts with the shift in the clothing of the poor

Zoramites. As has been mentioned, the poor were first blessed by the clothing they received from the people of Ammon. In addition, Mormon had earlier recorded that the poorly dressed Zoramites who came to Jershon took up arms to defend their newly obtained lands (Alma 35:14) against the approaching threat of the Lamanites, Zoramites, and Amalekites. Thus while the wealthy Zoramites were allied with the nearly naked Lamanites in order to assuage their wounded pride and possibly to regain power and support their material desires, the poor Zoramites were engaged with the Nephite army under Moroni in order to “preserve their rights and their privileges, yea, and also their liberty, that they might worship God according to their desires” (43:9) and in order to protect the people of Ammon who had rescued them. Mormon details that Moroni had provided his armies, including no doubt the outcast Zoramites, with special clothing: “Moroni, had prepared his people with breastplates and with arm-shields, yea, and also shields to defend their heads, and also they were dressed with thick clothing” (43:19).¹⁹ The repentant Zoramites, who had once been coarsely dressed, gained an additional layer of well-crafted clothing and armor that would distinguish them from the wealthy Zoramites and that would even place their manner of dress at a level above that of their former persecutors, at least in military matters. While the clothing of the rich Zoramites had been inappropriately focused on appearance, the clothing of the outcast Zoramites was designed with functionality and utility in mind.

These contrasting images, centered on clothing, serve a symbolic as well as a functional purpose in Mormon's narrative. The Lamanites and the Zoramites had desired freedom from the constrictions of the Nephite society and religious code. Korihor, who had died among the Zoramites, had described those societal rules as a “yoke” (Alma 30:13) and as “foolish ordinances and performances which are laid down by ancient priests, to usurp power and authority over [the people], to keep them in ignorance, that they may not lift up their heads, but be brought down” (30:23). The rich Zoramites echoed those sentiments in their prayer, referring to the Nephite beliefs as “childishness” (31:16). Nevertheless, much as the Book of Mormon teaches that obedience to God's commands will allow the people to “prosper in the land” (1 Nephi 4:14), the choice of

the Nephites to restrict and protect themselves with “thick clothing” and with the power of their newly found religious beliefs ensured their victory.²⁰

Additionally, the poor Zoramites displayed a symbolic spiritual progression relating to the clothes they wore. At first their coarse clothes can represent a state of spiritual confusion as well as a state of humility that prepared them to hear the word of the Lord. After they were converted to the correct principles taught by Alma they received new clothes from the Ammonites (Alma 35:9). Finally, the armor and thick clothing provided them by Captain Moroni after accepting his call to defend their lands and their families can symbolize a more advanced covenant level of giving their lives to God in order to support and defend their freedom and religion, reminiscent of the armor-of-God imagery used by Paul in Ephesians 6.

In his account Mormon emphasizes the importance of the clothing for the Nephite victory:

And the work of death commenced on both sides, but it was more dreadful on the part of the Lamanites, for their nakedness was exposed to the heavy blows of the Nephites with their swords and their cimeters, which brought death almost at every stroke. While on the other hand, there was now and then a man fell among the Nephites, . . . they being shielded . . . by their breastplates, and their armshields, and their head-plates. (Alma 43:37–38)

Mormon teaches that the clothing of the Nephites, however, was not the sole reason for their victory. Rather, he connected their victory to a “better cause, for they were not fighting for monarchy nor power but they were fighting for their homes and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all, yea, for their rites of worship and their church” (Alma 43:45). Mormon’s description of that which inspired the Nephites may indicate his belief that the Zoramites and Lamanites *were* fighting for monarchy, power, and material gain, echoing the motivations of the wealthy Zoramites.

While Mormon demonstrates that the success of the Nephites can be found in the correlation between their appropriate clothing and their religious motivations for fighting, he shows that Zarahemnah, the leader of the Zoramite/Lamanite army, suffered from an inappropriate focus on clothing—the battle attire of the Nephites—while ignoring the power of religious faith. Zarahemnah completely overlooked



This Zapotec funerary urn (about AD 500) illustrates the intricate symbols included in this elaborate clothing. Colección Museo Amparo. Fotografía Carlos Varillas.

the powerful motivations that spurred the Nephites to victory and attributed their victory solely to their clothing and their cunning: “We do not believe that it is God that has delivered us into your hands; but we believe that it is . . . your breastplates and your shields that have preserved you” (Alma 44:9). That the connection had been misunderstood by the enemies of the Nephites is demonstrated in a subsequent war (led by Amalickiah and Ammoron, descendants of the original Zoram, according to Alma 54:23) in which the Lamanites chose to copy the Nephite mode of armor but failed again to be guided by true, empowering religious principles (49:5–6). As a result, their overreliance on clothing and on material strength again led to their defeat.²¹

Resolution

The ferocious battle between the Nephites and Lamanites in Alma 43–44 provides a stunning array of contrasting images, ironies, and tensions based on the metaphor of clothing, all of which



This Maya king is wearing quilted cotton armor. Lintel 8, Yaxchilan, Chiapas, Mexico, AD 760. Redrawing by Michael P. Lyon.

are resolved by the end of the story line. The appropriately clothed Nephites were arrayed against their constant enemies: the naked Lamanites, the apostate Zoramites, and the power-hungry Amalekites. Although they are not overtly mentioned by Mormon after Alma 35, the poor Zoramites, joined together with the Nephites and dressed in their thick clothing and armor, were engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the rich who had despised them for their coarse apparel, who had sought power over them, and who had finally cast them out. The repentant Zoramites (Alma 35:14), now counted again among the Nephites, cried “with one voice” (43:49) together with the people from whom they had formerly been estranged and separated. In that moment of humble reliance upon the Lord they began to conquer those whose clothing had been a symbol of their

oppression, inflicting wounds upon the unprotected bodies of the Lamanites and the rich Zoramites while being protected by their own clothing, provided them as a result of their new beliefs and their union with God’s people. Engaged face to face in the brutal struggle of war, the wealthy Zoramites were forced to witness their complete defeat directly at the hands of the Nephites and the supposedly inferior Zoramite poor, now well dressed, well protected, and resolute.

The tension created by the promise of the Book of Mormon—that the obedient will “prosper in the land”—is resolved. At the end of the story the outward appearances have turned to match the inward reality of the blessings of the Lord upon those who humble themselves in righteousness. Whether or not the rich Zoramites ever understood the dramatic irony of their situation, Mormon’s narrative uses their clothing to develop that irony in order to teach the reader important truths about pride and humility, the power of faith in God, the dangers of an obsession with material things, and the appropriate place of material things in the scope of true worship. The story of the poorly adorned Zoramites contrasts powerfully with that of their well-clothed brethren, whose tale ends in complete humiliation and failure steeped in bitter irony, while Mormon demonstrates that in the end the obedient will indeed prosper in the land. ■



Parrish Brady is currently engaged in postdoctoral research at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is studying camouflage in fish and insects. He received his PhD in plasma physics at the University of Texas at Austin in 2008. He served an LDS mission in Norway and has spent many years teaching advanced gospel topics in the LDS Primary organization.



Shon Hopkin received his BA and MA degrees in ancient Near Eastern studies from Brigham Young University and his PhD in Hebrew studies from the University of Texas at Austin. He taught for the Seminaries and Institutes program for fourteen years and is currently an assistant professor in ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

NOTES

1. William Hamblin, for example, has provided a discussion focused on the functional nature of wartime clothing such as the thick clothing provided by Captain Moroni. See William J. Hamblin, “Armor in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 400–424.
2. For a discussion of Mormon’s influence as the main editor of the Book of Mormon, see Grant R. Hardy, “Mormon as Editor,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 15–28. In this article Hardy mostly discusses evidence of an editor’s presence that can be recognized because of “seams” or inconsistencies in the story line when multiple sources are connected together to create a narrative. In the Zoramite story line, the evidence of editing is less overt and is revealed mainly in the story being framed in such a way that themes—the theme of clothing or certain dramatic ironies—run consistently throughout. Although Mormon does not overtly insert his famous “and thus we see” perspective at any point in the Zoramite story line, he does reveal himself as editor in Alma 32:4. In identifying the poor Zoramites, he calls them “those of whom we [i.e., Mormon and the readers] have been speaking.” This curious choice of words may reveal Mormon’s attitude toward his work and his awareness of his “audience,” the future readers of his book, with whom he pictures himself having a conversation by means of the text. We are grateful to Dan Belnap for pointing out this interesting phrase.
3. The Zoramite story is not unique in this regard. Although some have considered the Book of Mormon a very simplistic account of good versus evil—for example, see Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 33—the tension between obedience, wickedness, and prosperity can be seen in almost every section of the book, such as when the righteous followers of Alma the Elder are persecuted, when Noah’s followers seem to prosper, or in the numerous situations in which the prosperity of the people of God almost immediately leads them into pride and wickedness. Indeed, this tension creates what is often known as the “pride cycle,” in which a prosperous state in the Book of Mormon predicts with high accuracy subsequent wickedness, while a humble economic state predicts future righteousness and blessings. This theme has been approached previously in Todd M. Compton, “The Spirituality of the Outcast,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 139–60. According to John Sorenson, Mormon’s primary purpose throughout his abridgment was to show the truthfulness of the promise that the obedient would prosper in the land and that the wicked would be cut off. See John L. Sorenson, “Mormon’s Sources,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/2 (2011): 12. The Zoramite narrative closely fits those editorial goals.
4. For this and other definitions, see Meyer H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 136–37. See also the excellent discussion on verbal and dramatic irony in the Book of Mormon by Robert A. Rees, “Irony in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (2003): 20–31. Rees gives examples of irony in the Book of Mormon accounts of Nephi and his brothers, of Korihor, and of Abinadi.
5. Although not claiming that the data are conclusive, Sherrie Mills Johnson has posited that the Zoramites were descendants of the original Zoram and that they separated from the Nephites for ethnic and sociological reasons. One of the most significant points in her reasoning is that Ammoron (and by extension Amalickiah) claimed to be a descendant of the original Zoram. This knowledge of original ancestry, mentioned so close in the narrative to the Zoramite story line, increases the probability that the group named themselves Zoramites in part because of this knowledge. See Sherrie Mills Johnson, “The Zoramite Separation: A Sociological Perspective,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 74–85. Nevertheless, the connection is not necessary to understand Mormon’s description of the Zoramite narrative. Interestingly, the original Zoram (introduced in 1 Nephi 4:20–37) was a participant in the first recorded Book of Mormon event in which clothing was important. In this account Nephi dressed in the garments of Laban and used clothing to cause Zoram to misidentify him (as Judah misidentified a disguised Tamar in Genesis 38). Thus authors and editors of the Book of Mormon (in this case Nephi) early on showed an awareness of the power of clothing to create an identity that would be interpreted by others. Zoram failed to grasp Nephi’s true identity because he was too focused on the outward appearance of clothing. Another literary irony of this nominal connection to the original Zoram with the Zoramites is that he entered the Book of Mormon story as a slave, while the Zoram of Alma 31 believed in his chosen status and sought to enslave others.
6. The phrase *dumb idols* shows up twice in the King James Version of the Bible, first in the writings of Habakkuk (2:18), a prophet whose ministry likely coincided with that of Lehi and whose writings may or may not have been included on the brass plates. In Habakkuk 2:18 the phrase *dumb* (i.e., mute) *idols* (אֱלִילִים אֲלֵמִים/’ēlîlîm ’lēmîm) creates a poetic play on words and refers to the creation of physical idols rather than to a symbolic worship of material wealth, which is the interpretation often given to idolatry by modern readers. The second instance is found in the writings of Paul (1 Corinthians 12:2). In this case Paul is explaining that although the Gentiles had previously “been carried away unto” the “dumb [i.e., mute] idols” (εἰδωλα τὰ ἄφωνα/*eidōla ta aphōna*), now the Spirit of God would give them true power and gifts, most importantly the ability to declare that Jesus is the Lord. Thus, Paul’s usage also seems to refer to the actual worship of handmade idols, which continued to exist in his time, but could also be understood metaphorically as an inappropriate focus on worldly substances that have no power within themselves. The phrase does not exist anywhere else in the Book of Mormon but is also found in Abraham 1:7—here it again refers to the creation and worship of actual physical idols.
7. Mormon provides a translation for the Rameumptom as a “holy stand” (Alma 31:21). If the word was originally derived from Hebrew, the first part of the word *Ram-* would coincide with the Hebrew רָמָה (*rāmā*), meaning “height, high place,” with *ramê-* likely corresponding to the masculine plural construct form

of *ramîm*, meaning “the heights of.” Although some difficulties remain with the second half of the word, it could be related to the Hebrew עומד (*ōmed*), or place of standing, with the nominalizing suffix *om* placed at the end. This word with possible Hebrew roots could literally be interpreted as the “exalted stand.” (A number of factors could influence the minor differences between *omed* and *umpt-* when rendered in English. For example, consider the form of the word *redemption* resulting from a combination of *redeem* and *-tion*.)

8. In addition to their costly apparel and jewelry, the rich Zoramites also seemed to be ornately decorated with other effects, probably unusually so, based on the statement “all their precious things which they are ornamented with” (Alma 31:28).
9. This interpretation, which connects the worship of dumb idols with a love of material things, seems to represent a modern understanding of the concept of idol worship (see D&C 1:16) rather than an ancient viewpoint in which idol worship was seen as an attempt to access the divine through man-made objects that looked like, represented, or were vehicles for the gods. This modern concept of idol worship suggests a couple of conflicting possibilities that bear mentioning: (1) Possibly Alma and Mormon had a broader understanding of the concept of idol worship as it is often understood in modern religion. Just as the Nephite understanding of other Mosaic concepts often reflects a more modern view of ritual behavior (such as a clear perception that ordinances under the law of Moses centered symbolically on Christ), the Nephites may also have understood that the dangers of idol worship extended to an obsession with material things. (2) On the other hand, if Alma and Mormon instead shared a simple view of idol worship that did not include a connection with material things, then it would indicate, contrary to Mormon’s description, that the Zoramites had some other form of worship besides the Rameumptom. However, even if Mormon did not intend to connect the worship of idols with the costly clothing of the Zoramites, the text demonstrates that when Alma arrived among the Zoramites he discovered that the obsession with costly apparel—including its use as a justification to cast the poor Zoramites out—was an

important feature of the Zoramite apostasy. In other words, the theme of costly apparel functions in the narrative whether it was connected by Mormon to the worship of dumb idols or not.

Additionally, Mormon’s mention of Alma being concerned about the worship of “dumb idols” by the apostate Zoramites may serve to remind the reader of Alma’s own apostate history as an “idolatrous man” (Moses 27:8). Not only did Alma have personal experience with idolatry, but he also had extensive familiarity with clothing as an external evidence of inward attitudes. After Alma’s repentance, Mormon describes the humility of Alma and his people by stating that “they did not wear costly apparel, yet they were neat and comely” (Alma 1:27). In other story lines surrounding Alma’s ministry, the description of costly apparel appears in connection with Nehor (1:6) and later with the arrogance of the Nephites, referring to “those who did not belong to their church” (1:32). Indeed, costly apparel appears as one of the chief evidences of pride that caused Alma to leave his position as chief judge (4:6-7) in order to preach the word, and Alma mentioned the “costly apparel” of the people of Zarahemla in his encouragement to them to repent (5:53). Thus Alma, the repentant idolater and opponent of pride, stands in the text as a foil for the wealthy Zoramites. The idolatrous Zoramites could have humbled themselves as Alma had but chose to maintain their corrupt attitudes. Instead the poor Zoramites, whose unostentatious mode of dress matched that of Alma much more closely, did take advantage of the opportunity Alma’s teachings provided them.

10. This form of prayer was also used in places of worship in Old Testament times, as evidenced by Psalm 63:4. Although the Zoramites had rejected the rituals of the law of Moses, they may have retained certain imbedded behaviors from their prior lives with the Nephites. See Johnson, “Zoramite Separation,” 80-81.
11. See also note 9, second paragraph.
12. The Book of Mormon shows a nuanced understanding of the poor, as does the Bible, often portraying them as the group truly prepared to follow God because of their humility and encouraging the rich to provide help to the poor without judging them. See Lindon J. Robison, “No Poor

among Them,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 86-97. See also Compton, “Spirituality of the Outcast,” 139-60.

13. The theme of the righteous outcasts may even receive subtle development through Alma’s next example of the brazen serpents and the Israelites, who had been slaves at the bottom levels of Egyptian society before being chosen as God’s people. Notwithstanding their slave status, they were chosen. Notwithstanding their chosen status, those who would not humble themselves or look upon the brazen serpent died. Only those who continued to be humble and righteous were truly “blessed” in the land and saved in the end. See Johnson, “Zoramite Separation,” 83.
14. Although no direct textual evidence supports the supposition, it is possible that the inconsistency of a suffering God—a concept diametrically opposed to the Zoramite understanding of chosen-ness—was one of the issues that caused the rich Zoramites to reject the concept of Christ. Throughout the Book of Mormon—including the examples of Sherem, Nehor, Korihor, and the priests of Noah—a rejection of Christ is often connected with an inappropriate emphasis on materiality, at times revealed by an obsession with costly apparel and other times by a prideful request for palpable signs. Alma also mentions the desires of the wicked for signs in Alma 32:17.
15. The connection of clothing in these chapters with Alma’s account of a tree of life growing to fill the inward man alludes—probably unintentionally—to the story of Adam and Eve. In contrast to Adam’s and Eve’s attempts to cover their nakedness with clothes made from a tree, Alma indicates that the tree should grow naturally inside the soul of the truly humble, filling the spiritual hunger and nakedness of those who exercise their faith in Christ and who have received true spiritual knowledge. In this way the Zoramites will have “clothing” of real significance, granted by God’s power and authority (as was the garment given to Adam and Eve by the Lord in the garden) and indicating their true spiritual standing before the Lord. Even the morphology of biblical Hebrew conveys a negative connotation for worldly human clothing but has a positive viewpoint of coverings when obtained through ordinance or when provided by God. The Hebrew word

meaning “clothed/dressed” (לבוש/*lābūš*) is phonetically similar to the infinitive form for “to be ashamed” (לבוש/*lēbōš*), perhaps pointing to the original attempt of Adam and Eve to cover their nakedness because of their shame. Additionally, one of the Hebrew words for “clothing” (בגד/*beḡed*) takes on the meaning of “to act treacherously or deceitfully” in its verbal form (בגד/*bāḡad*). On the other hand, the Hebrew word to describe the act of atonement through sacrifice (כפר/*cāpar*) also means “to cover.” This word implies that God is covering one’s sins as with a garment and has no negative connotations.

16. Compare a similar statement by Jacob in 2 Nephi 9:14, “and the righteous shall have a perfect knowledge of their enjoyment, and their righteousness, being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness.”
17. Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* indicates that the English word *craft* referred to some type of strength, skill, power, or ability and in many uses displayed negative connotations. Historically it could also refer to a spell or enchantment. In Joseph Smith’s day *craft* could have meant an art, ability, or skill, often in a manual profession; or it could have referred to an artifice or guile employed to deceive or control through words. Each of these senses exists in the KJV, in which Paul’s skill as a tentmaker is considered a “craft” (Acts 18:3), while the schemes of the chief priests to put Christ to death are also described with the same word (Mark 14:1). The skillful work of idol makers in Acts 19:25 probably demonstrates a combination of the two meanings in which “craft” is the manual skill of idol manufacture. This craft is meant to deceive in order to make a profit, and Paul’s teachings threaten that profit because they expose the falsehood of idolatry. This final usage shows interesting parallels with the Zoramite story line in which the teachings of missionaries destroy the craft of the rich, who had earlier been described as bowing down to dumb idols.
18. In Book of Mormon usage, the word *craft* occurs infrequently outside the Zoramite narrative. Typically it appears as part of the word *priestcraft*, which was defined by Nephi and was later used by Alma the Younger to describe Nehor’s false teachings that al-

lowed him to lead others away from the truth in order to get gain (Alma 1:12). Interestingly, Nehor is also described by Mormon as someone “lifted up in the pride of his heart, and to wear very costly apparel” (1:6), a textual precursor to Mormon’s description of the Zoramite society. According to Nephi, “priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world” (2 Nephi 26:29). Nephi’s definition closely mirrors Mormon’s description of the Zoramite prayer and focus on material riches. The only use of the word *craft* in the Book of Mormon outside of the word *priestcraft* is also connected to an inappropriate use of words in order to get gain. It describes the work of Gadianton, “who was exceedingly expert in many words, and also in his craft, to carry on the secret work of murder and of robbery” (Helaman 2:4).

That the true teachings of Alma and Amulek “destroyed” the Zoramite craft further strengthens the tie between the Zoramites’ religious beliefs and their craft, as well as increases the likelihood that Mormon is referring to a type of priestcraft in which the wealthy sought to get gain or praise of the world through the tenets of their false religion. Indeed, the poor had indicated to Alma that they were the ones who had “labored abundantly to build [the synagogues] with [their] own hands” (Alma 32:5). In the end the synagogues profited only the rich because they insisted that costly apparel was necessary in order to worship therein. An additional possibility should also be considered that the craft of the Zoramites could have had something to do with the manufacture of idols. Although the use of idols is only mentioned once at the beginning of the narrative, this interpretation of the “craft” of the rich Zoramites would connect closely with a similar understanding in Acts 19. This possibility, while not discussed further in this paper, would not necessarily undermine the proposal of this study that the false religious teachings of the Zoramites as taught from the Rameumptom constituted the “craft” that was destroyed by the teachings of Alma.

19. The armor of the Nephites—consisting of “breastplates and . . . arm-shields, yea, and also shields to defend their heads, and also . . .

thick clothing”—can be compared chiastically with the adornments of the rich Zoramites as described by Mormon: “costly apparel, and . . . ringlets, and . . . bracelets, and . . . ornaments of gold, and . . . precious things which they are ornamented with; and behold, their hearts are set upon them” (31:28). In the chiastic parallel costly apparel compares with the thick clothing, the ringlets that were likely worn on their heads compare with Moroni’s head shields, and the bracelets compare with the arm shields. Finally, the breast plates protect the hearts of the Nephites while the hearts of the Zoramites were set upon their precious ornamentations. If Mormon intentionally created this chiastic parallelism (which is admittedly unlikely considering the textual distance between the two statements), then it would be a remarkable example of skillful editing.

20. William Hamblin has discussed the possible nature of the Nephite armor provided by Moroni, which likely would have included breastplates and head armor made in part from heavy stone. See Hamblin, “Armor in the Book of Mormon,” 412–13.
21. Mormon’s literary use of clothing continues after the Zoramite battle. Captain Moroni used imagery of the nondecaying coat of Joseph (Alma 46:23–25) to inspire the use of his own coat to make the title of liberty. Moroni ignores the outward appearance of his clothing, rends it, and writes on the coat inspired words to protect the freedoms of the people (Alma 46:11–22). The title of liberty, written on clothes, is put on every city tower in the land, and strategically important cities are “clothed,” in a sense, or armored with surrounding mounds of dirt, becoming another divinely inspired victorious strategy from Moroni. Other Book of Mormon accounts not abridged by Mormon have also used clothing imagery; see, for example, the description of the great and spacious building from Lehi’s vision recorded by Nephi, where finely dressed individuals mock the righteous (1 Nephi 8:27), only to meet their demise at the end. This image serves as a literary parallel—whether consciously created by Mormon or not—to the Rameumptom stand upon which the richly appareled Zoramites stood to profess their superior status only to be subsequently defeated in battle.