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The Supremacy of the Word: Alma's Mission to the Zoramites and the Conversion of the Lamanites

Michael F. Perry

NEAR THE END OF HIS MORTAL LIFE, Alma leads an expedition to preach among the apostate Zoramites in the land of Antionum in order to “try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5).¹ This decision to try pure doctrine via missionary labor stems from Alma’s faith that “the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them” (Alma 31:5).

The intent of Alma’s mission to the Zoramites is clear, but commentators are divided on how they gauge its results. Some declare the mission a success because many Zoramites come back into the church,² while others offer a dimmer assessment, observing that the reclamation of so many believers ultimately triggers a war between the Nephites and the Lamanites (see Alma 35:9–13).³ Neither view accounts for the long-term effects of the Zoramite mission, however.

1. This is reminiscent of Alma’s earlier quest, upon abdicating the judgment seat, to “pull down, by the word of God, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people” (Alma 4:19).

2. See D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse By Verse: The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 2:23; George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Philip C. Reynolds and David S. King (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1959), 4:133.

3. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 149; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical*

In Helaman 5, four decades later, guards intent on killing Nephi and Lehi in a Lamanite prison become converted in a remarkable fashion, in part because one of them, Aminadab, exhorts his peers to “have faith in Christ, who was taught unto you by Alma, and Amulek, and Zeezrom” (Helaman 5:41). Aminadab’s comrades listen and, after being filled with the Spirit,⁴ go forth from the prison as missionaries, soon convincing “the more part of the Lamanites” to embrace the gospel (Helaman 5:42–50). Because the Zoramite mission recorded in Alma 31–35 is the only documented mission that Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom undertake together, we can view this mass conversion of the Lamanites in Helaman 5 as the symbolic fruit of Alma’s own “experiment” on the power of the word (see Alma 32:27).

Viewed in this light, Alma’s mission to the Zoramites is wildly successful. Indeed, the delayed influence of Alma and his brethren on the Lamanites is comparable to that of the sons of Mosiah.⁵ While Alma’s far-reaching influence among the Nephites is well understood,⁶ appreciating more fully his later impact on the Lamanites demonstrates that Alma’s legacy looms over both nations long after his disappearance.

Additionally, viewing the prison miracle and subsequent conversion of the Lamanites as the harvesting of seeds planted generations earlier by Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom sheds light on the intervening narrative. In particular, the connection between these events further explains Mormon’s decision to include at the end of the book of Alma a lengthy account of a series of wars between the Nephites and the

and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:493.

4. Mormon records that “the Holy Spirit of God did come down from heaven, and did enter into their hearts” (Helaman 5:45). Later, in speaking to the Nephites during the period of darkness following his crucifixion, the Savior taught that the Lamanites “were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not,” apparently in reference to the mass Lamanite conversion described in Helaman 5 (3 Nephi 9:20).

5. Three of the sons of Mosiah—Ammon, Aaron, and Omner—participated in the mission to the Zoramites, of course, but Aminadab only refers to the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom (see Alma 31:6; Helaman 5:41).

6. Mormon himself seems to revere Alma, as he quotes Alma’s teachings extensively (see Alma 5; 7; 9; 12–13; 32–33; and 36–42).

Lamanites and to bracket this war narrative with a pair of unmistakably parallel passages relating to Helaman's efforts to "declare the word" among the Nephites immediately before and after these wars (Alma 45:20–24; 62:45–51). Read in the context of a longer narrative arc between Alma 31 and Helaman 5, these war chapters throw into sharp relief the supremacy of the word over the sword.

Aminadab's reference to the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom

Commentators have long taken for granted that Aminadab's citation to the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom refers to their mission to the Zoramites.⁷ This article agrees with that conclusion, but it is worth considering the textual support for this inference at the outset, since Mormon does not clarify the point explicitly.

It is possible, of course, that Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom went on an undocumented preaching tour together, but Mormon chooses to describe only a single time—the Zoramite mission—that these three preach in the same place. Admittedly, Mormon frequently refers to his inability to document even "a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people" (Helaman 3:14),⁸ but throughout his record Mormon masterfully weaves together "complex narratives full of multiple strands, flashbacks, and interpretive comments."⁹ Because the referenced teachings in

7. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:96; Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 241. Matthew Roper discusses this issue more than most but primarily in the context of exploring whether Aminadab himself was a Zoramite or a descendant of the Zoramites. "Was Aminadab a Zoramite?" *Insights* 24/1 (2004): 2–3.

8. Mormon inserts similar caveats elsewhere (see Words of Mormon 1:5; 3 Nephi 5:8).

9. See Grant 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), 27–28. Examples of such commentary include a lengthy explanation of the Nephite monetary system in order to provide context for Zeezrom's offer to pay Amulek to deny God (Alma 11:1–20), and a reminder, when the event occurs, of Abinadi's prophecy that Noah's subjects would be enslaved (Mosiah 21:2–4). A lengthier example occurs with Mormon's explanatory comments marking the transition between the plates

Helaman 5 are so important to the story Mormon is telling, his failure to refer to another mission undertaken by Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom suggests the absence of one.

In fact, the text all but rules out a separate missionary undertaking by these three men, as it appears that they do not journey together prior to their mission to the Zoramites.¹⁰ Alma heals and then baptizes Zeezrom in Sidom approximately seven years before the Zoramite mission, but their paths diverge afterward. Zeezrom, for his part, eagerly goes “forth to preach unto the people,” while Alma, after establishing the church in Sidom, returns to his own home with Amulek in order to “administer unto [Amulek] in his tribulations, and [strengthen] him in the Lord” (Alma 15:12–18). Alma and Amulek remain together for up to three years with no mention of Zeezrom (Alma 16:1–13), but they eventually go their separate ways. Alma seems to be alone when he meets the sons of Mosiah on his way from Gideon to Manti (Alma 17:1), while Amulek and Zeezrom end up together in Melek just before joining Alma on the mission to the Zoramites (Alma 31:6).¹¹

The context of the scene in which the Lamanites in the prison remember the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom also points to the Zoramite mission as the likely reference point of Aminadab. Matthew Roper has identified numerous parallels between the language used to

of Nephi and his own abridgment (Words of Mormon). In *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Hardy examines at length Mormon’s prowess as a literary artist, historian, and theologian.

10. As the Zoramite mission comes shortly before Alma’s disappearance, it seems even less likely that Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom went on a separate mission together after their experience among the Zoramites.

11. Reynolds and Sjodahl note that although we know little about Zeezrom’s activities after his conversion, “it is highly probable that . . . he commenced the building of [the city of Zeezrom],” since “it was the custom of the Nephites to name their cities, towns, and villages, after whoever founded them,” and further that “it would not be unreasonable to suppose that he dwelt in the midst of its citizens as their High Priest or Chief Judge.” *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 5:29. Although this is interesting speculation, no textual evidence supports these theories. What we do know about Zeezrom suggests that he dedicated himself to preaching; after his baptism, “he began from that time forth to preach unto the people” (Alma 15:12).

describe the prison scene in Helaman 5 and the sermons delivered by Alma and Amulek to the Zoramites.¹² For example, Alma instructs the people in Antionum to “cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God” (Alma 33:22), much like Aminadab later urges his comrades to “turn and look”¹³ and then to “have faith in Christ” (Helaman 5:37, 41). Similarly, Amulek teaches the Zoramites that mercy “encircle[s the righteous] in the arms of safety,” potentially foreshadowing the fire from heaven that “encircled” Nephi and Lehi in the prison but leaves them unharmed (Alma 34:16; Helaman 5:23–24).¹⁴ The prison onlookers themselves eventually become “encircled about” by the pillar of fire, which effectively informs them that they qualify for the mercy described by Amulek (Helaman 5:43).¹⁵

These are not the only echoes of the messages delivered to the Zoramites that Roper identifies in the prison scene narrative. Additionally, a “cloud of darkness” descends upon the prison, bringing to mind Amulek’s warning to the Zoramites that failure to repent would lead to a “night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Helaman 5:28; Alma 34:33).¹⁶ Also, Amulek enjoins the Zoramites to “exercise your *faith* unto *repentance*. . . . Yea, *cry* unto him for mercy; for he is mighty to save” (Alma 34:17–18). Aminadab later uses similar language in the prison: “You must *repent*, and *cry* unto the voice, even until ye shall have *faith* in Christ, who was taught unto you by Alma,

12. Although Zeezrom accompanies Alma and Amulek (and the others in the group) to preach to the Zoramites, the text does not provide any information about Zeezrom’s sermons in Antionum. We can presume, however, that Zeezrom’s teachings would have closely tracked those of Alma, not only because his name is also mentioned by Aminadab but because this was standard practice among the Nephites. Years earlier, for example, Alma the Elder had instructed those among his converts who would preach that they “should teach nothing save it were the things which [Alma] had taught, and which had been spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets” (Mosiah 18:19).

13. Additionally, Alma reminds the Zoramites that Moses held up a “type” in the wilderness, “that whosoever would look upon it might live” (Alma 33:19). Roper, “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?” 2.

14. Roper, “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?” 2.

15. Roper, “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?” 2.

16. Roper, “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?” 2.

and Amulek, and Zeezrom; and when ye shall do this, the cloud of darkness shall be removed from overshadowing you” (Helaman 5:41).¹⁷

On balance, the textual evidence supports, but does not compel, the conclusion that Aminadab meant to refer to the Zoramite mission and that his listeners were familiar with the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom from that missionary journey.¹⁸ Some commentators have suggested that this connection is important primarily because it identifies Aminadab’s comrades as Zoramites.¹⁹ But the significance of

17. Roper, “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?,” 2–3.

18. Gardner has observed, “For these names [of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom] to mean anything to [Aminadab’s] hearers, they would have to be Zoramite.” *Second Witness*, 5:96. Roper similarly suggests that Aminadab and some of his fellows may have been “Zoramites who as young men had heard [Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom] preach.” “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?,” 3. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert Millet write the following with respect to the earlier labors of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom: “Theirs must have been a marvelous ministry, their testimonies of the Christ of immeasurable impact, inasmuch as these witnesses had been borne some fifty years earlier.” *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 3:359. McConkie and Millet do not explore further the connection between these earlier teachings and the conversion of the Lamanites. Given that the Zoramite mission did take place nearly fifty years before the prison scene documented in Helaman 5, it is unlikely that many of the people in the prison remember these teachings firsthand, though for the oldest among them we cannot rule out that possibility. We do know that Aminadab himself is a Nephite by birth (Helaman 5:35), so he may be a first-generation Zoramite. If so, his advanced age may have been one reason the others look to him for wisdom and guidance. It is also possible that the multitude had become familiar with written copies of the teachings of Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom, as years earlier copies of the records in Helaman’s custody had been “sent forth among the children of men throughout all the land” (Alma 63:12). This explanation is not fully satisfactory, though, because Aminadab tells the multitude to remember what Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom “taught unto you” (Helaman 5:41).

19. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:96; Ludlow, *Companion*, 241; and Roper, “Was Aminadab a Zoramite?,” 2–3. Ludlow takes his analysis one step further, arguing that identifying the prison mob as a group of Zoramites demonstrates that the Zoramites “have now occupied the land of Lehi-Nephi, which had just been deserted by Limhi and his people,” a textual detail that Ludlow uses to extol the “complex” and “wonderfully consistent” narrative of the Book of Mormon. *Companion*, 241. But Ludlow’s conclusion that the Zoramites took up residence in Lehi-Nephi on the heels of Limhi’s departure is unsatisfying in that it seems to conflict with what we know about the timeline of these events. Limhi’s people flee Lehi-Nephi—where the prison at issue

the relationship between the Zoramite mission in Alma 31–35 and the dramatic prison scene in Helaman 5 has deeper implications, particularly with respect to Alma’s lasting influence and Mormon’s use of a war narrative to highlight the ascendancy of the word of God in subtle but powerful ways.

Evaluating Alma’s missionary efforts

Throughout much of the book of Alma, which spans nearly 30 percent of the entire Book of Mormon, Alma himself emerges as the dominant figure, as he does much to guide the political and spiritual (and even military) fortunes of the Nephites. For the first eight years following Mosiah’s death, Alma plays the dual role of the first chief judge among the Nephites and the “high priest over the church” (Alma 4:18). During this period, Alma leads the Nephites personally into battle (Alma 2:16–31),²⁰ and he also oversees a period of explosive church growth—in the seventh year alone approximately 3,500 people “united themselves to the church of God and were baptized” (Alma 4:5). Later, after resigning as chief judge, Alma dedicates himself to preaching “among all the people in every city” (Alma 35:15).²¹ Alma’s influence among the Nephites

is located—in approximately 121 BC (see Mosiah 6:4; 7:1–3), whereas the Zoramites separate themselves from the Nephites nearly fifty years later, in approximately 74 BC (see Alma 30:6, 58–59). See also Joseph L. Allen, “Nephi, Land of and City of,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 593–94. During the intervening decades, any number of groups could have taken up residence in Lehi-Nephi.

20. Regarding Alma’s role as a military commander, John W. Welch has written: “Although we rarely think of him in this way, Alma the Younger, the high priest and chief judge, was the man who went out at the head of the Nephite armies in the civil war against the Amlicites and who did hand-to-hand combat himself (reminiscent of the heroic tradition of contests between such luminaries as Achilles and Hector, or David and Goliath).” “Why Study Warfare 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 and FARMS, 1990), 4.

21. We know, for example, that Alma preaches in Zarahemla (Alma 5:1), Gideon (Alma 6:8), Melek (Alma 8:3), Ammonihah (Alma 8:6), and Sidom (Alma 15:1) and

is profound, making him “one of the most compelling figures in the Book of Mormon.”²²

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, many commentators are generous in their assessment of the mission to the Zoramites undertaken by Alma and his brethren. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, for example, write that “the results of their labors were indeed great, for they had carried the Gospel Message to a great many of the Zoramites who had accepted it.”²³ D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner go further, observing that “the truth of Alma 31:5 is confirmed” in the acceptance of “the word” by many of the Zoramites.²⁴

Such praise is not universal. Brant Gardner argues that Alma clearly fails in his attempt to pursue “a religious solution” with the Zoramites.²⁵ According to Gardner, Alma 35:15, which recounts that Alma is “exceedingly sorrowful,” underscores Alma’s feelings in relation to “this failure” among the Zoramites.²⁶

Grant Hardy offers a similar view, noting that the narrative reveals “the rather awkward truth that Alma’s preaching to the Zoramites not only did not prevent hostilities but was itself a major catalyst for the fighting.”²⁷ According to Hardy, throughout the first half of the book of Alma, Mormon subtly but consciously emphasizes the contrast between “Alma’s faithful but conventional achievements” and the “extraordinary triumphs” of the sons of Mosiah.²⁸ Hardy even suggests that Alma’s desire to be an angel (Alma 29) may reveal “a hint of envy” at the success

that he is on his way to Manti when he has a joyous reunion with the sons of Mosiah (Alma 17:1). Alma also visits the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi with Ammon after they have separated themselves from the Lamanites and are camping in the “wilderness” on their way to Jerushon (Alma 27:25).

22. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 134.

23. Reynolds and Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4:133.

24. Ogden and Skinner, *Verse By Verse: The Book of Mormon*, 2:23.

25. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:493.

26. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:493.

27. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 149.

28. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 172–74.

of the sons of Mosiah, who were treated by their many converts “as though they were angels sent from God” (Alma 27:4).²⁹

These critical assessments raise valid points. Though many Zoramites accept his message, Alma does have real cause for sorrow when the Zoramites take up arms against the Nephites—after all, Alma embarks on his mission in the first place partly in an attempt to prevent an alliance between the Zoramites and the Lamanites that could lead to war (Alma 31:4).³⁰ Even still, it is not apparent from the text that Alma blames himself for the events that follow. Mormon’s reference in Alma 35:15 to Alma’s feeling “exceedingly sorrowful” is not tied specifically (and certainly not exclusively) to the aftermath of his labors among the Zoramites. Rather, Mormon observes that Alma feels “grieved for the iniquity of *his* people,” suggesting that Alma is reflecting generally on the growing wickedness of the Nephites.

Although Alma may nevertheless have felt some disappointment in how his mission to the Zoramites turned out, the fact remains that a Nephite dissenter remembers his teachings decades later and employs them in the Lamanite prison, to great effect. Viewing the conversion of the Lamanites as a miraculous epilogue to Alma’s Zoramite mission provides a broader perspective on the results of this mission and on the scope of Alma’s influence generally in the Book of Mormon. For instance, this episode significantly changes how Alma’s labors compare to those of the sons of Mosiah.

Like Alma, the sons of Mosiah see conflict follow in the wake of their missionary labors. Soon after the converts of the sons of Mosiah take upon themselves the name of Anti-Nephi-Lehies, more than a thousand

29. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 172.

30. Alma understands that a “correspondence” between the Lamanites and Zoramites could be “the means of great loss on the part of the Nephites” (Alma 31:4). John L. Sorenson explains that the Zoramite city of Antionum offered a potential base of operations to a Lamanite nation eagerly expanding to the south, so Alma realizes that if he could “anchor the Zoramites within the Nephite political and cultural sphere, it might forestall war.” *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 240.

of them are slain by the Lamanites without resistance (Alma 24:20–22). Later, when the group has become known as the people of Ammon and has taken up residence in the land of Jershon, the Lamanites meet the Nephites in “a tremendous battle; yea, even such an one as never had been known among all the people in the land from the time Lehi left Jerusalem” (Alma 28:2). These fierce battles readily compare with the conflict sparked by the apostate Zoramites after many of their brethren are converted by the teachings of Alma and his brethren (Alma 43–44).³¹

Those whose conversion can be traced to the labors of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, respectively, also ultimately aid the Nephites tremendously. The sons of the people of Ammon, for example, play a pivotal role in the wars documented at the end of the book of Alma under the direction of Helaman, Alma’s oldest son, all without the loss of a single warrior (Alma 56–58). Later, when the “more part” of the Lamanites embrace the gospel in the wake of the prison scene, they “yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession” (Helaman 5:50, 52), which is something the Nephites had desired for hundreds of years (see Omni 1:27).

Toward the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni discusses the mission of the sons of Mosiah alongside the conversion of the Lamanites. In a discourse on faith recorded in Ether 12, Moroni presents three examples of miracles wrought among the people as a result of faith: (1) the prison walls which tumble to the earth without hurting Alma and Amulek (Alma 14); (2) the remarkable “change upon the Lamanites” (Ether 12:14) resulting from the prison encounter of Nephi and Lehi (Helaman 5); and (3) the conversion of so many Lamanites by the sons of Mosiah (Alma 17–26; Ether 12:13–15). Moroni does not explicitly give Alma any credit for the conversion of the Lamanites in Helaman 5—in fact, he cites the faith of Nephi and Lehi—but he clearly views this later conversion as comparable to the “great . . . miracle” wrought by the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites (Ether 12:14–15).

31. Hardy acknowledges that war follows the converts of both Alma and the sons of Mosiah, though he argues that Mormon “seriously underplays the political costs” of the relocation of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to the land of Jershon, in keeping with his effort to accentuate the discrepancy between the successes of Alma and the sons of Mosiah, respectively. *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 173.

It is fitting that Moroni discusses these stories together. Although we do not have accurate population estimates for the Lamanites at any given time, Monte S. Nyman has observed that the conversion documented in Helaman 5 “was certainly comparable and probably surpassed the thousands brought to the fold of God by the sons of Mosiah.”³² Hardy seems to agree, noting that this Lamanite conversion is “the most astonishing conversion in the entire book.”³³

The conversion of the Lamanite guards in Helaman 5 also finds parallels in Alma’s earlier ministry in at least two respects. First, up to a point the experience closely mirrors Alma and Amulek’s experience in Ammonihah. In both stories, the prophet and his preaching companion are mistreated as prisoners for some time, after which their tormenters become frozen with fear when the prison walls begin to shake (Alma 14:18–27; Helaman 5:21–34). In Ammonihah, Alma and Amulek are spared while the walls of the prison collapse on their stunned captors, who are instantly killed (Alma 14:23–27). In the Lamanite prison, by contrast, the guards ultimately qualify for redemption when they remember the teachings of Alma and his brethren and repent accordingly (Helaman 5:40–49). Unlike the prison experience in Helaman 5, the miraculous display of power in Alma 14 does not affect the people in a positive way. On the contrary, the “multitudes” of people who rush to the prison to learn the cause of the “great noise” immediately turn and flee when they see Alma and Amulek emerge from the rubble unscathed (Alma 14:28–29). Perhaps Alma’s desire to be an angel in order to “cry repentance unto every people” (Alma 29:1) can be traced in part to his experience in Ammonihah, where Alma learns firsthand that death and destruction have limited value in leading others to repent.³⁴

The Lamanite conversion also contains parallels with Alma’s own conversion. While being “racked with torment” for his sins after a visit

32. Monte S. Nyman, *The Record of Helaman: A Teaching Commentary on the Book of Helaman* (Orem, UT: Granite, 2004), 304.

33. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 164.

34. Zeezrom eventually repents, of course, but not because of the power his teachers demonstrate—Zeezrom’s heart is pricked by their words, and he comes to believe in Christ (Alma 15:3–11).

from an angel, Alma remembers what his father taught about Jesus Christ—he later recounts to his son, “Now as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me” (Alma 36:17–18). This faith-filled plea is the turning point for Alma. He immediately is “filled with joy,” which he describes as “exquisite and sweet” (Alma 36:20–21). Aminadab’s comrades are similarly delivered many years later when they remember the teachings of Alma and his brethren and cry out with faith in Christ; they, too, become “filled with that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory” (Helaman 5:42–44).

John W. Welch has described Alma’s teachings as the “doctrinal epicenter” of the entire Book of Mormon and as “the spinal cord that runs through the backbone of Nephite prophetic history.”³⁵ Our assessment of Alma’s influence only grows when we appreciate Alma’s role in laying the foundation for the later conversion of the “more part” of the Lamanites, which has political and spiritual ramifications for both the Nephites and the Lamanites for years to come.³⁶ Indeed, Alma’s mission to the Zoramites emerges as a key part of his legacy, the scope of which Alma himself may not even have foreseen.

35. John W. Welch, “The Testimony of Alma: ‘Give Ear to My Words,’” *Religious Educator* 11/2 (2010): 67–88.

36. The Lamanites quickly become more righteous than the Nephites (Helaman 6:1) and thereafter, apparently for the first time, Lamanite missionaries take it upon themselves to preach to the Nephites (Helaman 6:4). Within a few years, the Nephites build up and support the Gadianton robbers to the point that this band obtains “sole management of the government,” whereas the Lamanites “utterly” destroy these robbers from their midst (Helaman 6:37–39). A generation later, it is a Lamanite prophet, Samuel, who foretells the signs that will accompany the Savior’s birth—signs that give the faithful hope and that, when manifested, cause the wicked to “fall to the earth” (Helaman 14:7) and to “know that the Son of God must shortly appear” (3 Nephi 1:17; see Helaman 14:1–8; 3 Nephi 1:5–21).

Mormon's use of the war chapters to highlight the supremacy of the word

Viewing the conversion of the Lamanites in Helaman 5 as the culmination of Alma's attempt to "try the virtue of the word of God" among the Zoramites decades earlier adds narrative meaning to Mormon's editorial choices between these two events. Specifically, we can view the so-called war chapters in late Alma as a unit that dramatically highlights the disparity between the power of the word and that of the sword.³⁷

Mormon's focus on war is undoubtedly an "explicit editorial shift" in his narrative,³⁸ and it begins rather suddenly. At the beginning of Alma 43, Mormon announces that he will "say no more" about Alma's preaching and that he will shift his focus to "the wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites" (Alma 43:2–3). Interestingly, though, Mormon is not ready to leave Alma behind just yet, and he describes how Alma, at Moroni's request, receives a revelation regarding the location of the armies of Zerahemnah (Alma 43:23–24).³⁹

Mormon also recounts a final exchange between Alma and Helaman before observing his pledge to say no more about Alma's teachings (Alma 45:2–16). Alma's parting message includes a prophecy that the people of Nephi would "become extinct" four hundred years after "Jesus

37. Michael L. King observes that these chapters on war generally serve as an extension of Mormon's focus on the power of the word, which is developed throughout the rest of the book of Alma: "Nowhere in scripture is the battle between conversion and compulsion more vividly described than in Alma. . . . Through its pages, the Lord teaches us the critical lesson that forced compliance is not sufficient to bring about a lasting change and a godly character." "Sickle or Sword? Conversion versus Compulsion in the Book of Alma," in *The Book of Mormon: The Foundation of Our Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 162–63. King does not explore how the war chapters in Alma relate to the events in Helaman 5.

38. Steven L. Olsen, "Prophecy and History: Structuring the Abridgment of the Nephite Records," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 23.

39. In 3 Nephi we learn that the Nephites employ the "custom" of appointing chief military captains "that had the spirit of revelation and also of prophecy" (3 Nephi 3:19). Mormon does not record the source of this custom, but it may trace in part back to Alma's use of his prophetic powers to track the movements of Zerahemnah's Lamanite army (Alma 43:23–24).

Christ shall manifest himself unto them” (Alma 45:10–11). Mormon then writes of Alma’s disappearance, explaining that nothing is known “concerning his death and burial” (Alma 45:19).

With Alma out of the way, Mormon is ready to begin his war narrative in earnest. First, though, Mormon briefly describes an unsuccessful attempt by Helaman to “declare the word unto” the Nephites (Alma 45:20–24). Mormon then immediately introduces Amalickiah to the story and begins to describe in detail the years of conflict that Amalickiah sets in motion.⁴⁰ Mormon marks the conclusion of the Amalickiahite Wars in Alma 62 by recounting that Helaman once again goes forth to “declare the word of God” among the people (Alma 62:45–51).

The accounts of Helaman’s ministry at either end of Mormon’s lengthy war narrative contain unmistakably parallel phrasing. In both passages, “Helaman and his brethren went forth” to declare “the word” unto the people because it was “expedient” that a “regulation should be made” in the church, because of “wars” and other contentions and disturbances (Alma 45:20–22; 62:44–45). These parallels are shown in table 1.

The significant phrasal overlap in these passages, as well as their placement at distinct textual breaking points, suggests that Mormon, who regularly uses repetition in the Book of Mormon for effect, consciously uses these passages to delineate the war chapters as a discrete departure from the rest of his narrative.⁴¹

40. Various attempts have been made to specify names for the different conflicts in the Book of Mormon. Welch identifies three distinct conflicts in the latter part of the book of Alma: the Zoramite War (Alma 43–44), the First Amalickiahite War (Alma 46:1–50:11), and the Second Amalickiahite War (Alma 51–62). “Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?” 5–10. By contrast, Ryan W. Davis describes the conflict from Alma 46–62 as a single war because “there is no separation of forces, and because it is explicitly treated as one war [by Mormon] (Alma 62:41);” though he does not suggest a specific name for the conflict. See “For the Peace of the People: War and Democracy in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16/1 (2007): 50. For the purposes of this article, I refer to the conflicts described in Alma 46–62 as the Amalickiahite Wars.

41. John W. Welch has cautioned against assuming that discernible textual patterns have been intentionally placed in the text by the author (a trap he refers to as the “intentional fallacy”). See “Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence

Table 1. Overlapping passages in Alma 45 and Alma 62

Alma 45	Alma 62
"Helaman went forth among the people to declare the word unto them" (v. 20)	"Helaman did take upon him again to preach unto the people the word of God" (v. 44)
"because of their wars with the Lamanites and the many little dissensions and disturbances which had been among the people" (v. 21)	"because of so many wars and contentions" (v. 44)
"it became expedient that . . . a regulation should be made throughout the church" (v. 21)	"it had become expedient that a regulation should be made again in the church" (v. 44)
"Therefore, Helaman and his brethren went forth" (v. 22)	"Therefore, Helaman and his brethren went forth" (v. 45)
"to establish the church again in all the land" (v. 22)	"And . . . they did establish again the church of God throughout all the land" (v. 46)

Notably, Helaman's attempts to declare the word have very different results before and after the wars.⁴² In Alma 45, we read that the people bristle at Helaman's teachings and "would not give heed" to them (Alma 45:23).⁴³ Rather, they "grew proud, being lifted up in their hearts because of their exceedingly great riches" (Alma 45:24). Helaman's initial

of Chiasmus," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 10. Given the degree of overlap here and the placement of these passages immediately before and after the longest war narrative in the Book of Mormon, it is likely that Mormon did intend to delineate the intervening chapters as a "coherent unit." See Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 107. Richard Dilworth Rust has observed that "although it might be argued that some repetition and contrast in the Book of Mormon is accidental, the accumulated evidence is that such narrators as Mormon and Moroni intended parallel materials to instruct and convince." *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), 24.

42. Years earlier, Alma similarly "made . . . regulations" in the church as he went among the people (see Alma 6:7).

43. At this point Alma has only recently disappeared, so dissatisfaction with the change in ecclesiastical leadership may have contributed to this "dissension" (Alma 45:17–24).

preaching effort appears minimally successful,⁴⁴ but his labors at the end of the wars do yield some immediate fruit: “many people” become convinced of “their wickedness,” leading them to repent (Alma 62:45). The people of the church enjoy a period of postwar material prosperity, though they nevertheless “remember how great things the Lord had done for them” and “pray unto the Lord their God continually” (Alma 62:48–51).

The different results do not arise from any change in Helaman’s teachings. Rather, years of war have taken their toll, leading many of the people to soften their hearts and “humble themselves before God” (Alma 62:41).⁴⁵ In other words, the sword and its attendant ills do have a powerful effect upon the people. These benefits prove to be short-lived, however. Soon after this widespread change of heart, the Nephites face major dissensions and contentions, including the emergence of Gadianton’s so-called band (Helaman 2:4).

During this period, the Lamanites overrun the capital city of Zarahemla for the first time (Helaman 1). Even when order is restored and the church seems to be making progress again, the people soon become so contentious that Mormon writes, without further explanation, that “there was much bloodshed” (Helaman 4:1). The softening and humility brought on by the Amalickiahite Wars seems to dissipate rapidly. There is no indication, moreover, that the wars themselves lessen the animosity between the Nephites and Lamanites in any meaningful way.

In isolation, it may seem surprising that the book of Alma, which focuses so heavily on the ascendant power of the word of God,⁴⁶ reveals at the end that Helaman’s missionary efforts bear fruit largely as a result

44. Later, after Amalickiah leads away a large group of people and Moroni dramatically erects the title of liberty, Helaman is able to “maintain order in the church” for approximately four years (see Alma 46:38).

45. Not everyone reacts this way—some of the people become more hardened as a result of the long wars (see Alma 62:41).

46. Gerald Hansen Jr. writes that “the entire book of Alma emphasizes, in one way or another, the power of God’s word.” “The Book of Alma as a Prototype for Teaching the Word of God,” in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 263.

of war-related suffering.⁴⁷ But this message takes on new meaning when viewed alongside the more lasting conversion of the Lamanites documented in Helaman 5, which does not stem from war and which produces more lasting change. Indeed, twenty-four years after the “more part” of the Lamanites embrace the gospel (Helaman 6:1),⁴⁸ the Lamanites continue to adhere “strictly” to the commandments of God (Helaman 13:1). We do not read about wickedness again among the Lamanites until approximately AD 3, more than thirty years after the events recorded in Helaman 5; even then it is primarily the “rising generation” that begins to dissent from the church (3 Nephi 1:28–30). Thus, the power of the word demonstrated in Helaman 5, which was planted by Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom and later harvested by Nephi and Lehi, does have a significantly greater and more lasting effect than the fleeting humility described in Alma 62 that was brought on by the sword.

Reading the war chapters as a prelude and a foil to the dramatic events that later unfold in Helaman 5 does not contradict other explanations for Mormon’s decision to recount the Amalickiahite Wars at such great length.⁴⁹ On the contrary, the variety of explanations for

47. Hansen also argues, “Mormon uses the drama of war to verify the old promise of prosperity if the Nephites keep God’s word—and of adversity and affliction if they do not” “The Book of Alma as a Prototype,” 277–78. Hansen does not address Helaman’s differing levels of preaching success before and after these wars.

48. The events recorded in Helaman 6:1 take place in the sixty-second year of the reign of the judges, and those in Helaman 13:1 take place in the eighty-sixth year of the reign of the judges.

49. R. Douglas Phillips, for example, has written that Mormon views war as “an instrument of divine purpose” and that we gain insight into Mormon’s purposes for devoting so much of the book of Alma to discussion of the “Lamanite wars” because this account demonstrates “the hand of God making use of devout and just military leaders and statesmen to preserve the righteous and punish the wicked.” “Why Is So Much of the Book of Mormon Given Over to Military Accounts?” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 25, 27. Others take a more apologetic approach to studying warfare in the Book of Mormon, stressing how Mormon’s descriptions of war (in the book of Alma and elsewhere) underscore the complexity and internal consistency of the record. See, for example, William J. Hamblin, “The Importance of Warfare in Book of Mormon Studies,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 484; Welch, “Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 17.

the purpose of these chapters highlights Mormon's masterly ability to weave a narrative tapestry with seemingly endless layers of meaning.

The war narrative in late Alma is just one way in which the dichotomy between the power of the word and that of the sword shines through during the years between the Zoramite mission and the mass Lamanite conversion. In Helaman 4, Mormon recounts a military campaign that also subtly highlights this theme.⁵⁰ Nearly a generation after Moroni's death, Nephite dissenters once again succeed in inciting Lamanite aggression, and the Lamanites attack the Nephites. The Lamanites enjoy immediate success and soon overtake much of the territory held by the Nephites, including the land of Zarahemla (Helaman 4:1–5). Moronihah, the son and military heir of Moroni, leads the Nephite armies and eventually manages to recapture half of the Nephite lands, but no more. The remaining Lamanite forces are so powerful that Moronihah and the Nephites “abandon their design” to retake any more lands (Helaman 4:19). The power of the sword, in other words, is exhausted, even when wielded by a righteous leader. Only a short time later, after the Lamanites are converted en masse, Mormon specifically notes that the Lamanites “did yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession” (Helaman 5:52).⁵¹ The “virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5) thus literally breaks down barriers that a military leader as capable as Moronihah would not even attempt to overthrow by force.

50. Other examples of this contrast abound in Mormon's narrative. Consider, for example, that Moroni gathers followers by writing a concise but powerful message on a piece of clothing and raising it up on a pole for others to see (Alma 46:11–21), whereas Amalickiah ascends to the Lamanite throne and “gained the hearts of the people” after his servant stabs the king of the Lamanites to death (Alma 47:22–35). Moroni, of course, emerges victorious, while Amalickiah, ironically, himself dies at the point of a javelin (Alma 51:33–34).

51. As Gardner notes, it is unclear just how much territory the Lamanites “yield up” to the Nephites—it may be that they simply give back the lands conquered in the most recent military campaign (rather than also abandoning the land of Nephi, which had been in Lamanite hands for approximately two hundred years). *Second Witness*, 5:98–99.

Conclusion

Viewing Alma's mission to the Zoramites as laying the foundation for the mass conversion of the Lamanites in Helaman 5 has many implications.⁵² This connection sheds light on Mormon's unique editorial decision to document war in unprecedented detail at the end of the book of Alma and also helps explain why he framed those war chapters with twin passages relating to the preaching efforts of Helaman, the significance of which otherwise seems to counteract the focus on the supremacy of the word developed throughout much of the rest of the book of Alma. Understanding this connection also provides the perspective necessary to declare Alma's mission to the Zoramites a resounding success and to appreciate more fully Alma's profound and lasting influence on the spiritual and political fortunes of both the Nephites and the Lamanites.

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52. There is undoubtedly more to explore regarding the narrative significance of the connection between Alma 31 and Helaman 5 than this article addresses.