

## A Floating Relationship: *Narrative Metalepsis* between Mormon and Alma

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Grant Hardy has proposed reading Mormon as an emotionally charged narrator. This can be expanded on with Gérard Genette's testimonial function of the narrator. The Book of Mormon text presents a complex narration structure. Using Genette's terminology, Mormon is the text's *extradiegetic* narrator. His narration contains other narrators such as Alma, who is an *intradiegetic* narrator. The Book of Mormon text usually clearly marks changes in diegetic levels. However, in the narrative of Ammonihah, the text undergoes multiple sudden shifts in narration levels. Some of these shifts are only seen through changes in grammatical person and are not otherwise 'narrated'. This makes these shifts transgressive, according to Genette, who calls these unmarked shifts *narrative metalepsis*. Alma 28 through 30 only indicates shifts of diegetic levels through changes in tense and textual content. This mixes the *extradiegetic* and *intradiegetic* narrators, creating a floating relationship between the two narrators and thus a complex and emotionally-loaded narration. Mormon, acting as narrator, can already be read as an emotional character before coming to Mormon's own narrative starting in Mormon 1:1. The Book of Mormon can be productively read through literary theory in order to expand on the idea of the narrators as emotionally complex characters.

Grant Hardy has previously argued that the Book of Mormon should be understood first through its narrators, chief among them Nephi, Mormon and Moroni. Of the three, Mormon's narration is the most extensive and most complex. However, he is not a traditional third person limited-omniscient narrator. Mormon's narration style is much more charged with personality and subjectivity: "In fact, Mormon's character is mostly revealed as he tries to negotiate the divergent demands of being an accurate record keeper, a literary artist, and a moral guide" (2010:92). The reader need not wait until Mormon 1:1 to see Mormon as a rounded and emotionally complex character. Gérard Genette, on whose narratology this paper is based, speaks of the "testimonial function" of the narrator through which the narrator can reveal an "affective relationship" with the narration (1980:256). This can be seen through the interplay of Alma's and Mormon's narration<sup>1</sup>. Looking at the Book of Mormon's narratology through grammar and formatting reveals a fluid and emotionally charged relationship between

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent mentions of Alma are to the son of Alma.

the character-narrator Alma and *his* narrator, Mormon. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent text is taken from Skousen (2009).

In *Narrative Discourse (Discours du récit)*, Gérard Genette posits multiple narration levels. Rather than ‘third person’ vs. ‘first person’ narration, he creates an ‘outermost’ narrator, who is himself *not* narrated by another instance, called the “extradiegetic” narrator (1980:228). This narrator may use the first or third person. The question is whether a narrator is ‘embedded’ in another narrative or acts as the outermost instance. The Book of Mormon has several such narrators in succession, each ‘taking over’ from the other. These include Nephi, Jacob, Mormon and Moroni, as well as the minor narrators from Enos through Amaleki. Each prophet in Omni ‘takes over’ from the other rather than creating a literary *matryoshka* doll.

Within the outer ‘shell’ of the *extradiegesis* there is the main plot of a narrative, the “diegesis”, which “designates the universe of the [extradiegetic] narrative” (Genette 1980:228, n41)<sup>2</sup>. Within this universe there can be other narrators who are ‘embedded’ in the main plot, being characters therein. They are not simply quoted but they themselves take over a portion of the narration, while still being within the main narrative. This internal narration level is called “intradiegetic” (cf. Genette 1980:228). This narrator may ‘speak’ in either the third or first person. The task of narration is then later resumed by the *extradiegetic* narrator, causing a *shift* in diegetic levels. Such internal narrators include Zeniff (Mosiah 9-10), Alma (in Ammonihah) and Helaman (in his epistle to Moroni in Alma 56-58). All of these narrators are characters within Mormon’s narrative (the diegesis) but are temporarily given ‘control’ over telling a story. The events narrated by an *intradiegetic* narrator are called the “metadiegetic” (Genette 1980:228).

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<sup>2</sup> *diegesis* “**a.** A narrative; a statement of the case. **b.** [French *diégèse*, introduced in this sense by E. Souriau 1953, *L’Univers Filmique*.] *spec.* The narrative presented by a cinematographic film or literary work; the fictional time, place, characters, and events which constitute the universe of the narrative” (OED.com, *diegesis*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/52402>).

We thus have three ‘layers’ of narration and narrative. In order to avoid confusion by Genette’s use of ‘meta’, we will place the *extradiegetic* as a base which narrates a diegetic world ‘on top’<sup>3</sup>. Within this *diegesis*, there can be another ‘narrated’ narrator, the *intradiegetic* narrator. This internal narrator presents the *metadiegetic*. In this paper I will be dealing with only two narrators and their relationship: Mormon, the *extradiegetic* narrator of the *diegetic* events around Alma; and Alma, the *intradiegetic* narrator of his own narrative (the *metadiegetic*)<sup>4</sup>. This is summarized in figure 1, below

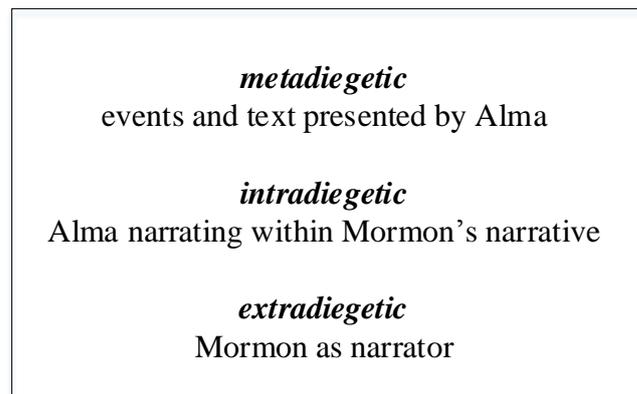


Figure 1. Diegetic levels, Alma and Mormon.

In the Book of Mormon, the different diegetic levels and the changes between them are usually made clear. The thresholds between the extradiegetic narrators are demarcated, such as in the extreme example of the rapid succession of extradiegetic narrators found in Omni<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> I am changing the spatial metaphor for ease of understanding, as Genette uses the term meta differently from how it is now understood in such words as meta-cognition. He explains his use of the prefix ‘meta’ in the following:

The prefix *meta-* obviously connotes here, as in ‘metalanguage’, the transition to the second degree: the *metanarrative* is a narrative within the narrative, the *metadiegesis* is the universe of this second narrative, as the *diegesis* (according to a now widespread usage) designates the universe of the first narrative. We must admit, however, that this term functions in a way opposite to that of its model in logic and linguistics: metalanguage is a language in which one speaks of another language, so metanarrative should be the first narrative, within which one would tell a second narrative. But it seemed to me that it was better to keep the simplest and most common designation for the first degree, and thus to reverse the direction of interlocking (Genette 1980:228, n41).

<sup>4</sup> In some Book of Mormon passages, the ‘events’ are superficially the same in each narrating instance. For example, this occurs in Ammonihah, where both Alma and Mormon tell the story of Alma and Amulek’s preaching. This difference also includes problems of “focalization”, another term coined by Genette. “The perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented; the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which they are rendered” (Prince 2003:31, *focalization*). For the sake of brevity and argumentative simplicity, I will be restricting my discussion to differences in diegetic levels.

<sup>5</sup> Here several narrators use “And I make an end” to mark the transition between themselves and the next record keeper to whom they are handing over the record.

Shifts between levels are also usually clearly marked, as between Alma 8 and 9. Mormon here finishes his extradiegetic narration: “And it came to pass that they [Alma and Amulek] went forth and began to preach and to prophesy unto the people according to the spirit and power which the Lord had given them” (Alma 8:32). This is followed by a chapter break in the 1830 edition (Skousen 2009:307). Then comes a headline summary setting up the transition:

The *words of Alma* and also the words of Amulek which was declared unto the people which was in the land of Ammonihah. And also they are cast into prison and delivered by the miraculous power of God which was in them, *according to the record of Alma* (Skousen 2009:308, my emphasis).

The headline summary tells the reader that the following is some record which is different from the one Mormon has been presenting<sup>6</sup>. In Alma 8, the extradiegetic narrator used the third person for Alma. In Alma 9, the *intradiegetic* narrator is also indicated by the use of first person: “And again, I Alma having been commanded of God that I should take Amulek and go forth and preach again unto this people...” (Alma 9:1). “The transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the narrating [instance]” (Genette 1980:234). The switch between Alma 8 and 9 is properly ‘narrated’ by using both a summary and an immediate change in grammar. However, the narration surrounding Ammonihah becomes more muddled.

Alma includes extensive direct quotation of his own sermon (the metadiegesis). He then closes the report on his own sermon: “Now it came to pass that when I Alma had spoken these words...” (Alma 9:31). He then introduces Amulek and his upcoming sermon: “And it came to pass that Amulek went and stood forth and began to preach unto them also. And now the words of Amulek are not all written; nevertheless a part of his words are written in *this book*” (Alma 9:34, my emphasis). The chapter ends, both in the 1830 and current chapter divisions (Skousen 2009:312). An attentive reader might remember that the previous chapter break was followed by a shift in diegesis. However, *that* break was also followed by an introductory header.

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<sup>6</sup> Such a shift had already occurred previously in Mormon’s narration, with the switch from Mormon to Zeniff in Mosiah 9.

Alma has told the reader that Amulek's words are included in "this book", a book which was marked as belonging to Alma, by noting that what followed was "according to the record of Alma". This is reminiscent of Zeniff's introduction, which is presented as "An account of his people..." (Skousen 2009:217). Alma's previous closing remarks even set up a quotation from Amulek's sermon, "the words of Amulek are not all written; nevertheless a part of his words are written" (Alma 9:34). Alma 10 then begins with a third person narration about Amulek. The third person here can mean either a continuation of Alma's *intradiegetic* narration (since Alma has already spoken *about* Amulek) or it can mean a return to Mormon's *extradiegetic* narration. "Now these are the words which Amulek preached unto the people which was in the land of Ammonihah, saying: *I am* Amulek. *I am* the son of Gidanah" (Alma 10:1-2, my emphasis). As established before, an *intradiegetic* narrator (Alma) had been narrating a *metadiegetic* world (his own experience, which includes Amulek's sermon). Unlike Alma 9, which immediately began with Alma referring to himself in the first person, the narration started in Alma 10 takes until verse 12 (!) for there to be proof that this is actually the *extradiegetic* Mormon and that the text has shifted levels:

And now when *Amulek had spoken these words*, the people began to be astonished, seeing there was more than one witness who testified of the things whereof they were accused, and also of the things which was to come, according to the spirit of prophecy which was in *them*. Nevertheless there were some among them who thought to question *them*...(Alma 10:12-13, my emphasis).

Previous experience and thus knowing that this shift in pronouns will occur in verse 12 tell the reader that Mormon is again acting as *extradiegetic* narrator starting in Alma 10:1. And yet for the first 11 verses, the only indication, and a weak one at that, is a chapter break. The boundary between the *intradiegetic* and *extradiegetic* narration in this passage is thus quite fluid. Because of this, a first time reader or a reader with a 'willing suspension of belief' might not even be conscious of the change<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> By this rather clumsy expression I mean a sort of extension of 'suspension of *disbelief*'. I mean an experienced Book of Mormon reader that, despite having read the text many times and already 'knows' who is speaking, nevertheless tries to 'suspend' the common 'Seminary' understanding and tries to ignore (added) paratextual markers and see the text anew; as the text presents itself. This type of reader also tries to read the text as he/she might read a novel: not analyzing the text, but letting it 'wash over' him- or herself.

Since Alma previously spoke of the reactions of the people of Ammonihah towards himself in the first person and spoke of Amulek in third person singular, this shift to third person *plural* must be *about* Alma *and* Amulek. Normally, transitions must be marked, as the text did between the previous shift from Mormon to Alma, coming after a chapter break, introductory summary and *immediate* use of first person. “Any other form of transit is, if not always impossible, at any rate always transgressive” (Genette 1980:234). Genette includes sudden shifts in pronouns in this list of transgressive transitions (cf. 237). The narration surrounding Ammonihah changes from *they* (Alma and Amulek) to *I* (Alma) to *he* (Amulek) to *I* (Amulek) to *them* (Alma and Amulek). Unlike the previous shift, which included a ‘narrated’ introduction by the extradiegetic narrator, the change here occurs after only a chapter break. Genette calls such transgressive shifts “narrative metalepsis” (235). Since the passage takes a dozen verses to finally establish its shift in diegetic levels, it is a severe case of *narrative metalepsis* and must be considered an important textual marker, even more so than a non-transgressive transition. However, this is not the only time the text transgressively shifts up and down between Mormon’s and Alma’s narrative levels. This brings us to Alma’s prayer in Alma 29.

To be able to see the shift between diegetic levels that occurs before, during and after Alma’s prayer requires establishing that Mormon was previously narrating. “And *Alma* also related unto them [the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi] his conversion...” (Alma 27:25, my emphasis). Since Alma is mentioned in the third person, it is clear that this must be *extradiegetic* narration. Chapter 28 then relates the establishment of the people of Ammon in Jershon and does so in past tense: “And now it came to pass that after the people of Ammon *were* established in the land of Jershon...the armies of the Lamanites *had followed* their brethren into the wilderness....And thus there *was* a tremendous (sic) battle...” (Alma 28:1-2, my emphasis). The results of the battle are also related in past tense: “And now this *was* a time that there *was* a great mourning and lamentation heard throughout all the land among all

the people of Nephi....And thus the cry of mourning *was* heard among every one of them....And now surely this *was* a sorrowful day....And thus *ended* the fifteenth year...” (Alma 28:4-7, my emphasis). The distance of past tense as well the third person narration about Alma establishes that Mormon, the *extradiegetic* narrator, is ‘speaking’.

The extradiegetic narrator ends the account of the Sons of Mosiah, which was introduced in Chapter 17 of Alma. “And this is the account of Ammon and his brethren” (Alma 28:8)<sup>8</sup>. Then the text suddenly and yet subtly shifts diegetic levels: “...the fifteenth year of the reign of the judges *is* ended” (Alma 28:9, my emphasis). Whereas verse 7 used past tense, the phrase “is ended” is a *present* tense construction. The shift to present continues: “And the bodies of many thousands *are* laid low in the earth, while the bodies of many thousands *are* moldering in heaps upon the face of the earth. Yea, and many thousands *are* mourning for the loss of their kindred” (Alma 28:11, my emphasis). Previously, in verse 5, the cry of mourning *was* heard. This is another indicator that a shift in diegesis has taken place<sup>9</sup>.

The fluid transgression of diegetic levels continues in Chapter 28 by the narrator using the common Book of Mormon phrase “and thus we see”:

*And thus we see* how great the inequality of man is because of sin and transgression and the power of the devil, which comes by the cunning plans which he hath devised to ensnare the hearts of men. *And thus we see* the great call of the diligence of men to labor in the vineyards of the Lord (Alma 28:13-14, my emphasis).

This phrase is most commonly associated with Mormon’s commentary and the contents fit well with Mormon’s overall project and style. The phrase is, however, not exclusively used by Mormon. It is also used at Ammonihah by both Alma and his interlocutors: Alma’s audience posits an argument: “*And thus we see* that there was no possible chance that [Adam and Eve]

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<sup>8</sup> The 1830 edition does not start a new paragraph or even use a full-stop: “...and thus ended the fifteenth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi; and this is the account of Ammon and his brethren...” (Joseph Smith 1830:302). Since the narrative is now complete, the present tense in verse 8 can still indicate the present tense of the previous narrator, Mormon. The text already established in Words of Mormon that Mormon speaks of his own time and record-making process in the present tense: “...the record which I *have been making*....And it *is* many hundred years after the coming of Christ” (Words of Mormon 1:1-2, my emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> “The present tense indicates that the author of this editorial summary is Alma<sub>2</sub>” (Hardy 2003:332).

should live forever” (Alma 12:21, my emphasis). Alma sets up his rebuttal: “*And thus we see that by [Adam’s] fall that all mankind became a lost and a fallen people*” (Alma 12:22, my emphasis). The use of the phrase in Alma 28 therefore does not guarantee that Mormon is speaking. As in the narrative in Ammonihah, a reader with a ‘willing suspension of belief’ might not even notice the previous temporal shift and might (rightfully) assume that this is *Mormon’s* commentary.

After Alma 28:14 comes an important difference in Book of Mormon editions. The current chapter divisions add a chapter break after Alma 28:14. Hardy adds a large header: “A Meditation by Alma<sub>2</sub> on Missionary Work” (2003:332). The 1830 text, however, does not even add a paragraph break and only employs its usual extra space between full-stop and a new sentence: “...and joy because of the light of Christ unto life. O that I were an angel...” (Joseph Smith 1830:303)<sup>10</sup>. Since the text never states that this is Alma speaking, the fluid relationship continues. The words used here by Alma could easily be uttered by Mormon. If one imagines Mormon reading these words in one of his many records and then including them in his own record, one can imagine a man both joyful over the success of Alma and weeping over his own failings and restrictions as prophet. One need only replace “I” with “I, Mormon”:

O that I were an angel and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth and cry repentance unto every people! Yea, I would declare unto every soul as with the voice of thunder repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might be no more sorrow upon all the face of the earth. But behold, I am a man and do sin in my wish, for I had ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me. I had not ought to (sic) harrow up in my desires the firm decree of a just God... (Alma 29:1-3).

Since the previous commentary used Mormon’s style and Mormon *does* include such lengthy asides in his own records, all of these words could be used by Mormon. If it were not for the later indications that this must be Alma speaking, the willing reader might not notice this until

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<sup>10</sup> This discrepancy changes how easily a reader is able to read with a ‘suspension of belief’. In treating the text as literature, such textual and paratextual differences change the way the text is ‘consumed’. For treatment of paratext, see Genette 1997.

quite late. This lengthy lag in indication is reminiscent of Alma 10:1-11 being unclear as to who is speaking. The words in Alma 29:1-3 only indicate a wish, not a description of external reality. One might say, to play on a German phrase, that the text ‘speaks from out of Mormon’s soul’, meaning that this is exactly Mormon’s own sentiment and that Alma’s text resonates with Mormon’s own feelings<sup>11</sup>.

Everything until the middle of verse 9 could still be said by Mormon. Only an experienced reader would notice a discrepancy starting in the second half of the verse 9. First-time readers might not recognize the semantic hint (the joy, which Mormon never expresses about himself) and that this must be Alma speaking:

Yea, and this is my glory, that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance; and this is my *joy*. And behold, when I see many of my brethren truly penitent and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with *joy*; then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer (Alma 29:9-10, my emphasis).

Through its contents, this passage finally makes it clear that this is definitely the *intradiegetic* Alma and not the *extradiegetic* Mormon. *Mormon’s* prayers were *not* heard: “And my soul had been poured out in prayer unto my God all the day long for them. Nevertheless it was without faith” (Mormon 3:12). While Alma uses the word ‘joy’ multiple times in Alma 29, there is only one (!) instance of ‘joy’ and one instance of ‘rejoicing’ in all of Mormon:

And it came to pass that when I Mormon saw their lamentation and their mourning and their sorrowing before the Lord, my heart did begin to *rejoice* within me, knowing the mercies and the long-suffering of the Lord, therefore supposing that he would be merciful unto them that they would again become a righteous people. But behold, this *my joy was vain*; for their sorrowing was not unto repentance (Mormon 2:12-13, my emphasis).

While Alma rejoices in the success of the Sons of Mosiah in the Land of Nephi, Mormon does not experience (or at least does not report on) any joy.

Alma chapter 29 then ends with a clear “Amen”, followed by a chapter break in both the 1830 and current edition (cf. Skousen 2009:382). In terms of content, the text folds back on

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<sup>11</sup> *Jemandem aus der Seele sprechen*. This is difficult to translate since English lacks grammatical endings for translating the two instances of dative case. An approximate literal translation is “speaking for someone from out of that other person’s soul.” This is usually used as an exclamation: *Du sprichst mir aus der Seele!* This means that what the other person has just said, often a lament or complaint, is what oneself is thinking or feeling.

itself and returns to the matter of the people of Ammon being resettled, which was started in Alma 28:1:

Behold, now it came to pass that after the people of Ammon *were* established in the land of Jershon, yea, and also after the Lamanites *were* driven out of the land and their dead *were* buried by the people of the land—now their dead *were* not numbered because of the greatness of their numbers, neither *were* the dead of the Nephites numbered (Alma 30:1-2, my emphasis).

The return to past tense indicates a return to the *extradiegetic* level. This passage repeats the exact phrasing of the previous mention of the event, including the past tense<sup>12</sup>. Between Alma 27:26 and 30:28, Alma is never mentioned by name and never clearly identifies himself. There is no clear indication of a shift back to Mormon. The first ‘definitive’ indicator of the shift occurs when Korihor is “brought before *Alma* and the chief judge” (Alma 30:29, my emphasis).

On an analytical level, all of these small grammatical and semantic signs make it clear that Alma 29 is in fact *intradiegetically* narrated by Alma and not *extradiegetically* by Mormon. The Sunday School manual is completely justified in ascribing it to Alma<sup>13</sup>. And yet reading the passage as a flowing, novelistic text, especially using the 1830 edition, a first-time reader could easily be unsure about the diegetic level of the text, and be forgiven for taking several verses, if not an entire chapter, to recognize the narrative metalepses between Alma and Mormon, both in Ammonihah and later in Alma 28-30. These narrative metalepses establish that the border between Alma’s and Mormon’s diegetic levels is fuzzy at best. The text does not “hesitate to establish between narrator and character(s) a variable or floating relationship” (Genette 1980:246). Juxtaposing the events of Ammonihah, including the atrocities committed there, as well as the sentiments expressed in Alma 29, with the events of Mormon’s time shows an emotionally charged mix of *déjà vu* and envy<sup>14</sup>. The floating relationship between narrator and narrated is not only one of plot similarity or inversion that

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<sup>12</sup> “...after the people of Ammon were established in the land of Jershon” (Alma 28:1).

<sup>13</sup> “Alma 29 records Alma’s feelings about the success of Ammon and his brothers and expresses Alma’s desire that all people might have the opportunity to hear and accept the gospel” (Intellectual Reserve 1999:118).

<sup>14</sup> One need only think of the atrocities reported in Mormon’s epistle in Moroni 9.

encourages a comparison and juxtaposition of Alma and Mormon. This melding and its subsequent juxtaposition are brought into play through how the text treats the narratological relationship between the two characters. This builds the connection into the very structure of the text itself.

The *narrative metalepses* between Alma and Mormon show a complex mixing of narrator voices. The blurring of voices also causes a blurring of the temporal situation of the narrators. Both the distant voice of Mormon and the close voice of Alma weave in and out of Ammonihah and Alma 28-29. This blurring can be read as a blending of experiences of the two narrator-prophets. Mormon both identifies with Alma and yearns for Alma's success. Mormon's story takes on an even more tragic flavor when read intertextually with Alma. These transgressive shifts serve as a 'testimonial function' of an "affective relationship" between Mormon and his diegesis (specifically Alma) (cf. Genette 1980:256). Through looking at the (often unmarked) weaving up and down between diegetic levels, Mormon can be seen as having an intimate, emotional relationship with his record, and not simply a rational one. This emotional aspect to what is commonly seen as a dry, even clinical historical exposé opens the door for more sophisticated literary theories to be applied to the Book of Mormon text. The reader need not wait until Mormon 1:1 to see Mormon as a rounded and emotionally complex character. Mormon the narrator, telling the stories of others, can already be read as such through the complex narrator-narrated relationship he has with his text. For why else is the book named *The Book of Mormon*?

*A final note:*

It is entirely possible to dismiss the analysis I do here with the claim that any apparent complexity through *metalepsis* cannot be significant but is only a sign of Joseph Smith's sloppy writing style and that these unmarked transitions are but indications of poor narration. In my view, this would be misguided, of a piece with responding to attempts at interpretation with *That's just ridiculous!* or *Joseph Smith was a hack!* In German this is called *Totschlagargument* (lit. 'strike-dead argument', the term for rhetorical moves meant to 'kill' further debate. This includes *argumentum ad lapidem*). Coupling the basic principle of hermeneutic exegesis that only the work itself is consulted with the fact that the blurring of narrator voices occurs at least twice between the same characters, warrants calling *metalepsis* a feature and not a 'bug', and invites careful consideration.

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