

“A REMARKABLE VISION OF HER FATHER”: THE MANY USES OF OF IN THE BOOK OF ALMA

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In the Book of Mormon, when Ammon is preaching to King Lamoni and his household, we meet a believing Lamanitish servant named Abish, who had “been converted unto the Lord for many years, on account of a remarkable vision of her father” (Alma 19:16). This stunning piece of backstory is delivered at a key moment in the narrative. The king, queen, Ammon, and all the other servants had just lost consciousness, “being overpowered by the Spirit” (Alma 19:13). Only Abish remained awake, apparently because of her earlier conversion. She then performs the crucial labor of gathering as many people as possible, supposing “that by beholding this scene it would cause them to believe in the power of God” (Alma 19:17).

Once the multitude is gathered, Abish takes the queen by the hand, and the queen “arose and stood upon her feet, and cried with a loud voice, saying: O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell! O blessed God, have mercy on this people!” (Alma 19:29). The queen then wakes the king, who calls the gathered people to order. Ammon and Abish’s fellow servants wake up, “And behold, many did declare unto the people that they had seen angels and had conversed with them; and thus they had told them things of God, and of his righteousness” (Alma 19:34).

This passage is a rare instance where the Book of Mormon tells of either a layperson or a woman having a vision, and this scene has both simultaneously. The queen and all the servants are converted after

having remarkable visions—or, it seems, all the servants except Abish. Apparently Abish, who played such a critical role in the conversion of the kingdom, was the only member of the king’s household who did not have a vision.

Or did she?

Abish was converted “on account of a remarkable vision of her father,” but this statement is, as Matthew L. Bowen explains, “formally ambiguous and yields several interpretive possibilities.”¹ The trouble, here, is the word *of*. Although a small and common preposition, *of* has a knack for introducing ambiguity into English prose. As linguist Dallin D. Oaks has observed: “Many prepositions can in fact represent a variety of relationships. In the *American Heritage Dictionary*, for example, I see that the preposition *of* has 20 listed definitions—21 if I count an archaic definition that it provides. I have a lexicographer colleague, Cynthia Hallen, who tells me that even this is an understatement of the number of possible meanings for this preposition, though of course any such number depends on how we lump or split definitions.”² Readers are fortunate that, in the specific case of “a remarkable vision of her father,” there are only two functions that *of* might be performing. In what Bowen calls “the traditional reading of this event,”³ Abish’s father had the vision. However, Kevin and Shauna Christensen say, “It seems a better reading to credit Abish with having a vision of her father, which led to her conversion.”⁴ Daniel H. Ludlow explains the ambiguity in more detail: “The brief account of the conversion of Abish . . . may have

1. Matthew L. Bowen, “Abish, Theophanies, and the First Lamanite Restoration,” *Religious Educator* 19, no. 1 (2018): 62.

2. Dallin D. Oaks, *Structural Ambiguity in English: An Applied Grammatical Inventory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 294.

3. Bowen, “Abish, Theophanies, and the First Lamanite Restoration,” 62.

4. Kevin Christensen and Shauna Christensen, “Nephite Feminism Revisited: Thoughts on Carol Lynn Pearson’s View of Women in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review of Books* 10, no. 2 (1998): 16.

two possible interpretations. One interpretation is that Abish herself had this vision and in her vision she saw her father. Another possible interpretation is that the vision was actually had by the father of Abish.”⁵

In the traditional interpretation, where Abish’s father had the vision, *of* denotes possession, as it does in a phrase like “the first vision of Joseph Smith.” In the alternative interpretation, where Abish had the vision herself, *of* describes the content of the vision, as it does in the phrase “the vision of the tree of life.” In these phrases—“the first vision of Joseph Smith” and “the vision of the tree of life”—*of* may be ambiguous from a grammatical perspective, but the content of each phrase can do a lot to reduce that ambiguity. For example, “the first vision of Joseph Smith” is ambiguous in the same way “a remarkable vision of her father” is, but because “the first vision” is the name often used for the vision Joseph had near his home as a young man, anyone familiar with that story is likely to understand that “the first vision of Joseph Smith” means a vision he had, not a vision he was in. In the case of “the vision of the tree of life,” there is effectively no ambiguity at all because the reader will likely assume trees do not have visions, so the tree must have been in the vision. But in the case of the phrase “vision of her father,” both interpretations are plausible.

Many commentators who notice this ambiguity are quick to dismiss it as inconsequential. Ludlow says, “Regardless of which interpretation is correct, this conversion of Abish plays an important role in converting large numbers of Lamanites.”⁶ Brant Gardner says that attributing the vision to Abish’s father is “a reasonable assumption for a firmly patriarchal society.”⁷ It seems to be Bowen alone who recognizes that

5. Daniel A. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 207.

6. Ludlow, *Companion to Your Study*, 207.

7. Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume 4: Alma* (Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 302–303.

the difference between these two interpretations is significant: “If the vision belonged to Abish, she, along with Lamoni’s wife, would have become one of the few women reported in the Book of Mormon to have experienced a theophany or have a vision.”⁸ However, Bowen avoids coming to any firm conclusion as to whether Abish or her father was the one who had the vision. This article, therefore, seeks to explore whether a grammatical analysis can settle it.

In wider Christianity, the idea of grammatical exegesis has been around for a long time. In fact, the sixteenth-century theologian Philip Melanchthon said, “It is impossible to understand Scripture in its theology without having first understood its grammar.”⁹ More recently, William Arnold Stevens wrote an article entitled “Grammatical Exegesis” to explain the value of this approach to scripture study. For anyone uncertain about the relevance of grammar to theology, the introduction to this article is instructive: “All real and effective Bible study begins with grammatical exegesis, that part of exegesis with which the present article is especially concerned. Grammatical exegesis . . . takes one sentence at a time, and applies the laws of thought and language in order to understand it. It aims immediately and principally . . . to ascertain the writer’s thought as determined from the meanings of the words, and from their relation to one another in the given sentence.”¹⁰ Near the end of the article, Stevens adds: “One caution must not be omitted. The grammatical process . . . does not embrace the whole of interpretation. Grammatical exegesis is only the first stage of the exegetical task—the gateway into the temple of biblical science. Yet all who will really know the Bible must humbly and obediently enter that gateway.”¹¹

8. Bowen, “Abish, Theophanies, and the First Lamanite Restoration,” 62.

9. William Arnold Stevens, “Grammatical Exegesis,” *The Old and New Testament Student* 9, no. 4 (1889): 206.

10. Stevens, “Grammatical Exegesis,” 199.

11. Stevens, “Grammatical Exegesis,” 206.

As for the Bible, so for the Book of Mormon. Before we can dive deep into its theology, we need to make a careful study of the words and structures of individual sentences. In the specific case of Abish's conversion, significant theological implications hinge on our interpretation of a single preposition. So let us not shy away from this "first stage of the exegetical task." Instead, let us closely examine the grammar of the Book of Mormon and venture a conclusion as to who had this remarkable vision.

The Function of *of* in Alma 17–20

The first step of this analysis will be to dig into the grammar of the Book of Mormon to see whether *of* appears in a pattern that will help us interpret the phrase "a remarkable vision of her father." A full answer to this question would require an analysis of the Book of Mormon's more than 10,000 instances of *of*, which is more analysis than this solo author can manage. Thankfully, the text itself is broken into sections,¹² and there are 248 instances of *of* in the section our passage appears

12. These sections are masked by our current chapter/verse structure, but you can see them in Skousen's reconstruction of the original text. In the editor's preface of that book, Skousen explains the nature of these sections:

The original text had sections that Joseph Smith decided to call "chapters," even though the word *chapter* itself is extracanonical and is never used by any writer within the Book of Mormon. Apparently as part of the revelatory process, Joseph would from time to time perceive breaks within the text. At those points in his dictation he would tell the scribe to put the word *chapter* into the manuscript but without any numerical specification (the chapter numbers were added later, sometimes months later). The RLDS church (now known as the Community of Christ) has maintained these original chapters in their editions and has added versification. The LDS system, in comparison, has divided the original longer chapters into shorter ones so that no chapter ever reaches a hundred verses.

Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), xl.

in (Alma 17–20), which is more manageable. That is the analysis this article undertakes.

Before we get started, it will be useful to define some key terms that will be used throughout this paper, particularly as relates to the functions *of* performs in the text. Similar to the dictionary cited by Oaks, Merriam-Webster's online dictionary gives a total of twenty-two different definitions for the preposition *of*.¹³ Of these, Alma 17–20 has instances of ten. Additionally, *of* frequently appears in phrases that are non-compositional, meaning that the definition of the phrase cannot be derived from the meaning of the words that make it up. Examples include “because of” (which Merriam-Webster calls a preposition¹⁴) and “in search of” (which Merriam-Webster calls an idiom¹⁵). In both of these examples, it is difficult to analyze the function of *of* because the phrase functions as a unit independent of the meanings of the individual words in it. Therefore, a “Non-compositional” category was created for these instances, bringing the number of categories up to eleven.

Table 1 gives a list of the eleven categories used in this study, ranked in order of frequency in Alma 17–20. Each row of the table provides a category's name, its Merriam-Webster definition, the number of times it appears in Alma 17–20 and what percentage of instances that number represents, and an example from the text.

The categories were typically unambiguous. Of the 248 instances of *of* in Alma 17–20, “a remarkable vision of her father” was the only one ambiguous enough to defy easy categorization using the definitions provided in table 1. There were other instances that theoretically could have been ambiguous, but these were invariably made clear by context.

13. Merriam-Webster.com *Dictionary*, s.v. “of,” accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/of>.

14. Merriam-Webster.com *Dictionary*, s.v. “because of,” accessed December 21, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/in%20search%20of>.

15. Merriam-Webster.com *Dictionary*, s.v. “in search of,” accessed December 21, 2022, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/in%20search%20of>.

For example, "the service of the king" could be service rendered either by or to a king, but the full phrase reads "after he had been in the service of the king three days," (Alma 17:26), which clearly means service rendered to the king. Similarly, "the thoughts of Ammon" (Alma 17:30) and "the thoughts of the king" (Alma 18:16) could be thoughts had by Ammon or the king, or they could be thoughts about Ammon or the king, but the larger context makes one interpretation the clear choice. Only "a remarkable vision of her father" remained truly ambiguous, so table 1 accounts for the other 247 instances of *of* in Alma 17–20.

The question at hand, then, is whether "a remarkable vision of her father" should be categorized as POSSESSIVE (meaning the vision belongs to her father, which suggests he was the one who had the vision) or as ABOUT (meaning the content of the vision was about her father, which suggests Abish had the vision). The other nine categories are mostly outside of this article's scope, but when we encounter instances of *of* that belong to one of these categories, the category's name will be given in all caps to make finding the relevant definition in table 1 as easy as possible.

One thing that should be noted about the categories in table 1 is that POSSESSIVE is by far the most common, accounting for nearly 40 percent of all instances. It should come as no surprise, then, that many people read "a remarkable vision of her father" as POSSESSIVE—nearly half of the instances of *of* in the verse's immediate neighborhood are exactly that, while ABOUT only occurs roughly once in every twenty-five instances. The human brain, reaching for analogous structures as a means of interpretation, makes the statistically smart choice if it chooses POSSESSIVE. And certainly it does not help that the ABOUT interpretation entails a Lamanitish servant woman having a heavenly vision. Visions in the Book of Mormon are typically the purview of Nephite men in the ruling class. It would be "remarkable" enough for Abish's father to have a vision and truly astounding for Abish herself to have one.

But just because a given interpretation is statistically (and socially) more likely does not mean it is actually correct. We should look

Table 1

Name	Merriam-Webster Definition	Count	Example
POSSESSIVE	6a. used as a function word to indicate belonging or a possessive relationship	96 (39%)	the house of the king (Alma 19:18)
CLASS	8a. used as a function word to indicate a particular example belonging to the class denoted by the preceding noun	33 (13%)	the waters of Sebus (Alma 17:34)
PARTITIVE1	4a. used as a function word to indicate the whole that includes the part denoted by the preceding word	20 (8%)	half of the kingdom (Alma 20:23)
NON-COMPOSITIONAL	N/A	20 (8%)	because of being bound (Alma 20:29)
COMPOSITION	3. used as a function word to indicate the component material, parts, or elements or the contents	17 (7%)	the cloud of darkness (Alma 19:6)
ORIGIN	2a. used as a function word to indicate origin or derivation	13 (5%)	a descendant of Ishmael (Alma 17:21)
DELIVER	7. used as a function word to indicate something from which a person or thing is delivered or with respect to which someone or something is made destitute	13 (5%)	born of a woman (Alma 19:13)
OBJECTIVE GENITIVE	9a. used as a function word to indicate the object of an action denoted or implied by the preceding noun	13 (5%)	the creation of Adam (Alma 18:36)
ABOUT	5a. ABOUT	10 (4%)	the knowledge of the truth (Alma 17:2)
PARTITIVE2	4b. used as a function word to indicate a whole or quantity from which a part is removed or expended	6 (2%)	What desirest thou of me? (Alma 18:15)
QUALITY	10. used as a function word to indicate a characteristic or distinctive quality or possession	6 (2%)	men of a sound understanding (Alma 17:2)

for textual patterns that suggest one interpretation is more grammatically justified than the other. That analysis is covered in the first section of this paper, "How Does *of* Function in Alma 17–20?"

Additionally, we should not ignore the fact that our ambiguous phrase is introduced by "on account of," which is a NON-COMPOSITIONAL phrase that Merriam-Webster defines as a preposition.¹⁶ Given that "a remarkable vision of her father" is embedded in a prepositional phrase, we should investigate whether that has an impact on its structure. The phrase "on account of" appears ten times in the Book of Mormon, and a brief investigation into its usage is covered in the second section of this paper, "How Does 'on Account of' Function in The Book of Mormon?"

How Does *of* Function in Alma 17–20?

In order to determine whether "a remarkable vision of her father" should be categorized as POSSESSIVE or ABOUT, we need to examine the contexts where *of* performs these functions and see whether any patterns emerge. There are ninety-six instances of POSSESSIVE *of* in Alma 17–20, and ten instances of ABOUT. If we can find a pattern that exists in one category but not the other, we can use that pattern to judge whether "a remarkable vision of her father" belongs in a particular category.

Before discussing a particularly striking pattern that emerges from the ninety-six instances of POSSESSIVE *of*, let us first consider how indefinite and definite articles are used in English. In basic terms, indefinite articles (such as *a*) are used when a topic is first introduced in a given discourse ("discourse new"), while definite articles (such as *the*) are used when a topic has already been established ("discourse old"). For example, when Lamoni loses consciousness, his servants put him onto a bed. In Alma 18:43, the bed is discourse new because it is being

16. More accurately, Merriam-Webster defines "on account of" as equivalent to "because of," which it defines as a preposition. See Merriam-Webster .com *dictionary*, s.v. "account" and "because of," accessed December 29, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/account> and <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/because%20of>.

mentioned for the first time, and the text uses an indefinite article (*a*) as we would expect: Lamoni's servants "took him and carried him in unto his wife, and laid him upon **a bed**." A few verses later, in Alma 19:11, the bed is now discourse old, so we see a definite article (*the*) when we are told the queen "watched over **the bed** of her husband."

With that in mind, one surprising pattern exists in the ninety-six instances of POSSESSIVE in Alma 17–20: They all occur in noun phrases that begin with *the*.¹⁷ There are no indefinite noun phrases

17. POSSESSIVE constructions in Alma 17–20:

1. the [altar / spirit / glory / image / name] of [God / the Lord] (7 instances)
2. the [countenance / eyes / pleasure] of the king (3 instances)
3. the [house / pasture] of the king (2 instances)
4. the arms of [those who sought to slay him / my brethren / others] (3 instances)
5. the bed of her husband (1 instance)
6. the borders of the land (1 instance)
7. the brethren of Ammon (2 instances)
8. the coming of Christ (1 instance)
9. the conditions of repentance (1 instance)
10. the curse of God (1 instance)
11. the custom of the Lamanites (1 instance)
12. the edge of his sword (1 instance)
13. the enemies of the king (1 instance)
14. the faithfulness of Ammon (2) (2 instances)
15. the fall of man (1 instance)
16. the fame of Ammon (1 instance)
17. the father of Lamoni (4 instances)
18. the first year of the judges (1 instance)
19. the flocks of [Ammon / Lamoni / the king / the people] (6 instances)
20. the hands of a more hardened and a more stiffnecked people (1 instance)
21. the hands of God (1 instance)
22. the hearts of the sons (1 instance)
23. the hearts of these my fellow-servants (1 instance)
24. the journeyings of their fathers (1 instance)
25. the king of the land (3 instances)
26. the land of the Lamanites (1 instance)
27. the manner of the Lamanites (1 instance)

being possessed. Of the ninety-six instances of POSSESSIVE *of* in Alma 17–20, all ninety-six are preceded by *the*. That is 100 percent. To see such consistency in a linguistic analysis is shocking. In contrast, the

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28. the minds of the people (1 instance)
 29. the mouth of Ammon (1 instance)
 30. the people of God (1 instance)
 31. the people of Nephi (1 instance)
 32. the power of [their words / Ammon / God] (6 instances)
 33. the practice of these Lamanites (1 instance)
 34. the promises of the Lord (1 instance)
 35. the rebellions of Laman and Lemuel (1 instance)
 36. the records and the holy scriptures of the people (1 instance)
 37. the servants of [Lamoni / the king / my husband] (7 instances)
 38. the strength of [his arm / the Lord] (2 instances)
 39. the sword of Ammon (2 instances)
 40. the thoughts and intents of the heart (1 instance)
 41. the thoughts of Ammon (1 instance)
 42. the thoughts of my heart (1 instance)
 43. the thoughts of the king (1 instance)
 44. the tradition of Lamoni (1 instance)
 45. the traditions of their fathers (2 instances)
 46. the voice of the Lord (1 instance)
 47. the wickedness of these men (1 instance)
 48. the word of Ammon (2 instances)
 49. the word of God (6 instances)
 50. the word of our servants (1 instance)
 51. the words of Ammon (1 instance)
 52. the work of the Lord (1 instance)
 53. the works of the Lord (1 instance)

ABOUT constructions in Alma 17–20:

1. a knowledge of that which is just and true (1 instance)
2. a testimony of the things which they had done (1 instance)
3. the fear of being slain (1 instance)
4. the knowledge of the baseness (1 instance)
5. the knowledge of the truth (3 instances)
6. to know of the plan (1 instance)
7. told them things [. . .] of his righteousness (1 instance)
8. told them things of God (1 instance)

ten instances of ABOUT are quite diverse: Only five have definite noun phrases.

Consider that for a moment. Intuitively, we should expect the more common construction to show more diversity. If the construction that occurs ninety-six times had more variability than the construction that occurs only ten times, we would be forced to consider the possibility that maybe the rarer construction has the same amount of variability but did not occur frequently enough for us to detect it. But what we have here is the opposite case. Four of the ten (40 percent) instances of ABOUT contained indefinite noun phrases.¹⁸ So we might expect nearly forty instances of indefinite phrases in our ninety-six instances of POSSESSIVE, but there are zero. That is a very striking pattern indeed.

In addition to being remarkable from a probabilistic perspective, this pattern has significant implications for our analysis because the phrase we are seeking to disambiguate begins with an indefinite article: “a remarkable vision of her father.” The question then arises—if this is a POSSESSIVE construction, why is it alone in having an indefinite article?

There is the possibility that “a remarkable vision of her father” is, indeed, POSSESSIVE, and it just happens to be the only discourse new POSSESSIVE in Alma 17–20. Perhaps this section of the Book of Mormon just happens to have a lot of discourse-old noun phrases.

This hypothesis is immediately suspect, since Alma 17 is the beginning of the narrator Mormon’s account of the sons of Mosiah. Being the beginning of a story, we would expect this part of the record to have at least some discourse-new material. Even so, we cannot dismiss the hypothesis out of hand because of a subtle pattern that has already been hinted at by the one example we have seen: King Lamoni’s bed. When

18. There are five instances of ABOUT starting with a definite noun phrase and four starting with an indefinite noun phrase. The tenth instance begins with a verb phrase: “that perhaps they might bring them to know of the plan of redemption” (Alma 17:16).

it was first introduced, it was just called "a bed." Later, when the bed is already discourse old, it is called "the bed of her husband." Could it be that POSSESSIVE phrases are generally introduced only after the object has already been mentioned non-possessively? If so, it could be the case that "a remarkable vision of her father" is POSSESSIVE, but it is mentioned so briefly that there is not space to follow the normal pattern.

There does seem to be this kind of pattern in Alma 17–20. For example, when the Lamanite robbers start attacking Ammon, he defends himself by "smiting their arms with **the edge of his sword**" (Alma 17:37). The edge of Ammon's sword has not been mentioned before, but his sword has been: Earlier in that same verse, we read "he smote off their arms with **his sword**." It is interesting that this sword is initially introduced with a possessive pronoun rather than an *of* construction.¹⁹ Just as the sword is discourse old by the time we read about its edge, Ammon is discourse old by the time we read about his sword. Similarly, "the father of Lamoni," which appears four times in Alma 17–20,²⁰ likely uses *the* because Lamoni is discourse old, even if his father is not. This does seem to suggest a pattern.

However, there is one POSSESSIVE instance in Alma 17–20 that solidly shows that inherited discourse status, if it is even a real phenomenon, cannot fully account for the preponderance of definite articles in POSSESSIVE phrases, and it comes in the very last verse of the section: "And, as it happened, it was their lot to have fallen into **the hands of a more hardened and a more stiffnecked people**" (Alma 20:30).

Here "a more hardened and a more stiffnecked people" is discourse new and takes *a* as its article, and yet the POSSESSIVE construction still takes *the*. So it seems the article for the POSSESSIVE phrase does

19. This is true even if we back up to the first mention of swords in the account of the sons of Mosiah: "Nevertheless they departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and took their swords" (Alma 17:7).

20. Alma 18:9, 20:8, 20:9, 20:14

not coordinate with the discourse newness of the possessor. Could it be that POSSESSIVE phrases do, in fact, prefer definite articles? If so, we have a good case for interpreting “a remarkable vision of her father” as an ABOUT instance of *of*.

One possible counterargument is that some noun phrases only make sense with a definite article. Looking again at “the hands of a more hardened and a more stiffnecked people,” it is hard to think of an indefinite rendering. Since *hands* is plural, the indefinite form would have no article at all, and “it was their lot to have fallen into hands of a more hardened . . . people” offends my native speaker intuitions.

This counterargument is strong in this instance, but it’s still insufficient to explain why POSSESSIVE phrases only have definite articles. Consider this passage from Alma 18: “Now it was **the practice of these Lamanites** to stand by the waters of Sebus to scatter the flocks of the people, that thereby they might drive away many that were scattered unto their own land, it being **a practice of plunder** among them” (Alma 18:7).

In the current analysis, “the practice of these Lamanites” is an instance of POSSESSIVE, while “a practice of plunder” is an instance of QUALITY. The curious thing about this passage is that the first (discourse new) instance of *plunder* in this passage takes *the*, while the second (discourse old) instance takes *a*. Presumably, “a practice of plunder” takes an indefinite article because these Lamanites had more than one “practice of plunder,” but that cannot be the full explanation. If it was, we would expect the verse to start “now it was a practice of these Lamanites.” The fact that the word *practice* takes an indefinite article in one part of a sentence and a definite article in another part of the sentence, and that the articles occur in an order opposed to discourse newness, is noteworthy. It suggests that either POSSESSIVE prefers definite noun phrases or QUALITY prefers indefinite noun phrases. We have already seen a lack of indefinite noun phrases with POSSESSIVE—do we see a similar lack of definite noun phrases with QUALITY?

No. In fact, even though Alma 17–20 only has six instances of QUALITY compared to its ninety-six instances of POSSESSIVE, the QUALITY instances show more variety in their articles. We have already seen “a practice of plunder” taking an indefinite article. Elsewhere, “the spirit of prophecy” and “the spirit of revelation” take a definite article.

Since QUALITY seems equally accepting of indefinite and definite articles, the articles in Alma 18:7 suggest POSSESSIVE really does prefer definite articles. Given that “a remarkable vision of her father” is an indefinite noun phrase, it’s unlikely that this is a POSSESSIVE construction. The grammatical patterns suggest that it cannot be. In light of this, rejecting the POSSESSIVE interpretation of “a remarkable vision of her father” is the wisest course of action, which is a strong point in favor of accepting the ABOUT interpretation—assuming that the phrase “on account of” is not somehow affecting the syntax of the phrase.

How Does “on Account of” Function in The Book of Mormon?

The phrase we have been focusing on is “a remarkable vision of her father,” but we should not ignore the fact that this phrase is introduced by “on account of,” which is a NON-COMPOSITIONAL *of* phrase. Oaks observes that “compound prepositions such as ‘in view of’ or ‘on account of’” can be “interpreted as subordinators.”²¹ Could it be that this subordination is affecting the structure of the phrase we’ve been examining?

As mentioned previously, “on account of” functions as a preposition, meaning that “a remarkable vision of her father” is itself embedded within another prepositional phrase: “she having been converted unto the Lord for many years, **on account of** a remarkable vision of her father.” If “a remarkable vision of her father” is POSSESSIVE, we have

21. Oaks, *Structural Ambiguity in English*, 295.

already seen that its structure is markedly different from other POSSESSIVE phrases in Alma 17–20 because of its indefinite noun phrase. Is there a possibility that being embedded in a prepositional phrase would force the POSSESSIVE construction to behave differently? If so, that would undermine the previous argument and once again make the phrase ambiguous.

The verse we have been examining is the only instance of “on account of” in Alma 17–20, so we will need to look at the broader text in order to find instances to examine, though perhaps not as broadly as we would expect. Including the verse in question, there are ten total instances of “on account of” in the Book of Mormon, and all ten of them are in the Book of Alma.²² The list below gives the phrase immediately following “on account of” in each instance:

- their exceeding faith and good works (Alma 13:3)
- their faith (Alma 13:4)

22. While this phrase is unique to the Book of Alma, we cannot conclude that it is unique to Alma himself, since his record concludes at the end of Alma 44, and there is one instance in Alma 53. Still, it would be interesting to analyze the other nine instances of “on account of” to see if they are all from Mormon or if some or all of them come from Alma himself. It is theoretically possible to determine this, given that a wordprint study of the Book of Mormon by Wayne A. Larsen and Alvin C. Rencher found that “the writers of each verse, or partial verse, could be identified according to the information given in the text. We found very little ambiguity as to who wrote what. However, identifying the source of each verse or portion of a verse required careful scrutiny, since authorship or source shifts approximately fifteen hundred times in the text of the Book of Mormon” (162). Sadly, Larsen and Rencher did not provide authorship data for each individual verse, and I am not qualified to achieve their level of scrutiny. If it turns out that “on account of a remarkable vision of her father” came from a different author than the other instances of “on account of” examined here, that could be a potential weakness in the arguments provided here. Wayne A. Larsen and Alvin C. Rencher, “Who Wrote the Book of Mormon? An Analysis of Wordprints,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982).

- the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds (Alma 13:4)
- their exceeding faith and repentance (Alma 13:10)
- his wickedness (Alma 15:3)
- a remarkable vision of her father (Alma 19:16)
- their fear to take up arms against their brethren (Alma 27:23)
- their many murders and their awful wickedness (Alma 27:23)
- their wickedness and abominations and their murders (Alma 37:29)
- some intrigue amongst the Nephites (Alma 53:8)

One striking feature of this is the predominance of possessive phrases. Indeed, at first glance, one might be tempted to suggest “on account of” only accepts possessive phrases, which would be a strong reason to suppose that “a remarkable vision of her father” is POSSESSIVE. However, the final instance—“some intrigue amongst the Nephites”—is not possessive. Thanks to this one passage, we see that “on account of” can introduce non-possessive phrases, which allows us to accept “a remarkable vision of her father” as either ABOUT or POSSESSIVE, but let us focus on the other examples to see if there is any evidence that “on account of” forces syntactic changes to POSSESSIVE phrases. If so, we will have another pattern we can compare “a remarkable vision of her father” to in order to disambiguate it.

The majority of the possessive phrases following “on account of” use possessive pronouns, which are not directly relevant to this study because they do not use *of*. However, the second instance of “on account of” in Alma 13:4 uses two instances of *of* in parallel: “the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds.” This is an especially helpful *of* phrase because it is introduced by the definite article *the*, so if this is a POSSESSIVE phrase, then we can rule out the possibility that “on account of” somehow forces POSSESSIVE phrases to have an indefinite article when they normally prefer definite articles.

But is this a POSSESSIVE phrase? Remember, we have a QUALITY category that is used to indicate a characteristic or distinctive quality or possession, and *hardness* and *blindness* feel like characteristics. Luckily, these categorizations do not have to be based on feel. If we compare the

structure of QUALITY phrases and POSSESSIVE phrases, we see that they are ordered differently:

- POSSESSIVE: the house of the king
- QUALITY: men of a sound understanding

In the POSSESSIVE phrase, the king possesses a house, and in the QUALITY phrase, men possess a sound understanding. However, in the POSSESSIVE phrase, the possession comes before *of* and the possessor comes afterward, while in the QUALITY phrase, the order is reversed: The possessor comes before *of*, and the possession comes afterward.

In “the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds,” *hearts* and *minds* are the possessors, and *hardness* and *blindness* are the possessions. The structure of these phrases is possession-*of*-possessor, which matches the POSSESSIVE structure. Because of this, we can determine that this phrase is POSSESSIVE, and it is yet another instance of a POSSESSIVE phrase being introduced by *the*, so we are maintaining our 100 percent rate of definite articles—even when the phrase is introduced by “on account of.”

We can therefore reject the possibility that “on account of” might force POSSESSIVE phrases to have indefinite articles. Since all other instances of POSSESSIVE constructions in Alma 17–20 have definite articles, the fact that “a remarkable vision of her father” has an indefinite article is a key detail and a strong point in favor of rejecting the POSSESSIVE interpretation. In other words, the patterns inside the text argue against interpreting the phrase as meaning that Abish’s father was the one who had the vision, leaving us to conclude that Abish did in fact have this vision herself.

What Did We Learn?

In Alma 19:16, we read that Abish was converted “on account of a remarkable vision of her father,” which could either mean her father

saw a vision (POSSESSIVE interpretation) or she saw her father in a vision (ABOUT interpretation). We've seen that the POSSESSIVE function is by far the most common function *of* performs in Alma 17–20, so we should not be surprised if readers interpret "a remarkable vision of her father" as a vision Abish's father saw. However, if this is a POSSESSIVE phrase, it is the only one in Alma 17–20 that begins with an indefinite article. All other instances of POSSESSIVE *of* are introduced by *the*, even in contexts where we would expect *a* based on discourse newness, and there is no evidence that this pattern is disrupted by the subordination of "on account of." Therefore, it seems unlikely that "a remarkable vision of her father" is a POSSESSIVE construction, leading us to conclude that it was Abish, not her father, who had the vision.

With that established, we have completed the grammatical exegesis for this verse and provided a foundation for theological exploration. As was mentioned at the outset, many authors have noticed the ambiguity of the phrase we have been examining, and a few have even suggested some theological implications that would arise if it turned out that Abish was the one who had the remarkable vision. But, lacking the grammatical evidence that the ABOUT interpretation was the correct one, these authors have had to treat their insights as mere speculation. With the grammar now disambiguated, these insights can be explored with more confidence. Below are a few brief examples.

First, in her 129-page *Brief Theological Introduction* for the first half of Alma, Kylie Nielson Turley allots ten pages to Abish, exploring her story from a variety of angles. In a section about social justice, Turley observes: "Abish . . . is a low-ranking person in every sense. She is a woman in a book that only names six women. . . . Having been converted 'many years' ago, Abish is probably somewhat older in a society that rarely speaks of the elderly. Perhaps being the queen's servant gives her some status, but she is still a servant. . . ." ²³ Turley's conclusion in

23. Kylie Nielson Turley, *Alma 1–29: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Brigham Young University Neil A. Maxwell Institute, 2020), 118.

this section is that “Abish is of no consequence in all the ways that seem to matter most. But God sees her, and she sees God’s power”²⁴—which is a powerful conclusion to draw from this story. However, her arguments leading up to this conclusion are tripped up by the ambiguity of who had the remarkable vision: “Did Abish see a remarkable vision of her father, which converted her to the Lord? Or did her father see a remarkable vision, which converted her to the Lord? Either way, this woman is a believer.”²⁵ If Turley had been able to confidently state that Abish was the one who had the vision, then instead of observing that God *chose to work through* someone who was unvalued in their society, she could have made the even more powerful theological point that God *chose to give a vision to* someone who was unvalued in their society.

Indeed, there are likely a great many theological points that could be made from the fact that God chose to reveal himself to “a low-ranking person in every sense,” putting Abish among the ranks of Enoch the hated lad, Moses the stutterer, Matthew the tax collector, and Joseph Smith the farmboy, “that the fulness of [the] gospel might be proclaimed by the weak and the simple unto the ends of the world, and before kings and rulers” (D&C 1:23). Abish, who had every reason to feel unremarkable, was given a remarkable vision and then played a key role in the conversion of the royal household she worked in.

To take this even further, Bowen suggests the possibility that the father Abish saw in vision was not her earthly father: “Could Abish’s ‘father’ (‘*āb*’) here constitute a divine or Christological reference? If so, the ‘remarkable’ nature of Abish’s vision would consist in her having seen ‘the Lamb of God, yea even the eternal father’ (1 Nephi 11:21, printer’s manuscript) condescending to the earth to be incarnate as a ‘man,’ just as Lamoni and others saw in Lamoni’s court—the very context

24. Turley, *Alma 1–29*, 123.

25. Turley, *Alma 1–29*, 118.

in which the 'remarkable vision of her father' is mentioned."²⁶ Again, without a solid argument to support the idea of Abish having the vision in the first place, Bowen is forced to give this notion short shrift. Even so, he has highlighted a key difference between the two interpretations of this verse: If Abish's father had the vision, then we have no explicit mention of its content whatsoever, but if Abish had the vision, then we know for certain "her father" was in it. With that fact firmly established, the door is opened for a wide range of theological exploration, regardless of whether Abish saw her father or The Father. And perhaps further textual analysis could suggest which interpretation of "her father" is more likely to be accurate.²⁷

Bowen additionally observes, "If Abish saw a vision of her own earthly father, it would constitute the only vision of a postmortal parent or ancestor in the Book of Mormon."²⁸ In the absence of solid evidence that Abish was the one who saw the vision, Bowen is forced to move on without exploring this much deeper, but if we accept the grammatical

26. Bowen, "Abish, Theophanies, and the First Lamanite Restoration," 62.

27. Turley makes the fascinating suggestion that, since Alma 19:16–17 is written from Abish's perspective, it may have come from an account she herself wrote. Turley's argument is based on the fact that these verses contain "eight words or phrases that are completely unique, two phrases that are not used elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, and eight more phrases that are used in the Book of Mormon but only after Abish's story." Turley, *Alma 1–29*, 119. It would be interesting to see how this number of unique words and phrases compares with other passages of similar length in Alma 17–20, particularly since Alma was not present for any of Ammon's adventures among the Lamanites so must have compiled his narratives from other people's accounts. If the text does indeed suggest that these are Abish's words, that could have interesting implications in the way we choose to interpret the phrase "her father."

28. Bowen, "Abish, Theophanies, and the First Lamanite Restoration," 62.

evidence that Abish had the vision, someone can now study out whether Abish's vision does indeed hold this distinction.²⁹

These are only three examples of the opportunities for theological exploration that are available now that the ambiguity of "a remarkable vision of her father" has been unraveled. Others may well arise. But perhaps the most straightforward theological insight is this: God, who can reveal himself to anyone he chooses, once chose to reveal himself to a Lamanitish servant, so he may well choose to reveal himself to us as well.

29. That being said, I feel obligated to point out that it does not necessarily follow that Abish's father was deceased at the time of her vision—after all, Lehi saw living family members in his vision—but it may be that Bowen has reasons for believing Abish's father was deceased that he didn't share in his paper because it was too far into the realm of speculation.

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