

# Outlining

Obviously, the first point of scripture study is to understand what the scriptures say, and one of the best tools for doing that is outlining. Outlines help us see how the parts of a passage fit together, how ideas and doctrines relate to each other, and what the passage emphasizes. Sometimes we might outline the material that we are studying to get an overview of the whole passage. Other times we might outline it to see how it fits into its scriptural context. The 1981 edition of the scriptures already contains outlines of each chapter in the chapter headings. I often find it useful to make my own outlines as well.

Outlines can range from a brief synopsis of several chapters to a detailed outline of one chapter. For example, in the first edition of the Book of Mormon, Alma 30–35 are one chapter (chapter 16), a division that seems to have been present on the golden plates and not merely an artifact of translation or an editorial change made in later editions. This might suggest that those chapters be outlined together. Even if we did not know about the original grouping of these chapters, because they collectively form a story, we might be curious about how they fit together. They might, for example, be briefly outlined like this (for a more detailed outline of four of these chapters, see pages 20–22):

Korihor (30) Zoramites (31–34) the poor in spirit (32a) faith and the atonement (32b–34) Separation of the Ammonites from Jershon (35)

An outline often generates scripture study questions. How does Alma’s discussion of faith and knowledge fit into the story as a whole? To whom and why did Alma deliver the sermon? How might the answers to those questions indicate ways to better understand the second half of Alma 32?

As part of my study, I might decide to make a more detailed outline of parts of a story. For example, if I were studying Mosiah 3, I might make an outline such as this:

A. The Lord has a message of joy for King Benjamin and his people: Jesus Christ is coming (3–5)

1. He will heal the sick, raise the dead, and cast out devils (5–6)
2. He will live and suffer in the flesh (6–7)
3. He will bring salvation (8–9)
4. He will rise from the dead (10)
5. He will do these things so that a righteous judgment of the children of men can be made (10)
6. He will atone for the sins of those who sin ignorantly (11)

B. The Lord has sent the prophets to preach woe to those who rebel, because the only way to be saved is through Jesus Christ (12–18; King Benjamin repeats the latter fact, which seems central to his message, several times)

C. The natural man is an enemy to God and always will be unless he does the following:

1. Yields to the Holy Spirit
2. Puts off the natural man
3. Becomes a saint through the atonement
4. Becomes like a child: submissive, meek, humble, patient, and full of love (19)

D. The knowledge of the Savior will spread throughout the world, and when it does, only little children will be held blameless (20–21)

E. King Benjamin's people are not blameless (22)

Outlines such as this can help us ask questions about other parts of King Benjamin's sermon. We might, for example, wonder about the contrast between what the angel says in verse 22 and King Benjamin's remark in Mosiah 1:11 that his people have been diligent in keeping the commandments. We might also ponder how the angel's comments relate to the people's fear recorded in Mosiah 4:1–2. If Benjamin's people are diligent in keeping the commandments, why are they not blameless?

Each degree of outlining serves different purposes, so it may be helpful to create both general and detailed outlines of the study material. As I study, I refer back to the outlines I have made to help me better understand the particular verses I am studying or to help me remember the context of the passage.

Following is one possible detailed outline of Alma 31–34. I made this when I wondered what the phrase *these things* in Alma 34:8 refers to. Does it refer to something named before verse 8? How am I to understand it if it refers to something named after verse 8? Considering the various possibilities helped me decide what I thought it referred to and, perhaps more important, it prompted me to think about how the teachings of Alma and Amulek are related to each other and what they mean.

A. Alma 31: Alma begins his mission to the Zoramites

1. The Nephites fear that the Zoramites will join forces with their Lamanite enemies (3–4)
2. Alma believes that preaching the gospel is the most effective way of getting people to do good (5–6)
3. The Zoramites are apostate Nephites (1–2, 8)
  - a) They do not keep the law of Moses (9)
  - b) They do not pray according to the church's teachings (10)
  - c) They stand on the Rameumptom and offer a set prayer that reflects their apostate beliefs (12–23)
    - (1) They are elect—they and no one else will be saved (16–18)
    - (2) There is no Christ (anointed one) (16–17)

(3) They are grateful they have not been deceived to believe in Christ and the foolish traditions of the Nephites (17)

4. Alma prays for strength and success among the Zoramites (24–35)

5. Alma, Ammon, Aaron, Omner, Amulek, Zeezrom, Shiblon, and Corianton separate to do missionary work (36–38)

B. Alma 32: The missionaries have success among the poor Zoramites (2)

1. The poor Zoramites have been cast out of the synagogue and ask Alma what they should do about having no place to worship (3–6)

2. Alma teaches them about humility (7–16)

a) It is good to be humbled (12–13)

b) It is better to be humble without being compelled (13–16)

3. Alma discusses sign seeking (17–20)

4. Alma discusses faith (21–43)

C. Alma 33: The poor Zoramites ask how to obtain faith

1. Alma quotes the prophet Zenos

a) The people can worship anywhere (2–11)

b) God answers prayers and is merciful (4–11)

2. Zenock and Moses testified of the same teachings as Zenos (15–19)

a) Alma compares the Zoramites to the people of Moses who would not look to the serpent and live (20–21)

b) Alma exhorts the people to believe in Christ (22–23)

D. Alma 34: Amulek adds his testimony

1. The poor Zoramites already know the things that Alma has taught them (2)

2. They wanted to know what to do about their suffering, and Alma taught them to exercise patience and faith (3)

a) They must try the experiment of belief on Christ (4)

b) Alma has proven that Christ is the way to salvation (5–7)

3. Amulek testifies that “these things” are true (8)
  - a) Christ will come (8)
  - b) An atonement must be made (9–16)
    - (1) It will be infinite (10)
    - (2) It will end Mosaic sacrifice, which points to the infinite sacrifice (11–14)
    - (3) It will make repentance and mercy possible (15–16)
4. The Zoramites should have faith, repent, and ask God for mercy (17)
5. They must pray always and everywhere (18–27)
6. They must take care of the sick and the afflicted or their prayer is useless (28–29)
7. Amulek exhorts the Zoramites to repent and abide by certain teachings (31–41)
  - a) Cease denying the coming of Christ (37)
  - b) Receive the Holy Ghost (38)
  - c) Take the name of Christ (38)
  - d) Be humble (38)
  - e) Worship God wherever they are (38)
  - f) Worship “in spirit and in truth” (38)
  - g) Live in thanksgiving for God’s mercy (38)
  - h) Pray continually to avoid temptation (39)
  - i) Do not revile against persecutors but bear suffering with patience and hope (40–41)

First, notice how this outline places Alma’s discussion of faith into a new light. His teachings on faith are part of the call to repentance that Alma issues to the Zoramites, and they are closely connected to his lesson that they must be humble. When Amulek adds his testimony to Alma’s, he does not focus on the nature of faith but on the necessity of humility and repentance. Considering Alma’s discussion of faith in that context may change how we think about it. Also notice that in these chapters the chapter breaks mark natural divisions in the outline, but that is not always the case. Most chapter and verse divisions were added to the scriptures long after they were written. Such divisions are helpful for finding references in the scriptures, but they do not always reflect the structure of the scriptures. Be careful not to be misled by the chapter and verse divisions; do not rely on them to decide meaning. Outlines such as the samples can help us learn more about the scriptures. They can lead us to

connections and questions we have not previously considered, and the new insights we gain can deepen our appreciation of the word of God.