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Count Your Many Mormons: Mormon's Personalized and Personal Messages in Mosiah 18 and 3 Nephi 5

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COUNT YOUR MANY MORMONS: MORMON'S PERSONALIZED AND PERSONAL MESSAGES IN MOSIAH 18 AND 3 NEPHI 5

Nathan J. Arp

Abstract: *The present work analyzes the narrative art Mormon employs, specifically Mormon's unique strategies for personalized and personal messaging, which can be seen in how Mormon connects the narration of the baptism at the waters of Mormon in Mosiah chapter 18 with his self-introductory material in 3 Nephi chapter 5. In these narratives, Mormon seems to simultaneously present an overt personalized message about Christ and a covert personal connection to Alma₁ through the almost excessive repetition of his own name. Mormon discreetly plants evidence to suggest his intention for the careful re-reader to discover that Mormon was a 12th generation descendant of the first Alma. Mormon's use of personalizing and personal messages lends emotive power to his narratives and shines a light on Mormon's love for Christ's church.*

As “Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” the narratives of the Book of Mormon of course focus on Christ; however, the strategies its authors use to direct our attention to Christ also shed light on these authors. Remarkably, our attention on the authors doesn't distract us from Christ but actually proffers the unique view of Christ as can only be seen through a personal lens. In contrast to the Bible, which “exhibits such a rage for impersonality as must lead to the conclusion that its writers actively sought the cover of anonymity,”¹ Mormon, like the other

1. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 65. This paper is heavily influenced by Sternberg's approach; however, I would not have known about Sternberg's work without the influence of Heather and Grant Hardy's publications, in particular “Another Testament of Jesus Christ: Mormon's

Book of Mormon narrators, has a different approach. He personalizes his messages — enters into the text as a person — for the reader through the use of the first person pronoun (“I” and “we”)² and his own name to punctuate key theological points for the reader. Brant Gardner calls this interaction with the future reader Mormon’s “author-voice,” as opposed to the “narrator-voice,” which he uses when “writing about the past.”³ In this paper, I am magnifying Gardner’s concept of the “author-voice” to distinguish between two similar but distinct voices: a *personalized* and a *personal* voice. In the connected passages in Mosiah 18 and 3 Nephi 5, Mormon uses the repetition of his own name as part of a powerfully personalized message to the reader about Christ. Mormon makes use of his personal presence in the text to teach the reader about Christ — what I call a *personalized* message. In these same chapters (Mosiah 18 and 3 Nephi 5), Mormon also uses the repetition of his name as a key to unraveling a more subtle, personal message, not necessarily a message focused on Christ, but a message primarily about the person Mormon. This is what I call a *personal* message — a message about the person, Mormon. This paper presents the idea that Mormon discreetly leads the careful reader towards a personal message about a genealogical connection between himself and Alma₁⁴ under his more overt message about Christ. Mormon’s careful narrative strategies seem to suggest that he intended the reader to discover that Mormon was a 12th generation descendant of Alma. Mormon’s personal and personalized messages align to maintain a continued focus on Christ and speak to the reader with unique, emotive power that Jesus is the Christ.

Poetics,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007) and *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). I was impressed by Grant Hardy’s acknowledgement of his wife’s role in unofficially co-authoring *Understanding the Book of Mormon* on page IX, and so I refer to the Hardys as authors of that work throughout this article.

2. Some examples: Mosiah 8:1, Mosiah 23:23, Alma 24:30, Alma 30:60, Alma 43:3, Alma 53:10, Helaman 3:27, Helaman 12:2–3, 3 Nephi 5:12–20, 3 Nephi 7:1, 3 Nephi 26:12, 3 Nephi 28:24, and 4 Nephi 1:23.

3. Brant A. Gardner, “Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture” in *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-Day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 35 (2020), 68, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/labor-diligently-to-write-the-ancient-making-of-a-modern-scripture-2/>.

4. I am following the Hardys and others in the use of subscripts to help distinguish characters in the Book of Mormon who share the same name. Hardy and Hardy, *Understanding Book of Mormon*, 295–96n5.

What Counting 12 Mormons in Mosiah 18 Could Mean in Connection to 3 Nephi 5

The baptisms at the waters of Mormon are a watershed moment in the history of the people of Nephi. It was in “the land of Mormon,” where “Alma did establish the church among the people” (3 Nephi 5:12). This church is the most precious possession the Nephites passed down through their lineage. Righteous Nephites gave everything else they had to preserve it. The significance of this place and this moment is emphasized through Mormon’s personal approval. As our narrator, Mormon is the authority for most of the messages of the Book of Mormon. In the description of the baptisms of Alma’s covert converts in the 18th chapter of Mosiah, Mormon employs some of his most direct engagement with the text — in an engagement both unique and personally powerful, he repeats his name. Through repeating his name a staggering 12 times in 26 verses (Mosiah 18:4–30), Mormon the person becomes the setting, the authorized witness condoning the event, and connects himself to its agent, Alma.⁵ Mormon’s presence rises to its most salient in verse 30, where the reader can almost hear Mormon calling to us through the ink.

And now it came to pass that all this was done in Mormon,
yea, by the waters of Mormon,
in the forest that was near the waters of Mormon,
yea, the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest
of Mormon.

How beautiful are they to the eyes of them
who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer!
Yea, and how blessed are they,
for they shall sing to his praise forever. (Mosiah 18:30)⁶

5. “The narrator’s participation ensures the appearance of one member whose reliability is beyond doubt — an authorized reference-point to which we may safely appeal in order to sort out and motivate the versions originating in the other participants.” Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 413. Mormon’s presence, via his repeated name, in Mosiah 18 signifies Mormon presenting Alma to the reader as his authorized voice.

6. All quotes from the Book of Mormon are from *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, ed. Royal Skousen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). I have used this version of the Book of Mormon because it is currently “the definitive scholarly version of the Book of Mormon,” as defined by Grant Hardy in its introduction. Skousen, *The Earliest Text*, xvii.

The Hardys note that this passage’s “mesmerizing, almost incantatory repetition” is “uncharacteristically effusive” for Mormon.⁷ Generally, Mormon’s narrative is so characteristically terse that any deviation from the norm, like what we see here, should arrest the reader’s attention.⁸ Such blatant repetition invites the reader to hypothesize possible reasons that would prompt Mormon to resort to this level of personal engagement. In fact, the excessive repetition of his own name in this narrative is as personalizing for Mormon as his use of “I” or “I, Mormon.” After this excessive repetition, Mormon employs an opposing strategy for communicating with the reader: silence. Mormon does not explain the overwhelming presence of his name in Mosiah 18 until 3 Nephi 5:12, a textual gap of some 200 pages.⁹ Although Mormon as a setting appears a few more times between these two passages, Mormon, as a self-reference, is absent.¹⁰ Both the excess and the absence of Mormon’s name are circumstantial pieces of evidence that support this paper’s

7. Hardy and Hardy, *Understanding Book of Mormon*, 96.

8. Sternberg observed, “[T]he Bible’s verbal artistry, without precedent in literary history and unrivaled since, operates by passing off its art for artlessness, its sequential linkages and supra-sequential echoes for unadorned parataxis, its density of evocation for chronicle-like thinness and transparency” (Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 53). The Bible’s narratives, according to Robert Alter, make use of a “striking artistic economy,” where “the specification of external circumstances, setting, and gesture is held to a bare minimum” (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 2011], 42). Alter further suggests that as modern readers, “we have to readjust our habits ... in order to bring an adequate attentiveness to the rather different narrative maneuvers that are characteristic of the Hebrew Bible” (Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 162). Readers of the Book of Mormon must also adjust their approaches, otherwise we can miss important and intended messages.

9. Mormon’s excessive repetition of his name in Mosiah 18 occurs on pages 181–83, and his commentary on his name doesn’t occur until 3 Nephi 5:12 on page 416, according to a 1995 print version of *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995).

10. 3 Nephi 5 is likely the first time Mormon introduces himself in our current Book of Mormon because of the loss of the 116 pages. The 116 manuscript pages were the actual beginning of Mormon’s abridgment of the Book of Mormon. The book, the Words of Mormon, in which Mormon does introduce himself by name, which precedes the book of Mosiah in our current Book of Mormon, was originally at the end of the record attached to the small plates. Mormon’s first introduction was likely in the beginning of his abridgment and part of the lost manuscript pages. Therefore, without having his first hypothetical introduction, 3 Nephi is his first introduction. For a discussion on some puzzling phenomena concerning the Words of Mormon, please see Gardner, “Labor Diligently to Write,” 129–32.

claim that Mormon intentionally marked these passages with his name and their content to connect them. When Mormon finally resorts to using his name, he uses it to explain a connection to the establishment of the church and Alma₁ in Mosiah 18:¹¹

... I am called Mormon,
being called after the land of Mormon,
the land in which Alma did establish the church among this
people. (3 Nephi 5:12)

Mormon also manifests a “strikingly personal connection to history”¹² when he demonstrates to the reader his awareness of his sacred role in Nephite history, a role he is emphasizing by his personal presence:

And it hath become expedient
that I, according to the will of God
—that the prayers of those who have gone hence,
which were the holy ones,
should be fulfilled according to their faith —
should make a record of these things which have been done
(3 Nephi 5:14)

After more than 400 years, Mormon becomes the person determined to ensure that the legacy of the waters of Mormon makes it to the future. Mormon expounds upon his sacred role as record keeper in preserving these records for the future by referencing the promises made to the seed of Joseph and Jacob (Israel), that they will be brought back to a knowledge of the Lord their God. The promises made to the seed of Joseph are emphasized in the Book of Mormon because the Nephites and Lamanites were descendants of Joseph through Manasseh. And like those at the waters of Mormon “who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer” (Mosiah 18:30) because of the person Mormon, who passed on the Nephite record, the seed of Jacob shall also come

11. Mormon interrupts the narrative to comment directly to the reader in multiple places, but he does not name drop (“I, Mormon”) between these two places (Mosiah 18 and 3 Nephi 5) — a divide of more than 200 pages. The extreme repetitions of the name *Mormon* in Mosiah 18 and Mormon’s extreme delay in inserting his name again in the narrative are tangentially related, but in concert with the connection in content — the land of Mormon — suggests an intentional, purposeful link between the two passages. 3 Nephi 5:12 is the only place in the extant Book of Mormon where Mormon calls the reader’s attention to the origin of his name explicitly. Mormon’s name as a setting appears in Mosiah 25:18, Mosiah 26:15, Alma 5:3, and Alma 21:1.

12. Hardy and Hardy, *Understanding Book of Mormon*, 94.

to “know their Redeemer, who is Jesus Christ” (3 Nephi 5:26). This is Mormon’s personalized message of Christ. It is part of his sustained message throughout the Book of Mormon, for which Mormon speaks to us directly, so we cannot misunderstand.¹³ He wants his message about Christ to carry forth and reconvert the children of Israel, particularly the descendants of Lehi (the remaining Lamanite and Nephite descendants).¹⁴

In both 3 Nephi 5 and Mosiah 18, Mormon likely inserts his name into the record to unlock a personal message as well. Like his repetitions of his name in Mosiah 18, Mormon uses his name in 3 Nephi 5:12 to again connect himself to Alma, and the church: “I am called Mormon, being called after the land of Mormon, the land in which Alma did establish the church.” He also employs his name to add significance to his ancestry: “I am Mormon and a pure descendant of Lehi” (3 Nephi 5:20). Regarding 3 Nephi 5:20, Brant Gardner observed that “the reference to being a ‘pure descendant of Lehi’ is interesting from a genealogical/historical viewpoint” and posited that “perhaps [Mormon] could have traced descendance through one thousand years.”¹⁵ But interestingly, he does not provide a full account of his genealogy, apart from saying his father was also named Mormon (Mormon 1:5). These two instances of Mormon’s name in 3 Nephi 5, and the 12 times his name appears in Mosiah 18 are meant to mark an aspect of Mormon he means for us to connect: his genealogical relationship to Alma.

Mormon provides information about Alma and his own ancestry in a uniquely binding way, and likewise he gives Alma’s age with a reference to Nephite chronology, something Mormon also allows for few others besides himself. I propose that Mormon’s excessive repetition of his name (12 times) in Mosiah 18 is a numerical key for identifying Alma and Mormon’s relationship in terms of generations — they are 12 generations apart.

13. The concept of foolproof messaging was inspired by Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 50.

14. This same purpose is described in the title page of the Book of Mormon.

15. Gardner, “Labor Diligently to Write,” 335, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/labor-diligently-to-write-the-ancient-making-of-a-modern-scripture-7/>. Anita Wells, in discussing the Book of Mormon’s archival tradition, also noted the oddity in the lack of lineage in the Book of Mormon in her article “Bare Record: The Nephite Archivist, The Record of Records, and the Book of Mormon Provenance,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 24 (2017): 113–16, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/bare-record-the-nephite-archivist-the-record-of-records-and-the-book-of-mormon-provenance/>.

A Descendent of Nephi: Alma and Mormon Connect

When Mormon introduces Alma₁ to the reader during the unjust trial of the prophet Abinadi, he makes an interesting interjection: “But there was one among them whose name was Alma, he also being a descendent of Nephi” (Mosiah 16:2).¹⁶ The use of “also” here seems to be a personalized reference to Mormon. There is no one else in this particular account that Mormon describes as a descendent of Nephi. Given that Alma is a part of a Nephite colony in Nephite ancestral lands, Mormon’s description of Alma as “also being a descendant of Nephi” (Mosiah 17:2) is unnecessary unless he was making a personal connection.¹⁷ Mormon is telling us that both he and Alma are descendants of Nephi. This would not be such a unique designation if Mormon had not wanted it to be. Mormon describes only two people in the Book of Mormon specifically as descendants of Nephi — Alma and himself (see Mormon 1:5).¹⁸ In a work detailing largely the history of the descendants of Nephi and a people who called themselves Nephites, it is significant that Mormon limits the epithet of “descendant of Nephi” to only Alma and himself. It is more common for a person to be designated as a descendant of Mulek or Zarahemla; this is expected, as these connections provide a more useful identification. The description unique to Alma and Mormon points to an intentionality on Mormon’s part to make sure the reader could connect him with Alma as kin. They both descended from the same primogenitor.

16. Note that Mormon’s introduction of Alma, “there was one among them whose name was ...” is identical to Mormon’s introduction of Zeezrom (Alma 10:31). Mormon also uses the exact phrase “there was one among them” to introduce Aminadab (Helaman 5:35–39). Similarly, Mormon uses the phrase “there was a man among them whose name was ...” to introduce Abinadi (Mosiah 11:20) and Gideon (Mosiah 19:4). I don’t think that this is coincidence.

17. Daniel L. Belnap, “The Abinadi Narrative, Redemption, and the Struggle for Nephite Identity,” in *Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise*, ed. Shon D. Hopkins (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 27–66.

18. Amulek identifies himself as a descendant of Nephi in one of his speeches to the people, but this was not a description Mormon gave him (see Alma 10:2–3). In addition, the original title heading to the Third Book of Nephi includes the genealogy of the record keepers after Alma₁. Moroni also emphasizes Mormon’s lineage to Nephi in Mormon 8:13. It is interesting to note that Moroni only references Mormon’s ancestral connection to Nephi and not his own. It is possible that Moroni knew of his father’s personal message and didn’t want to confuse it with his own personal messages.

Counting Years in Nephite Chronology: Alma and Mormon Connect Again

Mormon's connection to Alma is also evident in his choice to include Alma and his own age in relationship to the chronology in the Nephite record. In the first year of the reign of the judges, which was "five hundred and nine years from the time Lehi left Jerusalem," or about 91 BC, Alma died at the age of 82 years old; therefore, Alma was born around 173 BC (see Mosiah 29:45–46). In around 321 AD, Mormon was 10 years old and received his commission from Ammaron to be the next Nephite record keeper (see 4 Nephi 1:48–49 and Mormon 1:1–5). Consequently, Mormon was born approximately in 311 AD. Although Alma and Mormon are not the only people Mormon allows a connection between recorded ages and the Nephite chronology, this connection is still limited and, therefore, possible evidence of an intended signal from Mormon to the reader.¹⁹ Mormon and Alma are connected to history as well as to each other.

Because of Mormon's interest in sharing these connections with Alma in both genealogy and chronology, Mormon's seemingly hyperbolic repetition of his name (12 times) in Mosiah chapter 18 may also be connected to chronology. That is, Mormon might be subtly revealing that he is a 12th generation descendant of Alma and that this relationship may also be linked in chronology. Because we know when Alma was born and when Mormon was born, we know these births were approximately 484 years apart, which almost exactly matches an interval of 40 years for each generation (12 generations x 40 years = 480 years). A 40-year interval between generations is credible seeing that it is used in the ancient Near East, the world of the Hebrew Bible and the original setting of the Book of Mormon. K.A. Kitchen explains, "The 40-year full generation comprises 20 years for one group to grow up to childbearing age, and then 20 years for their children to reach the same age (this lies behind Numbers 14:33)."²⁰

19. Another example is Mosiah₂, whose age is memorialized in Nephite chronology in Mosiah 29:46. Moroni₁ is given an age when he started as the Chief Captain of the Nephite's military, but his age is not set in chronology (see Alma 43:16–17).

20. K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 307.

Alma, Alma and Mormon, Mormon: Yet Another Possible Connection

Furthermore, when Mormon announces that he is a descendant of Nephi, he interjects that his father's name was Mormon too (Mormon 1:5). This extraneous interjection is unnecessary to the storyline and may signify Mormon's interest in an additional literary connection between himself and Alma₂ who, like Mormon, was named after his father Alma₁. This connection would be significant considering the fact that Mormon chooses Alma₂ as the preferred voice for the gospel preached in the Book of Mormon.²¹ In the same way that Mormon is the setting for the first Alma's baptisms, the second Alma is the voice for Mormon. According to Michael F. Perry, the second Alma's voice is key to Mormon's strategy to show the word of God was more powerful "than the sword, or anything else" (Alma 31:5).²² Alma's preaching dominates the Book of Mormon's ecclesiastical landscape so fully that the only other voice in the Book of Mormon as prevalent is that of Nephi₁, who is a first-person author of two books within the Book of Mormon.²³ One can get a sense of why Mormon may have chosen the second Alma as his preferred preacher by the literary quality of his sermons. It is Alma who recorded a chiasmus in Alma chapter 36 that John W. Welch has described as "a masterpiece of composition, as good as any other use of chiasmus in world literature, and it deserves wide recognition and appreciation."²⁴

21. The Hardys note Mormon's admiration of Alma₂ in *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 94 and 105. Michael F. Perry also highlights Alma's dominance in the Book of Mormon in "The Supremacy of the Word: Alma's Mission to the Zoramites and the Conversion of the Lamanites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 119–37.

22. Perry, "Supremacy of the Word", 119–37.

23. John L. Hilton, "On Verifying Wordprint Studies: Book of Mormon Authorship," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies), 225–54.

24. John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 116. In response to criticism leveled against the existence of a chiasmus in Alma 36, Noel B. Reynolds not only defended its existence using Hebrew rhetorical principles, but also concluded that the "powerful conjunction of rhetorical form, personal transformation, and doctrinal teaching establishes Alma 36 as one of the greatest literary gems of the Book of Mormon." See Reynolds's "Rethinking Alma 36," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 279–312, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/rethinking-alma-36/>.

Conclusion

In tandem with his primary message, which is already personal, Mormon divulged more details about himself that he may not have wanted to interfere with his strategy for a more direct and “foolproof composition”²⁵ to preach of Christ. As proposed in this paper, Mormon may have felt that his own genealogy was not the primary message, so he chose to submerge these details underneath the main narrative. This way he could still express his connection with Alma but without distracting the reader from his primary message about Christ. These narrative techniques lend an air of authenticity to Mormon’s narrative presence in the Book of Mormon. Mormon’s own authenticity witnesses to the authenticity of the work that bears his name and strengthens his argument for a Christ.

As Mormon’s readers, we can come to Christ not only through the doctrine Mormon taught through the history of his people but also through learning more about Mormon, someone who loved Christ and spent his whole life in Christ’s service. Mormon’s method of combining his personalized message about Christ with personal details speaks powerfully to us from the dust, as prophesied (Isaiah 29:4).²⁶ On a personal note, Mormon and the other narrators’ personal engagement with me, as a reader, combined with personal spiritual witnesses convinced me of their reality and prepared me to eventually accept the reality of God and his son, Jesus Christ.

[Author’s note: The title of this article makes a play on the popular hymn, “Count Your Many Blessings,” found at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/music/library/hymns/count-your-blessings>. In the spirit of counting blessings, I am grateful to my friend Katherine and my brother David for their efforts in wordsmithing my first drafts and my rewrite. Similarly, thank you to the Interpreter’s peer reviewers for their helpful suggestions that guided this paper to be the best it could be. Additionally, I express a heart-felt thank you to Leslie Reynolds, whose constant encouragement brought this paper to life. And finally, thank you to my friend Spencer, who first introduced me to the academic world of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints two decades ago.]

Nathan J. Arp graduated from Brigham Young University with a BA in Chinese language and literature. As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Nathan has been enamored by the Church’s

25. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 50.

26. See Isaiah 29:4; 2 Nephi 26:15; 2 Nephi 27:13; 2 Nephi 33:10; Mormon 8:26.

scriptures for decades. He has been a longtime consumer of scholarly publications about the scriptures and is grateful for this opportunity to participate in the process of production. When not in an office cubicle, he can be found laughing with his wife, wrestling with their children, or playing with words.

