

[Structural Preface to Alma 36—42]

Some of the material quoted in this Preface comes from the 2019 BYU Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, sponsored by the BYU Religious Studies Center and published by Deseret Book. The published book is titled Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36—42, edited by Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith. The book (with many more articles than those quoted here) is a MUST read and the insights offered are well worth the money and time invested.

[Note: In a well-written article, Grant Hardy proposes that Alma’s instructions to his sons (ch. 36—42) are part of a complex literary structure of Alma’s writings (which includes chapters 1—44 of the book of Alma). Helaman would assume the writing responsibilities in Alma chapter 45. Hardy proposes that the structure of Alma’s writings can be represented chiastically as follows: [I have taken the liberty to colorize them.]

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|---|-------------|
| 1 Nehor and the Amlicite rebellions: | (ch. 1—3) |
| 2 The preaching journeys of Alma: | (ch. 4—16) |
| 3 The missionary journeys of the sons of Mosiah: | (ch. 17—29) |
| 4 [Overcoming] Korihor: | (ch. 30) |
| 5 Alma in Antionum (among the Zoramites): | (ch. 31—35) |
| 6 Alma’s testimony to his sons: | (ch. 36—42) |
| 7 The Zoramite war: | (ch. 43—44) |

Hardy writes that there are a number of literary parallels between Alma’s instructions to his sons (step 6) and the words and actions that were part of Alma’s various sermons delivered at various locations on his preaching journeys (see step 2). The correspondences between the three pairs of sermons can be generally represented by the following:

<u>CITIES</u>	(Spiritual Condition)	<u>SONS</u>	(<u>Number of words</u>)
Zarahemla (ch. 5)	(wavering)	Helaman (ch. 36—37)	(medium length)
Gideon (ch. 7)	(steadfast)	Shiblon (ch. 38)	(short length)
Ammonihah (9—13)	(serious transgression)	Corianton (ch. 39-42)	(long length)

Hardy writes that it is striking that each of the three pairs of sermons open in similar ways and have similar content:

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| Zarahemla/Helaman: | remember the captivity of their fathers (Alma 5:6 / 36:2) |
| | Put their trust in God (Alma 5:13 / 36:3) |
| | To be “born of God (Alma 5:14 / 36:5) |
| | Content: testimony of being spiritually delivered (5:6-10 / 36:5-21) |
| | Note* Both contain the phrase “encircled about by . . . death” (5:7 / 36:18) |
| | The only two such occurrences in the Book of Mormon. |

[Structural Preface to Alma 36—42 (continued)]

Gideon/Shiblon: "I trust . . . that I shall . . . have (great) joy in/over you",
because of your respective faithfulness (Alma 7:5 / 38:2)
Note* These are the only two such expressions in the entire Book of Mormon.
Content: In both sermons, Alma testifies of Christ using Abinadi's teachings
Both sermons include the only instances of the phrase "temperate in
all things" each time combined with an exhortation to be "diligent"
(Alma 7:23 / 38:10)

Ammonihah /Corianton: Moral lapses

"except ye repent, ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (9:12/39:9)
Note* These are two of only four instances in the Book of Mormon.

Content: Both address the same doctrinal issues

There are many corresponding phrases:

(Alma 9:23 / 39:6)	(Alma 12:11 / 40:13)	(Alma 11:43 / 40:19)
(Alma 11:43 / 40:23)	(Alma 11:44 / 40:23)	(Alma 12:16 / 40:26)
(Alma 12:12 / 41:4)	(Alma 12:31 / 41:7)	(Alma 9:11 / 42:1)
(Alma 12:21,23 / 42:3)	(Alma 12:24 / 42:4)	(Alma 12:23,26 / 42:5)
(Alma 12:26 / 42:5)	(Alma 12:27 / 42:6)	(Alma 12:16 / 42:9)
(Alma 12:24 / 42:10)	(Alma 12:32 / 42:13)	(Alma 12:30 / 42:26)

(Grant Hardy, "Nurturing Faith: Literary Patterning in the Book of Alma," in Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36—42, BYU Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, p. 369-388.)

[Note: Another perspective comes from an article by Gordon Thomasson and John Welch, in which it says that in August 1984 for the first time, several stunning similarities between Alma 35—42 and the traditional Israelite observance of Passover were discovered.

According to traditions at least as early as the time of Christ and probably earlier, after gathering his family the father then instructed his sons and answered their questions. His words were not fixed but were "to fit the knowledge and understanding of the child" and were supposed "to spell out the sequence of sin, suffering, repentance, and redemption." Each of Alma's admonitions to his sons, Helaman (Alma 36—37), Shiblon (Alma 38), and Corianton (Alma 39—42), does this precisely, each in its own way.

Moreover, three Passover questions are found in the Bible. Traditionally, each of these questions was asked in turn by the sons and was answered by the father. In time, each of these questions came to be associated with a different type of son.

First, "What is the meaning of the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord our God hath commanded you?" (Deuteronomy 6:20). This question was asked at Passover by a wise son. In the Book of Mormon, Helaman stands as the wise son: In talking to Helaman, Alma mentions "wisdom" at least eight times in Alma 37. Notice also how Alma explains the meaning of the laws and testimonies of God as he explains the meaning of the plates of Nephi (preserved for a "wise purpose"), the twenty-four gold plates, and the Liahona in Alma 37. The Jewish father was especially expected to explain the meaning of traditional things to "future generations" and to use "allegorical interpretations." Alma does exactly this. See Alma 37:19 ("future generations") and Alma 37:45 ("is there not a type in this thing?").

[Structural Preface to Alma 36—42 (continued)]

Second, "What mean ye by this service?" (Exodus 12:26). This question was asked by a wicked son. This son is depicted in the Jewish literature as one guilty of social crimes, who had excluded himself from the community, and believed in false doctrines. According to Jewish practice, he is to be told, in a manner that will "set his teeth on edge," that he will be punished for his own sins, and that, had he been in Egypt, he would not have been redeemed. Such is unmistakably the thrust of Alma's words to Corianton - who had left the ministry (see Alma 39:3), caused social problems (see Alma 39:11), followed false doctrines (see Alma 41:9), and is taught by his father about nothing but redemption and one's personal suffering for sin (see Alma 41:3-4,7).

Third, "What is This?" (Exodus 13:14) Israelite tradition said that the uninformed son who asked this question needed to be taught the law and given preventative instruction to keep him well away from any risk of breaking the law. This, indeed, is what Alma tells Shiblon, as he teaches him to be diligent (see Alma 38:10) and gives him a high code of conduct (see Alma 38:11-14).

(Gordon C. Thomasson and John W. Welch, "The Sons of the Passover," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, F.A.R.M.S., p. 196-197.)

[Note: According to Matthew Brown, in addition to the three sons pattern there are also several other Passover themes that can be seen in chapters 35 through 42 of the book of Alma:

<u>PASSOVER THEME</u>	<u>OLD TESTAMENT</u>	<u>BOOK OF MORMON</u>
Crying out for deliverance	Deuteronomy 26:6-7	Alma 36:3, 18, 27
Bitter suffering	Exodus 12:8	Alma 36:18, 21
Hardness of heart	Exodus 11:10	Alma 35:15
Three days and nights of darkness	Exodus 10:22	Alma 36:16

(Matthew B. Brown, *All Things Restored: Confirming the Authenticity of LDS Beliefs*, p. 222-223.)

[Note: Jane Allis Pike sees some structural similarities in Alma 36—39 related to "wisdom literature"— most notably exemplified by Proverbs 1—9. Wisdom literature involves wise advice on how to live well. The father-to-son advice and instruction given by Alma to his sons Helaman, Shiblon and Corianton as recorded in Alma 36—39 thus qualifies. Although she acknowledges that there is a difference in the literary genres of Proverbs and Alma, the following examples might give the reader a few perspectives on the similarities:

TOPIC **PROVERBS** **ALMA**

Positive manner in giving advice:

"My son, hear the instruction of thy father" (Proverbs 1:8)

"My son, if thou wilt receive my words" (Proverbs 2:1)

"My son, forget not my law" (Proverbs 3:1)

"My son, give ear to my words" (Alma 36:1)

"And now, my son Helaman, I command you" (37:1)

"My son, give ear to my words" (38:1)

[Structural Preface to Alma 36—42 (continued)]

TOPIC

PROVERBS

ALMA

Covenant relationship with God:

“For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it” (Proverbs 2:21-22)

“ye ought to know as I do know, that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and ye ought to know also, that inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence (Alma 36:30)

The source of wisdom:

“a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels” (Proverbs 1:5)

“fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7)

“by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise” (Alma 37:7)

Be humble. Trust in the Lord:

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5)

“See that ye are not lifted up unto pride; yea, see that ye do not boast in your own wisdom nor of your much strength” (Alma 38:11)

Restraint:

“Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left; remove thy foot from evil” (Proverbs 4:25-27)

“see that ye bridle all your passions” (Alma 38:12)

Listening to a father’s advice:

“My son, attend unto my wisdom, and bow thine ear to my understanding” (Proverbs 5:1)

“For thou didst not give so much heed unto my words” (Alma 39:2)

Carnal Lust:

“Keep thee from the evil woman. . . . Lust not after her beauty in thine heart” (Proverbs 6:24-25)

“Go no more after the lusts of your eyes” (Alma 39:9)

Although she has given only a sampling (of which I have noted just a few), Jane Allis-Pike concludes: “When seen through the lens of Proverbs 1—9, Alma’s teachings to his sons in Alma 36—39 become deeper and more meaningful.”

(Jane Allis-Pike, “Words from the Wise: Alma 36—39 through the Lens of Proverbs 1—9,” in Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36—42, BYU Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, p. 255-274.)]

[Note: Still another perspective on the structure of Alma’s words in Alma 36—42 is presented by Heather Hardy. She compares Alma’s words to his son Helaman (Alma 36—38) to an heirloom patchwork quilt:

I like the image of Alma carefully crafting a verbal patchwork to Helaman to mark the important transfer of centuries-old birthright treasures. Like quilters everywhere, pattern and repetition are his primary mode with thoughtfully selected, repurposed words, rather than fabric, as his primary medium. As in heirloom quilts, many of Alma’s component pieces have been salvaged from earlier contexts and deliberately incorporated into the new artifact, bringing with them a wealth of history and meaning. The design reveals the intention, sensibilities, and skill of its maker, and the finished product serves as a reflection of the maker’s tender, intergenerational concern.

[Structural Preface to Alma 36—42 (continued)]

Hardy's article is an excellent insight into the complexity of Alma's writing—precisely what I am trying to illustrate in the writings that I have incorporated into this "Preface." Although her full article needs to be read to fully understand her perspective, I will present just a few examples (which I have taken the liberty to colorize):

FABRIC

Hardy writes that in a similar manner to the dozens of distinct swatches of both solids and prints, Alma's composition showcases densely allusive quotations to prior Nephite and biblical texts:

Alma 36:22: *Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there.*

1 Nephi 1:8: *And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God.*

Alma 36:1: *My son, give ear to my words; for I swear unto you, that **inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land.***

2 Nephi 1:20: *And he hath said that: **inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land.***

Alma 36: *Story of Alma's conversion or deliverance (see also Mosiah 27)*

1 Nephi 16—18 *Earlier story of the deliverance of Lehi's family from the wilderness wanderings*

COMBINATIONS

Alma 36:26: *"taste(d)" "see(n)" Psalm 34:8
"see(n)" "eye to eye" Isaiah 52:8*

Alma 37:12 *"he counsel(eth) in wisdom . . . over all his works" (Jacob 4:10)
"paths . . . straight" + "course is one eternal round" (1 Nephi 10:8)*

Alma 37:14,18 *"for a wise purpose in him" (1 Nephi 9:5)
"show forth his power" (1 Nephi 18:11)*

Alma 37:16 *God "is powerful/has "power) . . .
(un)to the fulfilling of his word(s)" (1 Nephi 9:6; 18:11)*

Heather Hardy comments: "In these selections and many more, Alma demonstrates his deep familiarity with the scriptural texts that have been put in his charge."

PATTERNS (Repetitions, Variations and Multiple patterns)

Repetitions: Hardy writes: "Alma's primary mode of patterning in Alma 36—37 is the repetition of distinctive words for rhetorical effect. . . . Alma's use of repetition includes a variety of presentations of contrasts and reversals as well as of verbatim usage. [See my structured text]"

A BLOCKS—Merging Fabrics and Patterns, **Take 1**

Hardy writes that Alma 36—37 can be seen as comprising **four major blocks**. These include:

[1] A narrative of Alma’s conversion and subsequent ministry (36:5-27)

The descriptions and interpretations of three sets of sacred heirlooms being passed on:

[2] The Nephite records and brass plates (37:1-12)

[3] The Jaredite plates and interpreters (37:21-31)

[4] The Liahona (37:38-46)

She notes that Alma interweaves scriptural texts and complex repetitions or combinations to match his forms with his message.

Block 1: A narrative of Alma’s conversion and subsequent ministry (36:5-27)

Block 2: The Nephite records and brass plates (Alma 37:1-12)—rhetoric of continuity

Hardy writes: “In this block, Alma focuses his repeated counsel to keep the commandments by charging Helaman to take up his position as the next Nephite record keeper. In doing so, Alma interweaves the words of four distinguished predecessors (Nephi, Lehi, Benjamin and Mosiah)”:

Nephi (1 Nephi 19:3; 5:10, 12, 14): **plates [of Nephi]** . . . kept for . . . **wise purposes**; the **records** . . . **engraven** . . . **plates of brass**; **from the beginning**; **genealogy of his fathers**.

Lehi (1 Nephi 5:18): these **plates of brass**; should go forth **unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people**

Benjamin (Mosiah 1:3, 5): the **records** . . . **engraven** . . . **plates of brass** . . . knowing the **mysteries**; **kept** and **preserved by the hand of God**

Mosiah (Mosiah 28:20): **all the things** . . . **kept**; the **records** . . . **commanded** . . . **keep a record of the people, handing them down** from **one generation to another**

Hardy then illustrates how these colorized words and phrases have been incorporated into Alma’s writing:

Alma 37:1-4: And now, my son Helaman, I **command** you that ye take **the records** which have been entrusted with me; And I also **command** you that **ye keep a record of this people**, according as I have done, upon the **plates of Nephi**, and **keep all these things** sacred which I have **kept**, even as I have **kept** them; for it is for a **wise purpose** that they are **kept**. And these **plates of brass**, which contain these **engravings**, which have the **records** of the holy scriptures upon them, which have the **genealogy of our forefathers**, even **from the beginning**--behold, it has been prophesied by our fathers, that they should be **kept** and **handed down** from **one generation to another**, and be **kept** and **preserved by the hand of the Lord** until they should go forth unto **every nation, kindred, tongue and people**, that they shall **know** of the **mysteries** contained thereon.

Block 3: The Jaredite plates and interpreters (37:21-31)

Block 4: The Liahona (Alma 37:38-46)

Alma asks: “Is there not a type in this thing?” (Alma 37:45). The answer comes by integrating two previous allusions:

Alma 37:46: O my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way; for so was it with our fathers; for so was it prepared for them, that if they would look they might live; even so it is with us. The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever.

1 Nephi 17:41: The Lord . . . sent fiery flying serpents among them; and after they were bitten he prepared a way that they might be healed; and the labor which they had to perform was to look; and because of . . . the easiness of it, there were many who perished.

Alma 33:19, 21: A type was raised up in the wilderness
that whosoever would look upon it _____ might live;
would ye rather . . . be slothful, that ye would not cast about your eyes,
that ye might perish?

Note* Hardy writes that “The way the Lord had prepared for the Nephites was the word of Christ, preserved in the records being passed on to Helaman.” In my structured text of Alma 26—42 I have highlighted as follows every occurrence of the word, as the word repeats itself throughout each chapter.]

B Borders and Sashing—Merging Fabrics and Patterns, Take 2

Hardy states that most patchwork quilts are unified by the border, with the fabric or pattern echoed in the sashing of the blocks. Her analogy to this is to the extremities of John Welch’s chiasm of Alma 36, framing the verses of Alma 36 at the expanded base of the chiasm. She focuses on “the three nested layers of Alma’s border that correspond to three principles he has inherited from his fathers and is enjoining upon his son. Each principle is tied to a key source text and repeated as Alma transitions to chapter 37.

Border layer 1: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land” (Alma 36:1).

Hardy writes: “Alma follows Benjamin in quoting only the first half of Lehi’s foundational covenant on his first iteration at Alma 36:1.” (see 2 Nephi 1:20 and Mosiah 1:7) [See Welch’s full chiasm at the end of Alma 36 in this volume] The penalty part of this covenant is seen at the opposite border of the chiasm (Alma 36:30). Hardy notes that the “sashing” appears in the middle of chapter 37 (verses 13-14 and then in reverse order in verses 15-16—see my structured text). Thus the expanded content of Alma 37 is unified.

CONCLUSION

According to Heather Hardy, Alma’s creativity in design, skill in execution, and overall artistry go far beyond what anyone has imagined. As with a handmade heirloom quilt, Alma’s counsel is “offered as a token of love and an expression of a cherished relationship.” Hardy notes that Alma’s reference to Helaman as “my son” twenty times makes this evident. [See this highlighted in my structured text]

[Structural Preface to Alma 36—42 (continued)]

She writes: “As we take the effort to recognize and marvel at the details of their construction, our appreciation for the craft and effort of talented scripture writers like Alma is enhanced. We can learn to discern what has been lovingly created, preserved, and passed on for our insight and delight.”

(Heather Hardy, “Well-Crafted Counsel,” in Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36—42, BYU Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, p. 389-410.)]

[Note: From a slightly different perspective, Kimberly M. Berkey writes about the structure of Alma 37:

*Structurally speaking, there seem to be at least three nested levels at which Alma frames the initiation of his son [Helaman] into the fraternal order of Nephite record keepers. **The first is a threefold repetition of the Lehitic covenant.** . . . This **covenant promise** is given in full no less than three times in Alma’s sermon (Alma 36:1, 30; 37:13) with abbreviated or slightly altered versions further punctuating the text at regular intervals (Alma 36:13; 37:15-16, 20, 42). . . .*

Alma straightforwardly frames the plates and their preservation in covenant terms that have governed the Nephite record almost exclusively—terms that extend all the way back to Nephi, whose lifelong investment in Isaiah was explicitly motivated by that covenant, and terms that will persist forward all the way to the final record keeper, Moroni. . . .

*At the next level further down . . . echoing the triple iteration of the Lehitic covenant, Alma gives **three direct commands** to his son pursuant to Helaman’s new role as record keeper. [Alma 37:1-2; 37:20; 37:27]*

*Berkey writes that “by the time Alma turns his attention to the plates themselves, the records have thus been doubly framed in commandment and covenant terms. . . . so naturally the **third level** of the chapter’s structure focuses on **the two sets of records** themselves, which are **enclosed between the three specific commandments Alma gives to Helaman:***

A commandment 1 (Alma 37:1-2)

B comments on the Nephite record (Alma 37:3-19)

A commandment 2 (Alma 37:20)

B comments on the Jaredite record (Alma 37:21-26)

A commandment 3 (Alma 37:27)

“Structurally speaking, the plates are set up as parallel artifacts nested inside several layers of covenant framing. . . . The Lehitic covenant becomes a source of comfort and sure footing for Alma as he structures his instructions to Helaman and as he draws on its terminology to diffuse the threat of secret combinations contained on the twenty-four plates.”

(Kimberly M. Berkey, “Retain All Their Oaths,” in Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36—42, BYU Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, p. 411- 432.)]