Narrative Criticism and the Book of Mormon

Edgar C. Snow Jr.

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Abstract: This paper suggests the use of narrative criticism, a recent literary interpretive tool, as a favorable method of Book of Mormon interpretation. As an example of narrative interpretation, the Samuel the Lamanite narrative in Helaman 13–16 is analyzed as a discrete narrative portion of the Book of Mormon for the exploration of the possibilities of a narrative critical approach to its text. Instead of focusing on the content of Samuel’s exhortations, lamentations, and prophecies in order to understand these passages, I interpret the surrounding narrative and find it serves as an impressive complement to the doctrinal content of Samuel’s discourse.

While the Book of Mormon from the date of its publication has been the subject of historical interpretation (does the book contain ancient history?), until recently, relatively few students of the Book of Mormon have assessed its literary value. This should not come as a surprise since the Book of Mormon was presented to the world by Joseph Smith as an ancient history,¹ and he was

¹ Although some interpreters have argued to the contrary, the statement contained in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon referring to Joseph Smith as the “author and proprietor” of the Book of Mormon cannot be viewed as a statement of Joseph’s “initial” intent that the book be considered his work of historical fiction in light of (1) unequivocal statements by Joseph Smith that the Book of Mormon is a translation of an ancient text (see, e.g., HC 1:71), and (2) the copyright law of New York in 1830 requiring such a statement. See Miriam A. Smith and John W. Welch, “Joseph Smith: ‘Author and Proprietor,’ ” in Reexploring the Book of Mormon, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 154–57.
immediately taken to task for such claims. However, in recent years several Book of Mormon students have begun to notice the literary complexity and richness contained in the Book of Mormon, aside from its literary value for historical analysis.


explore in this paper an emerging area of literary and biblical scholarship known as narrative criticism and its possible uses in the literary interpretation of the Book of Mormon. After a brief explanation of the assumptions and techniques of narrative criticism, I will turn to the Samuel the Lamanite narrative contained in Helaman 13–16 to illustrate how this approach may assist us in our attempt to understand the Book of Mormon.

**Narrative Criticism**

Narrative criticism is a recently developed literary critical method which attempts to use the tools developed in the study of narratives to study works of both fiction and nonfiction. Narrative critics attempt to isolate the narrative of a text from the real

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author of the text in an effort to let a text speak for itself as much as possible. Rather than referring to the real author of the text, narrative critics refer to and study the implied author, meaning the person who wrote the text as that person is presented in the text itself. According to narrative interpretive theory, the narrative itself provides clues that indicate who the implied author is and which views the implied author holds. Likewise, the real reader of the text is ignored and an implied reader is referred to and studied by narrative critics, as is the anticipated response of such a reader to the views of an implied author. Quite often, the implied author's views are indistinguishable from the views of the narrator, who may actually be a character in a story if a narrator/character is acknowledged in the narrative. The implied author is most often clearly visible, in fiction rather than in nonfiction, when the narrator is a naive character or otherwise holds views obviously different from the implied author—such as Huck Finn, the naive narrator of Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—thereby producing a sense of irony in the implied reader. Regarding the implied reader, on the other hand, it is a rare narrative form, again usually found in fiction rather than nonfiction, which has a narratee, a character in the story to whom the story is being told, who is different from the implied reader in the actual narrative itself, such as the person to whom Marlow tells the story in Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, for example, and the implied reader must usually be determined without reference to a possible narratee.

For the purposes of using narrative criticism in reading the Book of Mormon, use of the term implied author does not suggest that the text had no actual historical narrators as reported. In fact, the views of each main narrator in the Book of Mormon appear to reflect, without any sense of irony, the views of the implied author of the entire text of the Book of Mormon, since each nar-

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5 Narrative critics can interpret the secondhand narratives reported by a narrator as a character in a work, resulting in multilevel narrative analyses.

6 It is possible in narrative theory to describe an implied author for a work that obviously consists of texts written by different historical authors. For instance, the New Testament is an anthology of works, each of which can be interpreted as separate narrative works, or as one narrative whole. The implied author of each gospel would be virtually identical to its narrator, whereas the
rator of the Book of Mormon appears to have nearly identical prophetic Judeo-Christian views. However, I suggest that Book of Mormon narrative critics interpret each discrete narrative section of the text with reference to the actual named narrator as the equivalent of the implied author for that particular passage.

The implied reader of the Book of Mormon is someone who is sympathetic to the views expressed by the Book of Mormon narrators and who is interested in the origin, history, and future of the Book of Mormon peoples (see 2 Nephi 25:8; 26:14; Mormon 3:17; 5:9–10) and their intersection with the implied reader’s own present and future (see Mormon 8:34–41). The narrative critic’s objective is to stand in the shoes of the implied reader presupposed by the text and forget almost all information outside of the text. For instance, in reading the book of Ether, the Book of Mormon narrative critic should ask why the brother of Jared’s name is not mentioned in Ether and not supplement the text with Joseph Smith’s subsequent statement that his name was Mahonri Moriancumr.

Narrative criticism uses the same tools as critics of fiction to understand a text and elucidate the response of the implied reader to the text, thereby showing what it means to the reader. Evaluation of the implied author’s narrative use of setting, events, and characters is crucial to this process, as well as consideration of the implied author’s use of literary forms and expressions. What is then interpreted is the narrative in the text as told by the implied author to the implied reader.

In spite of Neal Chandler’s observation that the Book of Mormon is “big” on exhortation, perhaps at the expense of story or narrative, the Book of Mormon nevertheless provides ample story material containing multiple layers of narrators and narratees. Even exhortations themselves can be viewed as events in a

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7 A demonstration otherwise would be useful in a historical interpretation, suggesting multiple authorship for the text.
story. Using the narrative critical approach, the Book of Mormon text can and should be treated as a series of stories discoursed as scripture, not necessarily as mere literature. Narrative criticism is a different approach from studying the Book of Mormon as mere literature because it allows doctrinal and spiritual aspects of the text to be fully explored while using the techniques developed in the study of narrative. The advantages of this approach are numerous: non-Mormons will be able to view the text from the believing Mormon’s point of view; other critical methods can be tested by narrative criticism for consistency; scholars and lay persons will find accessible common ground; and this approach celebrates the power of sacred narratives and their ability to inspire us. While some critics will consider the apparent weaknesses of narrative criticism greater than its strengths—it ignores, for instance, the historical witness of Christ in ancient America—these perceived weaknesses should not hinder narrative critics from interpreting the Book of Mormon. Only an eclectic approach to the Book of Mormon text will eventually render its full meaning, and narrative criticism should be a part of that complete approach. While narrative critics should ultimately interpret the entire Book of Mormon as a narrative whole, I hope that the following example of a narrative approach to an individual story in the Book of Mormon illustrates the worth of narrative criticism.

The Samuel the Lamanite Narrative

While most readers of Helaman 13–16 usually focus on the content of Samuel’s exhortations, lamentations, and prophecies in order to understand these passages, the surrounding narrative serves as an impressive complement to the theological content of Samuel’s discourse. The implied author of the Book of Mormon in this narrative, like all implied authors, has made choices of what to include in the narrative in order to achieve his desired effect: (1) he has chosen certain props or settings in describing the events he has chosen to tell us, (2) he has given order to the events and either summarized or elaborated upon them, and (3) he has chosen to reveal one or several character traits and transformations of the people who cause the related events. The Samuel the Lamanite narrative in Helaman 13–16 is accordingly analyzed
below to show how these narrative elements give meaning to the text.

Setting

Settings can be divided into two categories: spatial and temporal. As with the Bible, most Book of Mormon settings are sparsely described and utilitarian in nature. The Samuel the Lamanite narrative is no exception to this rule. However, the city wall climbed by Samuel in Helaman 13:4, though it represents a real wall in the narrative, may also act as a symbolic setting and may represent the stubbornness of the Nephites as the figurative wall they built around their hearts to reject Samuel's message.

Spatially, the narrative takes place in the city of Zarahemla near the city walls and in an unidentified place where Nephi is administering religious rites (Helaman 16:1). Unlike implied authors of other works, the implied author of the Book of Mormon—like the implied author of the Bible—is usually concerned with setting the stage with a bare minimum of spatial props where the events can take place.

Temporally, the text makes it very clear that the Samuel the Lamanite narrative takes place in the eighty-sixth year of the reign of the Nephite judges. In fact, it is the only reported event of the eighty-sixth year, other than a summary report of the evil doings of the Nephites and the righteousness of the Lamanites. References to the eighty-sixth year at the beginning of the Samuel the Lamanite narrative in Helaman 13:1 and at the end of the narrative in Helaman 16:9 delineate a discrete narrative section. Here the temporal setting is purely chronological, rather than typological—such as Nicodemus's visit to Jesus "by night" in John 3:2, suggesting in John's narrative that the term by night indicates Nicodemus wished his visit to remain a secret one.

Therefore, an analysis of the Samuel the Lamanite narrative shows that the implied reader should probably not view the narrative setting, other than perhaps the city wall, for any purpose other than as a mere backdrop against which to meet characters and watch events.
Events

It should be mentioned again that although my analysis ignores Samuel’s actual sermon, speech itself is often an event to be explored in a narrative. The narrative analysis of events usually consists of examining their order, duration, frequency, and causation. Causation might also be analyzed along with characterization.

Implied authors use a variety of methods to deal with the order of reported events. A reporter at the scene of a catastrophe might, for instance, report the event as it occurs: “I am watching an avalanche as I sit and eat my pastry in the ski lodge.” In this instance, the telling of the story is simultaneous with its occurrence, a narrative rarity. Typically the implied author reports events which occurred previously, and usually these events are a part of the story being told: “After I entered the ski lodge, I had an insatiable craving for pastry.” Sometimes, however, an event is told which occurred before or after the story being told: “While sitting next to the fire, eating my pastry, I remembered my last skiing trip.”

The Book of Mormon contains numerous examples of complicated ordering of narrative events, such as the interruption of the story of the Nephites by the story of the Jaredites. Another example of complicated ordering in the Book of Mormon occurs in the section I call the “meanwhile-back-at-the-ranch” narrative portion of the Book of Mormon contained in Mosiah 7–25. In these chapters the implied author simultaneously balances (1) the current narrative about Ammon with (2) a “flashback,” which follows the story of Zeniff, Noah, and Limhi and the “scene-stealing” episode of Abinadi, with (3) Alma departing to the waters of Mormon and his activities there, until (4) all of these accounts which had been suspended against each other by the implied author are folded together. Then, in an extraordinary narrative act, the implied author records that a character in the story reads the reports of these three simultaneous episodes to the people gathered at Zarahemla (Mosiah 25:4–6). The task of the narrative critic is to determine the use and effect of any ordering of events. The order of events in the Samuel the Lamanite narrative
shows an example of the remarkable narrative agility of the implied author of the Book of Mormon.

The implied author first introduces Samuel and tells of his attempts to preach to the Nephites. Samuel is initially rejected by the Nephites. But while returning to his own country, Samuel is prompted to return and attempt preaching again. After being refused admission to the city, he climbs the city wall and preaches (Helaman 13–15). As Samuel preaches, many believe his words. The implied author says in Helaman 16:1 that they “went forth and sought for Nephi; and when they had come forth and found him they confessed unto him their sins and denied not, desiring that they might be baptized unto the Lord.” At first glance it appears that, simultaneously with the continued preaching of Samuel, converted Nephites sought out Nephi somewhere in the city or its vicinity, confessing their sins and requesting baptism.

As the narrative continues, however, it appears that the implied author may be intentionally distorting the order of events to achieve a special narrative effect. While the first converted Nephites seek out Nephi, confessing their sins and requesting baptism, Samuel apparently continues to preach, and the remaining unbelieving Nephites become angry and cast stones and arrows as he stands on the wall (Helaman 16:2). Because of divine protection, Samuel is untouched by the stones and arrows, causing more Nephites to believe his message (Helaman 16:3). This second wave of converts also seeks out Nephi to be baptized while Samuel continues to preach. The implied author then reports in Helaman 16:4–5—in the past progressive tense, which denotes past action in progress in the narrative, as if occurring simultaneously with Samuel’s preaching on the wall—that Nephi was engaged in extensive activity and

was baptizing, and prophesying, and preaching, crying repentance unto the people, showing signs and wonders, working miracles among the people; ... therefore as many as believed on the words of Samuel went forth unto him to be baptized, for they came repenting and confessing their sins.
As more fully discussed below, Nephi’s extensive proselytizing activities appear to be told outside the actual chronological order of events.

As the implied author tells the implied reader, the majority of Nephites at the wall listening to Samuel did not believe his words, and since they could not hit him with stones or arrows, they sought to capture him by sending men up the wall after him (Helaman 16:6–7). Samuel then escaped capture and returned to his own people (Helaman 16:8), never to speak again to the Nephites.

While it is unclear exactly how long Samuel stood on the wall and delivered his discourse, it seems that the activities reported as occurring at the same time among Nephi and the two groups of converts—the Nephites confessing and Nephi “baptizing, and prophesying, and preaching, crying repentance unto the people, showing signs and wonders, working miracles among the people” (Helaman 16:4)—continued after Samuel’s actual discourse was delivered and are intentional narrative temporal distortions.

Several aspects of the Samuel the Lamanite narrative need to be clarified in order to substantiate this. It is unclear that the reported text of Samuel’s discourse is the discourse delivered on the wall, since Samuel preached “many days, repentance unto the people” (Helaman 13:2) before he was cast out of Zarahemla. The implied author’s introductions to the reported discourses contained in Helaman 13:5 and 14:1–2 are ambiguous as to the exact time when they were delivered. The reported discourses may have been delivered during these many days, not accounting for the “great many more things [which were spoken by Samuel] which [could not] be written” as indicated in Helaman 14:1.

But assuming that the reported discourse was spoken from the wall, in addition to prior unreported discourses, the reported passages of Samuel’s speech from the wall quoted by the implied author would last approximately twenty minutes. I base this on my own timed, slow reading of Samuel’s reported discourses out loud. If one assumes that some portion of the “great many more things” spoken were also delivered from the wall, one could further assume that it would not take substantially longer to have delivered a portion of the “great many more things” than it would to deliver that which is reported by the implied author in Helaman. This view is supported in that the entire speech would have been presumed to be delivered in a hostile setting with escalating attempts to kill Samuel following each other in apparent quick succession; no time lag was apparent between attempts to hit Samuel with stones and arrows and the attempt to capture him. So even if it is assumed by the implied reader that Samuel spoke for sixty minutes on the wall, it does not appear to be enough time for converts, in two separate groups in succession, to seek out Nephi, confess their sins to
Such apparent discrepancies between the occurrence of the events contained in the story and the discourse of the story by the implied author are called “anachronies” (not to be confused with “anachronisms”) by narrative critics. The implied author of the Samuel the Lamanite narrative appears to use internal prolepsis (an event reported in the story which actually occurs after the story) in reporting, on the one hand, the reactions of Samuel’s converts seeking Nephi’s spiritual administrations as temporally distorted/narrative sequential comparisons to, on the other hand, the reactions of the unbelieving Nephites.

In addition to time, duration is also used by implied authors to achieve certain narrative effects. It is rare that the time spent in telling a story—the time it takes to read the words (in narrative or story time)—is equal to the amount of time it might take for the story to actually occur (in real time). A radio sports announcer’s play-by-play narrative is the best example of how a “real time” narrative might occur; the sports announcer’s report would be described as a “scene” by a narrative critic. The Book of Mormon implied author uses several forms of narrative duration. The most striking example of summary—when the discourse time is less than the story time—can be found in 4 Nephi when approximately four hundred years of events are telescoped into one chapter. Summary is also used repeatedly in the Samuel the Lamanite narrative. It is typical that summary is used by the implied author of the Book of Mormon to cover ground between scenes, thus highlighting, for instance, the importance of the Samuel the Lamanite narrative itself.

Furthermore, an analysis of the frequency with which events are reported usually reveals the importance which the implied him, listen to his sermons and prophecies, watch his signs and miracles, and pursue baptismal rites while Samuel delivers his hurried message on the wall.

It might be argued, however, that the phrase Nephi was baptizing contained in Helaman 16:4 might refer to Nephi’s prior well-known attempts to preach the gospel, told in summary form to explain why the Nephites converted by Samuel’s discourse sought him out. Perhaps Helaman 16:5 should read “therefore [because of his past renown] as many as believed . . . went forth unto him.” This would still be a narrative temporal distortion of events. However, it seems unlikely that the implied author would need to explain Nephi’s renown in this summary manner since the story of his praying on a tower in his garden had been told only a few pages beforehand in Helaman 7–9.
reader should attach to the events. Frequency of narration may occur with one event reported several times, such as Alma’s thrice-repeated conversion story (Mosiah 27:8–37; Alma 36:4–26; 38:6–8), highlighting its importance. Also, separate similar events are often narrated to highlight commonalities for a narrative effect at the expense of their differences and are labeled “multiple-similar” narrations. The implied author of the Book of Mormon seems to favor at least three types of multiple-similar events: (1) confrontations with anti-Christs such as Sherem, Nehor, and Korihor, (2) righteous-wicked Nephite cycles (which are self-evident in the text—just look for the words “and thus we see”), and (3) prophetic failure/success stories, such as the stories about Abinadi and Alma₁, for instance. The Samuel the Lamanite narrative provides an example of the prophetic failure/success story: Samuel, a Lamanite prophet, attempts to preach, is rejected, is prompted to preach again by a divine source, and thereafter meets success.

Characters

The last general category of analysis for the narrative critic is to analyze the characters in a text. Although the characters in the Book of Mormon are intended to be considered real characters, the implied author may choose to use real characters as symbols and show them as flat characters who are perhaps presented as extraordinarily consistent (unlike most humans), or stock characters who represent mainly one character trait. Most of the Book of Mormon anti-Christ characters fit into the flat character mold, as well as many of the heroes such as Ammon₂ and Gideon. Some characters, such as zealous Zeniff, may be considered stock characters. However, in spite of certain criticisms that Book of Mormon characters are all flat or stock characters, thus implying that they are merely fictional characters—an invalid argument since real characters can be represented as flat or stock characters—numerous characters such as Lehi, Nephi, Alma₂, Abish,

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King Lamoni, and Chemish are round characters, revealing a variety of personality traits. It should be noted that narrative critics do not place a value judgment on the presentation of a character as flat, stock, or round.

Sometimes, as in the gospels, groups can be characters as well. Typically—but not always—in the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites are portrayed as an evil group character and the Nephites as a not-as-evil group character. The implied author tells us information about these characters or shows these characters through their actions. In the Samuel the Lamanite narrative, therefore, it is no small irony that the Nephites are so stiff-necked that Nephi, their “namesake,” had been unable to convert them, whereas Samuel, a Lamanite who was sent to convert them, was only partially successful, and returned to his own country.

In addition, static and dynamic characters should be examined. Book of Mormon static characters are usually presented as dyed-in-the-wool good guys or bad guys. The dynamic characters, however, are often presented as converts, reflecting the implied author’s main concerns: the only personality transformations worth page space in the Book of Mormon are spiritual conversions.

The implied author also uses narrative to develop the implied reader’s empathy for characters—whether divinely idealistic, as with Jesus (3 Nephi 17), or mortally realistic, as with Abish (Alma 19). The implied reader’s sympathy is often evoked through the sympathy of an empathetic character for other characters. For instance, as an empathetic character, the resurrected Jesus evokes our sympathy for children in 3 Nephi 17.13 In the Samuel the Lamanite narrative, the implied reader is idealistically empathetic to Samuel14 and Nephi; through them our sympathy for the converted Nephites is evoked. Of course, antipathy is also created in the implied reader through empathetic characters and the implied author succeeds with respect to the antipathy to be felt by the

13 Incidentally, I find the resurrected Jesus in the Book of Mormon to be a round character—he weeps, he smiles, and he prays—whereas in the New Testament I find him to be a stock character. Again, this is not a value judgment, but merely a narrative category.

14 Since so little is told about Samuel, it is difficult to characterize him, and, therefore, he is likely to be considered a stock character.
implied reader against the unconverted Nephites in the Samuel the Lamanite narrative.

**Conclusion**

A narrative critical analysis of the Samuel the Lamanite narrative in Helaman 13–16 shows that the implied author has attempted to illustrate through a narrative, as well as a sermon, the irony of Nephite wickedness by telling the story of Samuel, a Lamanite prophet who was sent to convert the Nephites, a Lamanite prophet who is perhaps *with* honor in his own country of traditionally evil Lamanites, who are in fact actually better than those Nephites who reject Samuel. The implied author shows simultaneously the differences between the converted Nephites and the unbelievers through their actions by using the narrative in a likely temporal distortion of the probable actual order of events in the story time, thereby highlighting those differences by comparison as the climactic story of the eighty-sixth year of the Nephite judges. The implied author evokes the implied reader’s idealistic empathy with Samuel and Nephi and thereby evokes the implied reader’s sympathy for the converted Nephites and the Lamanites, so that the implied reader may also accept Samuel’s message.

The use of narrative critical tools in future Book of Mormon scholarship should provide us with enhanced understanding and approaches that allow scholar and nonscholar, believer and nonbeliever alike to enjoy the message of the Book of Mormon. This analysis of the Samuel the Lamanite narrative has illustrated that point.