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ALMA'S REALITY: READING ALMA AS SINFUL, REPENTANT, TRAUMATIZED, QUESTIONING, AND RIGHTEOUS

Amanda Brown

Review of Kylie Nielson Turley, *Alma 1–29: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). 162 pages. \$9.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *Kylie Nielson Turley delves deep into the conversion and ministry of Alma the Younger, reading new life into a well-known narrative. By analyzing Alma's story with the full weight of his humanity in mind, she breathes emotion into Alma's conversion and missionary efforts. Her efforts to read Alma without a veneer of superhumanity result in a highly relatable figure who has known wickedness, repentance, loss, depression, and righteousness.*

Kylie Nielson Turley accomplishes exactly what the Maxwell Institute's *Brief Theological Introductions* series seeks to do — namely, to “read a few Book of Mormon stories you have probably read before and see them in a new light.”¹ She achieves this through careful analysis of the life of Alma the Younger (hereafter referred to as Alma) as reported by the Book of Alma's structural narrative. In re-analyzing familiar stories, Turley questions common (and assumed) tropes about Alma such as his age at the time of his conversion, the depths of his prior depravity, and the ramifications of personal trauma experienced during his missionary efforts. By allowing these stories the emotion all too often discarded in the standard “Sunday School answers,” Turley restores power to Alma's

1. Kylie Nielson Turley, *Alma 1-29: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 2.

redemptive arch and asks the reader to acknowledge the Atonement's ability to overcome all.

The book begins by questioning the specific structure surrounding the events of Alma's life, noticing the specificity with which dates and ages of both Alma and his father are recorded. After careful analysis, Turley concludes that Alma is far older than a wayward teenager. This provokes a poignant reflection: "Is it easier to trust an adult leader who had some youthful indiscretions (and repented) — or one who spent decades trying to destroy the church as an adult (and repented)?"²

Reading Alma as a repentant adult alters his interactions with the apostate figures he continuously faces. Turley notes, "When readers view Alma as the very wicked and idolatrous unbeliever the narrator describes, they likely interpret the text differently."³ She goes as far as to compare characterizations of Alma to those of Amalickiah, laying out a parallel structure in descriptions that substantiate the depths of Alma's former sinful lifestyle. And yet, Alma's death report specifically notes, "This we know, that he was a righteous man" (Alma 45:19), demonstrating the ability of Alma's repentance and conversion to overcome all previous sin, regardless of its severity.

Switching focus, the book discusses the trauma response of the Nephites to the destruction caused by a Lamanite attack upon the newly established Anti-Nephi-Lehis. The Nephites mourn and lament (Alma 28:4) the familial relationships lost in a battle where tens of thousands perish. In such circumstances, Turley proposes that Alma 29 is not a missionary anthem but a psalm of mourning and lament wherein Alma and the people ask "Why?"

Viewing this psalm as a trauma response to the battle and to the martyrdom of the believing women and children at Ammonihah, Turley emphasizes Alma's ability to plead for continued hope and understanding in Christ despite the recent chaos and trauma. She says, "Questioning God about why something happens demonstrates faith that he is there and hope that he has an answer. Moreover, underlying both questions is a plea for God to make sense of suffering. ... To ask why is to ask for meaning, to ask God to make sense of suffering. Pain and suffering prompt the question, but it is meaninglessness that is unendurable."⁴

Throughout the work, Turley rereads stories readers are accustomed to perceiving one way so as to maximize comprehension of the ability

2. Ibid., 15.

3. Ibid., 41.

4. Ibid., 106.

of Christ's Atonement to transcend apostasy, trauma, marginalization, and the heavens' seeming silence in the face of earth-shattering loss. Reading stories with the human nature of our scriptural heroes in mind is a demanding task. It asks us to forgo placing scriptural figures on pedestals and accept the need all have for Jesus Christ. As Turley so poignantly states, "We may lose a superhuman scripture hero, an idol untouched by doubt or despair and unaffected by circumstances. ... But the stories of Alma 1–29 are not trite or slick or flimsy. They offer more than theological Band-Aids."⁵ Alma's story indeed offers more than a theological Band-Aid. It offers belief in Christ, hope in the face of loss, and a path through self-inflicted and inescapable suffering alike.

Amanda Colleen Brown holds an MA in Bible and the Ancient Near East from The Hebrew University at Jerusalem, where she focused on Akkadian, Modern Hebrew, and Israelite popular religion as it relates to women's narratives. She previously graduated from Brigham Young University with a bachelor's degree in Ancient Near Eastern Studies. She is also passionate about a variety of dance styles, literature, and travel.

5. Ibid., 4.

