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## Alma's Wisdom-Poem to Helaman (Alma 37:35–37)

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**Abstract:** Not all of the occasions for my efforts at scriptural interpretation are as specifically “pastoral” or “ecclesial” as this one was, nor as were the occasions for the two dozen sermons I wrote notes or texts for during those three years. But all in some way, to some degree, are rooted in my community at the time, respond to a call within or from that community, and are offered to that community. That is the first thing that “Mormon scriptural hermeneutics” means to me. Were I not a member of a Mormon community and thus an heir of the texts it regards as holy scripture, I’m not at all sure I would have read, or would continue to read, those texts, nor that I would feel any impulse to write about them, much less publish anything I write about them. But I am a member and I read the scriptures, and I often respond to an explicit or implicit call to interpret and write about them. My published readings, so far, have all arisen in academic contexts that, because I teach at a Church-sponsored university, are strongly inflected by my community’s care for its sacred texts and its habits of using them.

# **Alma's Wisdom-Poem to Helaman (Alma 37:35–37)**

*Bruce W. Jorgensen*

## **Occasions**

For about three years, 1998–2001, I served on the High Council of a BYU student stake, and on November 18, 2000, my assignment was to speak for about ten minutes to an Elders Quorum on the scriptural theme for a ward conference, Alma 37:35–37. I don't recall how much advance notice I had. Those verses, when I re-read them, struck me as a small poem like the ones familiar in English translations of some parts of Proverbs. I copied out the verses in parallel clauses and wrote a few interpretive notes for my talk. A couple years later, when I transcribed the notes I expanded them into a brief essay draft, which I revised and enlarged over the next three years, thinking I might sometime try to publish it.

Not all of the occasions for my efforts at scriptural interpretation are as specifically “pastoral” or “ecclesial” as this one was, nor as were the occasions for the two dozen sermons I wrote notes or texts for during those three years. But all in some way, to some degree, are rooted in my community at the time, respond to a call within or from that community, and are offered to that community. That is the first thing that “Mormon scriptural hermeneutics” means to me. Were I not a member of a Mormon community and thus an heir of the texts it regards as holy scripture, I'm not at all sure I would have read, or would continue to read, those texts, nor that I would feel any impulse to write about them, much less publish anything I write about them. But I am a member and I read the scriptures, and I often respond to an explicit or implicit call to interpret and write about them. My published readings, so far, have all arisen in

academic contexts that, because I teach at a Church-sponsored university, are strongly inflected by my community's care for its sacred texts and its habits of using them.

As an undergraduate English major at BYU, I took the required religion courses, some of which encouraged close reading of scripture, and I took a Bible as Literature course that made me wonder if the Book of Mormon also might be read "as literature." As a graduate student at Cornell, I taught a once-a-week Institute class for a year, and, because I'd learned something of typology from courses I took or audited in Old and Middle English literature, began to think about typological patterns in the Book of Mormon. One eventual published result of this was "The Dark Way to the Tree."<sup>1</sup>

About 1986 I taught the second semester of the Book of Mormon course required of all BYU students, and noticed (with a mild shock) that nowhere in Alma 39 does Alma charge his son Corianton with fornication, the sin Mormons usually, and too casually, convict him of, and often, on the basis of one verse (Alma 39:5, which uses the plural "these things"), regard as "*the* sin next to murder." Out of that perplexity I eventually wrote "Scriptural Chastity Lessons."<sup>2</sup> A year or two later, in an Honors Colloquium, trying to help students distinguish "didactic" stories (told to illustrate a "message") from—for want of a better term—"mimetic" stories (told to move an audience by engaging them imaginatively with the lives and feelings and deeds of characters), I found myself spontaneously retelling the three stories Jesus tells in Luke 15, where the third story differs sharply in its form and detailed development from the first two; and sometime later I realized I had an essay to write about that: "'This Man Receiveth Sinners': Moral Storytelling in Luke 15."<sup>3</sup>

This is to say, among other things, that my forays into scriptural interpretation have never amounted to steps in any "research agenda"; they were not part of any "plan" of "professional development." After "The Dark Way to the Tree" I did map out three related essays that might join

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1. See Bruce W. Jorgensen, "The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon," *Encyclia* 54, no. 2 (1977): 16–24. Reprinted with a "Postscript 1980" in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scriptures and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 217–31.

2. See Bruce W. Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife; Corianton and the Harlot Isabel," *Dialogue* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 7–34.

3. See Bruce W. Jorgensen, "'This Man Receiveth Sinners': Moral Storytelling in Luke 15," *Sunstone* 20, no. 4 (December 1997): 18–26.

it and work toward a small, useful book. I presented “The Figure of the Vineyard” at the Mormon History Association meetings in Canandaigua, New York, in 1980, and “Violence in the Book of Mormon” in a “conjoint” session of The Association for Mormon Letters at the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association in Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 1988; I’ve not yet finished these to my satisfaction. Nor have I finished “The Good Story Mark Tells,” a narrative commentary, presented in fragmentary form in 1995, and initially provoked by the neglect of Mark in the LDS Sunday School curriculum. And still not in an ecclesial setting, though very much in a Mormon community, invited to give a plenary “keynote” speech at the Association for Mormon Letters conference in 2004, I wrote and presented “What If the Book of Mormon Were a Novel?—Which of Course It Is Not,” urging and starting to explore the notion that the sacred text might usefully be read not “monologically” but “dialogically.”<sup>4</sup>

My Mormon scriptural interpretations, then, mostly came when their occasions came, however long after the occasions it took to think them farther (not likely think them “through,” whatever that might mean) and, as far as I could, to write them out. They have all been “amateur” efforts in the better and worse senses of the word: done for love, and done without “professional” qualifications, training, or (as far as I can tell) rewards. I have used whatever skills and habits of attention—to texts and their contexts—I’ve acquired as a lifelong reader of prose and poetry and, formally, as an undergraduate and graduate student of literature. The present essay is one more of this kind.

### **Principles (If I Have Any)**

Is all hermeneutics general hermeneutics, particular only when and as it engages a particular text? Can it be tagged adjectivally—as “Mormon” or “Freudian” or “Marxist” or any “-ist” or “-ian”—only in terms of the interpreter’s ideological or doctrinal allegiances and pre-texts (the texts and understandings used to “translate” the understandings of the target text)? Maybe so. And does ideological or doctrinal allegiance seldom or never prescribe or in some degree guide any series of steps in any specific act of interpretation? Maybe so. Questions like these may keep me from ever getting off the ground as a possibly “Mormon” interpreter of anything.

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4. See Bruce W. Jorgensen, “What If the Book of Mormon Were a Novel?—Which of Course It Is Not,” *Irreantum* 6, no. 2 (October 2004): 13–32.

I have supposed that every interpretive practice and every hermeneutic act have both an ideological aspect and a methodological aspect. Maybe “doctrinal” would be a better word than “ideological” (though the latter rhymes better with “methodological”); I don’t think I want to use the word “ideological” in its strongest (Marxist) sense, yet perhaps I should not be over-cautious about that. Anyway, is it true that every interpretive act is both ideological and methodological? Does an ideology or a doctrine of some sort lie behind, or operate within, even so seemingly primary or elementary an act as “close reading,” or as consulting a dictionary or parsing a sentence? Maybe so. But what would such an ideology or doctrine look like if articulated?

As a “Mormon interpreter,” minimally an interpreter who also happens to be a (practicing) Mormon, am I *necessarily* bound by *any* “Mormon doctrine” to any specific ideas or to any specific maneuvers to satisfy my interest in a text, to understand it better? I can’t say that I am; I can’t say whether my being a Mormon and having some set of “Mormon doctrines” or “Mormon ideas” in my head makes any substantial difference in my interpretive practices or acts. So far, I feel myself hard-pressed—or as Candide says of Pangloss, *bien embarrassé*—to demonstrate that it does. But I might be wrong, and would gladly attend to any arguments that would demonstrate I am.

Might it be the case that, just as plumbing is plumbing and the only distinctions that matter are those between more and less competent jobs of plumbing, based on criteria such as whether joints and valves do not leak and drains do not clog, so with hermeneutics: all hermeneutics is general hermeneutics, and the only meaningful distinctions are among more and less competent hermeneutic acts, based on criteria internal to hermeneutics itself? Will an analogy between plumbing jobs and hermeneutic acts hold, or will it leak or clog? How deep are the differences between plumbing and interpreting? At least as deep as the differences between pipes and valves and liquids and words and sentences and genres and meanings? Can there be clog-proof paragraphs? Leakproof syntactic joints? A lifetime warranty on the reliable delivery of hot or cold meanings at so many gallons per minute, with  $x$  degree of softness?

It seems critical that hermeneutics—interpretation, understanding—is a transaction between persons, however separated by distance, time, cultural and linguistic difference, not to mention personal difference; that, because it is conducted in a language (of some kind or other, whether lexical-syntactic, gestural, or what-have-you), language is at once the matter

of the interpretation and its means and manner. As if plumbing plumbed itself! (Don't we all wish! Unless plumbing plumbed itself in ways as leaky and clogging as the hermeneutics of so many scholars in the humanities.)

This seems to be getting me farther away from my question. Yet it doesn't seem entirely irrelevant either. If the pertinent criteria for hermeneutic acts are internal to hermeneutics itself, to its functionality or usefulness, what difference can it make in any of my hermeneutic acts that I happen to be a Mormon? My distinction between methodological and ideological aspects of hermeneutic acts may be purely conceptual; the aspects might be inseparable in the acts themselves. Still, would a Mormon ideology or doctrine or cultural attitude or traditional practice be discernible not so much in the moves of a Mormon interpreter's interpretation as in the objects he selects for attention or excludes from it (crude example: R-rated films), and in the outcomes of his acts—a detectable preference, say, for the “uplifting” or for readings that support Mormonism's current image of the “traditional family” or man-woman monogamous marriage, or that do not question what any general authority has ever said about a scriptural text? Deck-stacking instances, I know. But isn't the very phrase “Mormon interpretation” at least covertly deck-stacking? It seems to me that if this is where one might locate the “Mormon” in “Mormon hermeneutics,” then that is not hermeneutics itself but a set of prejudices, pre-judgments, about its proper objects and preferable outcomes, which may well have influenced or guided some of the moves during the hermeneutic act.

And yet again, because both the objects and the acts of interpretation are enacted or produced by human agents, by persons, and because every person is situated in time, space, culture, language, communal and personal history, and ideology, there is no way to rule such prejudices out; or perhaps they may be called “fore-understandings.” Moreover, it matters very much that these prejudices or fore-understandings be given play, because it is highly likely that they will disclose hitherto unnoticed meanings in the objects of understanding. Let interpretations multiply. If they conflict, they conflict; if they agree, they agree. Either way, as they multiply they multiply understandings. As Gadamer wrote, “we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all.*”<sup>5</sup> Then let differences multiply and differ and flourish and interact to generate more differences. For in any case we shall not be able to close them down. No two interpreters can occupy the same hermeneutic locus or read a text from exactly the

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5. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 296.

same angle, and thus every interpreter may see something no other sees, however minuscule the difference, and every interpretation will offer some part of the “whole truth” (if there is such a thing).

I have preferred to limit myself to textual hermeneutics, and mostly to “literary” and “narrative” texts at that. Partly because narrative texts, short stories, novels, narrative poems, scriptural stories, are often, if not always, about what I call interpersonal hermeneutics. They are about the ways their characters (their lexical-syntactic representations of persons in relation) understand or fail to understand one another. (Read Robert Frost’s “Home Burial,” for instance.)

But one could take up any act of interpersonal hermeneutics in daily life. It is Thursday evening, May 8, 2008, and between stints at drafting an essay on Mormon hermeneutics, as I stand in the kitchen warming leftover rice and refried beans for my supper, my wife tells me that the shoes I wore on Sunday and am now wearing are “no longer church-worthy” because the left upper is visibly split in three places. It is hard for me to imagine a more “Mormon” object and act and context of interpretation. The previous summer I attended an Episcopal service in California, and in that religious context and occasion, although it was Sunday and I wore a jacket and tie and good shoes (these same shoes, before the left upper started to split), it seemed clear from the variability of attire in the congregation that no one was likely to care what I had on my feet. Tonight I question my wife’s interpretation of my left shoe: Why do the splits in the upper make it not “church-worthy”? Because people will notice. But will they? I don’t notice what people at church have on their feet, and if I did, I doubt I would make any judgments of that kind about their footwear. She hopes that makes me happy. Yes, on that point, it does; I admit I prefer not to trouble myself, if I can help it, with judging others’ footwear, or my own, provided it is serviceable, comfortable, and not filthy (for the context, of course; for yard work I wear a very old, worn, broken-down, often mud-caked pair of shoes that I would rather not wear to church or the office or the classroom). What was “Mormon” about my wife’s hermeneutic acts in that exchange? Or about my own hermeneutic acts in response to hers? How did our differentially-shared “Mormonism” make a difference in the conduct or the content of that compound-complex hermeneutic enactment?

Or what about dog hermeneutics? It’s clear there is something of the sort. Later this same evening in May 2008 as I roll open the bedroom closet door to hang up some freshly laundered shirts and pants, our dog trots up the short stairs into the upstairs hall that is officially off-limits to her

and from which we repeatedly scold her away. She takes the sound of the sliding door as a sign that I might take her for a walk. In colder weather, at least once per evening, she would be right: I'd be getting out my jacket and putting it on. But she is wrong far more often than she is right, because she is less of a contextualist than I am, or than most human beings are. She seems not to remember, or not to care, that we already had our walk this evening, and not to have connected the armload of shirts and pants she saw me carry up from the laundry room with the rumble of the sliding hollow-core closet door. She does have certain prejudices, and these render her interpretation false this time, though of course her interpretation does disclose a possibility in that sound and in my opening the door that is quite real to both of us, and always desirable to her and sometimes to me, though it is not on my agenda in this instance. Done with the evening's load of laundry, I intend to get back to writing my essay.

My dog hermeneutics example is not entirely frivolous—after all, Socrates' figure in the Republic for the guardians is a dog who has learned correctly to distinguish, to interpret, who's friend and who's foe. Our dog's "prejudice," her narrow one-track fore-understanding of the noise of our closet door, offers a brute instance, a sort of paradigm, of the problem inherent in the inescapable ideological or doctrinal aspect of any hermeneutic practice; especially of practices admitting an explicit and systematic set of doctrinal ideas. Freudianism, Marxism, Jungianism, Christianity, Mormonism: won't all doctrinal systems, admitted into the interpretation of texts, behave in much the same way—mapping susceptible details of the text onto the pertinent terms and relations of the doctrine or ideology? The literary critic Austin Quigley has put the problem soberly in highly general terms: "What so often happens . . . is that 'seeing something in terms of X' degenerates into 'seeing something as X' and finally into simply 'seeing X.' The . . . mode of orientation becomes not the means of discovery but the thing to be (re)discovered."<sup>6</sup> The same sees the same and not the other. So the devout Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor counseled would-be fiction writers, "Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing."<sup>7</sup> In another context she remarked that "There is no reason that

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6. Austin E. Quigley, "Wittgenstein's Philosophizing and Literary Theorizing," in *Ordinary Language Criticism: Literary Thinking after Cavell after Wittgenstein*, ed. Kenneth Dauber and Walter Jost (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2003), 20.

7. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, 1970), 91.



fixed dogma should fix anything that the writer sees in the world. On the contrary, dogma is an instrument for penetrating reality.”<sup>8</sup>

Even Flannery O’Connor’s figure for the relation of belief to “seeing” poses a problem. We all know how certain lights change the apparent color of the objects they fall on, or how the angle of incidence of light will highlight some features of the object and cast others into shadow, and even compose a deceptive image from highlights and shadows: a giant sculpture of the face of Jesus on the surface of Mars; a ledge on Maui that, from a certain angle, is John F. Kennedy’s profile.

Granting the difficulty of separating ideological from methodological aspects of hermeneutic acts, even if ideology does not prescribe method, could there be some sort of uniquely “Mormon way” of interpretation? I doubt it. One good candidate I can think of would be the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Yet although I think I receive rather frequent gifts from that source in my hermeneutic acts, I do not cite the Spirit in my endnotes, and I give thanks as privately as I receive the gifts. And while faithful Mormons may hope to enjoy the constant company of the Holy Ghost, and likely need that company in their everyday hermeneutic acts, they surely have no exclusive privilege in this respect. “The Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world” (D&C 84:46). And “the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth” (John 3:8).

Could there be some use or application of uniquely Mormon doctrines in hermeneutic acts—supposing there are uniquely Mormon doctrines—even if none specifically address the interpretation of texts? If so, which doctrines? My own first candidates would be an embodied God, the agency of embodied persons, and the eternality of family relationships. But can you show me how such concepts play in actual hermeneutic acts, especially interpretations of non-Mormon texts, perhaps especially of resolutely secular and atheistic texts? Won’t this be a necessary test? If there is a Mormon hermeneutics, will it not have to demonstrate its usefulness on any text at all? And then what of the obvious danger in the doctrinal aspect of any hermeneutic act, if we must concede that every interpreter, by being an interpreter at all, being historically and culturally situated, carries some doctrinal baggage or other?

The obvious danger in the ideological aspect would be to see the object of interpretation as simply an instance of one’s ideology. Make a

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8. *Ibid.*, 178.

Freudian of Woolf, a Marxist of Austen, a Mormon of Milton. But is that almost too easy, and would more rigor and scrupulosity of method tend to correct the errors of ideological and methodological excess, which have been so abundantly parodied (as in Frederick Crews's *Pooh Perplex* and *Postmodern Pooh*, or in Harold Kaplan's collection *The Overwrought Urn*), perhaps because they so often parody themselves? And how would one possibly ban all ideology from acts of interpretation?

The Mormon temptation to doctrinal distortion in interpretation comes obviously from the belief that we have the Real Truth, ultimate and absolute and eternal, from which standpoint anything else may be confidently criticized. This sounds like a parody, a cartoon of a hermeneutic posture and conduct that no actual interpreter, no concrete act of interpretation, could ever quite fit. Still, the doctrinal temptation runs that way. Yet, "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). This could mean—ought to mean, I think—that, as an interpreter, one who knows "the truth" might be free to understand what he does not know, to understand it *as* something else, other, not one more instantiation of what he already knows; also free to be generous to that other, not to distort or to dismiss but to behold patiently and attentively "in order" (in Simone Weil's formulation) that the soul may "receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as [it] is, in all [its] truth."<sup>9</sup>

Does that truth look alien (and why not? how not?), does it look separate, disconnected from the truth I think I already know, even contrary to it? If so, am I not called to faith and to longer patience, to longsuffering, to hope that somehow and sometime I will learn how all the many and disparate truths may hold together?

It has seemed to me that, rather than a "method," interpretation is an exercise of *phronesis*, of know-how derived from experience (however much or little guided at any stage by a master or mentor), of tact and taste. And likely also a matter of the interpreter's location and participation in (usually) an already ongoing conversation about a text. Or conversations, plural, and rather often conversations that include interlocutors both of and not-of the interpreter's nearest community: Frank Kermode is not a Christian, as far as I know, yet partakes in the conversation on the Gospel of Mark; Harold Bloom is a gnostic Jew, yet partakes in the conversation on the Book of Mormon. Often an interlocutor might not be aware of the conversation he or she is taking part in, by way of quotation or other

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9. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper, 1973), 115.

uses: Grant Hardy has remarked that Meir Sternberg's *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* "may be one of the best books ever written about the Book of Mormon";<sup>10</sup> and like Hardy and others, I've often had Robert Alter and some of his moves or habits in mind as I read the Book of Mormon (not to mention all the literary critics who've affected how I read poems, stories, novels). More recently, as in this essay, I've brought in James Kugel and J. P. Fokkelman.

One implication here seems to be that no interpreter—at least not I as one—is ever purely this or that sort of interpreter. It's all a kind of bricolage; we're all some kind of bricoleur, taking up whatever seems handy for the task at hand. Interpretation falls somewhere within the domains of the technical (but does it have techniques?) and the ethical/political; maybe on the borders of the technical and the ethical/political. To me it seems less like playing an instrument or throwing a pot than like understanding what to do in some exigency of family life or friendship (though usually granted more leisure than these allow).

Are interpreters, then, people without principles; more likely without pre-scribed procedures, but with habits and savvy and presumptions and (perhaps shifty) allegiances? Maybe so. In any case, it's hard for me to see how, if they have principles, those principles prescribe any procedures, especially a sequence of them, A, B, C, D, and so on, that could be guaranteed to work in any particular case. T. S. Eliot once wrote (in a context praising Aristotle as a literary critic) that "there is no method except to be very intelligent."<sup>11</sup> I think by "intelligent"—which, after all, etymologically suggests a capacity to "choose among" options, as in any concrete situation, in which, as Aristotle said, the judgment lies with perception—he meant something like what I point toward with words like *phronesis*, know-how, taste, tact, etc.

Are there any general hermeneutic principles, any habits, any moves or methods, that could be called "Mormon"? I'd like to think, for instance, that a Mormon hermeneutics would not be a hermeneutics of suspicion, though I guess at times that might be in order. I'd like to think that, on the contrary, it would be a hermeneutics of charity. But charity is hardly a doctrine or habit peculiar to Mormons. The literary critic Alan Jacobs got there way ahead of me in *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (2001),

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10. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 277.

11. T. S. Eliot, "The Perfect Critic," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt/Farrar, 1975), 55.

which draws together many of the thinkers who've guided my thinking along these lines (notably Martha Nussbaum, Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil, and Mikhail Bakhtin).<sup>12</sup> And the French Catholic theologian and phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion got there even sooner in his 1992 *Communio* essay “Christian Philosophy and Charity,” in which he wrote that

the Christian outlook exercises a radically new hermeneutics vis-à-vis the world only insofar as it sees or facilitates therein the appearance of phenomena that are themselves radically new. The Christian outlook facilitates the resurgence and appearance in the world of phenomena that have up until then remained invisible, on the basis of which a new interpretation of already visible phenomena becomes thenceforth legitimate. What is this new given and this new interpretation? The answer is charity, which gives itself and allows itself to be seen by those who love it.<sup>13</sup>

Thus for Marion, “only those who love see the phenomena of love. Loving becomes a theoretical exigency.”<sup>14</sup> To which I must give my belated and wholehearted Amen. But when Marion sums up finally that “There is . . . a specifically Christian outlook on the world. It is an outlook instructed by charity, a radically new phenomenon, which permits the discovery, by a radically new hermeneutics, of other new phenomena, and in the end renders all things new,”<sup>15</sup> my Amen carries with it the admission that I cannot claim a hermeneutics of charity as anything unique to Mormonism or to me as a Mormon interpreter. Indeed, I'm not sure Marion can claim a hermeneutics of charity as uniquely Christian. Can it be demonstrated that Buddhist compassion does not permit the discovery of new phenomena that might be the same as those discovered by Christian charity? (Jacobs's disparagement of “a kind of hermeneutical Buddhism” does not take into account the “compassionate Buddha.”)<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most authentically—or “essentially”—Mormon or Christian interpretive acts will be acts in which the interpreters do not know—and thus do not show—that they are Mormon or Christian. Like the “blessed of my Father” in Jesus's late parable of the sheep and goats, amazed to be told that they had clothed and fed and visited the Lord

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12. See Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

13. Jean-Luc Marion, “Christian Philosophy and Charity,” trans. Mark Sebanc, *Communio* 19 (Fall 1992): 469.

14. *Ibid.*, 470.

15. *Ibid.*, 472.

16. Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*, 34.

Jesus: it had not occurred to them. “Lord, when saw we thee . . . ?” (Matt. 25:31–46, especially 34, 37–39).

### Poems in the Scriptures

The Hebrew Bible, J. P. Fokkelman estimates, is “roughly one third” poetry.<sup>17</sup> Does the Book of Mormon, which claims kin with (a “traditional” relation to) the Hebrew Bible, include poems? If it does, where, what kinds, how does each poem poetically work, and how are they related to the prose narratives and other prose forms in which they occur? Those would be the largest and longest questions any approach to “poems,” or to “poetry” (to me these terms differ), in the Book of Mormon should try, however provisionally, to offer some answers to.

There are large obstacles in the way. The Book of Mormon includes no “books” largely or entirely composed in verse, as does the Bible (Job, Lamentations), no collections of songs like those in the Bible (Psalms, Song of Songs), and no collection of proverbs in verse. Virtually all of the Book of Mormon’s sizeable prophetic poems present themselves as quoted from Hebrew prophetic books, overwhelmingly Isaiah, which means in turn that most of the poems, or most of the poetic lines, so far discerned in the Book of Mormon (by, for example, Donald Parry and Grant Hardy) were written by Isaiah (and mostly match the translations of the committee that produced the Authorized Version). This would leave us to look for poems unique to the Book of Mormon distributed within the prose of the book’s historical narrative, exhortation, and didactic exposition. Do such poems in the Book of Mormon (supposing we find them), as Fokkelman says of those in the Bible, “articulate the mass of narrative prose, throughout the entire ‘history’ track”?<sup>18</sup> Or what do they do?

Like English translations of the Bible until the mid-twentieth century, the Book of Mormon comes to us printed throughout as prose, whether in its first edition of 1830 or as later formatted in columns and numbered in verses; and its numbered “verses” (for convenience of citation), just like verses in English Bible translations, often do not coincide with the verses (lines) of poems. But the problem of distinguishing poems in our books of scripture is not just an unfortunate consequence of print culture. Robert Alter reminds us that “poems are not set out as poetry in the traditional

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17. J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 1.

18. *Ibid.*, 2.

Hebrew text.”<sup>19</sup> Apparently, many ancient systems of writing simply did not develop visual or spatial conventions (lines, stanzas, etc.) for presenting poems as poems, or signs for marking verse lines as lines. Nonetheless, philologists for centuries have discerned the “rules” for “verse,” and the poems, in various traditions and manuscripts (e.g., the continuing recoveries of *Gilgamesh* from clay tablets and shards, or the Old English heroic poem *Beowulf*, which comes down to us by way of a single manuscript that might just as well not have survived a fire). It helps us late modern print-culture readers to hear a poem *as* a poem (especially one that does not use end-rhyme) if we can see it on the page; ancient hearers and readers (who normally read aloud) seem not to have needed such aids, or at any rate they did not have them.

So it's not surprising that different readers of the Book of Mormon in its standard printed format have not all discerned the same poems. Few LDS readers now would question the designation of 2 Nephi 4:17b–35 as “The Psalm of Nephi.” That this poem starts in the middle of a numbered verse nicely illustrates the problem of discerning poems without the aid of typographic or spatial conventions; that Parry sets just less than half of its numbered verses in his “parallelistic patterns” may be an even stronger demonstration.<sup>20</sup> Or does the “psalm” start at verse 15b, then lapse into prose at verse 17a and restart at verse 17b, as Hardy prints it in his *Reader's Edition*?<sup>21</sup> The brief “wisdom-poem” I propose to discuss here, Alma 37:35–37, has not been uniformly recognized: R. Dilworth Rust<sup>22</sup> and Grant Hardy<sup>23</sup> do set it as a poem (though they set its lines slightly differently), but Parry sets only vv. 35–36 as verse (dividing the first lines differently from Rust and Hardy to display their chiasmic pattern).<sup>24</sup> Both Parry (partially)<sup>25</sup> and Hardy (entirely)<sup>26</sup> set Alma 37:33–34 as verse lines (with different lineation); yet those same numbered verses do not strike

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19. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 5.

20. Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted According to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 58–60.

21. Grant Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 71–72.

22. R. Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997), 86–87.

23. Hardy, *Reader's Edition*, 360.

24. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted*, 284–85.

25. *Ibid.*, 284.

26. Hardy, *Reader's Edition*, 359–60.

me as a poem with anything like the clarity that vv. 35–37 do. It appears that even among readers on the *qui vive* for poems or parallelisms, not all look out at the text with the same formal traits in mind, or they look out differently. Royal Skousen in *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* does not seek to distinguish prose and poetry; yet he does set off Alma 37:35–37 as a paragraph,<sup>27</sup> and his “sense-lines” (most of them visibly shorter than others in the immediate context) do allow this text to be perceived as a poem.

Such different discernments of poems in the Book of Mormon surely reflect the continuing lack of full or exact consensus even among the most poetically attentive readers of the Hebrew Bible. The big problem has been, and still is, in James Kugel’s title phrase, “the idea of biblical poetry”: “what,” Kugel asks, “is the difference between what is called biblical poetry and biblical prose?”<sup>28</sup> This turns out to be less simple than one might wish or suppose. Kugel traces the effort to discern and define biblical poetry, and especially to discover a “meter” for it, from late antiquity to our own time. And as Robert Alter sees it, he “comes perilously close to concluding that there is no poetry in the Bible, only a ‘continuum’ from loosely parallelistic structures in what we think of as the prose sections to a more ‘heightened rhetoric’ of parallelistic devices in what we misleadingly label verse.”<sup>29</sup>

Though Alter does at times concur with Kugel, I find Kugel’s rigorously cautious and circumspect, not to say skeptical, arguments on this major critical point harder to get around than Alter does. The lack of an inclusive word in biblical Hebrew for “poem” or “poetry” seems especially telling. Though the Bible has, and names, many recognizable genres (hymns, prayers, curses, proverbs, blessings, genealogies, laws, etc.), biblical Hebrew has no words that can be accurately translated with our words “poem” and “poetry.” Our terms derive from Greek, and like the Greeks we include various genres—from lyric to epic and more—within the broad category “poem.” So we should never forget that when we use the words “poem,” “poetry,” and especially “poet,” we are applying terms and concepts apparently quite foreign to the language, tradition, and culture that produced the Hebrew Bible.

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27. Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 413–14.

28. James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 76.

29. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 4.

Still, from ancient times to the present, many biblical texts, especially the psalms, have been regarded as “poems,” and Jewish and Christian interpreters have attempted to elucidate the “system” of “Hebrew poetry” as something analogous to the more or less regular metrical and strophic patterns used in western cultures from the Greeks and Romans on down. And down to our own time, what almost no one seems inclined to dispute is that something we can call (since the English Bishop Robert Lowth's “discovery” in the mid-eighteenth century) “parallelism”—or something like it—is the first thing to attend to. But what does “parallel” mean, and what aspects of the language in a passage may be said to be “parallel”?

Lowth in his *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum* (1753) called it *parallelismus membrorum*, parallelism of the “members” or clauses; yet in many cases the parallel “members” are less than full clauses (sometimes, for instance, a full clause subjoined by a second predicate or complement, with a subject or subject and verb doing duty for both). James Kugel begins by saying that “the basic feature of biblical songs . . . is the recurrent use of a relatively short sentence-form that consists of two brief clauses” with a “slight pause” between and a “full pause” at the end.<sup>30</sup> He notes that “here and there ternary sentences . . . also occur, but the binary form is definitely the rule in Hebrew and ternary the exception.”<sup>31</sup>

Lowth offered three categories of “parallelism”: “synonymous,” “antithetical,” and “synthetic.” Kugel, for one, argues persuasively that synonymous parallels are almost never synonymous, antithetical is “a distinction without a difference,” and synthetic is a “catchall.”<sup>32</sup> Since Lowth the categories have been subdivided and supplemented and multiplied, but all that taxonomic ingenuity seems mostly wasted. Fokkelman basically repeats Kugel's arguments, and calls Lowth's third category, the “synthetic” or “complementary,” a “basket term” and “a counsel of despair.”<sup>33</sup> “In the end,” Kugel writes, “the most significant long-term result of Lowth's presentation has been the equation of ‘parallelism’ with poetry.” And he regards the continued discovery of poetic fragments in the prose books of the Hebrew Bible as “right and . . . wrong, for the whole notion of biblical poetry is both right and wrong.”<sup>34</sup>

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30. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 1.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 12–13; cf. 57–58.

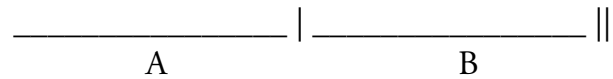
33. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 26.

34. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 286.



This is not an easy conclusion to feel comfortable with, yet it seems hard to avoid. And perhaps, if we once accept Kugel's central claim that "Biblical parallelism is of one sort, 'A, and what's more, B,' or a hundred sorts; but it is not three,"<sup>35</sup> we can settle down to read sentence by sentence, line upon line, and thus begin at least, whether it suits our notions or not, to discern and display the artistry and the meanings that are there.

The single most useful thing I've learned, so far, toward reading biblical poems, and thus toward discerning poems in the Book of Mormon, is Kugel's simple, just-mentioned formula, "A is so, and what's more, B." That is, this kind of biblical text is (mostly) based on a two-part (or much less often three-part) sentence form consisting of a first part, A, then a slight pause, then a second part, B, then a full pause. Kugel represents this sentence form as



where A and B are often, but not always, full clauses, and where the slight and full pauses indicated by | and ||, respectively, function somewhat like commas (or semicolons) and periods. Kugel generally refers to these clauses or "members" as A and B (using C when a three-part sentence calls for it). Diverging from Lowth and his successors, Kugel stresses that because B follows A, it is both broken from A and (in one way or another) continues or "seconds" A; B is "subjoined" to A, and thus always adds something to A. What Kugel and Alter and Fokkelman do at their best is to help me (and, I would think, anyone who spends time with them) hear how a reader of Psalms or Job or Proverbs or the prophets can track the dynamic movements from A to B (and sometimes to C) through longer series of these biblical sentences that, however wary we should be of our term, do seem to compose something like what we call "poems."

### Reading One Poem in the Book of Mormon

Poems in the Book of Mormon have received far less attention than doctrinal and narrative content, and (outside the frequently discussed "Psalm of Nephi" in 2 Nephi 4:15b–35) even less close reading (the best I know is Steven Sondrup's "Lyric Reading" of the Psalm of Nephi).<sup>36</sup> One large recent

35. *Ibid.*, 58.

36. See Steven P. Sondrup, "The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 357–72.

exception, R. Dilworth Rust's lengthy chapter 4, "By the Spirit of Prophecy," in his *Feasting on the Word*, ranges over at least a score of examples with helpful lineations.<sup>37</sup> Yet even Rust's perceptive discussion seldom attempts really close reading. The present verse-division and two-column prose format of the Book of Mormon have naturally obscured many occasional poetic passages, though the first edition's long chapters and paragraphs would have obscured just as many or more. Still, a reader, especially reading aloud, may occasionally strike a few sentences or verses in the Book of Mormon that, in their cadenced syntactical and semantic parallelism, sound startlingly like the Hebraic poetry of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, or the Prophets.

So I hear these three verses, printed as prose, as a small poem (I should mention that I'm using the 1981 LDS edition, and that Skousen's *Earliest Text* differs substantively at a few points and amends the 1830 typesetter John Gilbert's punctuation):

35 O remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.

36 Yea, and cry unto God for all thy support; yea, let all thy doings be unto the Lord, and whithersoever thou goest let it be in the Lord; yea, let all thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord; yea, let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever.

37 Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day. (Alma 37:35–37)

Verse-division here corresponds to sentence punctuation, though periods could replace any of the semicolons in the passage (as indeed Skousen does replace all but the first, as well as one comma, and as the first two periods here replace semicolons in the 1830 edition). Yet the prose format cannot entirely obscure the parallelistic rhythms of the clauses. And although some lines here are often used separately (e.g., the first two clauses of verse 37), it's also easy to sense these lines as a coherent unit of expression, of heartfelt and heart-thought exhortation, continuous with yet separable from what precedes and follows them.

I'm not the first or only reader to notice a poem here: I'd not read his chapter when I first discussed Alma 37:35–37 as a poem, but Rust also presents these verses as an instance of Book of Mormon poetry, "Alma's Instructions to Helaman," printing them in two strophes of seven and

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37. Rust, *Feasting on the Word*, 65–100.

eight lines and italicizing some key words and phrases.<sup>38</sup> I want to give closer and more extended attention to what he remarks on very briefly (a dozen lines). And beyond that, I want to suggest that readers of the Book of Mormon might well have a richer and more memorable experience of its language and its religious insights if its poems were printed as poems (as Grant Hardy also prints these verses in his *Reader's Edition*, and as Skousen's "sense-lines" and line-spaced paragraphing let them appear)—at least if we learned to read them as poems.

These verses occur in Alma's "commandments" (or instructions, or charge) to his eldest son Helaman, who did not accompany Alma, Shiblon, and Corianton on the mission to the Zoramites, and specifically just after Alma has charged Helaman as his successor in keeping and continuing the Nephite records. Apparently Mormon includes these "commandments" to Helaman, as well as the briefer instruction to Shiblon and the much longer discourse to Corianton, at this point in his abridgement of Alma's record because this is where they occurred: after the Zoramite mission and just before a Lamanite invasion starts a long war. Mormon calls this "an account . . . according to [Alma's] own record" (35:16), which I take to indicate that chapters 36–42 are a (largely) verbatim transcript, or an insertion, of Alma's own writing into Mormon's abridgment.

It may strike a reader as odd that Alma says "in thy youth" to Helaman, who is his eldest son and perhaps a mature man with responsibilities that prevented him from leaving Zarahemla for the Zoramite mission. Alma's entrusting the records to Helaman (37:1–2) would also suggest Helaman's readiness for a sacred responsibility. Yet still Alma has said "thou art in thy youth" (36:3). "Youth" for Alma may be not so much a matter of age as of experience, of whether one has yet begun to "learn wisdom" (37:35). But the call to attention, "O remember, my son," also evokes the standard situation of ancient near-eastern wisdom poetry, in which a member of the older generation, a father (or at many points in Proverbs, the personified Lady Wisdom), addresses "my son," a "youth" of the younger generation. "Wisdom-poetry" itself is a modern category, though it usefully designates an identifiable "family" of texts in ancient near-eastern literature, including many texts in the Hebrew Bible.

Alma 37:35–37, then, comprises a "wisdom-poem" set into the midst of a (mainly) prose discourse. In fact these verses occur as a kind of hinge between Alma's discussion of the sacred records and his typological inter-

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38. *Ibid.*, 86–87.

pretation of the Liahona, which he is also entrusting to Helaman. It would be interesting and instructive to study the relations among these segments of chapter 37, but I want to concentrate only on the wisdom-poem itself.

To disclose the poetic (and even, it seems to me, rather musical) structure of this passage, I will re-set it in lines or “versets” (Benjamin Hrushovski’s term, adopted by Alter and Fokkelman, who uses it alternately with “colon,” plural “cola”<sup>39</sup>). My lineation differs from Hardy’s and Rust’s, and from Skousen’s “sense-lines,” at only a few points, the most salient being my assignment of the initial call to attention as a separate line. The near-congruence of our independent lineations suggests the relative stability and “legibility” of poetic form in this passage. I’ve set each “verset” as a separate line, but also grouped them in sets of two and three which would correspond to binary and ternary “lines” in Kugel’s, Alter’s, and Fokkelman’s analyses of Biblical poems.

O remember, my son,  
 and learn wisdom in thy youth;  
 yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.  
 Yea, and cry unto God for all thy support;  
 yea, let all thy doings be unto the Lord,  
 and whithersoever thou goest let it be in the Lord;  
 yea, let all thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord;  
 yea, let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever.  
 Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings,  
 and he will direct thee for good;  
 yea, when thou liest down at night  
 lie down unto the Lord,  
 that he may watch over you in your sleep;  
 and when thou risest in the morning  
 let thy heart be full of thanks unto God;  
 and if ye do these things,  
 ye shall be lifted up at the last day. (Alma 37:35–37)

It’s generally not hard to recognize the parallel phrases or clauses of biblical “poems,” and that is what we can hear in this passage, after the introductory call to attention, “O remember, my son.” That call itself looks like a standard formula in wisdom-poetry; consider “My son, hear the

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39. Benjamin Hrushovski, “Prosody, Hebrew.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 16:595–623.

instruction of thy father” (Prov. 1:8), “My son, forget not my law” (3:1), “Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father” (4:1), “My son, attend unto my wisdom” (5:1), “My son, keep my words” (7:1), or Alma’s own more expansive “And now, O my son Helaman . . . I beseech of thee that thou wilt hear my words and learn of me” (Alma 36:3). Alma’s poem, in fact, seems to be an “instructional” expansion of his testimony in Alma 36:3b: “for I do know that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day.” James G. Williams, in his article on “Proverbs and Ecclesiastes” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, explains that one subcategory of wisdom-poetry is “instruction,” characterized by imperative verbs,<sup>40</sup> which dominate these verses.

The parallel phrases or clauses or versets of biblical poems occur commonly in pairs, sometimes in threes, with the second (or second and third) verset continuing, amplifying, or focusing the first, sometimes reversing the order of its key terms (“chiasm”), as in the first pair here (I’ll mark what I hear as primary stresses, to call attention to rhythmic parallels and differences, here the doubling, in terms of stress-count, of the amplifying clause):

and leárn wísdóm in thy yóuth;  
yéa, leárn in thy yóuth to kéep the commándments of Gód.

This suggests either that wisdom *is* keeping the commandments, or that keeping the commandments is the *way* to learn wisdom, or that we need wisdom *in order to* keep the commandments, or perhaps all of the above.

In biblical poetry (particularly as Hrushovski, Alter, and Fokkelman read it), semantic and syntactic parallelism are often joined and reinforced by rhythmic parallelism, a balancing, or sometimes off-balancing, of stress-count, sometimes even syllable-count, between versets. Of course the rhythms of biblical Hebrew cannot exactly carry over in translation, yet English renderings of biblical poems often achieve something like this balance or off-balance with the stress-patterns of English. We have no access to the “original” language of the Book of Mormon (presumably a colonial dialect of biblical Hebrew, but any back-translations would be suspect as either speculative or biased); for all practical purposes, English is the original language of the Book of Mormon, an “origin” we cannot

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40. James G. Williams, “Proverbs and Ecclesiastes,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1978), 270.

go behind. So it makes some sense to attend to the English rhythms and sounds of poems in the Book of Mormon.

From the standpoint of rhythmic parallelism, Rust's lineation, taking "O remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth" as the first verset, yielding two versets with six stresses each, makes better sense than my separation of the call to attention. Yet all the examples of the call that I quoted above from Proverbs are separate versets, each completed by a semantically and syntactically parallel verset. In both my lineation and Rust's, the second verset here approximates a very loose English iambic pentameter (with an initial spondee and three anapests). To my ear, most of the lines in Alma's poem sound nearly (and often exactly) iambic, with occasional notable departures from that norm.<sup>41</sup>

After Alma's opening line or lines, I think, we have a line (or set) of three versets, with the second and third again reversing the order of key terms in the first, and also urging habits of action that complement the petition recommended in the first:

Yéa, and crý unto Gód for áll thy suppórt;  
yeá, let áll thy dóings bé untó the Lórd,  
and whíthersoéver thou góest lét it bé in the Lórd;

I hear these as one iambic pentameter and two hexameters; the first line begins with two reversed (trochaic) feet and ends with an anapest, the second is catalectic (lacking its initial unstressed syllable), and the third is not only longer but also loosened by three anapests. Notice how the sense of *unto* changes (along with a contextual shift in its stress-contour): it's one thing to "cry unto God," but something else to "let all thy doings be unto the Lord"; one petitions, the other offers or submits.

Then in the third, longest verset (lengthened by syntax and by syllable-count), *unto* is replaced by *in*. All three versets urge a complete reliance on, and dedication to, God (in whom, as Paul told the Athenians in Acts

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41. This raises the interesting question of where Joseph Smith got his ear for iambic meter in English. My first hunch would be, from the verse prologue of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which is quite skillful, if homespun-sounding, iambic pentameter. But it's also the case that iambic meter in much early and modern English rests on an older Germanic stratum of accentual or strong-stress versification, normally four primary stresses per line, distributed as two per half-line and usually marked and linked by alliteration. Distribution of strong stresses in English also tends to be "isochronous," with roughly the same intervals of time between any two primary stresses. Stress markings other than the ones I offer here are possible without distorting "natural" speech rhythm; some that I've marked as primary might be marked as secondary.

17:28, “we live, and move, and have our being”): “all thy support,” “all thy doings,” “whithersoever thou goest.” (James Kugel points out how the Hebrew *kol*, “all,” often occurs in the second or B segment of a sentence as “one of the most characteristic ways that B is made to go beyond A,” “a reinforcement” that “brings with it a feeling of inclusiveness”;<sup>42</sup> but that normal pattern does not seem to govern the uses of “all” in these lines.)

Given the development here, which is underscored or expressed in the syntactic and rhythmic enlargement of that third verset, it’s easy to notice a similar progression or intensification of focus as the next pair of parallel versets shifts inward from doings and goings, first to “thy thoughts” and then to “the affections of thy heart”:

yeá, let áll thy thóughts be dirécted untó the Lórd;  
yeá, lét the afféctions óf thy héart be pláced upón the Lórd foréver.

Again the syntactic and syllabic and (thus necessarily) rhythmic expansion of the second, focusing or intensifying verset supports or indeed creates the emphasis; with nine stresses, it’s half again the length of the first, and takes a noticeably longer breath to speak. The “affections of [the] heart,” the moving powers of habit and action, are to be “placed upon the Lord forever”: the unexpected post-positioned adverb *forever* (after four versets have ended with “God” or “the Lord”) extends the categorial and spatial inclusiveness of the previous set of three versets into the dimension of human and divine temporality, perhaps with a subtle reminder that “the Lord” *is* “forever.” (“Endless,” as he declares in D&C 19:10, is one of his names.) The use of “forever” here might also recall its recurrence in the second verset of every line of Psalm 136 as part of an antiphonal refrain (though that psalm is regarded as post-exilic and, if so, would not have been available in Alma’s literary tradition): “for his mercy endureth forever” (where the Hebrew *hesed* may also be rendered “kindness” and always implies, as Alter points out, “steadfast faithfulness”).<sup>43</sup>

Next comes what Williams calls an “instruction proverb”:<sup>44</sup> an imperative clause, “Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings,” followed by an indicative clause of result or consequence, “and he will direct thee for good,” in which the future tense “will direct” makes an implied conditional promise—if you counsel, he *will* direct. These versets (a trochaic pentam-

42. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 47–48.

43. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 469.

44. Williams, “Proverbs and Ecclesiastes,” 270.

eter followed by a loose trimeter) also embed a chiasm: you “counsel with the Lord” / “he will direct thee.” Perhaps it’s worth noticing here that “for good,” which (like “in all thy doings”) stands outside the chiastic pattern to complete the sense of the verb *direct*, also stands in the end-position earlier occupied by “God” and “the Lord” and, just previously, “forever.” For speakers of English the sound-resemblance—almost a pun—between “good” and “God” is inescapable (in Old English the words sound identical, and are spelled identically, though they diverge etymologically). And also, at least in English, “for good” may carry the sense of “forever” or “permanently.”

The next line (or set) of versets, is also an instruction proverb in very similar form, and it also makes another move of focus or specification:

yeá, when thou líest dówn at níght  
lie dówn untó the Lórd,  
that hé may wáitch óver yoú in your sleép;

Perhaps I should treat this as two versets, as Rust and Hardy do, but to emphasize its syntax and its cumulative rhythm, and the chiastic pattern of its imperative and result clauses, I’ve given each clause a separate line (identical with Skousen’s “sense-lines,” though he adds a comma after the first): a tetrameter with a reversed first foot (not uncommon in English iambic lines), a regular trimeter, then a pentameter with dramatically reversed third and fourth feet. We move here from “all thy doings” to one kind of doing, and a largely passive kind at that: how we lie down at night, and what we may hope for if we “lie down unto the Lord”—that, when we are not awake or “watching,” He will keep “watch over” us. (For English-speaking readers, this may recall the first couplet of the bedtime prayer that millions of English-speaking children used to learn, “Now I lay me down to sleep; / I pray the Lord my soul to keep,” which appeared in the 1784 edition of the *New England Primer*. Though, having noticed that, I should perhaps also note that “unto the Lord,” as it were, replaces “to sleep.”)

The next line or verset-pair begins as a parallel to, and a sequential continuation from, this one, yet it lacks the result-clause. Here, a trochaic “counterpointed” rhythm set up in the first verset (iambic tetrameter with one hypermetrical syllable) by “risest” and “morning” plays through the second (pentameter) verset until its last foot returns to iambic:

and wHén thou rísest ín the mórning,  
lét thy héárt be fúll of thánks unto Gód;

Thanks, evidently, for God keeping “watch over you in your sleep,” and that you do rise “in the morning” to a new day’s light, God’s first creation



and earliest, most constant gift. This pair of lines, in fact, might also call to our minds that ancient poem of the days of creation itself, in Genesis 1, which reiterates “the evening and the morning.” And noticing this, we might also notice how many of the imperatives in Alma’s wisdom-poem echo (the English translation of) the Creator’s first imperative too: “Let there be light.”

But this admittedly faint echo of Genesis 1 is not all. For Alma appears to be working in—and strongly alluding to—a poetic tradition he inherits from the brass plates he is turning over to Helaman with this very discourse. The paired (and opposing) verbs *lie down* and *rise*—a merism which, like “high and low” or “heaven and earth” or “the evening and the morning,” maps a totality by marking its extreme parts—occur together elsewhere in scripture only twice in Deuteronomy (unless we count a likely despairing echo of Deuteronomy in Job 7:4): in the *Shema Yisrael* (6:4–9) and in a later echo from it (11:13–21). “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD,” it begins (the *shema* proper). And it includes the injunction that “these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deut. 6:6–7; cf. 11:19). These are two of the most important prayers in Judaism and in ancient Israel, the centerpiece of morning and evening prayer service, which parents would teach their children at bedtime. We may begin to guess what resonances Helaman could hear in his father’s words.

I noted the apparent absence of a result-clause in this penultimate line, the absence of a parallel to “that he may watch over you in your sleep.” But the result-clause in the last line of the text (another “instruction proverb” combining a conditional with a future indicative) does perform that function, even as it sums up the entire poem in a single encompassing conditional promise:

and if ye dó these thínigs,  
ye sháll be lífted úp at the lást dáy.

The final spondee here, stopping an otherwise steady iambic movement, gives emphatic closure to the whole poem. In the initial regular trimeter, “these things” must surely refer back not only to lying down and rising “unto the Lord,” but to the entire series of imperatively commended habits and actions, after which, and as a gracious result of which, the son who “learn[s] wisdom in [his] youth” “shall be lifted up.”

The language of this poem, compared to that of the best wisdom-poems in the Hebrew Bible, is generalized and abstract, almost entirely bare of concrete imagery or of the witty “sharpness” that marks the best of Proverbs.<sup>45</sup> Even lying down at night and rising in the morning are routine or generic actions—which may be partly Alma's point. If he knew some of the finest work in his poetic tradition, Alma might well have confessed, with Nephi (2 Ne. 33:1) and Moroni (Ether 12:23), his comparative “weakness in writing,” his lack of the best poets' gifts for keen imagery and metaphoric wit. Still, he does exercise something like their skill with parallelistic structure and development. And in his “own record” he does show us how one kind of wisdom-poem might have arisen from, and been embedded in, the lived and recorded history of a particular father and son.

Ancient Hebrew wisdom-poetry is persistently concerned with actions and results, with, as Robert Alter puts it, “dynamic process moving toward some culmination.”<sup>46</sup> In these lines constructed on ancient models and perhaps echoing the primal song of creation itself, Alma is instructing Helaman how to shape and conduct his life, from his “youth” (whatever age he is when he begins to “learn wisdom”) to his “last day,” when to rise in the morning will be to be “lifted up”: a life lived in wisdom or in the learning of wisdom, which for Alma is a life lived “unto the Lord” and “in the Lord,” will finally, “at the last day,” be a life “lifted up” unto that same Lord, who was himself “lifted up” in order that he might “draw all men” unto him (John 12:32; cf. 3 Ne. 27:14).

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45. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 11–12.

46. Robert Alter, “The Characteristics of Ancient Hebrew Poetry,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1978), 620.

