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Atop the Rameumptom

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Atop the Rameumptom

Allen Wyatt

Abstract: *Holy stands come in all shapes and sizes. We need to be careful that we don't unknowingly fashion a Rameumptom that blinds us to the ways in which God works with imperfect people of all eras.*

Alma 31 recounts an interesting story, one with which we are all, no doubt, familiar. Alma and his missionary companions are going to preach to some people in the land of Antionum. The people who gathered in this land are followers of a leader named Zoram, so they dissent from the Nephites and call themselves *Zoramites*. Alma has “received tidings that the Zoramites were perverting the ways of the Lord” (Alma 31:1)¹ and had “fallen into great errors” (Alma 31:9). To compound the problem, “the Nephites greatly feared that the Zoramites would enter into a correspondence with the Lamanites” (Alma 31:4). Clearly, something needed to be done.

Alma knew where such straying from God’s laws could (and inevitably does) lead. So, he assembled a missionary team, rushed to the area, and started poking about. To his “astonishment,” Alma found that the Zoramites had built meeting places (“synagogues”) and that they gathered once a week to worship in a way that had never been seen before (Alma 31:12). In the middle of their meeting places, they had built a high tower that would only hold a single person at a time. One by

1. The Zoramites also had part in the death of Korihor (Alma 30:59). It is possible that the “tidings” received by Alma were conveyed by those who bore news of Korihor’s death in the land of Antionum. See Godfrey J. Ellis, “The Rise and Fall of Korihor, a Zoramite: A New Look at the Failed Mission of an Agent of Zoram,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 48 (2021): 74–77, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-rise-and-fall-of-korihor-a-zoramite-a-new-look-at-the-failed-mission-of-an-agent-of-zoram.

one, people would climb to the top of the tower and each offer the exact same prayer, in a loud voice:

Holy, holy God; we believe that thou art God, and we believe that thou art holy, and that thou wast a spirit, and that thou art a spirit, and that thou wilt be a spirit forever.

Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren, which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers; but we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children; and also thou hast made it known unto us that there shall be no Christ.

But thou art the same yesterday, today, and forever; and thou hast elected us that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee; and we also thank thee that thou hast elected us, that we may not be led away after the foolish traditions of our brethren, which doth bind them down to a belief of Christ, which doth lead their hearts to wander far from thee, our God.

And again we thank thee, O God, that we are a chosen and a holy people. Amen. (Alma 31:15–18)

This tower on which the prayer was offered was called by the people *Rameumptom*, meaning *holy stand* (Alma 31:21).² Alma saw the prayer as evidence of one thing: pride (see Alma 31:24–25). In fact, the Zoramite incident has been used when teaching people about the perils of pride.³

Pride is, of course, a common vice — so common, in fact, that it is considered one of the seven deadly sins, sometimes under the synonym *hubris*. Many also consider it the deadliest of sins, as voiced by C. S. Lewis:

The essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites

2. For the Hebrew roots of the term *Rameumptom*, see the *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*, s.v. *Rameumptom*, onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php?title=RAM_EUMPTOM.

3. See, for example, Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Pride and the Priesthood,” *Ensign* (November 2010), 55–58. “Pride is the great sin of self-elevation. It is for so many a personal *Rameumptom*, a holy stand that justifies envy, greed, and vanity” (p. 56).

in comparison. It was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind.⁴

When it comes to pride, Alma's story about the Zoramites is instructive because we, as humans, also have a tendency to unthinkingly climb upon our own Rameumptoms. We may not believe that we do; we attend Church, we help the poor, we organize the PTA bake sale. We even watch numerous *Come, Follow Me* videos and endless hours of *Music and the Spoken Word*. We are, in a word, good people.

We certainly don't look down upon the people we see around us from a lofty perch on a tower as did the Zoramites. We know that to do so could be seen as uncharitable, lacking empathy, or intolerant. We do, however, easily and freely look down upon those who are no longer with us.

The Rameumptom of which I speak is temporal in nature. From our position at the apex of time, we look back upon people in bygone generations and thank God that we are not like them. We see ourselves as enlightened, as somehow smarter and "better off" than those who came before.

There are any number of subjects that cause us to climb our temporal Rameumptoms and claim our "election" as God's "holy children" because we "do not believe in the traditions . . . handed down" by the "childishness of [our] fathers" (see Alma 31:16). Subjects such as racism, sexism, imperialism, ageism, materialism, and classism are sample touchstones for making the climb and proclaiming our own prayer of thanks in a loud voice.

Judgments made from our Rameumptoms cause us to condemn those in the past to lives of error and wrong. We are grateful that we are not "led away after the foolish traditions of our brethren . . . which doth lead their hearts to wander far from thee, our God" (Alma 31:17). The assumption, of course, is that "our God" would never allow such thinking among his people — and especially his leaders — as what is exemplified in the words or acts of previous generations.

I can understand having difficulties when statements made by those in past generations don't fare well when measured against the standards of today. Plenty (as in tens of thousands) of such statements

4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 94, punctuation normalized, archive.org/details/merechristianity0000unse_q8b8/page/94/mode/2up.

could be found. They can be found penned in letters, preached over the pulpit, codified in official pronouncements, uttered in the Church, pontificated in the halls of Congress, and proclaimed by kings. They were ubiquitous. We damn people whom we've never met for having the temerity to make such statements and believe such things. From our temporal Rameumptoms, we thank God that we are better than that.

I often think of one of my grandfathers, born in 1903. He was raised far back in the hills of Tennessee but, by the time he was twenty, went north to find work. He died when I was forty-four years old, and I had many years to be with him, listen to him, learn of him, and learn from him. I knew of the world in which he was reared because he took the time to explain it to me. I walked with him in his old childhood haunts. I knew that in his Tennessee county, the northern portion sided with the Union during the Civil War and the southern portion sided with the Confederacy. (One of my ancestors with the surname Flynn, alive and active during the Civil War, even named a son, born in 1862, Abraham Lincoln Flynn. This was a gutsy and dangerous act in Tennessee during that period.) In other words, I know the background of my grandfather and his family.

I knew that my grandfather would, at times, refer to Blacks using the same language that his Tennessee contemporaries would use. I also knew that he didn't have any animosity in the least toward Blacks. His words were just "how it was done at the time." (This was driven home to me when I would visit Tennessee with him and observe the interaction between him, his siblings and cousins, and the other townspeople.)

Of course, it isn't done that way anymore. I knew that well before he died. No doubt many today would judge him a racist because of his past word choices. But I knew him, and he wasn't racist—except by the standards of a later day.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not justifying the words of my grandfather or any other historical person. To justify them would be the flip side of the coin played by those on their temporal Rameumptoms. The words spoken by those of earlier days need neither justification nor condemnation, for to do either is to judge. To judge accurately—dare I say, "to judge righteously"—we must come down from our Rameumptoms and use the standards of *those* days, not the standards of today.

It seems that, perhaps, a teaching of Jesus may be appropriate to mention here:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment

you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. (ESV Matthew 7:1–2)

This teaching doesn't forbid all judgments at all times. One must make judgments, for instance, on when it is safe to cross the street, which apartment to rent, what food to eat, what career to pursue, or to whom we should trust our children. We should, however, not judge the motives or intents of others when we cannot see their hearts. This is doubly true when we claim the approbation of God for ourselves and deny that approbation to others—we judge that we are worthy of God's favor, but those who lived before us were not. Jesus teaches that we will be judged for such judgments and the measure we used in our judging will be used to judge us.

In scholarly terms, we don't use the term *Rameumptom* to describe this human tendency to justify our enlightenment and harshly judge those of earlier times. Instead, the name that is most often affixed is *presentism*—the tendency to judge those of different eras by the standards of our day. We mistakenly assume that people of all eras should be judged by the standards by which we have chosen to live. Lynn Hunt, past president of the American Historical Association, makes the point:

Presentism, at its worst, encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation. Interpreting the past in terms of present concerns usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior. . . . Our forbears constantly fail to measure up to our present-day standards.⁵

Hunt's words were directed toward those who sought to evaluate the past, toward actual and aspiring historians. But presentism is something that can afflict anyone, professional or not. There is no credential check when climbing our temporal Rameumptoms. We can easily believe that anything that went before is of lower value and the result of ignorance or "wrong thinking." We believe that the standards we now follow are self-evident, singularly virtuous, and blessed by God because, in the mis-applied logic of the Zoramites, he "is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

5. Lynn Hunt, "Against Presentism," *Perspectives* 40, no. 5 (May 2002): 8, historians.org/perspectives-article/against-presentism-may-2002/. See also Paul Bartow, "The Growing Threat of Historical Presentism," American Enterprise Institute, 10 December 2015, aei.org/society-and-culture/the-growing-threat-of-historical-presentism/.

In other words, we climb our individual and collective temporal Rameumptoms and thank God we now know better and we aren't like those poor, benighted souls in times gone by. We sit atop our throne at the summit of human progress, smugly complacent in the knowledge that we are better than all who came before.

Except we aren't.

We are still human and, therefore, prone to human weaknesses. In time, we will climb our Rameumptom for the last time and eventually be replaced by someone of a future generation. Those who replace us, from their own finely fashioned holy stand, will likely judge us with the same harsh judgment we currently mete out—"with the measure you use it will be measured to you."

In climbing the tower, we jettison charity and, consciously or not, cloak ourselves in pride. Our own temporal Rameumptoms are symptomatic of destructive personal pride just as surely as the physical Rameumptoms were for the Zoramites. To return to the words of C. S. Lewis, consider this, with only slight revision from the original:

How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I am afraid it means they are worshiping an imaginary God. They theoretically admit themselves to be nothing in the presence of this phantom God, but they are really all the time imagining how He approves of them and thinks them far better than [those who came before]. That is, they pay a pennyworth of imaginary humility to Him and get out of it a pound's worth of pride towards [those of bygone eras].⁶

Lewis would have agreed with Alma's evaluation of the spiritual condition of the Zoramites. We are not better than others and, to the point, we are not better than those of the past.

I have no doubt that some who are reading this may not believe in the historicity of the Book of Mormon and thereby can easily dismiss the Alma 31 story of the Rameumptom. Alma never lived, the tower never existed, and the Zoramites and Nephites were never real people. Case closed, move on, there is nothing to see here. If that occurs, then the reader is missing the point. Presentism—whether

6. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 96, punctuation normalized. The "slight revision" is to alter the focus from contemporaries of the prideful to the forbears of the prideful.

practiced on a Rameumptom, behind a keyboard, or around a dinner table—is a human condition. It is part and parcel of the human experience, regardless of our religious affiliation or non-affiliation. Even if one believes that the Zoramites were never human, the believer of that belief *is* human and, thus, subject to human conditions.

As you study the scriptures—any of them, up to and including the Doctrine and Covenants—remember that they are a record of God’s dealings with people of the past, and those past people should not be judged by our current sensibilities. When a friend tries to educate you on the “obvious moral turpitude” of early Church leaders, don’t let pride and umbrage blind you to the fact that God has, without fail, worked with nothing but imperfect humans. When you run across an article from the *Journal of Discourses* that doesn’t seem to stand up well to the harsh light of today’s presumed moral superiority, step back and apply a little charity.

The past, after all, is a foreign country.⁷ Isn’t it time we climb down from our temporal Rameumptoms and enjoy that country on its own terms?



Allen Wyatt *has been working in the computer and publishing industries for over four decades. He has written more than sixty books explaining many facets of working with computers, as well as numerous magazine articles. He has been publishing free weekly newsletters about Microsoft Word and Excel since 1997. Allen has also helped educate thousands of individuals through seminars, lectures, and online video courses. He has served as a vice president of FAIR, founding president of the More Good Foundation, and is currently a vice president of The Interpreter Foundation. He has written articles for the FARMS Review, Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship, and various online venues, including Meridian Magazine. In the Church he has served in many ward, stake, region, and area callings. He lives in southwest Wyoming with his wife and takes great joy in his three children and nine grandchildren.*

7. “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 3, archive.org/details/gobetween00hart/page/n13/mode/2up.

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