SYMBOLIC ACTION AND PERSUASION
IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

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Keith H. Lane
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Grant M. Boswell, Committee Chairman

Bruce W. Young, Committee Member

James E. Faulconer, Committee Member

Dec. 6, 1990

Gloria Cronin, Graduate Coordinator
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Introduction

I start with at least this belief: that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be, a record of a people who lived approximately two thousand years ago, written by prophets inspired of the Lord, compiled by those who saw our day and have something of value to say to us, and translated by a modern prophet under inspiration of God.

I also start with the assertion that the Book of Mormon is a rhetorical book. By this I mean that it is a book that seeks to persuade its readers to certain actions. Indeed, as one reads the title page of the Book of Mormon, it seems to plead for a rhetorical approach, since one of its stated purposes is "[for] the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ".¹ Later we read what seems to be the general attitude and motive of those who compiled the book: "We labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God" (2 Nephi 25:23). We also read that the prophets labored under the command that "They should persuade all men to repentance" (2 Nephi 26:27). And Nephi, writing about what he will and will not include in his record, writes that "the fulness of mine intent is that I may persuade men to come unto the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and be saved" (1 Nephi 6:4). The book is persuasive and rhetorical in nature; and
much might be gained by studying it from the perspective of rhetoric.

To do this I choose to use some of the thinking of the philosopher, literary critic, and rhetorician, Kenneth Burke—not because Burke’s ideas are superior to those of the Book of Mormon, or that somehow something essential is missing in the gospel found in the Book of Mormon, but contained in Burke’s writings. Rather, I bring in Burke to help us understand some of the philosophical and cultural assumptions we commonly read with, and to show us some ways we might read more profitably. Burke is arguably the most important modern figure in the field of rhetoric, and his concerns and insights into language, ethics, and human relations make him an ideal choice for this project. Burke may be able to help us see things we otherwise miss.

Because of time constraints, as well as my desire to concentrate closely on the Book of Mormon, I will not mention scriptures outside of the Book of Mormon that might give support or insight into what I’m arguing. Because of this, my thesis might not be what it could be, but it will also be something it couldn’t be if I brought other things in. The Book of Mormon, I believe, can stand on its own merits, and after having seen those, we may appreciate it even more in its truer context among other works of scripture.

Much of what I will say could be said differently--
perhaps in less literary, philosophic, or rhetorical terms. Perhaps someday it will be. But I make no apology for saying what I have to say in an academic context, to members of the academy, and in my best academic voice.

Reading (and this is especially true of scripture) ought to induce us to live better--more ethically and morally. This study, I hope, will help us do that.
Chapter One. Rhetoric and Scripture: Another Way Through

Two of the most common ways to read scripture (ways I grew up with and adopted whole-heartedly) are to read them either from the perspective that the intent of scripture is to give us a true system of concepts and doctrines about God and the universe, or to see the scriptures as setting up a set of rules and regulations to live by, a systematic morality. The fundamental thing in both of these perspectives (two that are, in the long run, I think, the same perspective) is a grasping of knowledge—either the truth about God or a true set of principles from which to deduce how we should live. Sunday School and priesthood classes are full of these things, and I’ve added my fair share as well. Let me compare these two ways of reading to show their similarities and inadequacies.

Reading from the perspective of finding out the true concepts of doctrine behind the words of the scriptures implies that absolute laws or principles exist somewhere out in the universe, hidden for us to find by diligence and obedience. "Truth" consists in accurately representing those principles and laws in language. And a true conceptual system would be the accurate representation of God and whatever principles or laws can be deduced from that representation.
The conceptual approach assumes that the purpose of the scriptures is to give us an accurate representation of the universe. These concepts are behind the words of the scriptures--underlying them. From this view our aim in reading the scriptures is (by the aid of the Spirit) to find the facts out about God. We read the scriptures earnestly seeking the concepts behind them.

What I find, though, in reading from this perspective is that so much of the scriptures is ignored or tossed aside. The important thing, for instance, is not the effect the poetry of a certain passage has on us, but the doctrine that lies behind it. Once we know the concept, then we know what the scripture is really trying to say behind all those words, and we can essentially ignore the words and just keep hold of the concept. Reading in this way becomes essentially an intellectual endeavor, perplexed or oblivious at best, annoyed and intolerant at worst, at what doesn’t fit into our system of concepts. And it is this approach that usually results in heated, unprofitable debate over points of theology and doctrine.

The "rules and regulations" approach to the scriptures leads to a search in the scriptures for a system of rules and regulations by which we can deduce, how we should act in specific situations. Much like the conceptual approach, this method seeks to find the underlying rules behind the scriptures. It seeks for a certainty in what we do--a clear
way to know what we should and shouldn't do, as well as a clear way to judge if our actions (or others') are good or evil. While this approach seems to be better than the conceptual approach because it focuses on how we live rather than on what we know, in truth it is much the same because its aim (though not to find the "doctrine" in the scripture) is to uncover the correct rule of conduct behind the scripture. It assumes that living the gospel found in the scriptures is a matter of behavior and procedures—following rules and steps.

One of the problems with the rules and regulations approach (and here I must speak for myself, since perhaps everyone doesn't have the same experience) tends to make me more concerned for finding the right thing to do to "prove" I'm righteous, rather than leading me to do good for others. And the zeal for adherence to rules and steps often makes me intolerant of others who, in action or belief, do not measure up. I become more concerned for the rule than self-forgetfully loving and helping people, more focused on myself than on others, and "living the gospel" essentially becomes a selfish endeavor.

Both views (despite any claims that we must be spiritual or seeking to do right to understand the scriptures) assume that the important thing is accuracy in knowledge, whether that accuracy be about God or about the rules. Both assume an intellectual, rational grasp and
mastery of certain concepts. And both approaches, whether they eventually lead to how we should live or not, privilege knowledge over action. These approaches are basically metaphysical and "scientific." The main thing is to know--to be certain and in control. And while there is nothing wrong with science in and of itself, it would seem our studies of the scriptures ought to be more than that.

But if we don't read the scriptures to find what concepts lie behind them, or to set up a system of morality, then what is left for us to do? How should we read the scriptures (and in this study, the Book of Mormon) if we don't look for those things? There must be other ways.

One profitable way (among others) is to read from the perspective of rhetoric--that is, to see scripture as a work of rhetoric (a text designed to persuade) and to study its rhetorical aspects (how and to what it is trying to persuade us). Looking at a text from a rhetorical angle moves us first to considerations of what a text is asking us to do, and to inquiries into why and how the text is persuading. And those consideration come before any attempt to find or create a system of concepts or rules. Rhetoric concerns us with action more than knowledge. Knowledge clearly plays a role, as we will see, but the fundamental concern in a rhetorical approach is what a text is persuading us to do. Many of the genuinely profitable aspects of the conceptual or rule-oriented approach are still valued in a rhetorical
approach, but they are subordinated to questions of action.

Before I go any further, I need to give a general sense of the word *rhetoric*. By rhetoric I do not mean what might be called "campaign rhetoric," as in "Does the Senator mean what he says, or is it just campaign rhetoric?" When I use the word *rhetoric* in this thesis I do not mean empty bombast, verbal gymnastics, or deception. Rhetoric may include these things (rhetoric can be practiced unethically), but not necessarily. Nor by rhetoric do I mean merely style. Rhetoric includes style, but it is not exclusively that. Style (and it is important to remember this) is a significant aspect of rhetoric, but it is not its entirety. My reason for making this distinction is that it is possible, under the name of rhetoric, to do a stylistic reading of a work that is detached from genuine concerns for what the text means for us. This is similar to analyzing a work of literature on merely stylistic terms with no concern for its ethical, moral, or socio-political assertions and implications.²

To give a general sense of what I do mean by rhetoric, let's look at a few definitions (all of them valuable I think), finally ending with Kenneth Burke's. The most common definition (found in some form in nearly any dictionary) says simply that rhetoric is the art or science of persuasion. Aristotle's explanation is slightly different: "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any
given case the available means of persuasion" (1355b 25-26). Albert Duhamel defines rhetoric as "effective expression" (344). Burke defines rhetoric as the "use of symbols by one symbol-using entity to induce action in another" (Rhetoric 46), and as a "symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (43).

Burke asserts that even to persuade to a belief or attitude is to persuade to an incipient act (Rhetoric 42). In other words, when one practices rhetoric he or she seeks to persuade another to a belief or attitude and, consequently, to action. In calling a belief or attitude an incipient act, Burke is not saying that to believe or to hold an attitude towards something is not to act. This is simply his attempt to make useful distinctions between practical (nonverbal) acts and symbolic (verbal) acts. There is a difference between believing I should do something, and actually doing a good thing. As Burke says, "You may never be called upon to 'act,' in the brute sense of the word. You may act, a generation later, in the names [judgments] and attitudes you bequeath to your children" (Attitudes 4).

While keeping all the definitions in mind, it is this view of rhetoric—as the use of language to persuade to action—that I wish us to keep in the foreground as I consider what that means for how we approach the Book of Mormon.

At this point, let me describe and give a rationale for
a rhetorical approach, and then explain how a rhetorical approach to the Book of Mormon might be practiced, and my reasons for believing it to be a worthwhile alternative to reading to find a system of "true concepts" or morality.

One of the most significant reasons for valuing a rhetorical approach is found in modern philosophy. Much of the most important thinking about language, knowledge, and human existence (particularly in philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida) asserts that our use of language is selective--intentionally and inevitably. Our knowledge and our language is perspectival, and any claim to an absolute knowledge or accurate representation should be approached with intellectual and moral skepticism. This seems to be what Nietzsche has in mind when he writes:

Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confessions of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown. (13)

Nietzsche and others ask us to remember that knowledge mediated by language is perspectival and therefore our speech is selective and motivated.

This is similar to what Kenneth Burke maintains as he discusses how humans try to speak about the world and their
experience and create terms that will accurately represent the world. Burke is skeptical of such a terminology, for he sees even in scientific language a "suasive nature" and explains that "even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (Language 45). Burke is not arguing for some objective "reality," but rather that even if there were such, our language about it must be selective. For Burke and thinkers like him, reality is not manifest outside language but in language itself. Our perspective and our speaking about the world are necessarily selective, and our selections are motivated by social, political, psychological, biological, moral, or ethical influences.

Burke maintains that as we speak in a situation (context) about any subject, our speaking will reveal an attitude and imply, if not assert openly, a plan of action with regard to the situation and the subject. This is true even if one is not writing with the intention to "persuade" but just to work things out or to write poetically--merely for the sake of writing. We must still acknowledge that attitudes will be asserted and that a text will have social ramifications beyond itself, no matter the "purity" of motives or the earnestness in being objective (Language 25-43).

If language is selective and deflective, then we choose
what we will speak about and how we will speak about it—the "reality" and attitude we will assert. We must choose what we will say (we can’t say everything); and that choosing is a valuing, an assertion of will and attitude. This means that all language is in some way persuasive—rhetorical. We simply cannot speak without at least implying, if not openly asserting, beliefs or attitudes, and consequent action.

This can be said in another way, and that is to see language from the perspective of Kenneth Burke’s "Dramatism": "We view language as a kind of action, symbolic action. And for this terministic perspective we have proposed the trade name of ‘Dramatism’ precisely because we would feature the term ‘act’" (Language 366). For Burke, any time we use language we engage in symbolic action; that is, we act with symbols. As Burke says:

By "symbolic action" in the Dramatistic sense is meant any use of symbol systems in general; I am acting symbolically, in the Dramatistic sense, when I speak these sentences to you, and you are acting symbolically insofar as you "follow" them, and thus size up their "drift" or "meaning."

(Language 63)

Any use of language is action—we are doing something in a given context—and to use language is, by definition, to use symbols.

Burke’s theory of Dramatism views language "primarily
as a mode of action rather than as a mode of knowledge, though the two are by no means mutually exclusive" ("Questions" 330). And Burke further clarifies this when he says that "language is primarily a species of action, or expression of attitude, rather than an instrument of definition" ("Dramatism" 447). Placing language in the field of action causes us to see language in terms of our use of it, of what we do with it, more so than in terms of strict science, logic, representation, or epistemology. "In keeping with the rules of this calculus, language must be approached primarily in terms of its poetic and rhetorical uses (its functions as expression and as persuasion or inducement to action)" (Language 367).

Burke also explains that a "dramatistic" view of language will differ from a "scientistic" approach in that the latter "builds the edifice of language with primary stress upon a proposition such as 'It is or it is not.' The 'dramatistic' approach puts the primary stress upon such hortatory expressions as 'thou shalt, or thou shalt not'" (Language 44). It is not that "knowledge" will play no role, but that our primary concern in a Burkean critique of language use is more for what it does, for how it accomplishes its effects, and why (its moral, psychological, social, political, ethical, or religious assertions, forms and motives) than for accuracy in representation. Burke continues:
Accordingly, whereas the scientist emphasis spontaneously, almost automatically, begins with problems of the direct relation between the verbal sign and its corresponding nonverbal referent, a Dramatistic approach to the analysis of language starts with problems of terministic catharsis [the limits and implications of language and knowledge as perspectival]. . . . "Knowledge," in the strictly scientific sense, enters such a view secondarily. Insofar as the material assembled is properly managed, a Dramatistic view of it should be a contribution to knowledge. (Language 367)

To further clarify the notion of symbolic action, and in defense of his selection of the term Dramatism, Burke compares the notion of action (which he would characterize as creation) to that of motion (evolution) (Grammar 63) and confesses that he does make a pragmatic distinction between the "actions" of "persons" and the sheer "motions" of "things." . . . Yet we, the typically symbol--using animal, cannot relate to one another sheerly as things in motion. Even the behaviorist, who studies man in terms of his laboratory experiments, must treat his colleagues as persons, rather than purely and simply as automata responding to stimuli.

I should make it clear: I am not pronouncing on
the metaphysics of this controversy. Maybe we are but things in motion. I don’t have to haggle about that possibility. I need but point out that, whether or not we are just things in motion, we think of one another (and especially of those with whom we are intimate) as persons. And the difference between a thing and a person is that the one merely moves whereas the other acts. For the sake of the argument, I’m even willing to grant that the distinction between things moving and persons acting is but an illusion. All I would claim is that, illusion or not, the human race cannot possibly get along with itself on the basis of any other intuition. The human animal, as we know it, emerges into personality by first mastering whatever tribal speech happens to be its particular symbolic environment. *(Language 53)*

For Burke, the whole notion of language as symbolic action is tied to the idea that we are persons: we are in motion, but capable of action, capable of thought and speech about both motion and action (which means we are capable of symbolic action); and we are temporal, social beings. And the fact that our personhood is intertwined with language and language is tied to the society we are situated in starts us quickly moving to the realms of morals and ethics. We are persons because we speak language and we learn
language in a social context. One's existence as a person is inseparable from the persons and the "symbolic environment" in which he or she grew to personhood. Consequently an individual's action—be it "symbolic" or "practical"—has implications for those who share the scene and for the scene itself, and not just for the individual. From this we may conclude that it is possibly more important to ask what the words of a person require us to do, or what the words mean for us, than to determine if they are an accurate representation of "reality."

Burke views rhetoric as symbolic action taken to induce action in another, and in doing so places rhetoric squarely in the field of ethics, morality, and responsibility. Burke insists that rhetoric be seen "as addressed, since persuasion implies an audience" (Rhetoric 38). That is, rhetoric presupposes a situated audience for whom the action of rhetoric is taken and which the rhetor seeks to induce to cooperation, and such action expressly has social, moral, and ethical content. Any language addressed to another will be, in one way or another, persuasive or rhetorical. Not to approach language with this in mind is to overlook much of what goes on as we speak and listen to one another. The persuasive aspect of language—the fact that it is addressed—acknowledges the reality and the agency of another, as well as humanity's interrelatedness.

If all language, then, is in some way rhetorical
(persuasive) by its very nature, then clearly we are missing something if we don't transfer that knowledge to our study of texts, including scripture. And with the Book of Mormon we certainly deny ourselves a fruitful perspective—particularly when the writers themselves openly acknowledge their desire to persuade. To be unaware or unconcerned about the rhetorical aspects is to miss both the context and many of the insights one can get from the book. And possibly worse, it is to be unaware of how we are being (or should be) affected, and what we are being persuaded to believe and do. Reading scripture primarily from a traditional conceptual or systematic view limits our sights so narrowly that we miss the rhetorical context in which we find ourselves. Rhetoric does not ask that we ignore theology but demands that we see it in the larger context, the more encompassing situation of humans acting with and through language to achieve certain effects. Furthermore, to not read a text rhetorically also means we pass over, in so many instances, the implications for religious living.

To some, a text's implications for action may not matter—they may find it uninteresting and irrelevant. But to anyone genuinely concerned about religious matters, this is paramount. Indeed it seems to me that the questions "What should we do?" or "How should we live?" would be uppermost in the minds of people concerned with religion. While those questions (and others like them) may be explored
conceptually, or in traditional theological ways, they are not primarily the kind of questions metaphysics or traditional theology ask. Those questions are most at home and consequently best dealt with in rhetoric.

Of course, a common way to read scripture is first to look for the theology or principles and then deduce from that what we should do. That approach seeks to establish ontology or epistemology first and then move to questions of actions, ethics, and morals. Rhetoric asks that we reverse those questions. First, what should we do; second, what is this or how are we to understand?

One might rightly ask, though, how this rhetorical approach differs from a procedural (rules and regulations) approach, especially since both the rhetorical and procedural approaches seem to lead toward action. Perhaps the main difference is that the rhetorical approach I advocate occurs in the context of sharing a world with others, while the procedural approach is practiced primarily in isolation from people and real contexts. The procedural approach usually seeks to establish rules and regulations in an effort not to have to deal with the unpredictability of other people and the uncertainty of situations one faces. The rules and regulations are established in isolation from such concerns, whereas the rhetorical approach, since its fundamental concern is action, takes into account other people and specific contexts.
Among other things, a rhetorical approach applied to the Book of Mormon would mean that we would read it as persuading us to action in our particular contexts, rather than establishing concepts or procedures. The aim is action more than conceptual accuracy. Whatever statement of "facts" we are given must be read ultimately in the context of the authors' efforts to get us to believe in Christ and repent. Furthermore, in every instance, the passages of scripture that we most often abstract theological concepts from are not theological treatises, but exhortations, blessings, speeches, letters, etc.—all with the purpose of persuading a particular audience to repent. And the incidents we use to find procedures of conduct are specific instances, and we cannot assume the person so acting would say this is how we should always act. So whether or not we believe in finding or creating theological concepts or rules in the scriptures, to read passages of the Book of Mormon as seeking to establish such concepts or rules is at least to wrench the statements out of their original, rhetorical context.

When it comes to reading scripture, rhetoric would demand that we ask a relentless, possibly annoying, "so what?" and go from there. "What are the implications of what this person says for how I live, for what I do?" "What are the beliefs, attitudes, and subsequent actions this author wants me to espouse? Why?" "What is the author's purpose?" The rhetorical approach asks that we find meaningful
application for our reading. It's much like the student who asks in the middle of a Sunday School debate over some abstract doctrinal point, "But what's this got to do with how we should live?" The rhetorical approach would have us investigate the possible moral, ethical, political, social, and religious implications and applications of what an author asserts--not just the doctrinal content or consistency of what is being said.

Our discussions about the Book of Mormon would also take similar paths. And any conceptualizing (if we still choose to do so) would travel in a more practical, relational direction. It would ask, for instance, not "What is the nature of faith as described by Alma?" but "Why is Alma saying this particular thing about faith to his audience? What significance do Alma's statements about faith hold for us? What should we do in light of this?" The original question of the nature of faith may have bearing upon what we decide we should do, on what difference faith makes, but the asking and answering of that question will come in the context of seeking answers to the fundamental question of what a text means for how we live.

It seems obvious to me that an approach that ties a text more closely to how we live rather than what we imagine about some doctrinal abstraction should appeal to us. The Book of Mormon is written to persuade, and we are best to ask what action it is inducing us to take, and the manner in
which it does so.
Chapter Two. Situation and Strategy:

The Response of the Book of Mormon

In an essay calling for a sociological criticism of literature rather than a traditional stylistic criticism detached from concerns in real life, Kenneth Burke proposes that we read works of literature as "proverbs writ large." Texts in this light should be seen as "strategies for dealing with situations" (Philosophy 296). Symbolic action, says Burke, occurs within, and in response to, a particular situation; and in writing or speaking one asserts an attitude, and therefore a "strategy" or plan of action, in response to that situation. And it is from this perspective that Burke maintains that "every document bequeathed us by history must be treated as a strategy for encompassing a situation," and as "the answer or rejoinder to the assertions current in the situation in which it arose" (Philosophy 109).

A text in this view is not approached as merely a personal creative enterprise, a description, a treatise, or a disinterested explanation— it is action toward a situation. And symbolic action, since it involves persons (for only persons act), by definition involves ethics, morality, sociality and an assertion of an attitude or a way of being toward those things. "The symbolic act is the dancing of an attitude" (Philosophy 9).
As we encounter the situations dealt with and the responses or strategies asserted in a work, we will see similarities to our own situations. As Burke says, "These situations are real; the strategies for handling them have public content; and in so far as situations overlap from individual to individual, or from one historical period to another, the strategies possess universal relevance" (Philosophy 1). Approaching a text in this way allows us to see its relevance in the situations we face in our own lives and to use a text "as equipment for living" (293).

With this in mind, let us now turn to the Book of Mormon and establish the situations it deals with, both in its own time, and as a document given us by history with relevance to us.

I wish to look first in the broadest terms possible at the general situation presented by the book. This is not to deny smaller, more specific situations that are common to our present situation, but I believe that the general situation the Book of Mormon asserts and responds to, as well as the "strategy" or "action" enjoined, holds universally true.

The general situation in which the book places all of humanity is one of living in a world with other people. The book sets human beings in the situation of a temporary earth life, with the normal, inevitable interaction and interplay of influence and power—the interplay of beings, if you
will. Individuals are presented in relation to individuals, individuals to communities, communities to communities, and of course all of these in relation to Satan and God.

From a Burkean perspective, the book shows human beings in varying degrees of conflict or cooperation—from all-out war and destruction, to complete peace and cooperation. The book contains them all. The point to be made here is that the book places an individual in a world with other people (there is no isolated self here). It is significant in this light that the writers of the Book of Mormon always have an audience. This situation of being in the world with others is common to us all: like it or not, there are other people in the world besides you and me.

Related to the situation of being in the world with others is the notion set forth in the Book of Mormon that all human beings have estranged themselves from God, and consequently from all goodness and righteousness. And goodness and righteousness involve good and right actions with and toward others, so we are alienated from each other as well. This is our common lot. Yet, says the book, through the atonement of Christ, life becomes a probationary period—allowing the possibility of healing the rift between humanity and God, and between each other. We are also free to act, and within the framework of a probationary estate, free to do anything that's possible. Yet the writers of the book are also adamant to point out that ultimately any
freedom is mostly the freedom to choose between the two ultimates, God and Satan:

And because they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given. Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil. (2 Nephi 2:26-27)

Simple though it may sound, the Book of Mormon sets us in a situation of having to choose between Satan or Christ. This of course doesn’t mean that every choice is a choice between the two (I can imagine having to choose between two good things, or two bad things), but that ultimately one must choose between them. Part of the writers’ efforts is to establish those choices and show what happens when individuals or groups (ranging from small communities to whole nations) choose one or the other. The choice between Christ and Satan is described by the prophets as a choice between liberty, life, good, joy, and holiness, on the one hand, and captivity, death, evil, misery, and sin on the
other (see 2 Nephi 2 in particular). The writers also set things up in such a way that we know that to not choose Christ is to choose the other. Ultimately there is no third choice or neutral ground.

Obviously the writers of the book want us to know that we face the same situation that their peoples faced. We too are free to choose between Satan and Christ, and the way we live will be the realization of that choice. Yet as I describe this situation, it seems nearly too obvious and simple. The fact is the writers of the Book of Mormon know the situation they present is a simple, obvious choice, yet the history of the people shows that this simplicity is easily forgotten—for the most part the people choose not to follow Christ. The destruction of a people is a desperate thing, and the book stands as a testimony that such destruction can happen—just as it stands as a witness that salvation can occur as well. Salvation and destruction are real possibilities.

With this in mind, let us turn to what I believe to be the "strategy" the Book of Mormon asserts as a response to the general situation it describes. Given that we are estranged from God, that we live in the temporal world with others, and that we are free to act and choose, what "action" would the book induce or persuade us to take?

Perhaps the action the Book of Mormon seeks to persuade all men to take is most strongly stated in Moroni's last
plaintive invitation: "I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ and lay hold upon every good gift, and touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing. . . . Yea, come unto Christ and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness" (Moroni 10:30,32). After all that is said throughout the book, this is Moroni's last rejoinder: Come unto Christ. And in truth this is the same strategy offered by all the prophets. The invitation to come unto Christ is offered in various ways (as a call to repent, to believe, to hearken and obey the word of Christ, to be baptized, to be reconciled to God, to become holy, to do whatever one must do to come to him), but it is the same call. I should also note, in support of my earlier assertion that our ultimate choice is between the Lord or Satan (no third option), that in numerous instances, when the prophets call on us to choose Christ and his redemption, they also, often in the same breath, warn us not to choose Satan. For example, Lehi, speaking to Jacob, pleads:

    I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his holy Spirit. And not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in
his own kingdom. (2 Nephi 2:28-29)

To make the point that all the prophets have "spoken more or less concerning [Christ's plan of redemption]" (Mosiah 13: 33), and to demonstrate the prevalence and consistency of the call the come to the Lord, let us look at more instances where the prophets have sought to persuade people to come unto Christ.

Lehi sees the vision of the tree of life wherein he partakes of the fruit of the tree. After partaking he looks immediately for his family. "And it came to pass that I beckoned unto them: and I also did say unto them with a loud voice that they should come unto me, and partake of the fruit, which was desirable above all other fruit" (1 Nephi 8:15). This fruit, Nephi later discovers when he sees much the same vision, is best described by the Savior's sacrifice and "is the Love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men"(1 Nephi 11:22).

Later, Lehi's son, Jacob, cries: "Hearken diligently unto me, and remember the words which I have spoken; and come unto the Holy One of Israel, and feast upon that which perisheth not" (2 Nephi 9:51). And in a similar vein, Alma speaks of the Lord who sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you. Yea, he saith, Come unto me and ye shall partake of the
fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely: Yea come unto me and bring forth works of righteousness.

(Alma 5:33-35)

Nephi gives one of the longer explanation of the intentions of the prophets as they write:

For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do. . . . And we talk of Christ we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law; and they, by knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ, and know for what end the law was given. . . . I have spoken plainly unto you, that ye cannot misunderstand. And the words which I have spoken shall stand as a testimony against you: for they are sufficient to teach any man the right way; for the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not. . . . I say
unto you that the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not; and Christ is the Holy One of Israel; wherefore ye must bow down before him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul. (2 Nephi 25:23-29)

For the prophets like Nephi, the whole point of the law, both the Mosaic law and the law of the gospel, was to set people in relation to Christ--to point them to him. And it is Christ himself who gives one of the strongest invitations. After the crucifixion and the accompanying destruction, the voice of Christ is heard to say to those remaining:

Will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you? Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me. (3 Nephi 9:13-14)

Finally, it is Moroni (commissioned by Mormon to do the last bit of compiling of the book) who challenges us, "Doubt not, but be believing, and begin as in times of old, and come unto the Lord with all your heart, and work out your own salvation with fear and trembling before him" (Mormon 9:27). At the end of the book of Ether, Moroni (thinking this will be his last opportunity to write to us) exhorts,
"And now, I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever" (Ether 12:41). And it is (significantly) the same invitation that we come unto Christ with which Moroni ends the last chapter of the entire Book of Mormon (Moroni 10:30-33).

The "strategy" of returning or coming to the Lord is fundamental to all else said in the Book of Mormon. The plea that we come unto Christ is a call to action, an enjoinder to respond to the Lord's call. This is the action the prophets seek to persuade us to take. The attitude that accompanies this action seems to be characterized by faith, submissiveness, hope, steadfastness, and love. These kinds of attitudes and actions, built on the foundation of Christ's atonement, reconcile us to God and heal the estrangement.

But coming unto Christ not only heals our rift with God, but changes our relation with others as well. Coming to the Lord is not only the prophets' response to our estrangement from God, but the recommended response to any situation, including our living in a world with other people. The Book of Mormon shows in many places that when we come unto Christ, he fills us with his love, which in turn calls us to serve--to do good to others and tell our
own story and testimony in an effort to persuade them, also, to come to Christ. The point here is that the act of coming unto Christ does not sequester one from other people—it is not an isolating experience, but rather one that calls us to be infinitely concerned for others. Inherent in the action of coming to Christ is the attitude or strategy for our response to the others we share the world with.

Let me give a few examples. In Lehi’s vision of the tree of life, he partakes of the fruit of the tree (and both tree and fruit are described as representing the love of God). His next action is to turn immediately and look for his family that they might partake as well. Similarly, Nephi stresses the importance of charity: "The Lord God hath given a commandment that all men should have charity, which charity is love. And except they should have charity they were nothing" (2 Nephi 26:31). Nephi further states that when we are on the path to Christ we "must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men" (2 Nephi 31:20 emphasis mine).

Enos prays earnestly for forgiveness of sins. Upon being forgiven, he starts to pray for his people, the Nephites, then for the Lamanites, even to the point where he asks that if the Nephites are somehow destroyed by the Lamanites, a record might be kept and "be brought forth at some future day unto the Lamanites, that, perhaps, they
might be brought unto salvation" (Enos 1:13).

King Benjamin explains (Mosiah 4:11-17) that by remembering our own nothingness and God's greatness, and calling on him faithfully, we will retain a remission of our sins, and be filled with the love of God. And we "will not have a mind to injure one another, but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due" (13). Such attitudes will also compel us to not neglect our children and to care for those in need.

After Alma and the sons of Mosiah come unto Christ (with the help of Alma the elder, the prayers of the people, and a visit by a rather imposing angel—an experience Alma describes as harrowing, but ultimately joyful) they spend the rest of their lives testifying and ministering to the people (Mosiah 27-28; Alma 36). The one experience leads them to the other. Amulek states that after having turned to the Lord in a cry for mercy, we must not forget to "impart of [our] substance" or "[our] prayer is vain and availeth [us] nothing"; and that "if [we] do not remember to be charitable, [we] are as dross, which the refiners do cast out, (it being of no worth) and is trodden under foot of men" (Alma 34:28-29).

The Book of Mormon reminds us that our relation to God and our relation to others are intertwined. If one is not right, the other will not be either. The Lord himself tells the people: "If ye shall come unto me, or shall desire to
come unto me, and rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee--Go thy way unto thy brother, and first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I will receive you" (3 Nephi 12:23-24). It is in this same sermon that Christ commands those who would follow him to love even their enemies (44). From this perspective we cannot love God but resent humanity (even our enemies).

In the final chapters of the Book of Mormon, Moroni includes this exhortation given by his father, Mormon: "Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son" (Moroni 7:48). We should note here that charity is a gift--something bestowed by the Lord's Spirit when we come to him. The charity inspired seems to be not only the love God has for the individual involved, and not only the greater love for God that god inspires, but also the love of God for all people, which love he bestows on those who follow him. In the last chapter of Moroni, before giving the call to come unto Christ, Moroni exhorts his readers to seek the gifts of God. Why? Because without them "there shall be none that doeth good among you, no not one. For if there be one among you that doeth good, he shall work by the power and gifts of God" (Moroni 10:25). So any good done is done by the gifts of God designed to bless humanity, and those gifts are received
only by coming to Christ.

Moroni is clear to point out that fundamental to all the gifts are faith, hope, and charity:

Wherefore there must be faith; and if there must be faith there must also be hope; and if there must be hope there must also be charity. And except ye have charity ye can in nowise be saved in the kingdom of God; neither can ye be saved in the kingdom of God if ye have not faith; neither can ye if ye have no hope. (Moroni 10:20-21)

Faith, hope, and charity, of course, occur frequently in the scriptures in connection with each other. Significantly, all are related to Christ: Faith is faith in Christ, hope is "hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his resurrection to be raised unto life eternal" (Moroni 7:41), and charity is "the pure love of Christ"(7:48). In the context of our discussion of coming to Christ, these three together (for they don’t appear to exist separately) seem to be the motivation, means, and end of this action. Moroni quotes Christ elsewhere as saying, "I will show unto them that faith, hope, and charity bringeth unto me--the fountain of all righteousness" (Ether 12:27)

And when we come to him, the Book of Mormon shows, he gives us gifts and then sends us right back out with them to bless our neighbors.

I hope this has been enough to demonstrate the
pervasiveness of the call to come unto Christ, as well as its corollary that we do good to others. For this invitation is fundamental to all else said in the Book of Mormon. The prophets do all they can in order to get us going in that direction. And in essence that's all they can do: Relate experiences (their own and others'), teach from the scriptures, encourage, warn, plead, and testify. If the prophets speak by the power of the Spirit, then the people they speak to hear the words of Christ. This hearing, though it sets people in relation to Christ, is not the same as coming to him, and indeed people can easily respond negatively (2 Nephi 33: 1-2).

What I consider most significant here is that the Book of Mormon does not offer as its strategy for dealing with the human situation a system of rules, principles, laws, doctrines or a theology to be memorized and applied as needs be. The assertion of the Book of Mormon is a person (Christ) and an accepting, responsive attitude toward him. There is a sense in which there is a "doctrine" asserted, but once again it is the doctrine or truth of a personal being. Indeed, the Book of Mormon does talk about the "doctrine of Christ," but as Louis Midgley points out,

The "doctrine" of Jesus Christ is declared by him to consist of the following: "And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me; . . . and I bear record that
the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me. And whoso believeth in me and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God. And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned" (3 Nephi 11:33-34). The Book of Mormon, of course, contains more information about both human and divine things than the fullness of the gospel, which is the doctrine of Jesus Christ. . . [But those things] are never identified as "doctrine." That word is reserved for the core message that Jesus is the Christ--the Messiah, the Redeemer of mankind. Everything else is strictly subordinated to the one "doctrine of Christ," by which we may "know how to come unto Christ and be saved" (see 1 Nephi 15:14), for it is the Redeemer who is the way of salvation, the way, truth, life, light, and so forth--that being the one and only doctrine identified as such in the Book of Mormon. . . . "Doctrine" (usually in the singular, as opposed to the plural form, as in "false doctrines") identifies the gospel understood as faith, repentance, and baptism--how to come unto Christ and be saved. (Midgley 100-01) So the "doctrine" in the Book of Mormon is more concerned
with persons and actions than it is with theological belief. The salvation offered is not found in a concept or principle or a system of rules. The salvation rests in a person—Christ—and in coming to him. The Book of Mormon does not ask us to believe in a concept or a system, or to have hope in an abstract, eternal law written somewhere in the universe. Nor are we required to love some unmoved mover or follow an absolute value. We are asked to trust and follow and love a living being—to come to Christ. And nothing is lost in the idea of law or truth, for in the Book of Mormon Christ proclaims, "I am the law, and the light" (3 Nephi 15:9) and "I am the light, and the life, and the truth of the world" (Ether 4:12).

That Christ himself is the law and the truth, and not merely an embodiment of eternal truth, or the best representation of an absolute concept of perfection, should cause us to reconsider before we try to establish a system of propositions or doctrines. Speaking of the doctrine of Christ (again those essentials needed to come to him), the Lord says, "whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock," but "whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock" (3 Nephi 11:39-40 emphasis mine).

The truth the Book of Mormon speaks of is not representational, and truth as a doctrine or concept cannot be what we love or follow or build our lives around. The
truth we love and trust must be a person—Christ. This seems to be what Helaman wants his audience to understand when he asks his sons to remember, remember, that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall. (Helaman 5:12).

For philosophical reasons (among others) I find this quite satisfying. Often the concern that arises when one encounters much of the thinking in contemporary rhetoric and philosophy is that we seem all of a sudden to lose the foundation that we need to stand on. There must be something we can trust—some Law, Truth—something. But as James Faulconer has suggested, we can still have truth without it having to be (in the traditional sense) transcendental or absolute and without it being relative (58–59). The truth is a being and our relation with that being. And the Book of Mormon, rather than assert an abstraction of eternal proportions, sets us in relation to Christ and asks us to
come to him. Our foundation cannot be a system or a construct of truth; it must be in our actual relation to Christ.

Reading the Book of Mormon from the perspective that its purpose is to persuade us to come to Christ, and that the great truth it asserts is a living, divine being, gets us past looking for concepts or rules behind the scriptures, and immediately sets us in a situation where we must respond to that being. It moves us from the realm of mere knowledge to the world of action, ethics, and religion. It calls us from the situation we are in to come unto Christ.

A question that naturally arises at this stage is if the Book of Mormon asserts coming unto Christ as the overall strategy for acting in the situations we encounter, does it give some sense of what this means for more specific situations?

In Burke's notion that a text asserts a strategy for dealing with a situation, he mentions that many of the situations to which a text responds will have similarities to our own situations and therefore relevance to how we should act. The key here is the word "similar." Similar does not mean the same, for no two situations, regardless of the striking similarities, are going to be exactly the same. This means that our response to a situation can be enlightened by the responses others have had to their own, but that in each instance we must form our own response to
fit the demands we face now. And while the call to come unto Christ may be a universal call and the universal response asserted by the Book of Mormon, the response for individual situations must yet be worked out. That is to say, what one should do in particular situations after coming to Christ cannot be dictated, prescribed, or formulated in advance. The Book of Mormon may provide general principles or rules of thumb, but I'm convinced that it does not give stories for us to transpose entirely onto our own experiences. In many ways (as a friend told me one day after I discussed some of these notions with him) the Book of Mormon is an unruly book.

To exemplify this, let us take a general situation—one faced often by people in Book of Mormon times and our own time—and see what the Book of Mormon recommends for us. What should we do when faced with individuals who have violent intent toward us, either as individuals or as a people? What is the strategy the book recommends? One of the more obvious answers is that we love all, even our enemies (in Burkean terms we might call this the charity strategy). This is true, but what it is that love requires that we do seems to vary frequently. Indeed the various responses of the Lord’s people to situations of impending violence range from one end of the spectrum to the other. Here are just a few: Nephi is commanded to kill Laban to preserve the record so his people do not perish; the Anti-Nephi-Lehies prostrate
themselves before an attacking enemy and allow themselves to be killed; the people separate themselves from their enemies; Alma sends missionaries to teach and bring good will to a people that hate them; Moroni raises the title of liberty during a time of dissension and later orders the execution of those who refuse to support the cause of freedom when they are at war; the people prepare for war and fight; one group prays for deliverance; some annihilate those they fight with; others fight but stop the minute the enemy shows any sign of surrender. One wonders what the formula for this situation is—especially when some of the actions taken are so opposite. And that’s just the point: there isn’t a set formula for dealing with this or any situation, other than coming unto Christ and doing what he commands in a given situation.

The Book of Mormon may assert some general principles or attitudes, but it recognizes the need to face each situation on its own terms and with very few preconceived plans of what ought to be done. The book would have us do what’s best or right in any situation, but does not say that one person’s response in one situation is the exact reaction another person should have in a very similar instance. The book does not give a written prescription for particular situations.

Again, the book may offer a general attitude toward general situations, but one people’s action ought not to be
imposed on our own situations to justify our actions. To return to the discussion about what we do when facing the possibility of violent intent, I have no doubt that the writers of the Book of Mormon do not delight in violence and would have things be peaceful. The pathos of seeing a prophet mourn over a fallen people and his recommending as the antidote repentance and charity are case enough against any vindictiveness. One of the things that the writers imply, in fact, is that when people come to Christ, the moral life they live includes a general turning away from violence. To use only one example (or a cluster of similar examples) of either fighting or not fighting as the paradigm for all situations is to deny the other possible moral responses. For instance, to enter a situation of violence and to respond with violence because of a preconceived idea that if someone attacks me I am justified in defending myself because of some happening in Nephite history is to not be genuinely open to the range of possible moral responses. And it would be just as closed to moral possibilities to enter the situation already planning to give up our lives rather than to use force ourselves. To make an absolute rule from a specific or even a general commandment given another people in a different situation and to not ever allow for other exceptions is to miss the point.

I am not saying that certain commandments, for example,
are to be ignored in our time on the grounds that they are irrelevant to us because they were given to people a few thousand years ago. But when we consider a commandment in the scriptures in trying to find out how we should act, we must view it in its own context, in its context with all scripture, in its relation to our present circumstances, and in relation to the revelation given us now.

Nephi tells us he and his group likened the scriptures unto themselves for their profit and learning (1 Nephi 19:23). This "likening," I suggest, is similar to Burke's notion that we see a text as a response that implies attitudes and actions toward a situation, and that we use the situations of others, not to reduce our situation to theirs or theirs to ours, but to throw light on our own circumstances as we ask what we shall do. The Book of Mormon may serve as a guide, but very little should be taken as the rule or the law. For the book doesn't point us to those things, but rather to Christ, whom the book proclaims to be the law and the truth anyway. And ultimately we must go to him if we are to receive wisdom for our present concerns.

Perhaps Nephi heads in this same direction when, in 2 Nephi 31, he explains in very simple terms the gospel of Christ and encourages our entering in the path to eternal life. In the next chapter he exhorts his readers to follow Christ and then supposes that the readers "ponder somewhat in your hearts concerning that which ye should do after ye
have entered in the way." (In the context of our present discussion, we might frame that "What we should do after we come unto Christ.") Nephi then reminds his audience that they were promised to speak with the tongue of angels, which he interprets to mean by the power of the Holy Ghost. Nephi then adds,

Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ.
Wherefore I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do. Wherefore, now after I have spoken these words, if ye cannot understand them it will be because ye ask not, neither do ye knock; wherefore, ye are not brought into the light, but must perish in the dark. For behold, again I say unto you that if ye will enter in by the way, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all the things what ye should do. Behold this [referring to what he’s said here and all that preceded it in chapter 31] is the doctrine of Christ. (2 Nephi 32:3-6)

Nephi is bold in stating that the words of Christ will tell us all we should do, but let us notice that he doesn’t say a simple search of the written word will do, but that to understand what they are telling us to do, we must pray and "enter in the way" (another way of coming to Christ): and
then we will be shown all that we should do by the Holy Ghost, who speaks Christ's immediate will to us. The written words are not to be discounted or used only to get us in the mood for revelation, they must be understood to testify and point beyond themselves to Christ. And our truest reading of them occurs when we are in the presence of Christ conversing and listening to him. I am arguing that the greatest purpose of the Book of Mormon is to testify and persuade us to come to Christ, to set us in relation to him so he can speak to us, either through the words of the scriptures or however else he chooses to speak to us. The Book of Mormon points to a way to know what we should do (come unto Christ), but its intent is not to be a definitive theology or spiritual rule book that we (umpire like) refer to when faced with calls we must make. We go to the scriptures for guidance and help in one sense, but not in order to establish a set of principles from which we abstract a systematic religion or morality. This I think is in the spirit of these words by Arthur King:

When we live the gospel, then we live a means of knowing, of learning to know and being able to do, on all occasions, what is right. And what is right is not something that we work out rationally in our heads. We do not have to work out philosophical complexities of ethics. It has nothing to do with that. We have to study the Gospels, see what Christ did, and try to identify
ourselves with what he did. It is because we catch
the spirit of the Master, the Master’s love, and
because we have soaked ourselves in the gospel,
that we know what it is that we must do. The
gospel which we have stored within us enables us
at any moment to feel what we should do in a
certain situation. (123)

This is not to say that we do not think or deliberate over
the words of the Book of Mormon or other scriptures. We
clearly should--Moroni urges us to search diligently in the
light of Christ to know good and evil (Moroni 7:19)--but the
Book of Mormon seems to want to dissuade us from using it as
a theological treatise that gives us a systematic religion
or morality from which we can rationally come to conclusions
about what we should do in a particular situation. The
action it seeks to persuade us to take is not to come to
such conclusions but to come unto Christ.
Chapter Three. A Perspective of Action:

Alma 32-34

Having given both a rationale of a rhetorical approach to the Book of Mormon, and an explanation of the most encompassing action asserted by the book, let us now turn to a closer reading of a smaller section to see how a rhetorical approach can be applied to a reading of a text.

This chapter explores Burke’s notion of the pentad and ratios and applies this to a reading of Alma 32-34. This will give a broader view of Burke’s ideas as well as exemplify how we might look closely at a text from a perspective of action and rhetoric.

Burke’s pentad (scene, act, agent, agency, purpose) and the ratios he discusses primarily in Grammar of Motives offer a refreshing, practical, ethical, and theoretically sound approach to the perplexities found in language and human interaction. If approached a certain way it allows reading without categorizing or reducing a text to what we already formulate will be in it. The pentad helps us concentrate on the action of a text and allows us to make connections and insights without having to reduce everything to the concepts or rules we suppose lie behind words.

Burke’s Grammar of Motives, and the pentad he develops therein, is "concerned with the basic forms of thought which, in accordance with the nature of the world as all men
necessarily experience it, are exemplified in the attributing of motives" (xv). And the pentad (to which Burke occasionally adds the category of "attitude" and calls the hexad) contains the elements we inevitably bring up in asking "what people are doing and why they are doing it" (xv). For Burke, language is the basis and prototype of human relations. It is language that brings about the perplexities, problems, and joys of human interaction. In seeing our use of language as symbolic action, Burke says that certain factors will necessarily be involved as we talk about a particular act and the possible motives for taking that action. Burke describes the pentad thus:

In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the act (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the scene (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (agent) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (agency), and the purpose. Men may violently disagree about the purposes behind a given act, or about the character of the person who did it, or how he did it, or in what kind of situation he acted; or they may even insist upon totally different words to name the act itself. But be that as it may, any complete statement about
motives will offer some kind of answers to these five questions: What was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose). (Grammar xv)

Burke’s pentad offers a method of thinking and talking about any action a person might take. It "affords a serviceably over-all structure for the analysis of both literary texts in particular and human relations in general" ("Questions" 334). Burke’s pentad "used as a generating principle . . . should provide us with a kind of simplicity that can be developed into considerable complexity, and yet can be discovered beneath its elaborations" (Grammar xvi). It is simple in that it is easy to remember and relatively easy to apply to any action--verbal or nonverbal. It is complex in that it doesn’t allow one (if used like Burke would have it) to overly classify and categorize people or motives. Burke’s pentad, seen in the context of his dramatism, vigorously resists pigeonholing. It offers a way to talk about things, people, actions, and motives, but not a way to nail them down--they can’t be, at least without pain or peril. The pentad does not set forth "terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise" (xviii).

Our concern in using the Pentad is that we not use it to easily categorize things, and therefore impose a rigid system on that which is not a system. For Burke, as for
thinkers like Heidegger and Levinas, there is more to experience, more to being and human interaction, than can be accounted for systematically. And so our way of approaching a text should be one in which we have a method to get things started, but one where we are less concerned about finding the concepts behind the text, or fitting what we read into a moral or theological system, and more concerned rather that we let the text speak what it will to us.

So reading a text from the perspective of the pentad should give us terms by which we can generate talk about a text but the pentad should not be taken as a scale model of the universe. Burke confesses that "my own five terms are all about nothing, since they designate not this scene, or that agent, etc. but scene, agent, etc. in general" (Grammar 189), and that his pentadic terms ought not to be taken as "the necessary 'forms of experience,'" but rather "the necessary 'forms of talk about experience'" (317). We might see a pentadic approach to a text much like a way of approaching a person. We can pose certain questions to or about anyone, but those questions will never reveal all there is to know about that person, and the answering of those initial questions should lead to more questions and to more knowing rather than simply conclude our inquiry when we think we know everything we need.

Granted, the questions in the pentad could be used to reduce a text to oversimplified categories, just as we could
pigeonhole a person with a few questions. But Burke asks that we use them primarily to generate discussion. The pentad is a way--starting with the metaphor of Dramatism--of beginning talk about human action and motives.

Burke adds another important element to the concept of the pentad, and that is the notion of "ratios," which he says "are principles of determination" (Grammar 15). Because the terms of the pentad often overlap, we will find that some of the terms, according to the action taken, will have a high degree of similarity or influence. Burke notes that his terms lend themselves to both "merger and division" (7), and that in searching out a ratio we will be observing how such terms relate.

The ratios come into play as we examine an action and find that certain elements of the pentad seem to be more relevant in the work, and seem to be closely related to if not implicit in each other. For Burke, a ratio consists of a high degree of influence or relatedness between two of the five pentadic terms, allowing for ten ratios: scene-act, scene-agent, scene-agency, scene-purpose, act-purpose, act-agent, act-agency, agent purpose, agent-agency, and agency-purpose (15). As William Rueckert explains, "Each ratio contains two terms and each asserts a causal or equational relation between them" (74).

These ratios, Burke explains, "are essentially analogies. That is, by a 'scene-act ratio' we mean that the
nature of the act is implicit, or analogously present, in
the nature of the scene, etc." (Grammar 444). What we have
with a particular text will lead to that ratio which we
emphasize in our analysis. For instance, if I were to
analyze what we say about a person at a funeral, the ratio
to be emphasized would probably be scene-act because the
nature of the situation (scene) influences so directly what
we say (act). If the scene changes--we leave the funeral and
speak a few years later about the person--much of our speech
(the act) will change primarily because of the change in
scene. To clarify how certain ratios work, Burke explains:

A "purpose-agency ratio," for instance, would
concern the logic of "means selecting," the
relation of means to ends (as the Supreme Court
might decide that an emergency measure is
constitutional because it was taken in an
emergency situation). . . . Insofar as men's
actions are to be interpreted in terms of the
circumstances in which they are acting, their
behavior would fall under the heading of a "scene-
act ratio." But insofar as their acts reveal their
different characters, their behavior would fall
under the heading of an "agent-act ratio."
("Dramatism" 446).

Burke also notes that any of his pentadic terms can
potentially achieve similar relations (446).
So in generating talk about action through the pentad, Burke would also have us remember the ratios. And just as some of the terms in the pentad overlap on occasion, we may find certain ratios running into each other as well, and so we may need to be able to shift around as well. Burke is aware of this, admitting that there is a "circular possibility in the terms" (Grammar 19). But this is to be expected, for, as noted, the terms, though simple, potentially lead to great complexity.

What I hope the reader will see as we turn to our reading of Alma 32-34 is that we can look at the action of a text, comment on it, and be enlightened and edified, and in that way know the text by interacting with it, without needing to nail everything down, or look for and know the concepts or rules "behind" the scriptures. The questions asked by the pentad are questions we naturally employ as we try to size up situations and make judgments about what is going on and why; however, if we read from a conceptual or rule-oriented perspective, the questions are often shunned because we are looking past the actual action of the text for the "real truth" behind it. In other words, the questions the pentad asks are questions we should be asking (and often naturally do) in reading a text, but which we often lay aside because of concern for "deeper" things.

So in some ways I simply ask that we read a text on the level of action. (In many ways this is nothing new, really,
but something we may have slipped away from in our
preoccupation with the concepts and rules behind the
scriptures.) As we read we must always search out the
rhetorical aspects of the text we’ve read. We must determine
what the text is persuading us to do.

With the pentad and ratios fully in mind, then, let us
turn to an analysis of Alma 32-34. I will first fill in the
blanks, as it were, of the pentad and make comments about
certain ratios. Then I will employ the notion of a text as a
strategy (as explained in chapter two) and comment on the
possible meaning these passages have for us.

Scene:

Alma and Amulek (we read from chapter 31) are heading
up a mission to preach to the Zoramites, a proud, self-
righteous group who "did pervert many of the ways of the
Lord" (Alma 31:10). In the missionaries’ efforts to preach
to these people on every appropriate occasion, "they began
to have success among the poor class of people" who "were
cast out of the synagogues" and generally "esteemed as
filthiness" and "dross" (1-3). The first five verses of
chapter 31 mention the words "poor" or "poverty" seven
times, usually referring to economic status, but twice to
being "poor in heart."

Alma, while preaching to people on the "hill Onidah,"
is approached by the "one who was foremost" among the poor,
who says,

Behold, what shall these my brethren do, for they are despised of all men because of their poverty, yea, and more especially by our priests; for they have cast us out of our synagogues which we have labored abundantly to build with our own hands; and they have cast us out because of our exceeding poverty; and we have no place to worship our God; and behold, what shall we do? (Alma 32:5 emphasis mine).

The question "What shall we do?" is the question Alma responds to and is the springboard for the rest the chapter and, along with some clarifying questions asked later, chapters 33 and 34 as well. We might paraphrase the questions thus, "What shall we do, since we are despised because of our poverty? What shall we do since we are cast out of synagogues we helped build? What shall we do with no place to worship God?" This is the basic situation Alma responds to: A poor class is used, despised, and excluded from formal worship by a richer class. The poor class ask Alma what they should do, and especially how they ought to worship under such circumstances. And so the poorer class are alienated from those they share their world with, and, to a certain degree, alienated from God, as is evidenced in their ignorance of how to worship. But in connection with that, the writer specifically mentions that they are poor in
hearts, so in some ways it won't take much preparing to get them on the right track.

The scene-act ratio (again, described by Burke as a ratio in which the situation heavily influences, if not dictates, what will go on) is prevalent in these chapters. In Alma and Amulek's action, we see a direct, though unique, response to the people's particular situation and questions, so in many ways, the scene highly influences what Alma and Amulek do. Their action caters to the questions, needs, and situation of their audience.

**Act:**

Alma's and Amulek's "act" might be stated briefly as two sermons in which the people are exhorted to have faith in Christ, repent, and worship God in all circumstances, have patience, and be charitable. But a complete discussion of the action must essentially cover all that goes on in the sermons Alma and Amulek give. In other words, we would need to read very closely—read each paragraph, line, and word closely, noticing the action taking place. But rather than go into intricate detail (usually uninteresting if simply read in a written text such as this, but stimulating enough in a private reading or in a face-to-face close reading and discussion of a passage), I will touch upon what I consider to be the main action taking place, but leave much unsaid that could be said about the passages we read.
Much of what I say in this section of action may seem like summary. While some of it is summary, my hope is to explain things in terms of action—of what is being done—rather than look behind for the "real" meaning of the text. In other words, I will point out the action which we would have noticed in a close reading, but which is often obscured when we read for a theological doctrine or a set of behaviors. Let us now turn to the action of these chapters.

Alma’s act in response to this inquiry of what the poor people should do is not first to speak, but to turn himself about, "his face immediately towards" the one who asked the question. He sees with "great joy" that the poor people’s afflictions have put them "in a preparation to hear the word" (32:6). Because of this, Alma says "no more to the other multitude" and the writer really never tells us what happens to them, only that Alma quits teaching them immediately and turns to those more likely to accept what he has to say.

Alma’s first words to his new audience are "I behold the ye are lowly in heart; and if so, blessed are ye" (32:8) Alma’s act is not to initially concern himself or the people over their condition of poverty, because he sees that from the perspective of their attitudes and receptiveness to God, it has helped foster humility, which will be to their benefit. Alma’s statement seems unexpected, especially to ears expecting some statement that acknowledges the
injustice of their condition. But Alma’s turning his back to the other group, facing the poor with joy and calling them blessed, is clearly an act of acknowledgement of these people and a demonstration of his genuine concern for them and for the most important problems they face.

Alma then deals directly with the question of what these people should do since they are cast out of a synagogue where they worship God (32:9-13). His response is to teach them they can worship in places other than the synagogue, that indeed they ought to worship more than once a week, and that it’s probably even been good that they’ve been cast out so they might learn humility and wisdom. And why are these such blessings? Because they will lead one to repentance, and "whosoever repenteth shall find mercy; and he that findeth mercy and endureth to the end the same shall be saved" (32:13). Alma’s primary concern is not that the people be relieved of their poverty, or that they get their rightful place in society, but that they repent. The other matters are important (and Alma and Amulek will address them), but first things must come first, and the first thing is to repent or (in light of chapter two) to come unto Christ. The action Alma takes is to urge such repentance.

It is to this end, then, that Alma commends humility and exhorts the people to faith. We most often hear chapter 32 explained as a discourse on faith, and discussions about it usually wander off into arguments about what knowledge
and faith are, and which is superior. While Alma does talk about faith and knowledge here, in terms of action his talk is one of exhortation (trying to get the people to repent), not theology. Consequently, the explanation that "faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true" (32:21) need not be seen as a theological and complete definition of faith, but rather as an explanation given to help a particular people understand what they should do in their particular circumstances. Alma’s commends humility and faith because those who are humble believe the word of God and are baptized "without stubbornness of heart, yea without being brought to know the word, or even compelled to know, before they will believe" (32:16).

From here, Alma encourages the people to "awake and arouse [their] faculties, even to an experiment upon my words" (32:27); and he explains the things involved and the possible results of their giving place to the word and trying it in their hearts. If the seed is good, it will cause their souls to be enlarged, and it will be delicious to them. If bad, no such results will occur. Alma explains their need to nourish in faith and patience the seed in all stages—-not just in the stage to see if the seed is good, but all the way to the full growth of the tree and its bearing fruit (32:28-43).

Up to this point, however, Alma’s act has primarily
been to prepare the people for his word—to create a desire, humility, and faith that will lead to its reception. He hasn’t really given them the word. Therefore, his exhortation to faith is not intended as a theological discussion of what faith is, but merely as preparation to receive the word. And so the people send to "know whether they should believe in one God, that they might obtain" the fruit Alma promised as they tried the word, "or how they should plant the seed, or the word," and "in what manner they should begin to exercise their faith" (33:1).

Alma responds to these questions by returning to his earlier concern that the people understand that they can worship God even though they are cast out of the synagogue, and he quotes several scriptures to them to support this idea (33:2-12). Initially it seems as if he avoids the questions he’s been asked, until we see that he says that they can call on God in any circumstance, and that God hears them, has mercy, and turns away his judgments "because of [his] Son" (33:11-13). And Alma then asks, in light of what the scriptures say, "how can ye disbelieve on the Son of God?" (33:14). The Son of God (and if the Son, then implicitly the Father) is the God he tells them they should believe in.

Alma next answers the questions of how to plant the seed and in what way to begin exercising faith, by recalling the "type . . . raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever
would look upon it might live" (32:19) and exhorting the people to

cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins; and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him, to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works (33:22)

Alma’s brief explanation of the Savior and his gospel is the word he wants the people to believe in, and he tells them so, ending with a prayer for their well-being:

I desire that ye shall plant this word in your hearts, and as it beginneth to swell even so nourish it by your faith. And behold, it will become a tree, springing up in you unto everlasting life, and then may God grant unto you that your burdens may be light through the joy of his Son. And even all this can ye do if ye will.

Amen. (33:23 emphasis mine)

Having urged the people to act on the word given them, Alma sits down. His act in response to the whole situation is remarkably simple and straightforward: a recommendation of humility, repentance, and faith to try the word of the Son of God.
At this point Amulek takes up the discussion about the Son of God, assuming that the people had the scriptures and were taught some of these things before their "dissension" (34:1-2). Amulek reviews briefly the action taken by Alma in response to their question of what they should do. Amulek states that Alma spoke "somewhat unto you to prepare your minds; yea and he hath exhorted you unto faith and to patience . . . even to plant the word in your hearts" (34:3-4). So Alma's words were mostly to get the people in the right frame of mind--Amulek will give them more of what they've been properly prepared for.

Continuing, Amulek notes to the people that "the great question which is in your minds is whether the word be in the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ" (34:5). He reminds his audience that Alma has called on many of the prophets to prove that the word is in Christ and says that he himself "will testify" to them "that these things are true." Amulek explains the need for a redeemer and an "infinite and eternal sacrifice" and that "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" (34:6-14). Amulek then explains the need for salvation and the satisfying of justice by mercy, through the atonement and a person's faith and repentance (34:15-16).

At this point, after the people have been prepared by
Alma and had the doctrine of Christ preached to them, Amulek implores that God may grant that "ye may begin to exercise your faith unto repentance, that ye begin to call upon his holy name, that he would have mercy upon you; Yea cry unto him for mercy; for he is mighty to save" (34:17-18). All the faith, all the desire, all the belief in Christ, are designed to bring them to this action: the cry for mercy. The prophet's desire is that people come unto Christ, and the genuine cry for mercy is the act that most turns them to him. Amulek admonishes his listeners to "continue in prayer" and to "cry unto him" in all places, 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" (34:19-27). So Amulek's answer to the initial inquiry of what this people should do, seeing they are cast out of the synagogue is (much as Alma's) to believe in the word of Christ, and repent—to cry unto him for mercy.

Amulek is quick to point out, however, that this isn't all. The people must also care for those in need and remember to be charitable; otherwise "your prayer is vain, and availeth you nothing, and ye are as hypocrites who do deny the faith. . . . [and] ye are as dross, which the refiners do cast out, (it being of no worth) and is trodden under foot of men" (34:28-29). The genuinely repentant cry for mercy will be accompanied by a change of attitude and
action to those around the newly repentant.

Next Amulek exhorts the people that after hearing so many witnesses, they

Come forth and bring fruit unto repentance. Yea I would that ye would come forth and harden not your hearts any longer; for behold, now is the time and the day of your salvation; and therefore, if ye will repent and harden not your heart, immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you. (34:30-31)

Amulek desires that they genuinely repent, and that they not delay, not only because there’s no cause to (they don’t need the synagogue for this repentance) and because now is the time. Amulek gives his discourse a sense of great urgency by emphasizing time and its relation to eternity:

Harden not your hearts any longer. . . now is the time and the day . . . immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about. . . . this life is the time . . . the day of this life is the day. . . . do not procrastinate the day of repentance until the end; for after this day of life, which is given us to prepare for eternity, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis, that I will
return to my God. . . . for 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 posses your body in that eternal world. (34:31-
34; emphasis mine)

To this impoverished, persecuted group, Amulek urges
immediate repentance--no delay because of circumstances or
because they suppose they have no place to worship and
repent. The place is not important, but the time--now--is,
and the immediate action has eternal ramifications. This
emphasis on time highlights the urgency Amulek wants his
audience to feel as he persuades them to repentance. Amulek
preaches that they should "work out their salvation with
fear before God" and "no more deny the coming of Christ,"
that they "contend no more against the Holy Ghost" but
receive it and take on them Christ's name, and
that ye humble yourselves even to the dust, and
worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in, in
spirit and in truth; and that ye live in
thanksgiving daily, for the many mercies and
blessings which he doth bestow upon you. (34:37-
38)

Amulek recommends immediate repentance, humility, a constant
worship of God, and living in thanksgiving, to a group who
thought they were in terrible circumstances. He also
cautions them to pray constantly that they not be overrun by
temptation (39) and then adds this:

I would exhort you to have patience, and that ye bear with all manner of afflictions; that ye do 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, with a firm hope that ye shall one day rest from all your afflictions. (34:40-41)

Knowing how easy it would be for these people to revile against those who mistreat them (and certainly in approaching Alma the group describe themselves as nearly helpless victims when it comes to worship), Amulek urges patience and charity, lest the people impede their own coming to Christ. Though the richer class can keep the poorer class from worship in a synagogue, they cannot keep them from true worship. But reviling (sinning) against those who abuse them can, as can a mistaken idea of what it means to worship.

Alma and Amulek’s action towards the downtrodden poor who look to them for answers is to urge them to faith and repentance. Very little is said about political solutions or practical helps in getting along in these hard circumstances. Instead, Alma and Amulek work to get the people to turn to the Lord, knowing that that action should be their fundamental concern, and till their relationship
with the Lord is heading in the right direction, none of the other problems will find a proper resolution.

**Agent:**

In these chapters we have two "major" agents--Alma and Amulek. Not much is said in the chapters about them, but in both cases, their characters are revealed as concerned, compassionately honest, and certain of their purpose. In previous chapters of the Book of Mormon we read more of these two people, and many of these earlier passages bear on our understanding of the kind of agents acting in these particular chapters.

Alma at one time caused much trouble, associating with a group whom the record calls the "very vilest of sinners" (Mosiah 28:4). With the visit of an angel, Alma reverses his direction and becomes a most untiring laborer for the Lord, serving the people as chief judge, and as the high priest over the church. Later, when difficult problems arise in the church, Alma hands the office of chief judge to another so he can dedicate his efforts solely to the high priest's office, preaching the word of God among the people.

We are first introduced to Amulek at a time when Alma is preaching to an absolutely unreceptive group of people. Alma leaves the people, but is instructed to return, and upon returning is met, taken in, sheltered, and fed by Amulek who was told by an angel that a prophet would come
and he should receive him (Alma 8). By his own account, Amulek knew somewhat of the gospel, but rebelled against it. At least until the angel showed up. Things changed then, and Amulek serves with Alma from then on. We are even told that Amulek forsook "all his gold, and silver, and his precious things" and was "rejected by those who were once his friends and also by his father and his kindred" (Alma 15:16). So his is an experienced voice when he speaks to the group who are facing similar troubles. Having gone through much the same, if not worse, he can counsel the poor and oppressed in the way they should react.

Alma and Amulek go through much together. After preaching together for the first time, they are imprisoned, and taken bound to watch the burning of those they have preached to and converted. When Amulek urges that they use the power of God to save the people, Alma responds that the Spirit constrains him not to do so, "for the Lord receiveth them up unto himself" (Alma 14:11). This proves instructive in our discussion of Alma 32-34 as we see that Alma puts submission to the Lord’s will and his fundamental concern for a people’s relation to the Lord, above all other considerations.

Alma and Amulek organize many efforts to preach the word. It is also interesting to note that they often speak together, Amulek taking up where Alma finishes. Alma and Amulek seem to work well together, building on each other’s
words and offering joint testimony, as they do on this occasion.

Agency:

In reasoning out how or by what means Alma and Amulek perform their act, we must note that they use mostly words—sermons—to teach their audience. There is not, in this case, much "nonsymbolic" action taken. So my analysis must turn more closely to how they use and organize what they do.

Alma’s speech establishes from the first his relation to the audience, by acknowledging their condition of being "lowly in heart" (32:8). This acknowledgement establishes Alma’s level of concern for his audience (establishing his ethos). But the acknowledgment of the people would also appeal to their pathos, especially when they see themselves as oppressed, yet Alma calls them blessed and even calls on them to repent.

Alma also accomplishes his act through the famous analogy of planting the word in the heart, as one would plant the seed in the ground, nourishing it and patiently waiting for it to grow and bear fruit. The use of this analogy not only provides a simple and applicable metaphor to follow, but the imagery of fruit and trees might well have had greater influence on his audience than we expect.

If we assume the people had the records of Nephi or Lehi,
the imagery of the tree and fruit (which Alma says could become "a tree springing up unto everlasting life"—32:41 & 33:23) could not help but call the people's minds back to their ancestral and cultural roots: to Nephi's and Lehi's vision of the tree and the fruit which Nephi is shown to be best represented by the ministry of the Son of God, and which is "most desirable above all things," "most joyous to the soul" and which is "a representation of the love of God" (1 Nephi 11:8-25).

Both Alma and Amulek use exhortation as a rhetorical strategy as well. Alma exhorts his audience to an experiment on his words, given in the aforementioned analogy. Amulek has perhaps the most "poetic" of the exhortations in his repetitions of "Cry unto him" (34:17-27). And Amulek's exhortation that they not procrastinate repentance, as I mentioned in the section on "act," emphasizes to his audience the element of time and the urgency of their need to repent.

To continue our discussion of the means by which Alma and Amulek perform their act, let us note that they both quote scriptures and make references to the law of Moses to "prove," as Amulek puts it, "that the word is in Christ unto salvation" (34:6-7). This "proving," of course, seems to be quite different from compelling philosophical arguments, but rather seems to be the compiling of testimonies. And indeed that is what Amulek says next: "I will testify unto you
myself that these things are true" (34:8). After he has borne his witness, Amulek then hopes that "after ye have received so many witnesses, seeing that the holy scriptures testify of these things, ye come forth and bring fruit unto repentance" (Alma 34:30).

Alma and Amulek’s use of testimony (their own and other prophets’ words—as testimony, not lists of concepts) is perhaps the most common way the prophets in the Book of Mormon speak. For all their use of poetry, scriptures, analogies, parables, reasoned arguments, or appeals to the law, all is accompanied by and stated fundamentally as testimony, that is, as one’s personal assurance, knowledge, or witness of the Lord and his gospel.

**Purpose:**

Alma and Amulek’s purpose, as seems evident from the action taken, is to exhort the people to a belief on Christ and to repentance. Their motive is not to school the people in a way of thinking that they must accept because of their arguments, but to simply get them to try the word for themselves. Apparently this is all Alma and Amulek think they need to do, relying on their faith that if their audience does their part, the Lord will do his. Their purpose is to urge the people to make that effort—to come unto Christ.

In searching out a ratio for these chapters, two come
to mind most emphatically: scene-act (mentioned above), and purpose-agency. Many other ratios could be explored profitably, and we could reach interesting and possibly similar conclusions, but I think the purpose-agency to be the most useful in this analysis.

In many ways, what Alma and Amulek say is rather predictable; essentially the same thing would be said in any situation, of course with particular differences with particular speakers, audiences, and situations. That is, the prophets' purpose in all problematic situations will be to urge the people to repent, to come unto Christ. But how Alma and Amulek present this recommendation is at least as predictable. They use testimony. This is why the purpose-agency ratio seems to matter more here.

Alma's and Amulek's primary purpose is to urge faith and repentance, and that is also their main action--an active effort to induce the people to come unto Christ. If I am correct in my belief that all the prophets' purposes and messages have been more or less the same (come unto Christ), then it ought not to surprise us that Alma and Amulek have the same purpose. Nor should it surprise us that that purpose is so evident in how they deliver their message: by testimony. The prophets know the gospel to be true and matter-of-factly bear testimony of the Lord. Their purpose is to persuade people to come to Christ, and it is their witness that He and his gospel are true.
Of all the means the prophets use to persuade people to repent, we might ask why they choose testimony as their preferred way of speaking. In part it seems that testimony is used because the prophets do not wish to persuade merely by logically compelling arguments or proofs. Such arguments or proofs are something that any person trained well enough could do, and any persuasion resulting from these arguments does not need the Lord to be effective (something unacceptable to the prophets). In some ways, such arguments rely on compulsion—intellectual compulsion, but compulsion none-the-less—rather than persuasion resulting from the influence of the Lord’s presence.

Testimony, on the other hand, seems to acknowledge of the agency of both speaker and audience. Testimony also requires an openness on behalf of the listeners. In court of law, for instance, when we listen to a testimony, we (ideally) rid ourselves of predetermined judgments and listen carefully. We give the speaker a hearing. Similarly, when the prophets bear testimony, their hope is that we give them a hearing, that we hearken to their testimony.

For the prophets, testimony is effective because the being of whom they testify is real and powerful, and because he involves himself in the process of persuasion. It is the Lord’s being (his ethos, if you will) and his words of salvation for us, that bring about our persuasion. In essence, a prophet bearing testimony presents to us the
being of Christ, assures us of the Lord’s reality and goodness, and exhorts us to come to Him. If we hear the word of the Lord spoken through the prophets, then the prophets’ part in the process of persuasion is completed. It is left to us to respond to the Lord’s call.

For us to read or hear such words as testimony, we must not come searching for concepts or rules, but rather remain open to the words of the testimony. An argument or proof invites analysis in terms of knowledge (a doctrinal analysis), or in terms of comparisons to a predetermined system of concepts or procedures. But if we read scriptures as such, we are missing the effect that their testimonies should have on us. Testimony requires a different kind of approach than proofs or arguments. We must grant testimony a receptive hearing.

For this reason I believe we need to approach the Book of Mormon in the way I am recommending; that is, to not look for concepts or rules behind the scriptures, but to be open and responsive to the testimony given in the text. Only by letting the text speak to us as testimony can we experience the Book of Mormon as the testimony of prophets, as another testament of Jesus Christ. And only by hearkening to the word given through the prophets can we be genuinely persuaded to Come to Christ.

Situation and Strategy:
Let us continue this reading of Alma 32-34, by recalling the notion brought up in chapter 2 that a text is a response to a situation and has application to us as well. What is the relevance these chapters might have for us? What are we being persuaded to do?

We might read this chapter from two angles: first, as an assertion of what we should do if we are used or rejected by those around us; second, as an assertion of what we ought to recommend to people who ask us what they should do given similar impoverished or oppressive circumstances.

Concerning what these chapters assert we ought to do in instances when we have been used or abused, they seem to recommend that our response should not be to revile our oppressors lest we become sinners like them, as Amulek suggests (34:40), but rather that we respond by coming unto Christ. If we were to cast this Burke-like in the form of a proverb, we might say, "Cast the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly" (3 Nephi 14:5). Or we might say we should make repairs in the foundation before we patch up the walls. In our own cases, we need not wait for our situations to change in order to worship or to come to the Lord. The cry for mercy, the calling on the Lord, can occur wherever and whenever we truly mean it.

If we take Alma 32-34 as a strategy of what to do when teaching persons what they should do in dire circumstances, perhaps the most important thing to notice is that Alma and
Amulek do not offer primarily social changes or political action, nor do they recommend to the poor that what they need is for the rich to repent. Political action and social change may need to take place (and the rich definitely need to repent--as does everyone), but whether this happens or no, it is not the first concern for these people. Alma and Amulek work to set them on the path to Christ. Alma literally turns his whole being to these people, and from this position of true concern, he can offer the initial steps to solving their troubles, and that is to bring them to the Lord. As a strategy for helping people, Alma 32-34 would seem to say that we not offer ourselves or a certain political or social action as a remedy to a similar situation, but that we establish the Lord and coming to him as the fundamental solution.

Yet while it may prove helpful to see this text either as an assertion of what we ought to do when oppressed, or what we should recommend to those who turn to us for help, we need to recall the rhetorical context and primary purpose of the Book of Mormon. We are its intended audience, and what we are given in the account of Alma and Amulek’s teachings to this group of poor people has already been edited and subsumed under the underlying purpose of the Book of Mormon—to persuade us to repent. This means that to read Alma 32-34 primarily as a treatise on the oppressed, as a handbook for teaching the poor, or even as a definitive
statement about faith, knowledge, humility, or the atonement, is to miss the effect it should have on us.

The chapters are not intended to be a treatise, rule book, or doctrinal statement. We are being asked to do something. We are given this account in its particular form as one more testimony, among all the testimonies in the Book of Mormon, that seeks to persuade us that Jesus is the Christ, and which urges us to come to him. In other words, the solution Alma and Amulek give to their audience in response to their particular problem is the same general exhortation of the Book of Mormon--Come unto Christ. And if we remember the over-all purpose of the Book of Mormon, and liken the scripture to ourselves, we hear the same call to us. Alma and Amulek's call to faith, repentance, prayer, patience, charity, etc., joins in the chorus of voices raised in harmony throughout the Book of Mormon, singing the song of redeeming love--a song meant for us. These chapters testify to us that all other concerns (personal, political, social, economic, philosophical, ethical, moral, doctrinal, etc.) are secondary; we must first be concerned to come to Christ.
Chapter Four. Identification:

From Highest to Lowest

In this last chapter I explore ways that assure that a text such as the Book of Mormon has its intended rhetorical effect on us--another way we can allow the book to persuade us.

In Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (one of the earliest books outlining a systematized rhetoric), we encounter the notion of the three "modes" or ways that a rhetor persuades an audience. Aristotle describes them thus:

The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. . . . His character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses. Secondly, persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions. . . . Thirdly, persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question. (1356a 1-20)
These, of course, are the categories of ethos, pathos, and logos. The categories will overlap, and in truth one can’t speak to an audience without all these elements being involved somehow.

Burke, of course, recognizes these categories of persuasion, but places them all under the wider umbrella of identification: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (Rhetoric 55). Identification becomes the keyword for Burke in speaking of persuasion. We are persuaded when we "identify" with the speaker’s cause, and the speaker identifies him or herself with us and our circumstances.

Burke’s fundamental word for persuasion, then, is identification. This Burke describes:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. . . . In being identified with B, A is "substantially one" with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. (Rhetoric 20-21)
This idea of identification becomes for Burke the ground for persuasion. In other words, persuasion operates when speaker and listener share common ideas, motives, and circumstances and are identified with each other--speaker and audience become "consubstantial." Even as you read this thesis, Burke would say, you (my readers) and I are "consubstantial" in the sense that, though we are separate, we share a common situation or action in writing and reading this thesis. In a way we become one in this action, and the more "oneness," the more my readers would be persuaded to act on what I am asserting. But the identification works both ways, for in persuading to action, "the rhetorician may have to change an audience's opinion in one respect; but he can succeed only insofar as he yields to that audience's opinions in other respects" (56). There is a give and take here--a recognition of our separate beings, our "otherness," if you will, for "identification implies division" (45). Any attempt to persuade, to identify ourselves with another, means implicitly that we are divided and separate. Persuasion is only possible (and is needed) because we are separate.

The whole notion of a society getting along necessarily rests on identification or consubstantiality. According to Burke,

A doctrine of consubstantiality, either explicit of implicit, may be necessary to a way of life.

For substance, in the old philosophies, was an
act; and a way of life is an acting-together; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial. (Rhetoric 21)

Ours is at once a shared and a separate existence. If we were completely divided, we would not even be conscious of one another. If we were completely identified or consubstantial, we would be the same being. But we do share certain things, and it is at this level of "community," if you will--of both separate and shared identity--that persuasion takes places.

Recalling that rhetoric is concerned more with right action than with metaphysical knowledge or certainty, Burke notes that persuasion works on the level of opinion, but not opinion as contrasted with truth, . . . [rather opinion as] the underlying ethical assumptions on which the entire tactics of persuasion are based. Here the important factor is opinion (opinion in the moral order of action, rather than in the "scenic" order of truth). The rhetorician, as such, need operate only on this principle. (Rhetoric 54-55)

This "ethical assumption" Burke speaks of is (among other things) precisely this notion that persuasion takes place among persons that are both identified and divided. Burke realizes that persuasion or identification can be used to
deceive and manipulate, but also asserts that such is the inevitable possibility if we allow for real human interaction:

"We need never deny the presence of strife, enmity, faction as a characteristic motive of rhetorical expression. We need not close our eyes to their almost tyrannous ubiquity in human relations; we can be on the alert always to see how such temptations to strife are implicit in the institutions that condition human relationships; yet we can at the same time always look beyond this order, to the principle of identification in general, a terministic choice justified by the fact that the identifications in the order of love are also characteristic of rhetorical expression."

(Rhetoric 20)

Burke’s contention is that although rhetoric may be used for bad purposes, it is also used for good as well. The same conditions that make it possible to manipulate, coerce, deceive, or abuse others through language, also make it possible to speak deferentially, entreat kindly, disclose honestly, and talk lovingly. That is, our living in a world with others, our separate but shared existence, and our use of language to interact with others and establish relationships, are factors that allow negative uses of rhetoric, but which also allow for loving and moral
persuasion. The rhetoric of identification can be a humane, ethical way to approach situations where persuasion is called for.

When reading the Book of Mormon as a work designed to persuade, we would do well to read from this perspective of identification. In the Book of Mormon we are invited to identify with all sorts of beings, and the rhetoric is designed to affect our whole being. We are invited to identify with (among other beings) the dust of the earth, with the wicked, with the righteous, with the prophets, and with the Lord himself. Each of these categories deserves study and explanation, while we keep in mind that the ultimate purpose of all these identifications is to help us repent and come unto Christ. We might see this in the same light as Nephi’s likening the scripture unto himself and his people, "that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer" (1 Nephi 19:23).

The Identification with Dust

In many places in the Book of Mormon, human beings are compared to the dust, and this would surely imply that we identify with it as well. Since the Book of Mormon is written for us, any statement it contains about human beings in general should be taken as fitting for us to consider, since we share the same essential condition.

Helaman, in speaking of the unwillingness of most
people to have the Lord lead them, exclaims:

O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth. For behold the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the command of our great and everlasting God. (Helaman 12:7-8)

Helaman emphasizes our tendency to disobey or discount the command of God, in comparison to the dust’s responsiveness.

In a similar way, king Benjamin, speaking of our unprofitability without the Lord, asks of what we have to boast?

And now I ask, can ye say aught of yourselves? I answer you, Nay. Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth; but behold, it belongeth to him who created you. And I, even I, whom ye call your king, am no better than ye yourselves are; for I am also of the dust. (Mosiah 2:25-26)

The audience King Benjamin addresses repents and makes covenants, after having "viewed themselves in their own carnal state, even less than the dust of the earth" (Mosiah 4:2). And with that in mind, they are reminded to "always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even to the depths of humility" (Mosiah 4:11).
Jacob, in condemning his people's pride, emphatically warns, "O that he would show you that he can pierce you, and with one glance of his eye he can smite you to the dust" (Jacob 2:15). Jacob continues to warn us against thinking that we are better than another, for our similarity to the dust is a leveling factor: "And all flesh is of the dust; and for the selfsame end hath he created them, that they should keep his commandments and glorify him forever" (Jacob 2:21).

Amulek urges his audience to "humble [themselves] even to the dust" (Alma 34:38) much as Alma pleads with a wayward son to "let the justice of God, and his mercy, and his long-suffering have full sway in your heart; and let it bring you down to the dust in humility" (Alma 42:30).

The corrective to the ever-present pride exhibited by the people of the Book of Mormon and all of us is to consider ourselves less than the dust of the earth. Such an identification seems hard, not only because our usual view is that we are quite different from dust, but also because to start identifying ourselves as such is humiliating indeed. Yet the Book of Mormon invites such an identification--that we see our disobedience, weakness and nothingness. The dust (in the usual view) is the lowest of things, and the Book of Mormon invites us to that same level--and lower.

To identify ourselves as less than the dust of the
earth advances the purpose of the Book of Mormon to bring us to Christ by bringing to the forefront our nothingness and unworthiness without the Lord. The recognition of our nothingness comes about as we see ourselves in a powerless, weak state, like the dust of the earth. And we see our unworthiness as we identify with the dust, but are reminded that we are even less than the dust, for the dust at least obeys the Lord. Our repentance—our return to the Lord—begins when we realize our utter helplessness without the Lord and confess our unworthiness before him and our need of his strength and grace.

Identification with the Wicked

In the Book of Mormon, we read about (sometimes in great detail) the action of wicked people. As such there is an implicit invitation to identify with them. In suggesting that we identify with the wicked, I am not saying something so ridiculous as that we "enjoy" identifying with them, that we use them as role models, or that we somehow try to excuse what they are doing because we "understand" it. Instead I am saying that we identify ourselves in the wicked by seeing the way they act and how many of the things we do are the same.

I suggest that we hear a prophet's call to a people to repent of pride, murmuring, flattery, priestcraft, idolatry, adultery, murder, etc., as a call to us. That is, that we
see in ourselves the same sins, or tendencies to sin, that we see in Laman and Lemuel, proud Nephites, unfaithful and uncaring fathers, King Noah, Nehor, Zeezrom, the Zoramites, Coriantumr, blood-thirsty warriors, conspiring politicians, and people who "are without principle, and past feeling" (Moroni 9:20). The compilers of the Book of Mormon haven't set down the acts of the wicked for us to indignantly brood over, but as examples of what we do, to help us look beyond our self-deceptions and call what we are doing sin.

It isn't a pleasant thing to have to identify with those who do ugly, sinful things--it isn't supposed to be--but to some degree we all do ugly, sinful things, and to see this clearly is part of truly repenting.

If our identification with the wicked in the Book of Mormon isn't enough, the prophets on occasion address us directly, leaving no doubt in where we stand:

I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envying, and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities; and your churches, yea, even every one, have become polluted because of the pride of
your hearts. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more then ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted. 0 ye pollutions, ye hypocrites, ye teachers, who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God? Why are ye ashamed to take upon you the name of Christ?

(Mormon 8:35-38)

In this case, we are no longer only "identifiers" with those spoken to, we are the sinful audience addressed.

The hope of the prophets is that we get to the stage where we "could not look upon sin, save it were with abhorrence" (Alma 13:12), that we "shake at the appearance of sin" (2 Nephi 4:31), and that we learn "an everlasting hatred against sin and iniquity" (Alma 37:32). The Book of Mormon is replete wicked people and with calls to repentance (indeed the word repent or a derivative of it is found on virtually every other page). The wicked must repent, but the Lord says that all ends of the earth, all people, must repent (3 Nephi 27:20, Alma 5:50, 2 Nephi 2:21), the truth being that all have sinned, and all must repent.

This identification with the wicked helps us come to the Lord in part by helping us to quit deceiving ourselves and call the bad things we do sin. The identification with the wicked, as I mentioned, is intended to be unpleasant.
The prophets of the Book of Mormon want us to know that "wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 41:10) and to make both our vicarious sinning through identification, and our real sinning a miserable thing, such that we turn desperately for something better, for something good. And the Book of Mormon clearly asserts that the escape from sin, and the attaining of goodness, is possible only if we come to the Lord.

The Identification with the Righteous

To identify with the righteous does not mean that we pronounce ourselves "righteous" or become like the Zoramites, smug in our calling as a holy people, but that we try to identify ourselves with how the righteous live, and why they do what they do. Our identifications in this category would be individually and collectively to identify how righteous individuals and righteous communities act and why—to identify with the lives of saints and seek to do as they do.

The Book of Mormon prophets often ask their audience to identify with the righteous. King Mosiah invites his audience to consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the
end they are received into heaven, that thereby
they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending
happiness. (Mosiah 2:41)

It is a similar reflection on his father's words "concerning
the eternal life, and the joy of the saints" that causes
Enos to start repenting (Enos 1:3-5). The identification
here implies the division, in that the listeners are not
righteous in this sense, but they start repenting upon
considering the state of joy and peace attained by those who
keep the commandments.

Our identification with the righteous would often begin
where identifying with the wicked leaves off. In all
instances, except for Christ, those we read about make some
mistakes, and as we identify with those doing evil, we can
also identify with those who repent--from Alma and the Sons
of Mosiah, who go about destroying the church, and repent;
to Nephi, who laments that he is angry with his brethren.
The righteous are simply sinners who stop sinning, who
repent.

In identifying ourselves with the righteous, we would
do well to look not only for how they repent, but also for
hints as to what they are like, for what they do. That is to
say, in identifying with the righteous we, like the people
who heard King Benjamin's address, would share their
condition of being "willing to enter into a covenant with
our God to do his will, and to be obedient to his
commandments in all things that he shall command us, all the remainder of our days" (Mosiah 5:5). Or like those who listened to Alma, be

willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; yea and are 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 that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God. (Mosiah 18:8-9)

Our identification with the righteous would include identifying with (among others) those who suffer persecution, who take in the poor, who give their lives rather than break their solemn covenants, who go bravely to a people who hate them to preach the gospel, who wait patiently for the Lord's coming—in short, who do what they need to obey the Lord. By identifying with them, we start to feel and understand how they live and why. We should not try simply to make an outward or behavioral imitation of them, but recognize that the people are righteous not solely because of outward acts, but because they turn whole-heartedly to the Lord and respond to his commands. Identifying with them would mean to share their concerns, their labor, their faith, and their love.

The identification with the righteous helps the Book of
Mormon to persuade us to come to Christ, not only by giving us guidance in how the righteous live, and by causing us to realize the desirability and real possibility of a condition such as that described in 4 Nephi, but also by appealing to our sense of goodness and our desire to be righteous. When we read the words and witness the action of the righteous, something strikes us that what they are doing is not only right and good, but what we want (or know we should want) to do as well. The identification with the righteous should create in us a sense of discomfort and discontent, both because individually we need repentance, and because as a people we have not established Zion yet. But the identification with the righteous should also give us hope that like them, we, through coming to the Lord, can be righteous people.

The Identification with Prophets

Though clearly related to identification with the righteous, I separate the identification with the prophets, mostly to show the concern of the prophets for the people, and some of the particular ways they teach and testify to the people in bringing them to Christ. So identifying with the prophets would be to imagine ourselves in their situations—being called of the Lord to help a people repent. Let us look at two specific examples where identification with the prophets is clearly called for.
One of the most moving passages of the Book of Mormon is Mormon's lamentation over the destroyed Nephite nation. All the effort to guide them in the right way has come to this. Mormon's words invite not only an identification with a ruined people, but with Mormon himself, as he looks over the slain:

My soul was rent with anguish, because of the slain of my people, and I cried: O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you! Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen. But behold, ye are fallen, and I mourn your loss. O ye fair sons and daughters, ye fathers and mothers, ye husbands and wives, ye fair ones, how is it that ye could have fallen! But behold, ye are gone, and my sorrows cannot bring your return. . . . O that ye had repented before this great destruction had come upon you. But behold, ye are gone, and the Father, yea the Eternal Father of heaven, knoweth your state; and he doeth with you according to his justice and mercy. (Mormon 6:16-22)

Through identification, Mormon's lament over his people becomes our own, and we share his concern and sorrow. If we have read the Book of Mormon, identifying with the prophets
who so untiringly labor to get their people to repent, then
the impact of the destruction of this people fills our souls
with compassion and sorrow. This same attitude should carry
over into our concern for our present condition--to help us
work to prevent the same in our day.

In a similar way we feel for Moroni who witnesses the
destruction of his people, and the death of his father:

   And I remain alone to write the sad tale of the
destruction of my people. But behold, they are
gone, and I fulfill the commandment of my father.
And whether they will slay me, I know not.
Therefore I will write and hide up the records in
the earth; and whither I go it mattereth not.
Behold, my father hath made this record, and he
hath written the intent thereof. And behold, I
would write it also if I had room upon the plates,
but I have not; and ore I have none, for I am
alone. My father hath been slain in battle, and
all my kinsfolk, and I have not friend nor whither
to go; and how long the Lord will suffer that I
may live I know not. Behold four hundred years
have passed away since the coming of our Lord and
Savior. . . .great has been [the Nephite’s] fall;
yea great and marvelous is the destruction of my
people, the Nephites. (Mormon 8:3-7)

Added to Mormon’s lament, Moroni’s description (rich in
ethos and pathos) increases our sense of urgency. His witness, and the witness of the Book of Mormon, is that the destruction of whole nations is not just a clever scare tactic, but a true and inevitable reality for those nations who have the gospel and turn from it. Our identification with the prophets lets us see that as well as the possibility that people will turn to the Lord.

We have opportunity to identify with such prophets as Nephi, Jacob, Abinidi, Alma (elder and younger), Helaman, Samuel the Lamanite, the "other" Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. In doing so, we share in their successes, failures, persecutions, miracles, trials, visions, testimonies, and their deep concern for their people. Such identification helps us know how these people worked—what they did and why—among their people.

The Identification with Christ

The Book of Mormon asks that we also identify with Christ—that we try to be like him and that we share common concerns and actions. In his sermon at the temple in Bountiful, the Lord states, "I would the ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect" (3 Nephi 12:48). He also admonishes his disciples that they should be "even as I am" (3 Nephi 27:27). These two scriptures (among others) clearly establish an identification with Christ. We are to be like him.
The identification with Christ is also called for in that his followers should be "willing to take upon [them] the name of Christ" (2 Nephi 31:13). And the Lord tells Alma (the elder), "blessed is this people who are willing to bear my name, for in my name shall they be called; and they are mine" (Mosiah 26:18). It is this idea (that the Lord's people take upon him his name) that Alma has in mind later when he says "the good shepherd doth call you; yea, in his own name he doth call you, which is the name of Christ" (Alma 5:38) Coming unto Christ by means of faith, repentance, baptism clearly involves taking on us his name, and identifying with him.

The identification with Christ, says Alma, should also reach so far into us that it changes our lives and appearances.

Have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts? . . . I say unto you, can you look up, having the image of God engraved upon your countenances? (Alma 5:14, 19)

Like our identification with the prophets and with the righteous, our identifying with the Lord will involve reading his words and observing his actions to find what he does and why. Christ's own statement is that "I came into the world to do the will of my Father" (3 Nephi 27:13), and
"the works which ye have seen me do that shall ye also do; for that which ye have seen me do even that shall ye do" (3 Nephi 27:21). We identify with the Son as we follow him in doing the will of the Father. This Nephi clarifies when he says,

And [Christ] said unto the children of men: Follow thou me. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, can we follow Jesus save we shall be willing to keep the commandments of the Father? And the Father said: Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of My Beloved Son. And also, the voice of the Son came unto me saying: He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me; wherefore follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do. (2 Nephi 31:10-12)

Following the Son in doing the will of the Father is one of the major ways of identifying with Christ, who was "led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father" (Mosiah 15:7). Every time we truly seek to do the Father’s will, we are identifying ourselves with Christ.

Such identification, I would think, should not lead us to delusions of grandeur—a Savoir complex where we think we can save the world. Nor should it lead us to a martyr complex wherein we feel smug in our righteousness because we
are being persecuted or suffering under the weight of great burdens, as the Redeemer did. So once again, in identifying with a being, we must remember the implicit division: we are not the Savior. Our identification with Christ must be that of whole-heartedly, self-forgetfully following him in doing the will of the Father.

In asking us to identify with Christ, the prophets of the Book of Mormon help persuade us to repent by causing us to face the sheer disparity between us and the Lord. The comparison is enough to cause humility in the proudest who care to view the situation honestly. But even greater humility, accompanied by profound love and gratitude, fills earnest readers who realize the wonder and grace of the Lord’s love and redemption for us who are unworthy, and the stunning fact that He, himself, asks us to take on his name and seek to be like him. At the very least the effect of this realization moves the emotions; at its best it transforms us to beings in the image of Christ.

A Resolution of Identifications

We could establish many other identifications in the Book of Mormon (with the poor, the Lamanites, parents and children, women, etc.), but what I’ve done should be enough to illustrate some of the ways this can be done with the Book of Mormon.

However, in looking over the categories I’ve listed to
identify with, one is faced with the question of which category should be fundamental—which should we identify with most often. Should we identify with Christ or with the sinners? Do we see ourselves in the situations of the righteous or as less than the dust of the earth? Are we better off to identify with Nephi or with Laman and Lemuel? Will we gain more if we identify with the Zoramites or with the Anti-Nephi-Lehies? In short, how do we identify with this wide range of possible identifications?

My answer to that would be that we keep all these identifications in mind, but that we remain open and shift from category to category according to situations and needs. To identify with only one person or group of people is to miss other things that we ought to be persuaded of. A perspective that focuses on only one of these identifications is blind to other possibilities and potentially dangerous.

For instance, it is easy to take the identification with Christ and the command to be perfect to an extreme. From this extreme angle we often get problems with perfectionism, depression, or self-righteousness. But if we remember that we are also to identify with the lowest and not just the highest, then the problem of being too concerned for being perfect heals. We are told to be perfect, but we are also told to remember that we are less than the dust of the earth. By continually identifying with
these seemingly contradictory identifications, we can avoid the problems of focusing on one at the negation of the other, and such identification keeps us focused on responding to others, rather than fretting over ourselves and whether we are perfect or not.

This point deserves further clarification. In the Book of Mormon are asked simply to come unto Christ—to repent. Any of the identifications we could establish in the Book of Mormon call us to repent. An identification with the wicked is one in which we see how we are like them and need to repent. An identification with the righteous, or with Christ, is one in which we identify with how they are living so we can live the same way. And that means we are seeking to live right—to repent. This effort to live righteously calls for a kind of self-forgetful humility. What I assert is that the Book of Mormon asks us to be perfect at repenting—to constantly be returning to Christ. We are asked to come to the Lord and he will make us perfect:

Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God. And again, if ye by the
grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot. (Moroni 10:32-33 emphasis mine)

The Book of Mormon seeks to persuade us to repent, and the identifications sets us firmly on that path because any identification disrupts our self-centeredness and our complacency, and reveals our need to repent.

This need to repent is not found just in the passages where we are asked specifically to do so, but the whole book that is designed to that end—from the accounts of wars, or of Gadianton robbers, to the people of King Benjamin, and those who lived at the time immediately following the visit of the Savior. In other words, I am urging that we read and identify with the whole book, not just selective parts. And all our identifications should be to one end: to persuade us to come unto Christ.

So the identification needs to be a shifting one—one in which we identify with whatever or whomever we must to repent. We must be constantly ready to rethink and realign ourselves to whatever we need to do. The disparate categories of identification serve us well as we read the Book of Mormon, since they disrupt each other, and leave us
constantly having to move and take action—to repent. We can’t become comfortable in one of the categories, without another disturbing our ease and calling us to repent.

This shifting identification means that the Book of Mormon will remain essentially an unresolved book for us, at least until we are told we no longer need to repent. And in that sense at least, we can never make an end of reading it. Indeed the book itself is rather unresolved. To be sure, the Nephite history ends, tragically, but others are still left, and the book remains—a voice speaking to us from the dust, seeking to persuade us to take certain actions.

It strikes me that the Book of Mormon doesn’t seek so much to persuade us to these actions by compelling arguments and proofs. Granted the prophets quote scripture, give analogies, and argue in some ways, but the persuasion works primarily through identification with persons and situations and through testimony. Each identification and each testimony calls us to repent, either by directly telling us we need to come to Christ, or by urging such through identification with those who have repented or those who need to repent. Indeed we might think of the lives of those we identify with as testimonies in themselves, either as a witness of what happens when people do not repent, or a testimony of the Lord’s power to redeem when people do repent. The prophets of the Book of Mormon don’t feel a great need to compel us to believe or know, but simply to
help us initiate the action of coming to the Lord and finding out for ourselves. They don’t care so much that we believe them, but that we believe Christ. The prophets’ assumption is that if their words are indeed true, the Lord will be involved in the whole process of persuasion. This is perhaps best stated by Nephi in his parting words:

And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good. And if they are not the words of Christ, judge ye—for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness. (2 Nephi 33:10-11)

It is with this same surety that Moroni exhorts his readers to ask God about the truth of his message (Moroni 10:3-5).

If the prophets of the Book of Mormon have spoken under the command of God, spoken the word by the power of the Holy Ghost, then, as Nephi states, they have spoken the words of
Christ (2 Nephi 32:3). And any reader has heard the words of Christ calling him or her to come unto Christ. The Book of Mormon places us in the same situation as the people written of in its pages (in Burke’s language, we are identified or consubstantial with them) because we need to repent, and prophets have clearly presented the plan of redemption and urged us to choose the Redeemer. How the Book of Mormon resolves will depend on each reader’s response to its call that we repent. It is thus left with us to resolve the book whatever way we will--to decide whether we will come to Christ or no. Our lives will be that choice, and the choice, the resolution.
Conclusion

In this thesis I have urged that we read the Book of Mormon as a rhetorical text designed to persuade us to certain beliefs, attitudes, and actions. As I suggest in the first chapter, I think much the same approach ought to be taken to all scripture (and, for that matter, literature in general). That is, that we read less from a conceptual or procedural perspective, and more from a rhetorical perspective, responding to the attitudes and actions a text persuades us to take.

It is possible that since the Book of Mormon clearly sets itself up to be read as a persuasive text, it lends itself more readily than other scripture to the kind of rhetorical reading I have done. But all scripture, I believe, might profitably be approached in the same way—as a text that seeks to persuade. And while a compilation of scripture such as the Old Testament may not have such a unified organization and purpose as the Book of Mormon, individual books within in it often do. And I believe we find in all scripture much the same kind of testimony and call to come to Christ as we encounter in the Book of Mormon. The Lord himself admonishes a cantankerous gathering of Jews in this manner: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might be
saved" (John 5:39-40). In other words, contrary to the thinking of this group, the scriptures do not themselves contain the salvation sought for, nor does any law, concept, or procedure derived from them, but instead the Mediator testified of in the scriptures, "is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him" (Hebrews 7:25). Salvation rests in coming to the Lord. In recommending that we read the scriptures as texts of persuasion, my concern is that we not seek after something else when we should be coming to Christ.

To my recommendation that we read from a perspective of rhetoric, I also need to add a caution that we not turn this into a way of reading that is little better than the conceptual or procedural approaches. That is, there is a danger that we might simply read, look for what a text asks us to do, and turn our pursuit into one more question of mere knowledge (i.e., what action is the text recommending?), rather than genuinely being persuaded—responding and acting on what the text and the Lord require. We must watch carefully in this regard.

No method of reading can guarantee that its participants will be persuaded to act in a particular way—such would deny agency and genuine persuasion. But the question of what a text requires us to do sends us more solidly in the right direction than any other. And the approach I espouse in the last two chapters—an openness to
the text (the granting of a hearing), and the reading by shifting identification—should help us avoid making another self-centered system that privileges knowledge over action, as well as help assure that we hear the call the Lord makes to us. If this way of reading causes us to hear the voice of the Lord, then we can really ask nothing else of it—the scriptures have fulfilled their purpose, and we are left to act. Our response to what we experience in hearing the text will reveal the persuasiveness for us of the call to come to Him.
Notes

1 Emphasis here, and in all scriptures in this paragraph, is mine. All other emphasis of my own will be acknowledged in the parenthetical references in the text.

2 I am not the first to recommend that we approach scripture from a rhetorical perspective which concerns us with a text's moral and ethical implications. The works of Arthur King and Dennis and Sandra Packard offer ways of approaching a text and looking at its style, but in a larger context of its meaning—moral, social, ethical, religious—for how we live. In other words, theirs is not a detached stylistic approach, but one charged with religion and morality. My work has been deeply influenced by theirs, though it will not take the same emphasis on style. Nevertheless, I believe my approach to be reasonably compatible with King’s and with the Packards’.

I also must acknowledge James Faulconer’s influence on how I believe we ought to approach scripture. He has influenced me not only through his "Listening to the Voice of the Lord" (an unpublished manuscript in my possession) and his "Protestant and Jewish Styles of Criticism" (listed on Works Cited page), but also through many classes, lectures, and discussions in the hallway.

I also recommend the work of C. Terry Warner (a sample can be found in his introduction to Arthur King’s The Abundance of the Heart). It was while reading Warner’s
"Commitment and Life's Meaning" in To the Glory of God that I was first struck with the idea (developed in chapter two of this thesis) that our commitment must not be to concepts or rules, but to a divine being.

The seeds of many of the thoughts I develop in this thesis can be found in the work of these people, though no blame should be placed on them for anything said poorly or without sufficient thought.
Works Cited


SYMBOLIC ACTION AND PERSUASION
IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Keith Lane
Department of English
M.A. Degree, December 1990

ABSTRACT

This thesis contends that the Book of Mormon can be profitably read from a rhetorical perspective. It employs Kenneth Burke's ideas concerning language, texts, and his method of dramatistic analysis, to reveal certain persuasive aspects of the Book of Mormon, and to urge action in response to the persuasion of the Book of Mormon.

Chapter one discusses common ways of reading scripture, and explains some of the inadequacies of these approaches. It gives a rationale of a rhetorical approach that concerns itself with action, and recommends this approach for the Book of Mormon. Chapter two applies a rhetorical reading to the Book of Mormon as a whole, and concludes that the book has a fundamental and unified purpose: to persuade its readers to come to Christ. Chapter three analyzes Alma 32-34 from the perspective of Burke's pentad, and urges an open, responsive reading of scripture. It concludes that the overall purpose of the Book of Mormon is revealed in these chapters as well. Chapter four explores Burke's notion of identification, and suggests ways to allow for persuasion as readers of the Book of Mormon.

COMMITTEE APPROVAL:

Grant M. Boswell, Committee Chairman
Bruce W. Young, Committee Member
James E. Faulconer, Committee Member
Gloria Cronin, Graduate Coordinator