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Abstract Arnold gives personal reflections on the compatibility of scholarship and discipleship, the latter deepened by earnest study of the Book of Mormon. Neal A. Maxwell's gift for words is illustrated. As an inexhaustible source of insight and delight, the Book of Mormon rewards close reading, as is apparent by a look at even the minor characters in the narrative.

The Book of Mormon: Passport to Discipleship

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MARILYN ARNOLD

A couple of years ago I was in Rexburg, lecturing at BYU-Idaho. As I walked through the student center, I noticed a bulletin board featuring a poster with a catchy heading: “Come and set sail on the disciple ship.” Student leaders were being invited to sign up for a gathering at Teton Lodge. I hardly think that a Teton Lodge destination was what Elder Maxwell had in mind when he used the term *discipleship*, but I have to admire the creativity of the student who came up with that clever bit of wordplay. I suspect he or she was an English major. (We are known to take liberties with words.)

I confess that I boarded the “scholar ship” far too long before I boarded the “disciple ship.” If my destinations in those days were more intellectually demanding than the Teton Lodge, they proved to be at least as enjoyable and possibly more invigorating. Still, my ship was earthbound, and my charts were horizontal and literary rather than vertical. My destinations then were

countless library archives, conferences, and symposia across the country. I lectured all over (no surprise there, I fear!), and I wrote books, articles, and papers. More significantly, I taught students and enlisted some of them in my work. We grew together in scholarship and camaraderie and accomplishment. In a word, it was good.

It was good, yes, but it was earthbound. And then, at last, I discovered a passport on another kind of ship, a ship of the soul. A ship that had been docked right outside my door, waiting for me to board it. I had held the passport and boarding ticket all my life and didn’t know it. That passport was the Book of Mormon. It might be something else for others, but for me it was, first and foremost, the Book of Mormon. And then—it should have been no surprise—I discovered that the two “ships,” discipleship and scholarship, could travel side by side. Far from being two incompatible or mutually exclusive pursuits, the lesser one, scholarship, could embrace the

greater one, discipleship. I could journey with both simultaneously.

Bringing those two “ships” together wrought nothing short of a miracle in my life. And the older I get, the more I value the treasures aboard the “disciple ship,” and the more my goal is an ultimate rather than an earthly destination. This is not in any way to diminish the role and value of scholarship. It was that ship, after all, that gave me a highly satisfying profession, endless opportunities, and a “family” of friends across the country. And it taught me to study and think. But more important, and more pertinent to my subject this evening, the “scholar ship” gave me the maps, tools, and skills that someone like me—a *word* person—needed for steering the other ship, the “disciple ship,” onto a course of blessed understanding and unspeakable joy.

In the preface to my new book on the Book of Mormon, titled *From the Heart: Charity in the Book of Mormon*, I describe the night of soul-searching, decades ago, that impelled me to begin earnest study of the Book of Mormon. What I say there is pertinent to my subject here, and I decided to quote briefly from it:

My academic training, which was long and rigorous, was in the study of the written word. I had learned how to read and understand literary texts—narratives, essays, poetry, journals, drama. And what was the Book of Mormon but literature of the highest caliber, literature from the mind of the Lord, recorded through his chosen servants. And in English, translated only once and that directly from the Lord. . . .

I knew then, with a surety I had rarely experienced before, that it was time to turn those years of education and experience to serving something beyond my profes-

sional career. Something of greater importance. Something of eternal consequence. I knew it was time to apply my training to a more specific kind of service in the kingdom, something that reached beyond the worldly concerns of academia, else why was I blessed to receive such training? I knew it was time to study the Book of Mormon with, at the very least, the same intensity that I had devoted to the study of literary texts and lives. I also knew it was time to raise my life to a higher spiritual plane, to cast off anything superficial or incompatible with pure pursuit of divine truth in the Book of Mormon. . . .

I began studying, devouring the Book of Mormon daily, poring over every word and phrase. As I read the early chapters, I was overwhelmed with a desire to write about the book.¹

That night brought me to my knees and to the realization that “the Book of Mormon was the key to my testimony” (xvi). I add that “writing the book that had its genesis in that first night of soul-searching and divine guidance was a life-altering experience” (xvii).² And indeed it was. The Book of Mormon became then, and still is, my passport to discipleship. It is the instrument the Lord used to change my heart and bring me to him with new commitment, and it is the instrument he still uses as I stumble along on my imperfect journey. But I am aboard that ship, growing, changing, celebrating with every

1. Marilyn Arnold, *From the Heart: Charity in the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2011), xv–xvi.

2. The book I allude to is *Sweet Is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon* (American Fork, UT: Covenant, 1996). It was many wonderful years in the making.

reading. And every reading brings new insights and increased faith.

I recognize, too, that important as my scholarly work has been to my study and teaching and writing about the Book of Mormon, such preparation is insufficient when brought alone to a sacred text. The guidance of the Spirit is absolutely essential. With that guidance, the humblest, least educated among us can read and understand and love the Book of Mormon. I am the first to admit that I am not a scholar of ancient religious history, nor of ancient writings. What I have is what all of us have—the book itself. Perhaps, however, as an English teacher and a writer for many years (I won't say how many), I have developed a special relationship with written words, a love that has found its fullest expression in the Book of Mormon.

I write about the Book of Mormon because I *have* to; it compels me. It is the tangible force behind my faith. The second Alma knew that power. He said that “the preaching of the word . . . 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). It was Alma's conviction of the word's capacity to change people that prompted him to leave the Nephite judgment seat and go forth to “preach the word of God, . . . bearing down in pure testimony” in an effort to “stir [his people] up in remembrance of their duty” (Alma 4:19).

Nephi learns that the iron rod, seen first in Lehi's vision and then in his own, represents the word of God, to which we must cling if we are to inherit eternal life (1 Nephi 8 and 11). I remind you that the iron rod metaphor is entirely the Lord's, and no mortal invention. Alma's special regard for the word, and his recognition that inspired verbal truth can change lives, is evident

in his sermon to the Zoramite castoffs. There he, too, employs metaphor in likening the word of God to a seed that we must plant in our hearts and nourish to a fulness of faith (Alma 32:28-43). Jacob reminds us that “by the power of [God's] word man came upon the face of the earth” (Jacob 4:9). No fewer than three columns in the Book of Mormon index are devoted to “word” entries, and the list is far from complete.

One of the remarkable things about the man in whose memory we assemble tonight is his obvious love for, and skill with, words. That special gift is enhanced by his love for Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, and the church and gospel restored by that divine Son. Elder Neal A. Maxwell's writings attest to his utter delight in language. He experiments with word combinations and carefully structures phrases and sentences to make words say a great deal in very little space. In just one address, we find such stunning images and alliterated phrases as “rhythm of the Restoration” (twice), “trail of testifying tombstones,” “slit-eyed skepticism,” “triumphant triad of truth,” and “sudden luxuriant meadows of meaning.”³ Who, among ordinary mortals, before hearing it or seeing it in print, could conceive of “meaning” in terms of “luxuriant meadows”? He also urges us to “make more Mary-like choices and show less Martha-like anxiety.” Then he adds, surely with a smile, “What are calories anyway, compared to special conversations?”⁴ (Did you catch the alliterated *c*'s even in that little addendum?)

Maybe his uncommon awareness of language made scripture and the words of prophets all that much dearer to Elder Maxwell. His sensitivity

3. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Book of Mormon: A Great Answer to ‘The Great Question,’” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 1-17.

4. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Precious Promise,” *Ensign*, April 2004, 47.

to the sounds of words, and how they resonate together, is part of the spiritual awareness of the man. And, I must add, he is never more eloquent than when he is urging us to discipleship, which ultimately became his signature subject. With every sentence he wrote, Neal Maxwell knew what he wanted to accomplish. His extraordinary gift for verbal expression is evidenced in his keen awareness of how word choice, sound, and placement can carry a thought.

In the English department we call this matching form and content. And in the hands of a master craftsman, it was mighty effective. Contrary to some popular notion, this master craftsman did not use big words and lengthy, difficult sentences. His aim was not to overwhelm us with his learning. What he did, instead of meandering as most of us do (present party included), was make every word count. President Gordon B. Hinckley mentioned this special quality in his address at Elder Maxwell's funeral:

I know of no other who spoke in such a distinctive and interesting way. When he opened his mouth we all listened. We came alive with expectation of something unusual, and we were never disappointed. . . . Each talk was a masterpiece, each book a work of art, worthy of repeated reading. I think we shall not see one like him again.⁵

When I read the Book of Mormon, I'm afraid I often do "English teacher" things with it. Relishing the blend of language and thought, I read for more than story line or "quotable quotes." I read for doctrine and for insight and understanding about divine purposes, expectations, and promises for Earth's children. I read to increase my faith, and I read for the utter joy of it. Like

any great literature, the Book of Mormon can be read and understood on several levels. As a reader takes that magnificent book into his or her life, absorbing it ever more deeply in mind and heart, it becomes a part of that person. Consider that nearly everything entering the dedicated reader's mind is filtered through the very language and essence of the book. And since the book is a stirring testimony of Jesus Christ, to absorb it into one's very being is to know him better and better. It is to change, it is to become a disciple.

At every level, the Book of Mormon lifts and inspires. But the more earnestly we read it and savor it, seeking to make it ours, the more meaningful it becomes and the stronger we grow in discipleship. Yes, the Book of Mormon can be approached as one might approach a fine piece of narrative literature, something that has endured through the ages and is read and revered the world over. Something known and esteemed for the beauty and strength of its language, the truth of its message, the innate nobility of its principal characters, and its capacity to yield more and more meanings and delights the closer the reading of it.

Indeed, the Book of Mormon is a great book, by every worldly test. But the real greatness of the book resides in what lies behind it. It is, in very fact, the word of God delivered to and through mortal prophets, prophets chosen by him for this most important task. How can we do any less than bring to it all the training and experience we can muster, and all the prayers and repenting and desire of which we are capable? When the Savior enjoined us to "search the scriptures" (John 5:39), I think he really meant *search*, as opposed to skim, peruse, glance at on occasion—or merely dust.

There is this thing about English teachers that drives their friends (if they have any left) crazy.

5. *Church News*, July 31, 2004, 3; quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, *Moving in His Majesty and Power* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), xii.

In addition to insisting on the proper use of the verbs *lie* and *lay*, they are compulsive close readers. They can read *Hamlet* for the fiftieth time and discover things they had missed in the previous forty-nine readings. It is a disease of the profession. This is how I am with the Book of Mormon, and so it never grows tedious or stale. I always come to it with joyous anticipation and renewed expectations of learning and insight.

Last summer, long before this lecture invitation arrived, I had decided to go at the book differently this time, deliberately considering each sentence in each verse. This would be a complete reversal of several readings in recent years, when, with dedicated Relief Society groups who read with me, I devoured the whole Book of Mormon—and led weekly discussions on it—in six weeks. Reading this way is a glorious experience, and I am lifted by it and by the enthusiasm and spiritual feast we share. But now, having finished our most recent study marathon, I turned to the first chapter of 1 Nephi and began afresh, recording in a notebook any new thoughts that came to me as I read yet again, very slowly, the precious words.

I venture to share a few random thoughts from that little journal with you, all of them composed at bedtime. (If I see some of you nodding off, I'll know it was a mistake.) Then, too, some of the supposed “new” insights may really be old insights I have forgotten. (That's one of the benefits of aging.) The Book of Mormon is both familiarly old and refreshingly new, every time I approach it. For example, my opening note on page 1 of the new journal focuses on Nephi's brief general introduction to his record, which I hadn't given much attention to before. Nephi's closing sentence makes it clear that he authored these introductory words as well as the narrative that follows. He says: “This is according to the

account of Nephi; or in other words, I, Nephi, wrote this record.”

“Why does this sentence jump out at me tonight, for the first time?” I asked myself. And then I knew. If Nephi hadn't written that last sentence, we might have assumed that Mormon had composed the introduction. After all, until the last half of the last sentence, Nephi writes in the third person, opening with these words: “An account of Lehi and his wife Sariah, and his four sons, being called, (beginning at the eldest) Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi.” We might have expected a first-person narrator to say it another way: “An account of my father Lehi, my mother Sariah, my three brothers,” and so on. You see what English teachers do? We latch onto what are molehills for normal people and happily make small mountains out of them. Then we foist them off on innocent bystanders.

In literature I am often drawn to so-called minor characters whom casual readers and critics sometimes pass by or give only scant attention to. I find that they have much to teach me, and this is true in my reading of the Book of Mormon also. Although Lehi is scarcely a minor figure in the Book of Mormon, he sometimes takes a backseat to his incredible fourth son. I refuse to leave him there. In fact, recent readings of 1 Nephi 1 have lifted Lehi off the page and given me still greater appreciation for this dynamic, courageous man whom God trusted with the destiny of a whole new nation in a faraway land. We must ask ourselves why it was Lehi, and not his contemporary Jeremiah—or even Ezekiel or Daniel—who was instructed to leave Jerusalem and later establish the chosen people in the promised land. If the abridgment of his record had not been lost, I think we would know why.

Nephi wastes no time in reporting that Lehi experienced glorious visionary events, including the opening of the heavens to a vision of God the Father, his Son, angels, and the original Twelve Apostles. Does it surprise you that Nephi immediately introduces the miraculous—just five verses into the record? The skeptical reader, already programed to doubt, might see this as preposterous and slam the book shut, never to open it again. Of course, that person would then have all the ammunition needed to compose a critical review declaring the book to be the foolish invention of an unbalanced mind. (I think I'm beginning to sound like Hugh Nibley!)

Every verse in this chapter yields amazing information, and I could probably spend the entire evening on the twenty verses in 1 Nephi 1. I'll spare you that, but one thing I must emphasize—we have only a tiny fraction of Lehi's words. In my journal I say, referencing verse 16, "Nephi notes that Lehi had written a great deal about his visions, dreams, and prophecies." In fact, Nephi refers to Lehi's writings three times in a single verse, twice explaining that he can't record them all, so vast are they:

And now I, Nephi, do not make a full account of the things which my father hath written, for he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams; and he also hath written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children, of which I shall not make a full account. (1 Nephi 1:16)

Both 16 and 17 are important verses if we are to comprehend just how prolific Lehi was and Nephi's role in dealing with his father's record. We tend to skip over the passages about Lehi's writings, and I think we should not. Nephi is

careful to add that he will not write an account of *his* "proceedings" until *after* he has abridged the record of his father (see v. 17). This postponement of his own work in order to prepare his father's affirms the importance of Lehi's writings. It also underscores the great respect Nephi shows his father throughout the narrative.

If some of us have been swayed by Laman and Lemuel's growing inclination to dismiss Lehi as an aged man out of touch with reality, we need to correct that impression. Perhaps we should look more closely at Nephi's words about his father, and perhaps we should study more intently Lehi's prophecies and teachings. We remember Lehi for his visions, but we sometimes forget that he delivered some amazing discourses near the end of his life. In fact, the first three chapters of 2 Nephi are given entirely to his teachings. They include his powerful prophecies of the promised land, his warnings and commandments to Laman and Lemuel, and his inspired discourse on the whole redemptive gospel plan, with particular emphasis on the principle of opposition in relation to agency. Lehi teaches all this magnificent doctrine and then adds prophecies from the ancient Joseph that have special implications for the latter days. Surely Lehi could stand shoulder to shoulder with many of the great Old Testament prophets.

Let's consider another father who, like Lehi, is sometimes overshadowed by an exceptional son, a son whose writings and ministry are prominent in the record. A modest man, he is seldom mentioned in talks and lessons. His son is named after him, and it is the son whom the name "Alma" generally calls to mind. But this father is as worthy of our attention and admiration as his son. His conversion is less dramatic—no angel descending to shock him to his senses. Perhaps

that is why he doesn't capture our imagination the way the second Alma does. But it is also a measure of the man that he is converted simply by hearing the words of Abinadi and recognizing them as true. He is open to the word of salvation and open to the whisperings of the Spirit. I dearly love this man who has come to embody for me the very essence of humble discipleship.

In speaking of him, we typically call him "Alma the Elder," thereby creating a mental image of an older man. But he was not an older man, nor even a middle-aged man, when he heard Abinadi boldly prophesy and testify, at length, before wicked King Noah's court. We learn much about this man in one verse of introduction:

But there was one among them whose name was Alma, he also being a descendant of Nephi. And he was a young man, and he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken, for he knew concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them; therefore he began to plead with the king that he would not be angry with Abinadi, but suffer that he might depart in peace. (Mosiah 17:2)

Not only was Alma a young man, but he was a direct descendant of the first Nephi and therefore had the blood of prophets in his veins. He also recognized truth when he heard it. Noah, we remember, was the son of Zeniff, leader of a group who left Zarahemla to inhabit their ancestral lands. When Noah succeeded his father to the throne, he replaced Zeniff's priests with his own minions and turned to worldly indulgences and idolatry (see Mosiah 11:5-7). Unfortunately, he drew his people after him.

The amazing thing about this young priest named Alma is that he stood before King Noah,

begging him to spare Abinadi's life and allow him to leave. Now, Alma must have known Noah quite well, known him as a pompous, sinful, demanding, if sometimes cowardly, magistrate who would not look kindly on insubordination among his paid yes-men. Yet, risking his own life, Alma dared challenge the king's command that Abinadi be executed. Not only was Alma cast out, but orders were issued for his capture and execution. Alma was able to escape and hide, and most certainly under the influence of the Spirit, he wrote "all the words which Abinadi had spoken" (Mosiah 17:4). Abinadi would die for his testimony, but his words would be preserved intact and then taught by one man whose heart was changed by them. That one man was Alma.

We have ample proof that the first Alma became a great prophet, a true disciple, and a man of exceptional gifts as a teacher. Alma's story unfolds in Mosiah 18, one of my favorite chapters in all scripture. It tells what occurred at the waters of Mormon, a remote and lovely place of temporary safety where people gathered to hear the words of life taught by Alma. There this small but growing group of souls came together and formed a community of Saints; and Alma was the Lord's instrument for the miracle. I simply must quote a few passages. The beauty of the language is breathtaking as it captures the utter wonder of events at those waters and nearby woods where Alma hid during the day.

What Alma taught was "the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven" (Mosiah 18:2). The essence of the Christian gospel, which an inspired Alma understood thoroughly even this early. He taught "privately," and people listened as he spoke of "repentance,

and redemption, and faith on the Lord” (vv. 3, 7). Bring his words into the present, and marvel at the love and faith that are to define his followers. Marvel, too, at the beautiful phrasing of the lines. What will set you apart, Alma tells those gathered, is your desire “to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people,” and your willingness “to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light” (v. 8). Moreover, he says, you must be

willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places . . . even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life. (Mosiah 18:9)

Alma then invites them to be

baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you. (v. 10)

Try to realize fully what is happening. A young man only recently serving in the apostate Noah’s court has become the Lord’s chosen emissary to revitalize faith, not only here among this small group of would-be Saints, but eventually in Zarahemla as well. Knowing that baptism is necessary for true followers of Christ, and that he, too, must be baptized and can receive authority only from on high to baptize others, Alma steps into the water and humbly seeks that authority. He is ready to consecrate himself and his life to God’s purposes. He pleads, “O Lord, pour out thy Spirit upon thy servant, that he may do this work with holiness of heart. And when he had

said these words, the Spirit of the Lord was upon him.” Feeling that holy ordination, he addresses Helam, attesting that he has “authority from the Almighty God” to baptize him. He tells Helam that in accepting baptism, Helam has “entered into a covenant to serve” God until he dies. The two of them are then “buried in the water; and they arose and came forth out of the water rejoicing, being filled with the Spirit” (Mosiah 18:12-14).

“About two hundred and four souls” are baptized at this time, and “from that time forward” they are “called the church of God, or the church of Christ.” The record emphasizes the formation of this organization “by the power and authority of God” (Mosiah 18:16-17). In reading about these blessed souls, we might overlook the fact that the community Alma created at Mormon is a revelation of his character. Steadfast he was, and filled with the pure love of Christ. His instructions to his people reveal him better than any adjectives I can call up. With his unflinching emphasis on the Savior, and on unity and love, he molded them into a holy congregation where peace and sharing and devotion were boundless. He insisted that

there should be no contention one with another, but that they should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another. And thus he commanded them to preach. And thus they became the children of God. (Mosiah 18:21-22)

I can’t think that the city of Enoch was more blessed.

Alma instructed these dear followers to “observe the sabbath day, and keep it holy,” and to “give thanks to the Lord their God” every day.

They were to gather and worship at least “one day in every week,” and more when possible (Mosiah 18:23, 25). He emphasized that their priests were to be self-supporting; payment “for their labor” would be “the grace of God, that they might wax strong in the Spirit, having the knowledge of God, that they might teach with power and authority from God” (vv. 24, 26). Alma also taught that “of their own free will and good desires towards God” they were to share resources—those with more abundance giving to those with little or nothing. And this they did, “walk[ing] uprightly before God, imparting to one another both temporally and spiritually according to their needs” (vv. 27-29).

I must quote one more passage, a highly poetic one, that captures the spirit of the community that owed its very existence to one man who opened his mind, heart, and soul to his Maker. I sense a lift in Mormon’s spirits as he composed this summary passage, echoing and re-echoing his own name:

And now it came to pass that all this was done in Mormon, yea, by the waters of Mormon, in the forest that was near the waters of Mormon; yea, the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer; yea, and how blessed are they, for they shall sing to his praise forever. (Mosiah 18:30)

Did you notice that each reference to place, waters, and forest is condensed and repeated? Truly, this is elevated poetic language, written by one very much alive both to the Spirit and to the sounds and rhythms of words and phrases. And note that all this poetry builds to the fact that

here these blessed souls “came to the knowledge of their Redeemer,” whose praises “they shall sing . . . forever.” They became disciples, in the finest sense of the word.

As I have suggested, this first Alma was divinely called to reestablish and lead the Lord’s church, first among his exiled followers and then in the larger nation after he and his people arrived safely in Zarahemla. There are several references later on to his being the appointed leader of that church. The record states that although “many churches” were established, “they were all one church, yea, even the church of God” (Mosiah 25:22). Clearly, Alma was to head them all, for “king Mosiah had given Alma the authority over the church” (26:8; see 25:19). Of course, the higher, ecclesiastical authority had to come from God himself, and it did. In fact, the Lord speaks directly to Alma, confirming that it is His church that has been established among those willing to be called by His name. (You can read the full text of the Lord’s words to Alma on one occasion in Mosiah 26:15-32.)

The Lord makes a rare and splendid promise to Alma: “Thou art my servant; and I covenant with thee that thou shalt have eternal life; and thou shalt serve me and go forth in my name” (Mosiah 26:20). Could any covenant be grander and any calling more clear? The Lord gives him authority both to judge and to forgive (see v. 29), and Alma writes all the Lord’s words “that he might judge the people of that church according to the commandments of God” (v. 33). We are told in the same chapter that “Alma did regulate all the affairs of the church” (v. 37).

One measure of the first Alma’s great faith and strength as a prophet is in his ultimate influence on his rebellious son and namesake. When the converted younger Alma leaves the judgeship

and dedicates himself solely to teaching the word of God throughout the land, he launches what would become his principal sermon with a lengthy tribute to his father. He tells who his father was and what he achieved as a devoted emissary of God. We cannot overstate the importance of the first thirteen verses of Alma 5, as they reveal the forthright, unwavering character of the first Alma. How grateful I am that this son recognized his father's accomplishments, but perhaps more than that, the kind of man he was. It is only too bad that this son wasted his early years in foolish denial of his father's holy calling, exceptional leadership, and capacity for love. This is how the younger man opens his sermon:

I, Alma, having been consecrated by my father, Alma, to be a high priest over the church of God, he having power and authority from God to do these things, behold, I say unto you that he began to establish a church . . . ; and he did baptize his brethren in the waters of Mormon. (Alma 5:3)

The second Alma then speaks of how the Lord changed the hearts of those whom the first Alma taught, "their souls," he says, being "illuminated by the light of the everlasting word." Having been "loosed" from "the bands of death . . . and the chains of hell . . . , their souls did expand, and they did sing redeeming love" (Alma 5:7, 9).

The younger man then rightly credits his father with bringing these once-alienated people to know and embrace the word of God. But first it is his father's believing heart that the younger Alma celebrates. These next verses are a revelation of the man whom we tend to forget, but whom his son can never forget:

Behold, I can tell you—did not my father Alma believe in the words which

were delivered by the mouth of Abinadi? And was he not a holy prophet? Did he not speak the words of God, and my father Alma believe them?

And according to his faith there was a mighty change wrought in his heart. . . .

And behold, he preached the word unto your fathers, and a mighty change was also wrought in their hearts, and they humbled themselves and put their trust in the true and living God. And behold, they were faithful unto the end; therefore they were saved. (Alma 5:11-13)

What a powerful testifier the first Alma was! We have many more of his son's words, but that son's ability to reach hearts with the inspired spoken word could not have been any greater than his father's.

Years later, in counseling his son Helaman, a grateful Alma recalls the role his father played in his own dramatic conversion, a conversion initiated by the visitation of a commanding angel:

As I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world.

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)

That was the moment of the great turnaround for the younger man, and we should not underestimate his father's part in that event, having taught of Christ and now calling for a fast in his

son's behalf, rejoicing at heaven's intervention to save his son.

There are many other Book of Mormon figures who are very dear to me, stalwarts who are perhaps too seldom called to our attention. Consider Jacob, who saw the Lord himself (see 2 Nephi 2:4), and two later Nephis and a Lehi, who were visited by angels and the voice of the Lord, who experienced miracles and performed miracles—even raising the dead. One later Nephi served the resurrected Savior as head of his church. And consider Amulek who, like Alma the father, is sometimes obscured in the shadow of Alma the son, with whom he served. We frequently quote passages from Amulek's magnificent sermon to the poverty-ridden Zoramites whom Alma had just addressed, but too often we merely credit "Alma 34" without verbally recognizing Amulek as the speaker of those words. Consider this statement, for example:

For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors. (Alma 34:32)

Sound familiar? How about this one:

I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. (Alma 34:33)

Or this one:

That same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in that eternal world. (Alma 34:34)

Before uttering these words, Amulek had spoken extensively and powerfully of the infinite atonement, clarifying the meaning of the word *infinite* when linked with *atonement*. Much earlier both Jacob and Nephi used the term *infinite* in speaking of the atonement (see 2 Nephi 9:7; 25:16), but it is Amulek who fully explains just what that means and why only Christ could accomplish it. He says, in part:

For it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice; yea, not a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice; but it must be an infinite and eternal sacrifice. (Alma 34:10)

Amulek explains further that "there can be nothing which is short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world" (Alma 34:12) and also fulfill "the law of Moses" (v. 13). But the clincher is in the next verse, where he more pointedly links the law to the atonement of Christ:

And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal. (Alma 34:14)

I am grateful to Mormon for also including Amulek's words about prayer to these poor Zoramites who had been forbidden to worship in churches they helped build, and therefore apparently assumed they could no longer approach God. In what can only be described as poetry (at least by me), Amulek enjoins the outcast Zoramites to pray to the Lord wherever they are, whenever they can, over all aspects of their lives. And if they can't speak their prayers aloud, they should speak them silently. I won't cite the entire

passage, but you remember that verse after verse begins with “Cry unto him,” whether it be over crops, flocks, and household, or against enemies that threaten, or even the devil himself (see Alma 34:18–27). In closing this portion of his counsel, Amulek eloquently insists that mortals must also utter private prayers in sequestered places and in their hearts for themselves and others. Hear him:

But this is not all; ye must pour out your souls in your closets, and your secret places, and in your wilderness. (Alma 34:26)

A sidenote here: I think the word *wilderness* in this passage can refer to a barren spiritual place or condition as well as to a remote location. Amulek continues:

Yea, and when you do not cry unto the Lord, let your hearts be full, drawn out in prayer unto him continually for your welfare, and also for the welfare of those who are around you. (Alma 34:27)


Certainly Alma 34 is one of the most moving doctrinal chapters in the Book of Mormon, and all forty-one verses are devoted to Amulek’s sermon. Some might glance at verse 1 and assume this discourse to be merely a postscript to Alma’s splendid sermon on faith and the word as a seed. Believe me, it is much more than that, and Mormon must have recognized that a summary would not do. We should never forget, either, that Amulek, a once-prominent and -prosperous man in the apostate city of Ammonihah, has given up everything for the gospel—home, family, friends, worldly possessions—to join the younger Alma on a mission to bring backsliders to faith and repentance.

I urge you to return to the Book of Mormon with gladness, perhaps reading more closely, seeing even the very familiar parts of the book with new eyes. This time, too, consider the larger

context of the oft-recited quotations, and come to know the people we might overlook in our well-deserved adulation of larger-than-life figures such as the first Nephi and the second Alma.

Elder Neal Maxwell, whom I have been blessed to count as a friend, once said, “Only by searching the scriptures,” rather than merely “using them occasionally as quote books, can we begin to understand the implications as well as the declarations of the gospel.”⁶ He also spoke on this matter in his book *“Not My Will, But Thine.”* His words, which describe the Book of Mormon metaphorically, in poet’s terms, are my conclusion:

The Book of Mormon will be with us “as long as the earth shall stand.” We need all that time to explore it, for the book is like a vast mansion with gardens, towers, courtyards, and wings. There are rooms yet to be entered, with flaming fireplaces waiting to warm us. . . . There are panels inlaid with incredible insights. . . . Yet we as Church members sometimes behave like hurried tourists, scarcely venturing beyond the entry hall.⁷

May all of us venture time and time again beyond the entry hall of what I regard as the greatest book ever published. For me, it is ever new. For me, it is the passport to discipleship on the most important journey of my life. 

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6. “Called and Prepared from the Foundation of the World,” *Ensign*, May 1986, 34.

7. Neal A. Maxwell, *“Not My Will, But Thine”* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 33.