Close study of Nephi has brought us only halfway to the possibility of assessing what it means to read the Book of Mormon typologically, to read the Book of Mormon as the Book of Mormon itself suggests it should be read. In order to set off Nephi’s approach to typology, it is necessary to look just as carefully at Abinadi’s approach. At the heart of Abinadi’s encounter with Noah’s priests lies not only a typological theory but also a question of Isaianic interpretation. The larger importance of that encounter, though, predictably emerges only through analysis of its textual setting. The present chapter will be given entirely to exegesis, while chapter 5 will deal with Abinadi’s distinct notion of typology and its complex relationship to Isaiah.

Nephi’s massive record is obviously a different kind of text from Abinadi’s isolable, relatively short speech. Exegesis of the former primarily involved structural analysis, focused on drawing out the contexts of and relationships between distinct discussions of typology positioned within Nephi’s larger engagement with the book of Isaiah. Because Abinadi’s speech is much shorter, its internal structure much simpler, its discussion of typology more direct, and its engagement with Isaiah more familiar, my exegesis will focus more on the stakes of the Abinadi episode within Mormon’s larger record than on the structure of the text itself.

What follows in the present chapter, then, is first a series of attempts to situate Abinadi’s discussion of Isaiah within the Book of Mormon as a whole.
First, I consider the structure of Mormon’s larger editorial project, guided by connections between Abinadi’s words in Mosiah and Christ’s teachings in Third Nephi, particularly a shared interest in Isaiah 52:7–10. Second, I clarify both the historical setting of the Abinadi narrative and the basic structure of Mosiah. Finally, I take up the important, unexplored relationship between Abinadi’s speech and the book of Jacob (from the small plates), a relationship that will shed important light on the status of Abinadi’s encounter with Noah’s priests. Following these three attempts to situate Abinadi within the Book of Mormon, I offer a few words on the internal structure of Abinadi’s speech itself, mostly by way of transition to the more theological considerations of chapter 5.

**Mormon’s Project: Contentions and Disputations**

After Nephi’s near obsession with Isaiah in the small plates, readers can be baffled (and, all too often, relieved) to find that Isaiah effectively disappears from the Book of Mormon after the small plates—baffles, that is, until Jesus Christ himself, during his Third Nephi visit to the Lehites, initiates a return to Isaiah. There, Isaiah returns with a vengeance, with Christ going so far as to command his listeners to “search these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1). The respite from Isaiah in Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman, as well as the sudden return to Isaiah in Third Nephi, deserves critical attention. What is behind this Isaianic lacuna?

Crucially, Abinadi is the last figure to take up Isaiah before the apparent lapse in interest. Moreover, when Christ returns to Isaiah in Third Nephi, he takes up first the very text Abinadi last commented on—namely, Isaiah 52. When Noah’s priests question him during his trial in Mosiah 12, Abinadi is burdened with the task of interpreting Isaiah 52:7–10. Then, Christ, at the end of his first discourse and through the whole of his second discourse in Third Nephi, interprets Isaiah 52:7–15. Abinadi and Christ both concern themselves with the same Isaianic text, though the former takes chapter 53 of Isaiah as the key for interpreting that text, while the latter takes chapter 54 of Isaiah as the key.

This common interest in Isaiah 52 is one in a whole series of connections between Abinadi’s speech and Christ’s teachings. From the very beginning of his words to the Lehites, it appears that Christ makes two subtle references to Abinadi. First, his initial point of instruction in Third Nephi concerns
baptism—an ordinance that seems to have been introduced to the Nephites only by Alma the Elder and precisely in fidelity to the teachings of Abinadi. That the “Abinadite baptism” had to be replaced by a “Christian baptism” is certainly of some significance. Second, Christ’s second point of instruction concerns what he calls “the points of my doctrine” (3 Nephi 11:28)—points of doctrine he immediately clarifies as concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son (3 Nephi 11:32). As every reader of the Book of Mormon knows, any dispute over the relationship between the Father and the Son was likely to have been generated by Abinadi’s difficult doctrinal discussion in Mosiah 15.

But determining the significance of these allusions is difficult. Why does the visiting Christ focus so heavily on questions connected to Abinadi’s discourse and influence, to the “Abinadite institution”? It is my contention that the simplest way to make sense of the “disputations” Christ identifies—disputations that have as much to do with the practice of baptism as with doctrines concerning the Godhead—is to suggest that there had been in the Nephite ecclesiastical tradition a “Nephi faction” and an “Abinadi faction.” Abinadi was not the only one who had spoken on the question of the Godhead, nor was he the only one who had outlined or inspired a baptismal tradition. Nephi, in the small plates, assumed both of these otherwise distinctively Abinadite tasks. And crucially, Nephi’s and Abinadi’s teachings on both baptism and the Godhead are distinct, if not at odds. Nephi thoroughly intertwines his doctrine of the Godhead with his understanding of baptism (in 2 Nephi 31)—from which one might conclude that Abinadi’s doctrine of the Godhead came to be intertwined with Alma’s Abinadite institution of baptism. At any rate, it requires little imagination to picture the Nephites contending over whether Nephi or Abinadi was right about both the doctrinal basis and the practical execution of baptism.

Latter-day Saints have long recognized that 3 Nephi 11, with its reinstitution of baptism, calls for explanation. The Nephites had been practicing some kind of Christian baptism for two centuries, but Christ dismisses that longstanding practice by authorizing and commanding his Lehite disciples to baptize in a new way. The standard explanation, expressed by Joseph McConkie and Robert Millet, posits that though previously administered baptisms were indeed valid (that is, performed under appropriate priesthood authority), a “new gospel dispensation” called for a readministration of the ordinances. As helpful as this interpretation is, and as generally agreed upon
as it has become, it makes little sense of the text. That Christ introduces his “new” order of baptism within the context of settling longstanding disputes suggests that a real difficulty concerning baptism had been circulating since Alma’s founding of the Nephite church at the waters of Mormon. Another possibility, then, is that the “rebaptisms” of Third Nephi mark a return from the Abinadite practice to that outlined earlier by Nephi. 5

This question of rebaptism is tied up with another much-commented-on “problem” of the Book of Mormon. How did Alma the Elder receive the “authority” to perform baptisms in the first place? Because no ordination is mentioned, and especially because the text suggests that Alma simply received authorization to baptize through prayer immediately before performing the ordinance, there has long been debate about the source of Alma’s authority. But if Alma’s baptisms were, as the text suggests, authorized by the Spirit (rather than by the priesthood strictly speaking), it would seem that Alma introduced a second understanding of baptism, one supplementing that of Nephi and Jacob. While Nephi’s and Jacob’s understandings of the ordinance called for priesthood authority—Jacob was, after all, a Nephite priest—Alma’s notion of baptism, perhaps, did not.

So far, in dealing with these “problems” in the Book of Mormon, I have only been exploring possibilities. I do not intend to argue for any particular approach to the difficulties. 6 I want only to highlight possibilities opened by giving due weight to Christ’s indication that there had been contentions about baptism and the Godhead, the most crucial of which is that the Nephites may have harbored two related but rival ritual and theological traditions, one associated with Nephi and one associated with Abinadi. Most important for my purposes is the possibility that the Lehites saw Abinadi’s teachings as having marked a turning point in Nephite theological thinking. Because Abinadi seems to have been at the bottom of a number of theological innovations and diversions in the years between his martyrdom and the visit of Christ—innovations and diversions that mark his distance specifically from the ideas of Nephi—there is reason at least to explore the possibility that it was similarly Abinadi’s teachings that effected the shift in (or away from) Nephite thinking about Isaiah.

At any rate, Third Nephi may form the climax of the Book of Mormon for more reasons than that it marks the visit of Christ to the Americas. Third Nephi seems to mark also the reconciliation—or at least the working out—of two parallel and perhaps rival theological traditions. Part of Christ’s
task, during his visit, appears to have been to heal what had been perceived for two centuries as a rift between Nephi and Abinadi, what readers of the Book of Mormon might see as a rift between the small and large plates. Importantly, this understanding of Christ’s task in Third Nephi allows for a preliminary structuration of Mormon’s larger editorial project, which can be diagrammed in two distinct ways:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nephi’s Writings (1, 2 Nephi):</th>
<th>Abinadi’s Speech (Mosiah):</th>
<th>Christ’s Teachings (3 Nephi):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; (2) Likened Isaiah</td>
<td>(1) Christ’s nature as dual; (2) An alternate Isaiah</td>
<td>(1) The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; (2) Likened Isaiah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To put a finer point on this interpretation of the clearly crucial role of Abinadi—and of the whole book of Mosiah—in the larger Book of Mormon project, it is necessary to ask about everything this preliminary structuration ignores. What of the remainder of the small plates—Jacob through Omni? What of Alma and Helaman (as well as the last chapters of Mosiah and the first chapters of Third Nephi)? What of Fourth Nephi and Mormon? And what of Moroni’s contributions to the volume? All these questions call for
attention, and answers to them will help to clarify the stakes of Mosiah, and particularly of the Abinadi episode.

**Mormon’s Project: The Rest of the Book of Mormon**

Quite as crucial as Third Nephi’s intervention in the Nephi/Abinadi entanglement is its essentially apocalyptic role in Nephite history. Arguably, *everything* in Mormon’s narrative anticipates the events of that book. There are, though, two distinct ways this anticipation unfolds in the Book of Mormon. On the one hand, of course, the visit of Christ marks the fulfillment of centuries of Nephite preaching. In this first sense, Third Nephi is a culmination because it realizes every positive Nephite yearning. On the other hand, though, Third Nephi tells the story of the horrific destructions that immediately preceded Christ’s visit. In this second sense, Third Nephi is a culmination because it brings the long, negative process of Nephite political deterioration to its end. Third Nephi thus realizes every negative Nephite *fear* as much as every positive Nephite *hope*.

This double culmination—positive and negative—makes Third Nephi apocalyptic. And, importantly, this double culmination is set in motion by a double inauguration in Mosiah. Every hope as well as every fear realized in Third Nephi initially entered the Nephite consciousness in the events recorded in Mosiah. In particular, this double trajectory leading from Mosiah to Third Nephi begins with the event of Abinadi’s speech.

The first trajectory—that of Nephite preaching—clearly begins with Alma’s organization of the Nephite church after Abinadi’s martyrdom. From that initial point in Mosiah 18, Mormon’s story traces the ups and downs of Nephite preaching through Alma and Helaman to its culmination in Third Nephi. Importantly, Mormon highlights the continuity of this preaching by rooting it in an unbroken dynastic line of high priests responsible for the church through the whole period leading up to the coming of Christ. This dynasty acquires priestly “power” only through the strange circumstances recounted in the second half of Mosiah. Before Mosiah grants complete ecclesiastical jurisdiction to Alma the Elder—and before he awards the newly founded chief judgeship to Alma the Younger—Alma’s family was anything but central to the Nephite story in Zarahemla. But, once appointed
to positions of authority, Alma and his descendants quickly replace the centuries-old Nephite royal dynasty.

Moreover, the basic story of dynastic succession among Alma’s descendants seems to have guided the structure of Mormon’s history. The four books that trace the progress of Nephite preaching from its founding to its culmination with the visit of Christ—the books of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and Third Nephi—read as stories of a particular succession: (1) from the royal lineage of Mosiah to Alma; (2) from Alma to Helaman; (3) from Helaman to Nephi; and (4) from Nephi to Christ himself.

Of course, while each book in Mormon’s history recounts a particular succession, each break between books also marks a succession. At the same time, Mormon softens the impact of these breaks by having all cross-book successions be those in which the successor shares his name with his father: (1) the break between Mosiah and Alma marks the succession from Alma to Alma; (2) the break between Alma and Helaman marks the succession from Helaman to Helaman; and (3) the break between Helaman and Third Nephi marks the succession from Nephi to Nephi.

That Mormon highlights dynastic continuity even at points of historical transition makes clear his interest in maintaining the essential progression of the trajectory of Christian preaching that underlies his history.
This first trajectory of continuous Nephite preaching is, however, coupled with a second trajectory—that, namely, of the progressive political collapse of the Nephite state. This second trajectory, like the first, takes its bearings from Mosiah 18, where the narrator emphasizes the possibility of understanding Alma’s Abinadite church as politically revolutionary. I will justify this interpretation later. For the moment, it is only necessary to recognize that the initiation of Nephite preaching cannot be separated from the beginning of the collapse of the centuries-old Nephite state—just as the culmination of Nephite Christian anticipation cannot be disentangled from the culmination of Nephite political deterioration.

As with the first trajectory, the points of the second trajectory are tied to the basic structure of Mormon’s history. But whereas the story of Christian preaching is a story of essential continuity, the story of Nephite political dissolution is clearly marked by political crises and reversals. The largest and most crucial of these crises are, interestingly, always located at the breaks between historical books (that is, at the moment of the strongest indications of continuity in the first trajectory): (1) the dismantling of the Nephite monarchy (both the lines of Mosiah and Zeniff) and the organization of the system of judges marks the transition from Mosiah to Alma; (2) the effective dissolution of the system of judges and the rise of the Gadianton robbers marks the transition from Alma to Helaman; and (3) the dissolution of the Gadianton robbers and the complete collapse of Nephite politics marks the transition from Helaman to Third Nephi:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mosiah</th>
<th>Alma</th>
<th>Helaman</th>
<th>Third Nephi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The reign of the kings</td>
<td>The reign of the judges</td>
<td>The reign of the Gadiantons</td>
<td>Complete dissolution of state power</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That these major breaks in Nephite political history take place at the transitions from one book to another makes clear that, in Mormon’s history, each book is meant in part (1) to recount the establishment of a political system, (2) to trace the process through which that system’s internal problems
emerge, and (3) to detail the essential collapse of that particular system. And, importantly, whatever system of government replaces its failed predecessor is always weaker or more fragmented, from the perspective of the state, than what went before it—until, that is, the state completely collapses in the first chapters of Third Nephi.\textsuperscript{10}

Two trajectories, then, but what must not be missed is the way the two trajectories are actually one and the same—the way, that is, each trajectory is ultimately just the reverse side of the other. It seems to have been the establishment of the church and its preaching that set the dissolution of the state in motion, and it is arguably the continuity of that preaching that consistently pushes the state toward collapse. How and why it does so will be explored in the sections that follow. For the moment, though, the double trajectory of Mormon’s history might be worked into a single diagram:

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
  \node (mosiah) at (0,0) {Mosiah};
  \node (alma) at (2,0) {Alma};
  \node (helaman) at (4,0) {Helaman};
  \node (thirdnephi) at (6,0) {Third Nephi};

  \draw[-latex] (mosiah) to [bend left=10] node [midway, above] {The reign of the kings} (alma);
  \draw[-latex] (alma) to [bend left=10] node [midway, above] {The reign of the judges} (helaman);
  \draw[-latex] (helaman) to [bend left=10] node [midway, above] {The reign of the Gadiantons} (thirdnephi);
  \draw[-latex] (thirdnephi) to [bend left=10] node [midway, above] {Complete dissolution of state power} (mosiah);

  \node at (1,-1) {Mosiah\textsubscript{1}/Alma\textsubscript{1}};
  \node at (3,-1) {Alma\textsubscript{1}/Helaman\textsubscript{1}};
  \node at (5,-1) {Helaman\textsubscript{1}/Nephi\textsubscript{1}};
  \node at (7,-1) {Nephi\textsubscript{1}/Christ};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

In essence, each of Mormon’s four historical books tells the story of a priestly succession that both sustains the basic continuity of Nephite preaching but presses forward the essential fragmentation of the Nephite state; and each of the breaks between these books tells the story of a break in the dissolution of the Nephite state even as it marks the unbroken succession of the Nephite priestly dynasty.

If these comments do justice to Alma and Helaman, what remains to be said of what follows Third Nephi and, apart from Nephi’s record, precedes Mosiah? I will address the as-yet-untreated parts of the small plates later in
this chapter. As for the rest, it is perhaps best to deal with it summarily. In light of what I have just said about Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and Third Nephi, it seems best to understand Fourth Nephi and Mormon to be an epilogue to Mormon’s overarching project. And, so far as Moroni’s contributions go, they are concerned with details so foreign to Mormon’s immediate concerns that I will simply excuse myself from commenting on them. At any rate, it seems clear that, for Mormon, Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and Third Nephi were most central to his project.

The Book of Mosiah:
The Context of the Abinadi Episode

A few attempts have been made to discover a basic structure in Mosiah, the most productive of which is Gary Sturgess’s “The Book of Mosiah: Thoughts about Its Structure, Purposes, Themes, and Authorship.” Pointing to the obvious antithesis between King Benjamin and King Noah—as also to the abandonment of monarchy at the end of the book—Sturgess suggests that the book forms “a loosely chiastic structure built around the three great royal ceremonies of King Mosiah in 124, 121, and 92 or 91 B.C.” But commentators generally—Sturgess included—tend to ignore the larger importance of Alma’s church in Nephite history, as well as in Mosiah more narrowly. Here, then, I will start from the question of, not the Nephite monarchy, but the Nephite church in Mosiah. But because Alma’s church is clearly founded in direct fidelity to Abinadi’s words, the following analysis of Mosiah takes its bearings primarily from the Abinadi episode. Of course, sorting out Abinadi’s place in Mosiah—structurally or historico-politically—is hard work. I will first address the historical circumstances surrounding the Abinadi episode, so that all the relevant details are on the table from the start. Building on that foundation, I will then attempt to sort out the textual structure of Mosiah.

The Abinadi story is woven into the intricate history of the land of Nephi. That story began shortly after the death of Lehi, essentially at the beginning of Nephite history. To avoid further conflicts with Laman and Lemuel, Nephi was told to “depart from them and flee into the wilderness” (2 Nephi 5:5). Traveling into the mountains from their original settlement, the newly separated Nephites established the land of Nephi as a permanent settlement. Some three and half centuries of increasing apostasy ensued, until a man named Mosiah was, as Nephi had been before, “warned of the
Lord that he should flee out of the land,” since destruction had become imminent (Omni 1:12). Leaving this second “land of their inheritance,” Mosiah and his followers came down out of the mountains into an already populated valley to the north—the land of Zarahemla—where Mosiah soon became king over both the Nephites and the already-settled people of Zarahemla. In the meanwhile, the promised destruction came to the land of Nephi, apparently in the shape of a Lamanite conquest. By the time of Benjamin’s accession to the throne (only a few years before Abinadi’s speech), the Nephites were established in the valley of Zarahemla and in the mountainous land of Nephi.

Textual clues (see Omni 1:24, 27–30; Words of Mormon 1:12–18) suggest that Nephite control of power in Zarahemla was at first insecure. But King Benjamin eventually established a political unification—a Nephite/Zarahemlaite fusion that laid the foundation for two hundred years of Lehite history. Uniting the Nephites and the people of Zarahemla, Benjamin came to wield the military strength to “drive [the Lamanites] out of the land of Zarahemla” when they tried to claim the valley as well as the mountains (Omni 1:24). Benjamin’s victory against the Lamanites—associated on the one hand with his political unification and on the other hand with his retrenchment of Nephite religion (see Words of Mormon 1:15–18) and followed by his marvelous speech—led to the longest season of peace in pre-Fourth Nephi history.
Apparently taking advantage of peacetime, a group of Nephites announced their intention to return to the land of Nephi in hopes of again “possess[ing] the land of their inheritance” (Omni 1:27). Their purposes at first appear to have been violent. They hoped, it seems, to reclaim their lands by force. Allowed to do so by Benjamin, the group traveled up into Lamanite territory and sent out spies to “spy out their forces, that [their] army might come upon them and destroy them” (Mosiah 9:1). One of these spies, Zeniff by name—chosen for the job because he had “a knowledge of the land of Nephi, or of the land of our fathers’ first inheritance” (Mosiah 9:1)—upset plans when he “saw that which was good among [the Lamanites]” and so became “desirous that they should not be destroyed” (Mosiah 9:1).  

Zeniff’s pacifistic report to his “blood-thirsty” commander caused a violent contention, in which “father fought against father, and brother against brother, until the greater number of [their] army was destroyed in the wilderness” (Mosiah 9:2). The survivors—Zeniff among them—returned to Zarahemla, but Zeniff seems to have become convinced that, because of the goodness he had seen among the Lamanites, the Nephites’ lands could be reclaimed peacefully. He assembled a group of followers, and they again traveled up into Lamanite territory. Once there, Zeniff worked out an arrangement with the Lamanite king, and his people settled in the city of Lehi-Nephi. (The king actually removed Lamanites from the city to make
this settlement happen.) Though he would soon enough claim that “it was the cunning and the craftiness of king Laman, to bring my people into bondage, that he yielded up the land that we might possess it” (Mosiah 9:10), in the meanwhile Zeniff seems to have believed he had, in reclaiming the land of Nephi, effectively restored the “original” Nephite kingdom.

With Zeniff’s kingdom established in Lehi-Nephi, the Nephite regime was divided between two kingdoms, one in Nephi, and one in Zarahemla. But while Zarahemla continued in peace (Mosiah inherited from Benjamin a kingdom quite prepared to follow him), things in Lehi-Nephi quickly deteriorated. Zeniff’s successor Noah used his royal prerogatives to turn his followers into an idolatrous and effectively enslaved people. It was into this situation that Abinadi came with his message.

Abinadi’s words would have been without effect had there not been present the one sympathetic listener he found in Noah’s court—Alma. Because he was one of Noah’s royal priests, Alma nearly lost his life for defending Abinadi. After escaping from Noah’s servants and going into hiding, Alma began secretly to spread Abinadi’s teachings, soon founding a church in the
The Nephite kingdom is reunited as the groups return to Zarahemla.

If the story is complex, the way it is organized in Mosiah—as a series of flashbacks and flashforwards—is more so. But the book might be outlined as follows:

Part I: In Zarahemla
   Chapters 1–6: Benjamin’s coronation of Mosiah
   Chapters 7–8: The envoy to Lehi-Nephi

Part II: In Lehi-Nephi
   Chapters 9–10: The reign of Zeniff

forest at the border of Noah’s kingdom, and eventually taking the whole church into exile to escape Noah’s army. Abinadi was in the meanwhile put to death by Noah and his priests, but soon Noah’s people grew tired of Noah’s excesses, such that he in turn was killed, while his corrupt priests escaped into the wilderness. Limhi, Noah’s son, reluctantly assumed the throne only to become soon thereafter a vassal king under harsh Lamanite rule. At the height of despair, Limhi’s people were joined by an unsolicited relief company from Zarahemla who helped them to escape the land of Nephi and to return to Zarahemla. Alma’s people also eventually found their way back to Zarahemla, where Alma’s church flourished, though this flourishing led inexorably to a major restructuring of Nephite government—the first major step in the dissolution of the Nephite state.

The Book of Mosiah: Alma and Abinadi
Typology for Abinadi: Exegesis

Chapters 11–17: Abinadi’s speech
Chapters 18: The formation of the church
Chapters 19–20: From Noah to Limhi

Part III: Back to Zarahemla
Chapters 21–22: Limhi’s return to Zarahemla
Chapters 23–24: Alma’s return to Zarahemla

Part IV: Of the Church
Chapters 25–29: The dissolution of the kingdom

Is there, though, any order behind this basic list? I believe it is possible to detect a basic chiastic structure at work here—one that Mormon could only set up by dechronologizing the events in Mosiah:

Establishment of the kingdom (Mosiah’s coronation)
On the road (from Zarahemla to Lehi-Nephi)
Zeniiff’s reign (wars and contentions)
Abinadi’s speech
Alma’s formation of the church
Limhi’s reign (wars and contentions)
On the road (from Lehi-Nephi to Zarahemla)
Dissolution of the kingdom (establishment of the judges)

Thus, Mosiah seems to trace a road from the establishment to (only a few years later) the thorough dissolution of the kingdom under Mosiah. Paving this road is an entanglement between peaceful Zarahemla and turbulent Lehi-Nephi, at the heart of which lies Abinadi’s encounter with Noah’s priests and Alma’s faithful establishment of the Abinadite church.

Abinadi and Alma are entangled not only narratively and structurally, but also textually. The narrative explicitly states that Alma reconstructed Abinadi’s words. After he pled on Abinadi’s behalf and so had to go into hiding to save his life, Alma assumed the responsibility to “write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:4). Presumably, it was Alma’s definitive account that Mormon employed, not only because it would have been the most authoritative account, but also because it would likely have been the only favorable account. The Abinadi of Mosiah 11–17 is, in the end, Alma’s Abinadi.19

It appears that Mosiah should be read as the story of how the ecclesiastical entanglement between Abinadi and Alma in the land of Nephi came to alter the status of the monarchical state in the land of Zarahemla. In other words, the book is heavily political because Abinadi’s speech led to the
An Other Testament

founding of a church that came quickly into conflict with the Nephite state and so eventually led to its dissolution. Actually, this conflict between the Nephite monarchy and the Abinadite church takes two distinct shapes in the narrative. A first period of conflict occurs right in Mosiah 18, at the time of the church’s founding. Here, though, the conflict is between the Abinadite church and the monarchy in the land of Nephi under Noah. In this first period of conflict, it almost appears as if the church was organized for specifically political ends—that questioning the state was part of the church’s essential program (see Mosiah 23:6–16). Abinadi’s original prophetic announcements have a clearly seditious nature (see Mosiah 12:10–12) and Noah’s first reaction to the discovery of Alma’s church is to assume that a political coup is being organized (see Mosiah 18:33).

The second period of conflict unfolds only after the monarchy in the land of Nephi ceases to exist—the whole kingdom having abandoned their lands and returned to Zarahemla—and Alma’s church/people find their way also to Zarahemla. In this second period, the conflict is between the Abinadite church and the monarchy in Zarahemla under Mosiah. Because of Mosiah’s official support of the church and its expansion, however, this second period of conflict is much friendlier, so to speak, but it is no less conflictual. The difficulties resulting from the copresence of the church and the monarchy—which had previously united church and state—are the principal focus of the last chapters of Mosiah (chapters 25–29), and they culminate in Mosiah’s official call for a complete dissolution of the Nephite monarchy. Abinadi’s subversive prophetic activity in the land of Nephi thus ultimately leads—through Alma’s militant fidelity to Abinadi’s teachings—to the complete, though official, subversion of the Nephite state in the land of Zarahemla. Without question, Abinadi and Alma make up the heart of the Mosiah narrative.

The Book of Mosiah: Benjamin and Abinadi

This privileging of Abinadi and Alma is unusual. I have already noted that most commentators focus principally, in analyzing Mosiah, on the obvious antithetical parallel between Benjamin and Noah and the way this parallel itself leads Mosiah to shift from monarchy to a system of judges. Though this familiar approach overlooks the crucial role of the Abinadi/Alma entanglement, there is nonetheless something obviously correct about its identification of the antithesis between Noah and Benjamin. What, then, should be said about this antithetical relationship?
Greatly complicating this antithesis is a striking correspondence between the speeches of Benjamin and Abinadi. Both explicitly teach, in Abinadi’s words, that “God himself shall come down among the children of men and shall redeem his people” (Mosiah 15:1) or, in Benjamin’s words, that “the time cometh and is not far distant, that with power, the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay” (Mosiah 3:5). While this teaching seems to be what inspired Benjamin’s people to set aside political and cultural differences so as definitively to unite, it is also this teaching that Noah officially cited in order to justify the execution of Abinadi (see Mosiah 17:7–8). Benjamin thus seems at once (positively) to parallel Abinadi and (negatively) to parallel Noah.

But the just-cited parallel between Benjamin’s and Abinadi’s speeches, both in Mosiah, is only the first of a remarkable series of similarities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benjamin</th>
<th>Abinadi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For behold, the time cometh and is not far distant, that with power, the</td>
<td>I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all</td>
<td>among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. (15:1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men, and shall</td>
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<tr>
<td>dwell in a tabernacle of clay. (3:5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>[Christ] shall go forth amongst men, working mighty miracles, such as</td>
<td>And after all this, after working many mighty miracles among the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>healing the sick, raising the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind</td>
<td>of men . . . (15:6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to receive their sight, and the deaf to hear, and curing all manner of</td>
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<tr>
<td>diseases. And he shall cast out devils, or the evil spirits which dwell</td>
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<tr>
<td>in the hearts of the children of men. (3:5–6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst,</td>
<td>[Christ] suffereth temptation, and yieldeth not to the temptation, but</td>
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<tr>
<td>and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for</td>
<td>suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged. (15:5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>the wickedness and the abominations of his people. (3:7)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benjamin</strong></td>
<td><strong>Abinadi</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>And even after all this they shall consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil. (3:9)</td>
<td>[Christ is also] cast out, and dis-owned by his people. (15:5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And [they] shall scourge him, and shall crucify him. (3:9)</td>
<td>Yea, even so he shall be led, crucified, and slain. (15:7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And he shall rise the third day from the dead. (3:10)</td>
<td>And thus God breaketh the bands of death, having gained the victory over death; giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men—having ascended into heaven. (15:8–9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And behold, he standeth to judge the world; and behold, all these things are done that a righteous judgment might come upon the children of men. (3:10)</td>
<td>[Christ] stand[s] betwixt them and justice; having broken the bands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice. (15:9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For behold, and also his blood atoneth for the sins of those who have fallen by the transgression of Adam, who have died not knowing the will of God concerning them, or who have ignorantly sinned. (3:11)</td>
<td>These are they that have died before Christ came, in their ignorance, not having salvation declared unto them. And thus the Lord bringeth about the restoration of these; and they have a part in the first resurrection, or have eternal life, being redeemed by the Lord. (15:24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But wo, wo unto him who knoweth that he rebelleth against God! For salvation cometh to none such except it be through repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ. (3:12)</td>
<td>But behold, and fear, and tremble before God, for ye ought to tremble; for the Lord redeemeth none such that rebel against him and die in their sins; yea, even all those that have perished in their sins ever since the world began, that have wilfully rebelled against God, that have known the commandments of God, and would not keep them; these are they that have no part in the first resurrection. (15:26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>Abinadi</td>
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<tr>
<td>And the Lord God hath sent his holy prophets among all the children of men, to declare these things to every kindred, nation, and tongue, that thereby whosoever should believe that Christ should come, the same might receive remission of their sins, and rejoice with exceedingly great joy, even as though he had already come among them. (3:13)</td>
<td>Yea, and are not the prophets, every one that has opened his mouth to prophesy, that has not fallen into transgression, I mean all the holy prophets ever since the world began? I say unto you that they are his seed. And these are they who have published peace, who have brought good tidings of good, who have published salvation; and said unto Zion: Thy God reigneth. (15:13–14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yet the Lord God saw that his people were a stiffnecked people, and he appointed unto them a law, even the law of Moses. And many signs, and wonders, and types, and shadows showed he unto them, concerning his coming; and also holy prophets spake unto them concerning his coming; and yet they hardened their hearts, and understood not that the law of Moses availeth nothing except it were through the atonement of his blood. (3:14–15)</td>
<td>And now I say unto you that it was expedient that there should be a law given to the children of Israel, yea, even a very strict law; for they were a stiffnecked people, quick to do iniquity, and slow to remember the Lord their God. Therefore there was a law given them, yea, a law of performances and of ordinances, a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him. But behold, I say unto you, that all these things were types of things to come. (13:29–31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And even if it were possible that little children could sin they could not be saved; but I say unto you they are blessed; for behold, as in Adam, or by nature, they fall, even so the blood of Christ atoneth for their sins. (3:16)</td>
<td>And little children also have eternal life. (15:25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These parallels suggest on close analysis that it is not, strictly speaking, Abinadi and Benjamin that are parallel. Because all of the quotations from Benjamin given above come specifically from chapter 3 of Mosiah, they are not Benjamin’s words but the words of the angel who visited Benjamin
before his speech (see Mosiah 3:1–3). Consequently, it is the angel who visits Benjamin rather than Benjamin himself whose words are parallel to Abinadi’s, and Benjamin is in fact parallel, not to Abinadi, but to Noah. The Benjamin and Abinadi narratives thus do, as the commentators suggest, set up an antithetical parallel between the righteous King Benjamin and the wicked King Noah. But the parallel is actually stronger and deeper than is usually recognized—stronger because both Benjamin and Noah receive the same message from a divinely appointed messenger (the angel for Benjamin and Abinadi for Noah) and deeper because all the apparently political differences between Noah and Benjamin are less a question of simple moral goodness or badness than a question of how they respond to the divine message.

But a further complication must be addressed. Though I have, to this point, argued that Benjamin’s speech effected a crucial political unification in Zarahemla, a closer look at Benjamin’s words shows that he anticipated and effectively laid the foundation for the eventual dismantling of the Nephite monarchy under Mosiah. He begins by disavowing sacral kingship—“I am like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind” (Mosiah 2:11)—and by subtly inviting his listeners themselves, through language borrowed from coronation ritual, to become kings and priests: “you should hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view” (Mosiah 2:9). Moreover, he goes on to invite his hearers to do exactly what he has done as their king, that is, to be lost in the service of God (see Mosiah 2:16–18). Benjamin’s speech might thus be interpreted as an attempt, however subtle, to demonarchize the monarchy, to flatten the political hierarchy.

It seems all the clearer, then, that what is on display in Mosiah is less a comparison between ways of deploying monarchical power than a comparison...
between monarchical responses to a message that in itself calls earthly power into question. While Benjamin responded to the angel by planting the seeds of demonarchization—seeds that would bear fruit only a few years later when Alma’s church arrived in Zarahemla—Noah responded to Abinadi by attempting futilely to secure his control of the state, something that resulted in short order in Noah’s death, the enslavement of the Nephites, and finally the complete abandonment of the settlement and its monarchy. And, in the last chapters of the book, Mosiah himself is presented with these two alternatives, and with the necessity of emulating one of them. Wisely, he chose to follow his father’s example.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the message in each case took the shape of an announcement of the coming Christ. Thus, throughout Mosiah, it is the core of Nephite preaching itself—whether in a demonarchizing monarchical address or in the consistent preaching of an ecclesiastical organization—that calls Nephite political power into question. What unsettles earthly things for the Nephites is the return, after so many years of effective apostasy, to the small plates vision of the coming Christ. But in order to clarify the stakes of this return—and the political questions associated with it throughout Mosiah—it is necessary to turn to the relationship between Abinadi and Jacob, the brother of Nephi.

Abinadi and Jacob

It is difficult to ascertain the relationship between the small plates and Mosiah. The one gives way rather suddenly—perhaps too suddenly—to the other. Turning from the short books of the later small plates to the robust history of Mosiah, the reader of the Book of Mormon feels a bit lost. That the small plates are never specifically mentioned again and are seldom quoted is somewhat confusing and one wonders how the small plates had become so marginalized over the course of the centuries.

As it turns out, though, there are important connections to the small plates in Mosiah, though they may be easy to miss. In order to spell out the connection between Abinadi and the small plates author Jacob, it is necessary to look at some of these in detail.

Scholars have noted the connection between Mosiah 9:1–2 and 1 Nephi 1:1. The two passages should be seen side by side:
At first, the obvious similarity between these two passages appears to be a straightforward borrowing—evidence, perhaps, of a Nephite royal tradition. But there may be reason, in light of the history surrounding the return to the land of Nephi, to take the connection more seriously. Given the uniqueness of Zeniff’s situation, it may be advisable to assume that Zeniff’s borrowing from the opening of the small plates was also unique. Indeed, one might suggest that the borrowing is meant to mark the return to the land of Nephi as a restoration or at least reenactment of the beginnings of Nephite civilization. As a kind of “latter-day Nephi,” Zeniff may have seen himself as reviving his ancestor’s settlement of the mountainous land of Nephi through a glorious conquest. And indeed, the whole of Mosiah 9–10—written entirely in the first person and therefore apparently by Zeniff himself—betrays a kind of self-conscious spirit of historical reenactment. A whole series of parallels with 1 Nephi 18 and 2 Nephi 5 deserves attention:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Nephi 1:1</th>
<th>Mosiah 9:1–2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.</td>
<td>I, Zeniff, having been taught in all the language of the Nephites, and having had a knowledge of the land of Nephi, or of the land of our fathers’ first inheritance, and having been sent as a spy among the Lamanites that I might spy out their forces, that our army might come upon them and destroy them—but when I saw that which was good among them I was desirous that they should not be destroyed. Therefore, I contended with my brethren in the wilderness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From the Record of Zeniff</strong></td>
<td><strong>From the Small Plates</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>We started again on our journey into the wilderness to go up to the land; but we were smitten with famine and sore afflictions; for we were slow to remember the Lord our God. (Mosiah 9:3)</td>
<td>And it came to pass that after they had bound me insomuch that I could not move, the compass, which had been prepared of the Lord, did cease to work. (1 Nephi 18:12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>And it did work for them according to their faith in God; therefore, if they had faith to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go, behold, it was done; therefore they had this miracle, and also many other miracles wrought by the power of God, day by day. Nevertheless, because those miracles were worked by small means it did show unto them marvelous works. They were slothful, and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence and then those marvelous works ceased, and they did not progress in their journey; Therefore, they tarried in the wilderness, or did not travel a direct course, and were afflicted with hunger and thirst, because of their transgressions. (Alma 37:40–42)</td>
<td>And it came to pass that when [Lehi] had traveled three days in the wilderness, he pitched his tent in a valley by the side of a river of water. (1 Nephi 2:6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>After many days’ wandering in the wilderness we pitched our tents. (Mosiah 9:4)</td>
<td>And it came to pass that after we had sailed for the space of many days we did arrive at the promised land; and we went forth upon the land, and did pitch our tents; and we did call it the promised land. (1 Nephi 18:23)</td>
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<tr>
<td>And after we had journeyed for the space of many days we did pitch our tents. (2 Nephi 5:7)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>From the Record of Zeniff</strong></td>
<td><strong>From the Small Plates</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The land of Lehi-Nephi. (Mosiah 9:6)</td>
<td>An account of Lehi and his wife Sariah and his four sons, being called, (beginning at the eldest) Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi. (headnote to 1 Nephi)</td>
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<tr>
<td>And we began to build buildings, and to repair the walls of the city. (Mosiah 9:8)</td>
<td>And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance. (2 Nephi 5:15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And we began to till the ground, yea, even with all manner of seeds, with seeds of corn, and of wheat, and of barley, and with neas, and with sheum, and with seeds of all manner of fruits; and we did begin to multiply and prosper in the land. (Mosiah 9:9)</td>
<td>And it came to pass that we did begin to till the earth, and we began to plant seeds; yea, we did put all our seeds into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem. And it came to pass that they did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance. (1 Nephi 18:24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did cause that the men should till the ground, and raise all manner of grain and all manner of fruit of every kind. (Mosiah 10:4)</td>
<td>And the Lord was with us; and we did prosper exceedingly; for we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. (2 Nephi 5:11).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now they were a lazy and an idolatrous people; therefore they were desirous to bring us into bondage, that they might glut themselves with the labors of our hands; yea, that they might feast themselves upon the flocks of our field. (Mosiah 9:12)</td>
<td>And because of their cursing which was upon them they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey. (2 Nephi 5:24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There began to be wars and contentions in the land. (Mosiah 9:13)</td>
<td>And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren. (2 Nephi 5:34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the Record of Zeniff</td>
<td>From the Small Plates</td>
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<tr>
<td>[My people] did call upon me for protection. (Mosiah 9:15)</td>
<td>Nephi, unto whom ye look as a king or a protector, and on whom ye depend for safety. (2 Nephi 6:2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did arm them with bows, and with arrows, with swords, and with cimeters, and with clubs, and with slings, and with all manner of weapons which we could invent. (Mosiah 9:16)</td>
<td>And I, Nephi, did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us. (2 Nephi 5:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And I caused that there should be weapons of war made of every kind, that thereby I might have weapons for my people against the time the Lamanites should come up again to war against my people. (Mosiah 10:1)</td>
<td>Wilt thou deliver me out of the hands of mine enemies? . . . O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, and hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy. (2 Nephi 4:31–33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I and my people did cry mightily to the Lord that he would deliver us out of the hands of our enemies. (Mosiah 9:17)</td>
<td>And thou art like unto our father, led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart; yea, he hath led us out of the land of Jerusalem, and we have wandered in the wilderness for these many years; and our women have toiled, being big with child; and they have borne children in the wilderness and suffered all things, save it were death; and it would have been better that they had died before they came out of Jerusalem than to have suffered these afflictions. (1 Nephi 17:20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[The Lamanites] believ[ed] that they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers, and that they were wronged in the wilderness by their brethren, and they were also wronged while crossing the sea. (Mosiah 10:12)</td>
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<td>From the Record of Zeniff</td>
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<tr>
<td>And I, Nephi, began to fear exceedingly lest the Lord should be angry with us, and smite us because of our iniquity, that we should be swallowed up in the depths of the sea; wherefore, I, Nephi, began to speak to them with much soberness; but behold they were angry with me, saying: We will not that our younger brother shall be a ruler over us. (1 Nephi 18:10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>And again, [Nephi’s brethren] were wroth with him when they had arrived in the promised land, because they said that he had taken the ruling of the people out of their hands; and they sought to kill him. (Mosiah 10:15)</td>
<td>Yea, they did murmur against me, saying: Our younger brother thinks to rule over us; and we have had much trial because of him; wherefore, now let us slay him, that we may not be afflicted more because of his words. For behold, we will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people. (2 Nephi 5:3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And again, [Nephi’s brethren] were wroth with him because he departed into the wilderness as the Lord had commanded him, and took the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, for they said that he robbed them. (Mosiah 10:16)</td>
<td>Wherefore, it came to pass that I, Nephi, did take my family, and also Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, and all those who would go with me. And all those who would go with me were those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words. . . . And I, Nephi, had also brought the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass. (2 Nephi 5:6, 12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These parallels suggest that Zeniff consciously borrowed from the small plates and, in light of these borrowings, it seems that Zeniff saw himself as a kind of Nephi reborn, reproducing the Nephite beginnings in his own time, right down to gaining superiority over the Lamanites and claiming the land over which Nephi himself had originally ruled.

Curiously, as soon as Zeniff’s record (Mosiah 9–10) comes to an end, the voice of a third-person narrator, rather than the first-person voice of Zeniff’s royal successor, takes over (in Mosiah 11). This sudden distance from the king’s perspective, though, also reproduces the spirit of the small plates. After Nephi’s contribution to the small plates, the priestly—rather than kingly—line assumes responsibility for the record, such that the small plates, like the “record of Zeniff,” turn abruptly from a first-person account of the king to a third-person account about the king. Moreover, in both Mosiah and the small plates, the succeeding third-person account about the king is critical. Nephi’s successor, like King Noah, is unfaithful. Indeed, both succeeding kings are described in the respective records as given to the same sins:

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<th>From the Small Plates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And thus [the Lamanites] have taught their children that they should hate them, and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them; therefore they have an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi. (Mosiah 10:17)</td>
<td>I knew their hatred towards me and my children and those who were called my people. (2 Nephi 5:14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now Nephi began to be old, and he saw that he must soon die; wherefore, he anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people now, according to the reigns of the kings. (Jacob 1:9)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These parallels suggest that Zeniff consciously borrowed from the small plates and, in light of these borrowings, it seems that Zeniff saw himself as a kind of Nephi reborn, reproducing the Nephite beginnings in his own time, right down to gaining superiority over the Lamanites and claiming the land over which Nephi himself had originally ruled.

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<table>
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<th>King Noah</th>
<th>Nephi’s Successor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He had many wives and concubines. And he did cause his people to commit sin, and do that which was abominable in the sight of the Lord.</td>
<td>And now it came to pass that the people of Nephi, under the reign of the second king, began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yea, and they did commit whoredoms and all manner of wickedness. And he laid a tax of one fifth part of all they possessed, a fifth part of their gold and of their silver, and a fifth part of their ziff, and of their copper, and of their brass and their iron; and a fifth part of their fatlings; and also a fifth part of all their grain. . . . And it came to pass that king Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings; and he ornamented them with fine work of wood, and of all manner of precious things, of gold, and of silver, and of iron, and of brass, and of ziff, and of copper. And he also built him a spacious palace, and a throne in the midst thereof, all of which was of fine wood and was ornamented with gold and silver and with precious things. And he also caused that his workmen should work all manner of fine work within the walls of the temple, of fine wood, and of copper, and of brass. (Mosiah 11:2–3, 8–10)

This connection between Noah’s sins and the sins of Nephi’s successor makes clear that the parallel between the small plates and the story of the return to the land of Nephi runs deep. If the Zeniff narrative is an intentional echo of First and Second Nephi, it appears that the Noah/Abinadi narrative is similarly an intentional echo of the book of Jacob.

The book of Mosiah thus reenacts not only the original settling of the land of Nephi but also—unfortunately—the corruption of the founding king’s successor. This allows for a more critical reading of the shift from first-person narration in Mosiah 9–10 to third-person narration beginning in Mosiah 11. It seems that the editor of the Noah narrative intended with this shift to highlight an implicit problem in Zeniff’s apparent belief that he was restoring the original Nephite kingdom. Though Zeniff would seem to have been justified in seeing himself as an eschatological figure—a
kind of end-times character bringing back the golden age and so, in some sense, bringing Nephite history to its end—the editor of the narrative makes clear that such a vision would be badly mistaken, because Zeniff’s restoration led only to the same problematic excesses that followed the original monarchical establishment in the land of Nephi. The editor, in other words, emphasized what Zeniff himself began to suspect by the end of his life—that the “restoration” was the result of an “over-zealous” and therefore romantic/nostalgic desire to restore a paradise that had never really existed as such in the first place (see Mosiah 9:3).

What, though, of Jacob in all this? Crucially, just as Jacob in the small plates prophetically disrupts the second Nephite king’s royal excesses, Abinadi in Mosiah prophetically disrupts Noah’s similar actions. If Zeniff is Nephi reborn and Noah Nephi’s successor reborn, Abinadi is Jacob reborn. But, one might object, did not Jacob—as a priest and teacher, ordained by Nephi himself—wield far more institutional power than Abinadi? Not necessarily. Jacob’s own book, carefully read, seems to trace a trajectory of increasing disincorporation. If Jacob seems to have a strong influence when he gives his speech against the king’s excesses in Jacob 1–3, his writings in Jacob 4–6 suggest that he subsequently retreated from (or was forced out of) the public sphere and focused his efforts on writing, Isaiah-like, to future generations. At any rate, Jacob’s marginal social position in Jacob 7 is unmistakable, and he describes himself there as having had to use Sherem’s demise to his prophetic advantage. And Jacob’s descendants Enos and Jarom appear to have been even further marginalized institutionally. If Jacob was not at first an outsider like Abinadi, there is nonetheless some evidence that he became such, perhaps precisely because of his witness against the king.35

But Jacob and Abinadi are connected still more profoundly. Abinadi not only reembodies Jacob narratively, he also clearly inherits Jacob’s doctrinal legacy. Jacob actually occupies a strange place in the small plates. Nephi’s doctrinal concerns focus almost exclusively on what might be called “covenantal theology.” Likely because of his apocalyptic visions—not to mention his way of reading Isaiah—Nephi always looked to the future history of Israel. Nephi never leaves this theme to discuss its soteriological underpinnings (to discuss, that is, what the covenant implies about individual salvation). In short, because Nephi’s vision is consistently trained on the covenant, he says nothing about Christ’s atoning sacrifice as such. But while Nephi never deals with these “practical” details, Jacob does—and, interestingly, he does so right
An Other Testament

The first word on the subject comes from Lehi in 2 Nephi 2, but the words offered there are directed specifically to Jacob. And so it is unsurprising that it is Jacob who offers the only systematic discussion of the theme in the small plates, located in 2 Nephi 9—a chapter long celebrated for its doctrinal exposition of the atonement. Interestingly, Nephi’s only close-to-explicit statement about soteriology—“we are saved by grace, after all we can do”—is actually just a reformulation of something said by Jacob.26

Abinadi is Jacob’s unquestionable doctrinal heir. Faced with Noah’s priests who seem, as will be seen, to have inherited (and likely distorted) only Nephi’s covenantal focus, Abinadi criticizes them by setting forth the soteriology that they apparently overlooked through their focus on a strictly covenantal theology. Moreover, Abinadi’s discourse borders on being a commentary on 2 Nephi 9 (as well as on 2 Nephi 2), revealing his familiarity with Jacob’s teachings. And Abinadi—through his influence on Alma—seems thereby to have launched a two-centuries-long Nephite focus on soteriology.27 Abinadi thus appears in Mosiah as the double heir of Jacob, as much doctrinally or theologically as narratively or historically.

The Structure of Abinadi’s Speech

The analysis so far wagered locates Abinadi’s speech both within the framework of the larger Book of Mormon project and within the framework of the book of Mosiah itself. The importance of these contextual details will become clear in chapter 5. However, before finally turning to less exegetical, more theological reflection, it is necessary to take up one last question: What is the basic structure of Abinadi’s speech itself?

Abinadi’s speech is responsive and interpretive from the start. Taken before Noah and his priests because he criticized the king and his people, Abinadi’s words are a bold defense of his actions. Moreover, because his condemnation of the king was a prophetic intervention (rather than a merely political move), Abinadi’s trial has a thoroughly religious character. Noah’s priests force Abinadi to defend himself by, oddly enough, interpreting scripture, and the text they ask him to interpret happens to be, of all things, a passage from Second Isaiah (Isaiah 52:7–10). The way this develops deserves close attention.

The verses leading up to the priests’ challenge read as follows:

And it came to pass that king Noah caused that Abinadi should be cast into prison; and he commanded that the priests should gather themselves
together that he might hold a council with them what he should do with him. And it came to pass that they said unto the king: Bring him hither that we may question him; and the king commanded that he should be brought before them. And they began to question him, that they might cross him, that thereby they might have wherewith to accuse him; but he answered them boldly, and withstood all their questions, yea, to their astonishment; for he did withstand them in all their questions, and did confound them in all their words. And it came to pass that one of them said unto him: What meaneth the words which are written, and which have been taught by our fathers, saying... (Mosiah 12:17–20)

Several points here call for comment. First, does verse 19 (“they began to question him... but he answered them boldly,” etc.) refer to an event separate from the speech recorded at length, or is it meant to summarize the recorded speech itself? In other words, does the whole passage just quoted lay out the chronology leading up to the encounter over Second Isaiah, or does only the first half do so, the remainder being a summary of Abinadi’s recorded speech? In the end, I think that this passage describes two distinct events—a first, unnarrated interrogation in which Abinadi withstands the priests (verses 17–19), and only thereafter the question about Isaiah and Abinadi’s chapters-long response (verse 20 and what follows). If this is right, then it appears that the question about Isaiah was the priests’ trump card—their final, most difficult question, saved to the last because they believed Abinadi could not maneuver out of its trap. This is important, I believe, because it indicates that Noah’s priests, despite being physically lazy (as described in Mosiah 11:6), were anything but theologically lazy. Though it is perhaps common to see the priests as crafty but simply wrong—as if they had no theological leg to stand on, no actual scriptural or even logical defense for their ideology—it may prove important to see them as having believed they had a watertight case that would settle the whole Abinadi affair to everyone’s—perhaps even Abinadi’s—satisfaction. The priests’ “astonishment” may well have been more of a question of their being completely unprepared for the radically “unorthodox” position Abinadi would take than of their being unprepared to defend their own position in generally convincing terms.

That Abinadi’s defense was launched from grounds that were drastically distinct from those on which the priests stood is perhaps confirmed by the roundabout nature of Abinadi’s speech. Abinadi does not come to the actual work of interpreting the Isaiah passage until relatively late in his remarks
(the question comes in Mosiah 12:20–24, but Abinadi’s actual interpretation does not appear until Mosiah 15), making clear that he had first to establish the grounds on which his interpretation was to be built, or at least to call into question the priests’ problematic presuppositions. Only after so much preliminary work is it possible for Abinadi’s interpretation to have any purchase for his audience.

In light just of this first remark, Abinadi’s speech can be divided into two major parts:


Interestingly, this basic division of the speech turns out to be significant in light of chapters 2 and 3 of the present study. While the second part of the speech is unquestionably focused on the question of how Isaiah is to be interpreted, Abinadi only comes to this second part after a preliminary discussion focused—in the work of questioning the priests’ basic presuppositions—on the relationship between the Law (of Moses) and the Prophets. In other words, in order to come to the task of sorting out how to read Isaiah, Abinadi first clarifies the status of the (typological) Law.

Narrowing in, then, on the first half of Abinadi’s speech, one can further subdivide the discussion of the Law:

1a. Mosiah 12:25 – 13:26: On Obeying the Law
1b. Mosiah 13:27–33: From the Law to the Prophets

At the level of the outline, things seem relatively simple. At the level of the details, however, things are not. After first discussing the necessity of obeying the Law—something Abinadi addresses primarily, it seems, to point out his hearers’ hypocrisy—Abinadi talks about the typological Law in a way that might at first seem to echo Nephi. But as he turns from the Law to the Prophets, Abinadi proposes an understanding of the prophets that is clearly distinct from Nephi’s, the result being that Abinadi’s typological Law takes a shape structurally different from that articulated by Nephi. These details and their significance will be worked out in chapter 5.

In the meanwhile, what about the second half of Abinadi’s speech? Importantly, Abinadi straightforwardly divides his interpretation of Isaiah into two
parts. When he finally comes to Isaiah, he first addresses only Isaiah 52:7 (in Mosiah 15:10–18). It is only after an excursus of sorts that he comes (beginning with Mosiah 15:28) to Isaiah 52:8–10. It is thus possible also to outline the basic structure of the second half of Abinadi’s speech:

2a. Mosiah 15:10–18: Interpretation of Isaiah 52:7
2c. Mosiah 15:28 – 16:15: Interpretation of Isaiah 52:8–10

It is in the excursus that divides his discussion of Isaiah in two that Abinadi introduces into the Book of Mormon the doctrine of what he calls the “first resurrection.” That he takes up an excursus of such length in the middle of his interpretive work indicates that the doctrine there discussed is, for Abinadi, necessary to his interpretation of Isaiah. Without that doctrine, Abinadi’s interpretation of Isaiah 52:7 cannot be linked up with his interpretation of Isaiah 52:8–10. Again, these details and their significance will have to be worked out in chapter 5.

Abinadi’s speech, then, can be read as having two major parts: (1) a revisionary discussion of the relationship between the Law and the Prophets that (2) allows for a further revisionary discussion of how Isaiah should be read. Whatever else Abinadi’s speech accomplishes, it reworks the meaning of the Law for the Nephites and opens the way for the church that then shapes Nephite religious thought up until the visit of Christ in Third Nephi.

Notes

1. Among the commentators, only one both mentions that Abinadi and Christ comment on the same passage from Isaiah and notes that there are differences between their interpretations. Nonetheless, he makes no actual comparison between the two interpretations. See Dana M. Pike, “How Beautiful upon the Mountains: The Imagery of Isaiah 52:7–10 and Its Occurrences in the Book of Mormon,” in Parry and Welch, Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, 260–271.

2. Among the standard commentaries, none attempts to identify the nature of the disputations to which Christ refers. While most simply ignore the question entirely, two specifically warn against any attempt to identify the disputations. See McConkie and Millet, Doctrinal Commentary, 4:57; and Gardner, Second Witness, 5:346.

3. See Gardner, Second Witness, 3:327–328, for instance: “Alma’s baptism . . . differs from Nephi’s.” Cf. also 2:433–436. That McConkie and Millet, on the other hand,
see no fundamental difference between Nephi’s and Alma’s notions of baptism is clear when, in their commentary on Mosiah 18, they quote 2 Nephi 31 in order to exposit Alma’s understanding. McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 2:254.


5. Sidney B. Sperry offers another approach to these questions, suggesting, on the strength of 3 Nephi 5:12 (which speaks of Alma’s church as “the first church” but perhaps qualifies the word “first” when it adds “after their [the Nephites’] transgression”), that Alma’s church was a *restoration* of Nephi’s, an organization lost during the apostate years of the later small plates writers. See Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 312.

6. Indeed, there is a good deal of textual work that has never been fully and responsibly undertaken that would have to be done before any definitive interpretation of these questions could be offered. My treatment here has skimmed over the surface of the difficulties at best.


8. The only quasi-interruption of this lineage is to be found in Alma 63 and is brilliantly analyzed by Grant Hardy. See Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 142–144.

9. Wherever it might be unclear which Book of Mormon character is referred to, I have used the subscript numbering system employed in Hardy’s *Reader’s Edition* of the Book of Mormon.


11. I do, however, highly recommend the analysis of Moroni in Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 217–267.

12. I have ignored here the so-called “book of Lehi,” Mormon’s lost abridgment of the history of the Nephites up to the reign of King Benjamin. While this material would obviously have been important to Mormon, it is difficult to know what it would have looked like, since Mormon wrote it before he discovered the small plates. Speculation about the contents of the book of Lehi seems to me to be unhelpful.


17. Because of the distance between them, the two kingdoms were completely out of touch with one another. Their histories became entirely independent for two generations.

18. The parallel deaths of Abinadi and Noah mirror the parallel escapes of Alma and Noah’s priests.


22. That Benjamin receives a heavenly messenger while Noah receives an earthly messenger is important, but not decisive. It will be remembered that Abinadi takes on an angelic—or at least certainly supernatural—appearance during his speech (see Mosiah 13:5).


24. Brant Gardner states straightforwardly of Mosiah 9:1–2: “This introduction echoes [1] Nephi 1:1–2.” He goes on, however, to suggest that the passages are “sufficiently different” that one should not regard Zeniff as “copying Nephi.” Curiously, he goes on to suggest that perhaps Nephi had “introduced his large plates in a similar way,” such that Zeniff would have been copying from those, rather than the small plates. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 3:227. Alan Goff, on the other hand, places Mosiah 9:1–2 and 1 Nephi 1 side by side much in the manner I do here, asserting their interdependence. Alan Goff, “Historical Narrative, Literary Narrative—Expelling Poetics from the Republic of History,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5:1 (Spring 1996): 85–86.

25. Radicalizing the parallel between Jacob and Abinadi, one might suggest that Abinadi was one of the deposed when Noah “put down all the priests that had been consecrated by his father, and consecrated new ones in their stead, such as were lifted up in the pride of their hearts” (Mosiah 11:5). Incidentally, John Tvedtøes has outlined
this possibility: “It is possible that [Abinadi] was one of the deposed priests who had served under the righteous king Zeniff, but, alas, the record is silent on this matter.” John A. Tvedtnes, The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 324.

26. I do not intend to suggest, though, that Jacob was unconcerned with covenantal theology. Indeed, he seems to have been quite as concerned with the covenant as with constructing a working soteriology. The point to emphasize is Jacob’s uniqueness in focusing at all on soteriology in the small plates.

27. A Jacob-like focus on Christ’s atoning sacrifice saturates the Book of Mormon from Abinadi’s speech up until the visit of Christ. During the same period, interestingly, covenantal theology seems effectively to have disappeared.

28. The only detailed treatment of this “preliminary council” is in Welch, Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon, 166–169.

29. John Welch presents a picture of the priests “spen[ding] a fair amount of time discussing the law, if for no other purpose than to justify their conduct and to get as close to the edge of legality as they possibly could.” Welch, Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon, 147.