After so much preparation, it is possible at last to turn to what Abinadi has to say about typology and to differentiate Abinadi’s approach from Nephi’s. Only with these two models of typological interpretation set side by side will it be possible to draw conclusions about what the Book of Mormon means by its claim—derived from Alma 36—that it, the Book of Mormon itself, is to be read typologically. The task of the present chapter is, then, to tackle Abinadi’s discussion of typology quite directly.

I begin with a brief discussion, drawing heavily on the exegetical findings of chapter 4, of what seems to have motivated Noah’s priests to give Abinadi the task to interpret, of all things, a passage from Second Isaiah. Through this preliminary discussion, the stakes of Abinadi’s approach to Isaiah are clarified: the only way Abinadi could challenge the charges brought against him was to question the dominant approach to Isaiah he encountered in Noah’s regime. This is followed by a close analysis of Abinadi’s initial response to the question, which was not to address the meaning of Isaiah, but to call into question the priests’ presumptions about the relationship between the Law and the Prophets. Through an audacious reworking of the meaning of the spirit of prophecy, coupled with an interpretation of Deuteronomy 18 that is clearly distinct from Nephi’s much earlier interpretation, Abinadi presents himself to the priests as a radical revisionist.

In the next part of the chapter, I turn with Abinadi from Deuteronomy to Isaiah, looking at how Abinadi connects his understanding of Moses’s role as prophet with Isaiah’s role as prophet. This connection lays the foundation
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for what becomes Abinadi’s understanding of typology, but it does not yet make clear exactly what his typological methodology is. That becomes clear only when we look in great detail at Mosiah 13:29–32, Abinadi’s direct discussion, carefully contextualized by its placement in the midst of his discussion of Moses, of typology. There Abinadi clearly understands the typological nature of the Law to be a question of its symbolic anticipation of events in the life of the coming Christ.

Finally, I close the chapter with a look at how Christ, in Third Nephi, calls for a “return to Nephi” and privileges Nephi’s approach to typology (together with its covenantal focus) over Abinadi’s. Crucially, there are hints, both in Third Nephi and in the Mosiah account of Abinadi’s speech, that the privileged role of Nephi’s typological methodology is not to be understood as dismissing or simply dispensing with the Abinadite model. Rather, there seems to be a hierarchical relationship between them.

Motivations

In chapter 4, I argued not only that Abinadi’s speech lays the foundation for a massive theological shift in Nephite thinking—a shift addressed by Christ himself in Third Nephi—but also that Abinadi lays that foundation through his approach to interpreting (Second) Isaiah. Consequently, the question to be asked in launching a theological interpretation of Abinadi’s words is: Why do Noah’s priests ask Abinadi to interpret Isaiah? If their intention was, as the text says, to “cross him, that thereby they might have wherewith to accuse him” (Mosiah 12:19), what do Noah’s priests see in Isaiah 52:7–10, such that Abinadi’s expected answer would allow them to condemn him? If this question has any real purchase, the priests must have anticipated a specific response from Abinadi. Noah’s priests apparently assumed that Isaiah 52:7–10 had a single, obvious, incontrovertible meaning—a meaning that everyone in the land of Nephi would immediately see. Such an interpretation would have to have been well-known and rooted in a culture-wide ideology.

I begin, then, with these two assumptions. First, Isaiah 52:7–10 had, in the time of King Noah and at least in the land of Nephi, a standard interpretation, one secure enough to blind Noah’s priests to the possibility of any other (justifiable) interpretation. Second, that standard interpretation—once extracted from or agreed to by Abinadi—would itself have condemned
Abinadi’s prophetic intervention. With this background in mind, here is the Isaiah passage Abinadi was asked to interpret:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings; that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good; that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth; Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing; for they shall see eye to eye when the Lord shall bring again Zion; Break forth into joy; sing together ye waste places of Jerusalem; for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem; The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Mosiah 12:21–24)

What was the standard interpretation of this text in Abinadi’s time and place, and how would that interpretation have been used to condemn the prophet?

The most common approach among the commentators is to suggest that Abinadi’s actions contradicted the first verse of the Isaiah passage. Whereas Isaiah speaks of bringing “good tidings,” “peace,” and “salvation” (Mosiah 12:21), Abinadi had prophetically spoken only of bondage, destruction, and punishment for wickedness. Perhaps the difference between Abinadi’s negative character and Isaiah’s positive picture of the prophet was meant to be used against Abinadi in the trial. On this approach, Abinadi’s speech could be read as reinterpreting Isaiah 52:7 along the following lines: the prophet did indeed, as Isaiah claims, have a positive message, the message that Christ is coming. Unfortunately, the prophet discovers few who desire to hear that good news, and so his positive announcement gives way to negative denunciation.

Without question, this first approach takes a step in the right direction, but it is hardly robust enough as it stands. First, it would be extreme to justify capital punishment by claiming, on the interpretation of a single verse, that prophets should always bring messages of joy. Second, the approach has no obvious connection to the historical and political circumstances in Noah’s land of Nephi. And third, had the priests meant only to condemn Abinadi through verse 7 of Isaiah 52, why would they have bothered to quote verses 8–10 as well? This last point is crucial, since Abinadi himself does not finish his response with his counterinterpretation of Isaiah 52:7, but goes on—after an excursus on the first resurrection—to provide a full interpretation of Isaiah 52:8–10 as well. Abinadi himself makes clear that there is more at stake than the definition of prophecy.
How, then, might Isaiah 52:8–10 have been interpreted at that time and place? In a recent study, John Welch identifies the following vital point:

This passage of scripture quoted to Abinadi by the priests could very well have been one of the theme texts that had been used often by Zeniff’s colony as they rejoiced over their redemption of the land of their inheritance and temple. . . . In the face of Isaiah’s prophecy and its apparent glorious fulfillment by Zeniff’s people, how did Abinadi dare to accuse both the king and his people of falling under God’s worst judgments?

I believe Welch is exactly right here. That Noah’s priests expected a particular answer to their question would likely imply that they themselves had often publicly expounded the text, and it is not difficult to imagine that they had presented it as a prophecy that Zeniff’s return to the land of Nephi had gloriously fulfilled. They had witnessed the Lord “bring[ing] again Zion”; they had watched as the Lord “comforted his people” and “redeemed [a likened] Jerusalem”; and because these events had taken place through successful wars against the Lamanites, the Lord had “made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations” and “all the ends of the earth . . . [had seen] the salvation of [their] God.”

The pieces fit. Zeniff seems to have seen himself as the major player in a remarkable restoration—the refounding of the original Nephite monarchy in the land of Nephi. Among his revitalizations of Nephi’s original project and through his obvious familiarity with the small plates, Zeniff may well have also attempted to reintroduce Nephi’s interpretive strategy of likening Isaiah. Of course, because Zeniff seems to have seen himself as an eschatological figure, he likely would have seen Isaiah less as spelling out the still-future history of Israel than as detailing the present history of Israel—the history he and his people had lived out. In other words, there is reason to suggest that Zeniff took his own refounding to fulfill the likened writings of Second Isaiah. Indeed, when Noah’s priests introduce the text to Abinadi, it is described as “the words . . . which have been taught by our fathers” (Mosiah 12:20). And if Isaiah had described perfectly and in advance Zeniff’s restoration of Nephi’s original kingdom, who could question the excesses of Noah’s regime? Having received a land flowing with milk and honey, who could deny them their rightful enjoyment of that bounty?

If Zeniff’s people had come to interpret Isaiah 52:8–10 as connected to the refounding of the land of Nephi, they would naturally have come to interpret Isaiah 52:7 as claiming that, from the restoration onward, prophets were in
essence no longer needed. The good tidings of the eschatological restoration of Nephi’s kingdom had been definitively delivered, prophets (Isaiah, Nephi) and kings (Zeniff, Noah) had finally seen eye to eye and together lifted up the voice to sing praises. It appears that the employment of Isaiah 52:7–10 in Abinadi’s trial was not opportunistic proof-texting that took advantage of a single scriptural passage suggesting that prophets are happy, positive characters. Rather, Noah’s people and priests were apparently baffled by Abinadi’s prophetic intervention simply because he claimed to be a prophet when prophets were no longer needed.

Thus, it would have been easy for the priests to put Abinadi away by making him interpret Isaiah 52:7–10. By the time of Abinadi’s trial, that passage seems to have been interpreted for a full generation in such a way that the priests could—once Abinadi had dutifully repeated what had come to be the obvious (or only?) interpretation of the text in that time and place—condemn his intervention as the work of a religious radical, of someone who dismissed not only Isaiah (the likened prophet), but also Nephi (the provider of the method of likening). Blasphemy and sedition were the crimes on the docket, not merely unscriptural negativity.

From all this, a crucial point follows: the only way Abinadi could avoid the charge and defend his prophetic intervention was to question the priests’ understanding of Isaiah—of what it means to liken Isaiah. This point guides the whole theological interpretation to follow.

**The Law and the Prophets: Recasting the Situation**

Abinadi’s speech is thus principally a question of articulating a method for interpreting Isaiah. As already indicated in chapter 4, Abinadi takes up his task first by clarifying in detail his understanding of the relationship between the Law and the Prophets. It is therefore necessary to take up the task of interpretation here by beginning with Abinadi’s discussion of that relationship.

Abinadi begins his response to Noah’s priests with a poignant question: “Are you priests, and pretend to teach this people, and to understand the spirit of prophesying, and yet desire to know of me what these things mean?” (Mosiah 12:25). Here, through the wording of his counterquestion, together with its obvious sarcasm, Abinadi brutally exposes the subtle play of power at work in the priests’ question. At the level of the word, Abinadi both
(1) affirms the priests’ superiority and his own inferiority and, (2) by “coloring their question as a [genuine] request for information they did not possess,” indicates that the priests themselves, through their question about Isaiah, have inverted their relationship with Abinadi (making him superior and themselves inferior). Of course, given Abinadi’s sarcasm, it is clear that he actually neither believes in the priests’ superiority nor assumes their question to be honest. But through the boldness of his sarcasm, as well as his charade of taking the priests quite literally at their word, Abinadi takes complete control of the situation, such that he becomes the asker—and the priests the answerers—of questions.

By seizing rhetorical control, Abinadi also introduces an idea that he regards as central to interpreting Isaiah—and the Prophets more generally—namely, “the spirit of prophesying.” Coupling this “spirit” with “understanding,” he makes his initial accusation against the priests:

> Are you priests, and pretend to teach this people, and to understand the spirit of prophesying, and yet desire to know of me what these things mean? I say unto you, wo be unto you for perverting the ways of the Lord! For if ye understand these things ye have not taught them; therefore, ye have perverted the ways of the Lord. Ye have not applied your hearts to understanding; therefore, ye have not been wise. (Mosiah 12:25–27)

Abinadi here refers three times to “understanding.” First, as already mentioned, he refers to understanding the spirit of prophesying—something the priests apparently profess to do. Second, he speaks of understanding Isaiah, suggesting that there is some direct connection between understanding the spirit of prophesying and understanding the Prophets. In making this connection, moreover, Abinadi, while leaving open the possibility that the priests actually do understand Isaiah correctly, nonetheless makes clear that the priests have never taught him correctly. And Abinadi thus can, third, accuse the priests of “not applying their hearts to understanding,” that is, to the specifically prophetic work of interpreting the prophet.

In these verses, Abinadi sets out two possible approaches to the fact that Noah’s priests have not taught Isaiah correctly. Either they have not taught Isaiah correctly because they lack the spirit of prophesying, and therefore their question is actually an honest plea for interpretive help—whether they know it or not. Or they have not taught Isaiah correctly because, while through the spirit of prophesying they actually do know the meaning of
Isaiah, they nonetheless deliberately misinterpret his words, and therefore their question is deceptive through and through. Either they mistakenly believe they understand the spirit of prophesying, in which case they need correction; or they deliberately deceive the public, in which case they simply deserve condemnation.

Abinadi next asks the first of a series of questions that he intends the priests actually to answer: “Therefore, what teach ye this people?” (Mosiah 12:27). Given what has just been said, it seems Abinadi asks this question in order, through the priests’ answer, to determine which of the two possibilities outlined is correct. Are the priests simply ideologically blinded to their misunderstanding of the spirit of prophesying, or are they deliberately deceiving the people in their interpretation of Isaiah? But the priests’ response is, in essence, a dodge: “We teach the law of Moses” (Mosiah 12:28).

Attempting, it would seem, to get around the issue of prophetically interpreting the Prophets, Noah’s priests turn to the Law. But there they find another impasse when Abinadi asks his next question: “If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it?” (Mosiah 12:29). Certainly it is as problematic to interpret the Prophets without the spirit of prophesying as it is to teach the Law without obeying it.

But more importantly, Abinadi’s second question also blocks the priests’ attempted retreat by making clear that there is no clean disconnect between the Law and the Prophets: “If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it . . . , [such] that the Lord has cause to send me to prophesy against this people?” (Mosiah 12:29). The connection Abinadi here asserts between the Law and the Prophets is crucial. For him, it seems, prophets appear precisely when and where the Law is being misunderstood or abused, as if the prophets are sent specifically to clarify the status or meaning of the Law. The Law, it seems, is not without the Prophets, nor the Prophets without the Law.

But this connection between the Law and the Prophets is subtle at this point in the narrative, and Abinadi, instead of belaboring the point, returns to the priests’ hypocritical flouting of the Law that they claim to teach: “it shall come to pass that ye shall be smitten for your iniquities, for ye have said that ye teach the law of Moses” (Mosiah 12:31). In fact, making his accusations more specific, Abinadi begins to recite the Ten Commandments, announcing in the middle of the recitation: “Have ye done all this? I say unto you, Nay, ye have not. And have ye taught this people that they should do all these things? I say unto you, Nay, ye have not” (Mosiah 12:37).
But Abinadi’s interrogation is disrupted at this point. Noah, likely sick of this carnivalesque showdown, interjects with a diagnosis of Abinadi as obviously “mad” and a command that he be hauled away and killed (Mosiah 13:1). But Abinadi famously commands Noah’s servants not to touch him, because he has “not delivered the message which the Lord sent [him] to deliver” (Mosiah 13:3). Rather than confirming Abinadi’s madness, this resistance convinces the court to leave him alone—apparently principally because his face is reported to have “shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses’ did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord” (Mosiah 13:5). The crucial significance of this turn of events will be discussed in some detail later. For the moment, it is only important to note that the miracle allows Abinadi to continue his speech. He quickly finishes his recitation and thus completes his basic accusation.

However, as Abinadi comes to the end of the Ten Commandments, he returns to the subtle point of connection between the Law and the Prophets: “It came to pass that after Abinadi had made an end of these sayings that he said unto them: Have ye taught this people that they should observe to do all these things for to keep these commandments? I say unto you, Nay; for if ye had, the Lord would not have caused me to come forth and to prophesy evil concerning this people” (Mosiah 13:25–26). But whereas Abinadi passed over this connection rather quickly before, he now takes it up explicitly and at length.

At this point, with only the subtle affirmation of an implicit connection between the Law and the Prophets, it might appear that Abinadi understands the prophets to have the task—as they often enough do in the Old Testament—of interrupting popular attempts to totalize the Law, of ensuring that the Law does not become a “Said” rather than a “Saying.” That is, it appears at first that Abinadi means only to say what has been explained by Paul Beauchamp (and nicely summarized by Paul Ricoeur):

The Torah [Law], inasmuch as it is indivisibly law and narrative tradition, establishes what could be called the ethico-narrative identity of the people; and this identity is grounded in the security and the stability of a tradition. Prophecy, in turn, confronts this identity with the hazards of a strange and hostile history. Harbingers and witnesses of the destruction, the Prophets establish an essentially threatened [cultural] identity.\(^4\)

However, beginning from the very next verses (Mosiah 13:27–33), Abinadi clarifies at length that he has in mind a rather distinct notion of prophetic intervention.
He begins:

And now ye have said that salvation cometh by the law of Moses. I say unto you that it is expedient that ye should keep the law of Moses as yet; but I say unto you, that the time shall come when it shall no more be expedient to keep the law of Moses. And moreover, I say unto you, that salvation doth not come by the law alone; and were it not for the atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people, that they must unavoidably perish, notwithstanding the law of Moses. (Mosiah 13:27–28)

Here it becomes clear that Abinadi does not mean, in his intertwining of the Law and the Prophets, just to “establish an essentially threatened identity” through announcements of apocalypse. Rather, what calls narrow understandings of the Law into question for Abinadi is the prophetic anticipation of the atonement. For Abinadi, a prophet is through and through the figure who looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, the coming of “God himself” who “shall make [atonement] for the sins and iniquities of his people.” The prophet’s task is to make clear that obedience to the Law is not, in the end, what saves the people—whether as a “Saying” or a “Said”—because, “were it not for the atonement, . . . they must unavoidably perish, notwithstanding the law of Moses.”

The Law and the Prophets: Deuteronomy 18

At exactly this moment, Abinadi begins to mark his distinction from Nephi—less, at first, in terms of the Law than in terms of the Prophets. Where Nephi took the Prophets to be concerned primarily—if not exclusively—with the eschatological redemption of Israel, Abinadi takes them to be concerned primarily—if not exclusively—with the redemption worked out in Christ’s atonement. Thus, though both Nephi and Abinadi understand the Law to be aimed at its fulfillment in Christ, each holds a distinct notion of the Prophets. But in order to make this point sharper, it is necessary to look more closely at what Abinadi has to say about the relationship between the Law and the Prophets.

Distinguishing most sharply between Nephi’s and Abinadi’s understandings of the Prophets is Moses’s own status as a prophet. Both Nephi and Abinadi call Moses a prophet, but they seem to understand this in different ways. In
Mosiah 13:33, Abinadi asks rhetorically: “For behold, did not Moses prophesy unto them concerning the coming of the Messiah, and that God should redeem his people?” Presumably, Abinadi here has reference to Deuteronomy 18:15–19:

[Moses says:] The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken... And the Lord said unto me, ... I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.

By alluding to this Deuteronomistic text, Abinadi joins a venerable tradition of Nephite interest in it. Lehi first makes reference to it in 1 Nephi 10:4, and that quotation launches a trajectory that passes through Nephi’s reference to it 1 Nephi 22:20–21 and Abinadi’s in Mosiah 13:33 to Christ’s in 3 Nephi 20:23 and 21:11.

The reference in 1 Nephi 10:4 is of particular importance. There Nephi describes Lehi as teaching that “six hundred years from the time that [he] left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world.” While the first part of this prophecy—the raising up of a prophet among the Jews—clearly echoes the Deuteronomy passage, Lehi adds the explicitly messianic element (“even a Messiah”), which never appears in Deuteronomy. But because Deuteronomy 18 itself speaks only of a prophet and never of a Messiah, it is likely that Abinadi’s reference to the text has passed through the mediating, messianic lens of Lehi in 1 Nephi 10. This likelihood is, in fact, stronger still, given the fact that Nephi describes Lehi (in the next verse) as further describing “this Messiah” as the “Redeemer of the world” (1 Nephi 10:5). Abinadi not only speaks of Moses’s “prophet” as “the Messiah,” but also as the figure who “should redeem [God’s] people” (Mosiah 13:33).

There thus seems to be a kind of trajectory of both textual abridgment and theological expansion that passes from Deuteronomy 18 through 1 Nephi 10 to Mosiah 13. Moses’s original prophecy is summarized but also theologically augmented by Lehi; and Abinadi in turn further summarizes Lehi’s summary while retaining his theological expansions:
It thus seems that it is Nephi specifically, through his recording of Lehi’s teachings, who provides Abinadi with his interpretation of Deuteronomy 18. For Abinadi, Moses prophesied of the Messiah who, having been God, would “come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth,” only to be “oppressed and afflicted” and then put to death (Mosiah 13:34–35). Ironically, though, when Nephi himself—that is, not in reporting his father’s teachings, but in outlining his own—quotes the same Deuteronomy passage in 1 Nephi 22, he understands it quite differently. Whatever Lehi might have seen in the Deuteronomy 18 prophecy, Nephi takes it to refer not to the Messiah’s mortal advent, but to the Redeemer’s eschatological intervention.
The context of Nephi’s quotation of and commentary on Deuteronomy 18 (in 1 Nephi 22) is pivotal: Nephi takes up Deuteronomy 18 immediately after quoting—and thus in the context of commenting on—two full chapters from Second Isaiah. Nephi’s focus, consequently, is not on Christ’s coming in the flesh to accomplish the atonement and resurrection, but on the much later restoration of Israel. Here, as elsewhere, Nephi assumes that Moses and his Law are to be understood through the careful work of likening Isaiah. The passage from 1 Nephi 22 is worth citing at length:

For behold, saith the prophet, the time cometh speedily that Satan shall have no more power over the hearts of the children of men; for the day soon cometh that all the proud and they who do wickedly shall be as stubble; and the day cometh that they must be burned. For the time soon cometh that the fulness of the wrath of God shall be poured out upon all the children of men; for he will not suffer that the wicked shall destroy the righteous. Wherefore, he will preserve the righteous by his power, even if it so be that the fulness of his wrath must come, and the righteous be preserved, even unto the destruction of their enemies by fire. Wherefore, the righteous need not fear; for thus saith the prophet, they shall be saved, even if it so be as by fire. Behold, my brethren, I say unto you, that these things must shortly come; yea, even blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke must come; and it must needs be upon the face of this earth; and it cometh unto men according to the flesh if it so be that they will harden their hearts against the Holy One of Israel. For behold, the righteous shall not perish; for the time surely must come that all they who fight against Zion shall be cut off. And the Lord will surely prepare a way for his people, unto the fulfilling of the words of Moses, which he spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass that all those who will not hear that prophet shall be cut off from among the people. And now I, Nephi, declare unto you, that this prophet of whom Moses spake was the Holy One of Israel; wherefore, he shall execute judgment in righteousness. (1 Nephi 22:15–21)⁹

There is a tendency among Latter-day Saints to read Nephi’s words here (as elsewhere!) through an Abinadite lens—that is, to read Nephi’s quotation as a straightforward reference to Christ’s mortal sojourn. However, in context, Nephi does not at all appear to have reference to the mortal mission of the Messiah. Rather, he clearly takes the passage as referring to the eschatological gathering of Israel. Among the commentators, only George Reynolds and Janne Sjodahl note this fact, explaining Nephi’s meaning thus: “Our Lord will, himself, have charge of the preparations for his second advent.”¹⁰ Moreover, when
Nephi boldly “declares” the identity of the “prophet of whom Moses spake,” he says nothing of “Jesus Christ” or even “the Messiah,” instead employing the title “the Holy One of Israel.” This title is almost entirely unique in the Old Testament to the writings of Isaiah, where it refers to the sovereign Lord of history, not to the mortal Christ.

The upshot of these comments is hopefully clear. While Abinadi regards Moses as a prophet because he prophesied of the (mortal) coming of Christ, Nephi takes Moses as a prophet because he prophesied of the eschatological gathering of Israel—and, of course, both Abinadi and Nephi root these distinct understandings in the same Deuteronomic passage. Hence the irony of Abinadi’s drawing his reading of Deuteronomy from Nephi’s writings. While Abinadi uses Nephi’s words as justifying a Christic interpretation of Moses’s prophecy, Nephi himself understands Moses’s prophecy to refer to the Israelite eschaton.

However, it is not only Nephi who connects his interpretation of Moses’s prophecy to his reading of Isaiah. While Nephi frames his eschatological interpretation of Deuteronomy 18 with an interpretation of Second Isaiah, Abinadi takes up his passing interpretation of the same passage only in order to introduce his own extensive discussion of Second Isaiah. Thus, immediately after he wagers his interpretation of the Deuteronomy passage, Abinadi universalizes his claim:

Yea, and even all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began—have they not spoken more or less concerning these things? Have they not said that God himself should come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth? Yea, and have they not said also that he should bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, and that he, himself, should be oppressed and afflicted? (Mosiah 13:33–35)

Having made this universal claim, Abinadi turns immediately to Isaiah.

Deuteronomy and Isaiah

Most striking about Abinadi’s assertion that all prophets have looked to Christ’s mortal ministry is the way it opens onto his exposition of one prophet in particular. Mosiah 13 ends with the passage quoted immediately above. Mosiah 14 then begins with one last rhetorical question: “Yea, even doth not Isaiah say: Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (Mosiah 14:1). Abinadi makes what looks like a
simple turn from Moses to Isaiah, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, this pivot has deep implications.

Gerhard von Rad long ago identified an important connection between Deuteronomy 18 (the passage alluded to in Mosiah 13:33) and Isaiah 53 (the chapter Abinadi quotes at length in Mosiah 14). After outlining “Deuteronomy’s picture of Moses” as “a suffering intercessor,” von Rad suggests that the idea, in Deuteronomy 18, “that Israel should expect just such a prophet as [Moses] in the future,” marks an intentional relationship between Deuteronomy and the famous portrait of the suffering servant in Second Isaiah (most poignantly, of course, in Isaiah 53). More specifically, recognizing this connection, von Rad claims that it is possible to recognize that Isaiah 53 is meant, in part, to answer Deuteronomy 18: the expectation of the one (Deuteronomy 18) is fulfilled in the described events of the other (Isaiah 53). Thus, as von Rad concludes, “what [Isaiah 53] says was prepared long beforehand.”

Given this connection, Abinadi’s direct turn from Moses’s prophecy to Isaiah’s Suffering Servant Song is unsurprising. But the significance of the connection between the two passages as Abinadi understands it is crucial. For von Rad, as a modern biblical theologian, the connection between Deuteronomy and Second Isaiah is in itself only a question of Israelite understandings of the prophet’s assumption of an “intercessory office”; it has nothing to do, immediately, with the coming of the Messiah. That is, von Rad predictably does not take Isaiah 53 as a prophecy of Christ, but as an account of a prophet’s murder several centuries before Christ. Of course, it is standard in biblical scholarship to regard the typological connection between Isaiah 53 and Christ’s death to have been imposed on the text only after the dawn of Christianity. Thus, for von Rad, the connection between Deuteronomy 18 and Isaiah 53 is not a question of their jointly looking forward to Christ’s mortal advent, but of their sharing a certain notion of the prophet as a suffering intercessor, the one (Deuteronomy 18) anticipating such an intercessor’s appearance, and the other (Isaiah 53) describing such an intercessor’s actually having been historically raised up.

Abinadi, though—apparently because he understands Deuteronomy 18 to refer to the coming of Christ—takes the obvious connection between Deuteronomy and Isaiah as justification for reading into Isaiah, as much as into Moses, an anticipation of the Savior’s earthly ministry. Thus, Nephi and Abinadi differ not only on Moses’s role as prophet, but also on Isaiah’s.
Abinadi’s quotation of Isaiah 53 thus does not really serve as proof that Moses looked prophetically to the coming of the Christ. Rather, it seems best to take Abinadi’s understanding of prophecy as such as lying behind his interpretations of both Moses and Isaiah.

This wrinkle in Abinadi’s turn from Moses to Isaiah is only the first. Abinadi’s interpretation of Isaiah is further complicated by the performative quality of his chosen text. Because Isaiah 53 describes, according to scholars, the intercessory suffering of a specifically prophetic figure, Abinadi could easily have cited it to describe his own experience in Noah’s court. Abinadi himself was “despised and rejected of men,” was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Mosiah 14:3)—and soon enough would be “wounded for [the Nephites’] transgression” and “bruised for [their] iniquities” (Mosiah 14:5). Abinadi was apparently aware of this connection: “But this much I tell you, what you do with me, after this, shall be as a type and a shadow of things which are to come” (Mosiah 13:10).

This last claim obviously bears on Abinadi’s approach to typology. Indeed, a first point might here be made about Abinadite typology. Typology is, for Abinadi, as much a question of reading the Prophets as of interpreting the Law. It thus seems that Abinadi’s notion of typology is, so to speak, broader than Nephi’s. While typology for Nephi is a question of seeing that a “present” law, given and received as a gift, implies its own “future” fulfillment, typology for Abinadi is rooted in a series of discernible correlations between the present—apparently the individual’s contingent experiences as much as the community’s necessary relation to the law—and the future advent of Christ. This is, though, of course only a preliminary formulation. It will have to be clarified through further investigation of Abinadi’s discourse.

**Abinadite Interpretation of Isaiah**

Abinadi unambiguously interprets Isaiah 53 in terms of the event of Christ’s atonement, but what has this to do with his further interpretation of Isaiah 52:7–10? The thrust of his argument is that the obviously messianic message of Isaiah 53 makes clear that Isaiah 52:7–10 also has reference to the coming of the Messiah. In essence, then, Abinadi’s response to the priests is a reprimand concerning their unwillingness to look at scriptural context. Because Isaiah 52 and Isaiah 53 are so proximate in Isaiah’s writings, they
should be read as having similar points of reference, and who could miss the messianic spirit of Isaiah 53?

Abinadi claims that prophets, as the announcers of Christ’s coming and atonement (Mosiah 14; Isaiah 53), are those “who have published peace, who have brought good tidings of good, who have published salvation; and said unto Zion: Thy God reigneth!” (Mosiah 15:14; Isaiah 52:7). Moreover, he uses the same text of Isaiah 52:7 to indicate a typological connection between the prophet and the Prophet, between suffering servant figures like himself and the Messiah:

And O how beautiful upon the mountains were [the ancient prophets’] feet! And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those that are still [like Abinadi] publishing peace! And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who shall hereafter [in Alma’s church?] publish peace, yea, from this time henceforth and forever! And behold, I say unto you, this is not all. For O how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that is the founder of peace, yea, even the Lord, who has redeemed his people; yea, him who has granted salvation unto his people. (Mosiah 15:15–18)

The prophets—Abinadi among them—are all types of Christ.

Such is Abinadi’s straightforward interpretation of Isaiah 52:7. But before turning to Isaiah 52:8–10, he introduces his doctrine of the first resurrection, of “a resurrection of [the uncondemned] that have been, and who are, and who shall be, even until the resurrection of Christ” (Mosiah 15:21). According to Abinadi, there are two ways to fall under the category of “the uncondemned.” On the one hand, one can believe in the words of the prophets and keep the commandments of God (see Mosiah 15:22); but on the other hand, one can simply never have heard the prophetic message of salvation: “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”; and, significantly, “little children also have eternal life” (Mosiah 15:24–25). Thus it is only those who have “wilfully rebelled against God, that have known the commandments of God, and would not keep them” who will be excluded (Mosiah 15:26).

What seems most important to Abinadi in this aside about the first resurrection, it turns out, is the question of knowledge. In addition to dividing the knowingly obedient from the knowingly disobedient, Abinadi identifies a third
group, the unknowingly obedient/disobedient, which also have a place in the first resurrection. Each of these three groups embodies a particular relationship (or nonrelationship) to the prophetic message of Christ’s coming:

Moreover, this threefold distinction sets up Abinadi’s return to the Isaiah passage. In large part, Abinadi uses Isaiah 52:8–10 to make clear that the unknowingly obedient/disobedient will, at some point, all encounter the prophetic message, such that this third group will cease to exist: “the time shall come that the salvation of the Lord shall be declared to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (Mosiah 15:28). That is, because the prophets will announce the atonement to all, everyone “shall see eye to eye” (Mosiah 15:29), and the Lord will “make bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Mosiah 15:31). With none left ignorant, only the obedient will be saved.

It is clear, then, that Abinadi’s critique of the priests is methodological in character. If the priests would note how close Isaiah 52:7–10—through which they were apparently justifying their self-satisfied wickedness in the land of Nephi—is situated to the obviously Christological prophecy of Isaiah 53, the priests would see that they have wrested the text in their likening of it. Their blindness follows from their narrow focus, from their inability to see larger contexts. In the end, however, this methodological critique forms only the outer shell of Abinadi’s deeper worry, which is less a question of interpretive methodology than of Christology. Because both Isaiah 53 and Deuteronomy 18 can be read in non-Christological terms, Abinadi’s reference to the broader context of Isaiah 52:7–10 does more than merely point out overlooked facts. That is, Abinadi attempts to draw the attention of Noah’s priests, not to a textual something about which they ought already to have knowledge, but to an evental something in which they must have faith. In effect, while Abinadi
shares a common past with Noah’s priests, his present is drastically different from theirs because—unlike them—he believes that something remains to happen in the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past (The Time of Nephi)</th>
<th>Present (The Time of Abinadi)</th>
<th>Future (Still to Come)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noah’s priests, through their reading of Second Isaiah, regard the covenant as having been fulfilled by their state</td>
<td>Effectively, there is no future: the priests claim that history, projected by Nephi, is over</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Lehitic Covenant is articulated, tied to Second Isaiah, and pointed to its eventual fulfillment</td>
<td>Abinadi, through his reading of Second Isaiah, regards the covenant as yet to be fulfilled at Christ’s resurrection</td>
<td>The events of Christ’s coming, atonement, and resurrection remain to happen</td>
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That Abinadi regarded the closure of the Law as a question of faith and not a question of knowledge (of provability) will become clear in a moment. Folding that question within itself is the larger question: Why does Abinadi invent a distinct approach to Isaiah—distinct, that is, from Nephi’s? Obviously, to answer this question, it is necessary to turn to the status of the Law in Abinadi’s speech. It is necessary, that is, finally to flesh out completely Abinadi’s notion of typology and to compare it with Nephi’s.
The Prophets and the Law

The bulk of Abinadi’s discussion of the Law is found in Mosiah 13:29–32. These verses come relatively early in the speech and just after Abinadi bluntly announces that “the time shall come when it shall no more be expedient to keep the law of Moses” because “salvation doth not come by the law alone” (Mosiah 13:27–28). Notably, they also immediately precede Abinadi’s interpretation of Deuteronomy 18 (Mosiah 13:33). Suspended between the insufficiency of the Law and Moses’s prophetic anticipation of Christ, Abinadi’s discussion of the Law carries a heavy theological burden. Its task is to explain how the reality of Christ’s coming—announced by Moses the Lawgiver himself—marks within the Law itself an essential insufficiency.

But even before turning to the details, a major point of difference between Abinadi and Nephi is obvious. For Nephi, the Law’s temporal limitation follows from its givenness, from the necessity of its fulfillment. That is, Nephi understands the Law as temporary because of its participation in the much broader logic of the gift (of God). All things given of God, because they were given by the infinitely faithful, will be fulfilled, and therefore the Law, received as a gift, points away from its own locality to the universality of its Giver. For Abinadi, on the other hand, the temporary character of the Law is a consequence of the prophetic lawgiver’s—that is, Moses’s—anticipation of something more comprehensive than the Law: a higher law. Thus, while fulfillment of the Law is for Nephi internally prescribed by the Law itself (as a gift), its fulfillment is for Abinadi externally imposed on the Law by Christ’s singular atonement. Put another way, Nephi sees the atonement and the Law as two (perhaps parallel) instances of God’s grace, either of which can be problematized by being treated as something other than a gift, while Abinadi takes the atonement as genuinely graceful but the Law as a circumstantial expediency problematic by its very nature.

This initial formulation, however, needs to be fleshed out through a careful interpretation of Mosiah 13:29–32.

The Law according to Abinadi

Abinadi begins with the question of circumstantial expediency: “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” (Mosiah 13:29). Though Abinadi uses the word “given” to describe the inauguration of the Law, he clearly uses it differently than Nephi. While Nephi emphasizes that the givenness of the Law reveals its graceful character—Nephi follows his first discussion of the Law by saying that his “soul delights in [God’s] grace” (2 Nephi 11:5)—Abinadi emphasizes the expedient circumstances under which the Law was “given,” as if any rational person would have ordained such a law in such a situation. (Indeed, it should be noted that Abinadi never specifically attributes the giving of the Law to God. Might his emphasis on Moses in verse 33 suggest that Abinadi believed Moses to be the principal author of the Law?) The fact that Abinadi apparently can give reasons for the establishment of the Law, while it may not cancel the compassionate intentions with which the Law was given, nonetheless indicates that the Law was not fully graceful. For Abinadi—as verse 30 makes especially clear—the Law is about works rather than grace.

But even before verse 30, Abinadi marks the ungraceful nature of the Law still more radically. When he actually outlines the reason for the Law, he explains that Israel had become “a stiffnecked people, quick to do iniquity, and slow to remember the Lord their God.” Not only, then, does Abinadi regard the Law as a response rather than as an unprecedented gift, he sees it as a response to wickedness. Though he clearly understands the Law as given out of love, since he says it was given in order to curb iniquity and to aid remembrance, Abinadi nonetheless appears to see the Law as an unfortunate necessity—as anything but a happy moment in the unfolding history of God’s engagement with Abraham’s children.

Verse 30: “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.” As already pointed out above, there is a clear emphasis here on the Law as a system of works, as so many “performances” and “ordinances” to be “observe[d] strictly from day to day” if the Law is to serve its purpose. Abinadi thus frankly describes the Law as an intentionally massive burden, one unwieldy enough to ensure that Israel could not ignore it. But more important is the fact that, whereas the Law is for Nephi a singular manifestation of grace, it is for Abinadi a multiplicity of works. This difference is vital. The internal fulfillment of the Law in Nephi’s account seems to follow from the Law’s singularity. But precisely because Abinadi understands the Law
as a proliferating plurality of more or less disconnected performances and ordinances, it has no unifying center in itself. For Nephi, the Law of Moses organizes itself into a coherent order through its very giftedness. But for Abinadi, the Law of Moses, left to itself, falls apart into a self-disseminating mass of legislative attempts to curb what would, without the Law, inevitably be the falling apart and self-dissemination of Israel itself.

If the instability of the Law in verse 30 is problematic, though, Abinadi goes on in verse 31 to suggest that this is because the Law should have a unifying center: “But behold, I say unto you, that all these things were types of things to come.” Abinadi’s contrastive “but” here is vital, as if his statement in verse 31 is meant to stop the process of proliferation and dissemination of the Law that follows from verse 30. And inasmuch as the various performances and ordinances of the Law are “types of things to come,” it would seem that Abinadi gives the Law—in Christ—its unifying center, though a center ultimately external to the Law as such.

But, strictly speaking, Abinadi’s verse 31 lacks the force necessary to hold the Law together. Technically, Abinadi does not actually orient the self-disseminating Law to a single unifying center. Rather, Abinadi can only assign to the various performances and ordinances of the Law (“these things”) the status of “types” (in the plural) of “things to come” (also, crucially, in the plural). Thus, though typology would seem to have the potential to unify the Law for Abinadi, the Law nonetheless remains a system of so many types. Even the typological Law is, for Abinadi, a still-proliferating mass, though of “symbolic precursors” rather than mere performances and ordinances. Because he does not unify the life of Christ, but leaves it as a plurality of activities perhaps irreducible to a single storyline, Abinadi creates a system of typological plurality.

The difference between Nephi and Abinadi is embodied in the words themselves. While Abinadi speaks explicitly of “types” (a plural noun), Nephi speaks of “typifying” (a gerund). Whereas Abinadi understands the individual laws, performances, and ordinances of the Law to be individually typical of the various individual events of Christ’s mortal ministry, Nephi focuses primarily on the whole Law as indicative of Christ’s coming. In short: Abinadi’s Law of Moses was called for because of the atonement still to come; Nephi’s Law of Moses calls for the atonement to come.

Significantly, Abinadi goes on in verse 32 to claim that Israel seldom—if ever—understood the Law as typological: “And now, did they understand the
law? I say unto you, Nay, they did not all understand the law; and this because of the hardness of their hearts; for they understood not that there could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God.” Even if the Law did have something like a unifying center in its typological referents, it was seldom experienced as such. For Abinadi, regardless of its actual meaning, the Law remained for Israel a scattering of disparate rules and ordinances.

Here again the difference between Abinadi and Nephi is clear. Because for Abinadi the messianic meaning of the Law of Moses is only externally imposed by the Prophets, it never takes hold for Israel. For Abinadi, the Law and the Prophets are inseparable because the Law cannot be understood without the Prophets’ key to the Law’s real meaning. In Nephi’s model, however, no external hermeneutical key is necessary because the Law is not a multiplicity without a center. For Nephi, the Law is simply a gift to be received. For this reason, Nephi regards the Prophets as effectively separate from the Law, as given to the task, not of announcing the Law’s meaning and fulfillment in Christ’s first coming, but of outlining the gathering of Israel before his second coming. While Nephi sees the fulfillment of the Law—the coming of the Messiah—as thus provable or knowable, Abinadi sees in the insufficiency of the Law the need for prophetically instigated faith. Of the two, only Nephi’s soul could delight in “proving” the coming of Christ through the givenness of the Law of Moses.

The differences between Nephi and Abinadi are sharpest, however, at the level of methodology. It is, more than anything else, the relationship between the Law and the Prophets that determines the details of methodology. Nephi and Abinadi work out, in the end, two distinct interpretive strategies, one associated with the Law and the other with the Prophets. For both, it is the reading of the Prophets that gives shape to the reading of the Law, and so, even though both describe their ways of interpreting the Law as typological, their different approaches to the Prophets lead them to distinct understandings of typology. For Nephi, the Prophets are to be likened, to be taken as providing a template for interpreting Israelite history—particularly Israelite eschatology. And because he focuses his attention most heavily on the complex of First and Second Isaiah, a complex that both works out its own typological methodology and roots that methodology in a highly developed theology of history, Nephi adopts a model of typology that roots the Law in a strong theology of grace. Abinadi, on the other hand, claims that the Prophets are to be read Christologically, to be read as consistently prophesying of the coming
Messiah and the larger soteriological consequences of that advent. Accordingly, Abinadi develops a model of typological interpretation that focuses on how the details of the Law can be taken as symbols both of the events of Christ’s mortal advent and of its larger soteriological consequences. Whereas for Nephi, the Prophets ultimately speak to a community, for Abinadi, they speak to the individual who desires salvation.

The difference between these two interpretive approaches is critical. Nephi’s approach to the Prophets leads him to a typological method characterized by literalism. Nephi is little given to reading scripture symbolically or allegorically. Instead, he intertwines the spiritual and the temporal in a likening that reveals God’s grace (see 1 Nephi 22, for example). Abinadi’s approach leads him to a typological method that takes scripture to be primarily symbolic. Because scripture for him points inevitably to “things to come,” and especially because—as the larger Abinadite tradition makes clear (see, for example, Alma 36–37)—those “things to come” consist not only of Christ’s actual mortal advent but also the abstract doctrinal soteriology derivable from that advent, Abinadi’s typological approach to scripture lends itself to symbolic and even allegorical interpretation of scripture. Thus while Nephi essentially takes the scriptures as an end unto themselves, something to delight in, Abinadi takes the scriptures as a means to a separable end, something to look forward from.

Interestingly, though, as Jacob’s heir, Abinadi arguably and ironically derives his approach to the Prophets from Nephi’s own record. Not only is Abinadi’s interpretation of Deuteronomy 18 to be found in Lehi’s words recorded in 1 Nephi 10, but his larger interest in Christological soteriology derives from his familiarity with Jacob’s sermon in 2 Nephi 9 (as well as with Lehi’s sermon to Jacob in 2 Nephi 2). And Abinadi likely would never have been able to see Christological elements in Isaiah 53 had he not been familiar with Nephi’s passing comments on the mortal ministry of Christ. Thus, for all the obvious differences between Nephi and Abinadi at the abstract level of methodology, there is no question that the two come from the same tradition, and that the one remains largely the heir of the other.

But at the same time, there is also no question that Abinadi marks a crucial turning point in Nephite theology. Though Abinadi may well have drawn his soteriological focus from certain portions of Nephi’s record, he does so only by privileging soteriology over what is clearly Nephi’s principal concern in the small plates: the covenant. Whereas Nephi’s writings concern
themselves obsessively with the Abrahamic and Lehitic covenants, Mormon’s abridgment—detailing the aftermath of the Abinadite intervention—almost entirely ignores covenantal themes, providing instead sermon after sermon about the atonement of the coming Christ. Making these differences all the more important is the fact that Christ himself, during his visit to the Lehites, addresses the Abinadite shift.

**Christ and Abinadite Typology**

In chapter 4, I only introduced the possibility that Christ’s words in 3 Nephi 11 speak directly to a Nephite/Abinadite divide among the Lehites. But here I will argue that Christ says far more about the differences between Nephi and Abinadi than might at first appear. The question, then, to be asked is this: What should be read into Christ’s effective reversal of the Abinadite project?

In chapter 4, I suggested that Christ’s expressed concern, in 3 Nephi 11, about doctrinal “disputations” were connected to Abinadi’s difficult teachings in Mosiah 15—a chapter that still baffles readers of the Book of Mormon. It is now necessary, however, to point out that Christ not only identifies these disputations, he weighs in on them, and he does so by spelling out a doctrine of the Godhead that is unquestionably cast in terms of 2 Nephi 31 rather than Mosiah 15. If Christ favors an approach during his visit to the Lehites, his approval clearly goes to Nephi rather than Abinadi. Similarly, when Christ re instituted baptism during the same initial discourse, he not only effectively sets aside the Abinadite baptismal tradition, he also articulates the ordinance’s meaning in terms strikingly reminiscent of Nephi’s teachings.

But this is only the beginning of what becomes a robust return to Nephi. The Abinadite (and Jacobite) emphasis on soteriology—saturating the Book of Mormon from Abinadi’s time to the arrival of Christ—is also trumped through a definitive return to the covenantal focus of Nephi’s record. Pointing with his pierced hands to the Old Testament, and especially to Isaiah, Christ practically says nothing about his sacrificial atonement. Like Nephi, Christ’s gaze is trained on the eschatological covenant rather than on the already-past atonement. There is something anti-climactic about this after Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman. Rather than coming to confirm all their Christological speculations, and rather than coming just to stand before them in all his prophesied glory,24 Christ comes to the Lehites to point them back to the small plates and forward to the covenant’s fulfillment.
Still more, when Christ comes to the task of reading the Prophets with the gathered Nephites and Lamanites, not only does he read them (Isaiah, Micah, and Malachi) employing Nephi’s (rather than Abinadi’s) methodological approach, he addresses himself first to the very verses Abinadi addressed at the request of Noah’s priests. And, crucially, he takes these verses to refer, not to his mortal advent, but to the covenant’s fulfillment and Israel’s gathering:

And then will I remember my covenant which I have made unto my people, O house of Israel, and I will bring my gospel unto them. And I will show unto thee, O house of Israel, that the Gentiles shall not have power over you; but I will remember my covenant unto you, O house of Israel, and ye shall come unto the knowledge of the fulness of my gospel. But if the Gentiles will repent and return unto me, saith the Father, behold they shall be numbered among my people, O house of Israel. . . . Verily, verily, I say unto you, thus hath the Father commanded me—that I should give unto this people this land for their inheritance. And then the words of the prophet Isaiah shall be fulfilled, which say: Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing, for they shall see eye to eye when the Lord shall bring again Zion. Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God. (3 Nephi 16:11–20)

For Christ—as for Nephi—Isaiah 52:8–10 has reference to the eventual covenantal inheritance of the promised land by the Lehites.

Significantly, Christ comes back to the same passage in 3 Nephi 20, during the second day of his visit. There the difference between his own approach and Abinadi’s is even sharper. Like Abinadi, who had clarified his interpretation of Isaiah 52:7–10 by quoting it alongside the obviously Christological prophecy of Isaiah 53, Christ couples Isaiah 52:7–10 with another chapter from Second Isaiah. But instead of coupling it with an obviously Christological prophecy, Christ couples it with Isaiah 54, emphasizing his covenantal approach to the text that Abinadi had interpreted otherwise for Noah’s priests.

3 Nephi 15 contains yet another indication of Christ’s “return to Nephi.” There he outlines the relationship between the Law and the Prophets in a way that echoes Nephi rather than Abinadi:

Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses. Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil
the law; therefore it hath an end. Behold, I do not destroy the prophets, for as many as have not been fulfilled in me, verily I say unto you, shall all be fulfilled. And because I said unto you that old things have passed away, I do not destroy that which hath been spoken concerning things which are to come. For behold, the covenant which I have made with my people is not all fulfilled; but the law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me. (3 Nephi 15:4–8)

Joseph McConkie and Robert Millet comment on this verse: “Many of the Nephites, as they heard the Lord speak of the fulfillment of the law of Moses, must have wondered whether the words and teachings of . . . the Old World prophets, whose teachings they had from the brass plates, were no longer relevant to them.” Such confusion on the part of the Lehites, it would seem, could only result from the interweaving of the Law and the Prophets outlined by Abinadi. Of course, because Christ also suggests that some of the prophecies had indeed been “fulfilled in [him],” he nicely accommodates Abinadi’s understanding of the Prophets while nonetheless canceling its exclusivity. That is, while Christ allows for the Abinadite approach, he also places specific limits on it, making clear that the Prophets more fundamentally had their eyes on the covenant’s fulfillment.

One final but especially illustrative indication of the “return to Nephi” must be mentioned: Christ, like both Nephi and Abinadi, quotes and interprets Deuteronomy 18. And yet again he clearly privileges Nephi’s interpretation over Abinadi’s:

And it shall come to pass that I will establish my people, O house of Israel. And behold, this people will I establish in this land, unto the fulfilling of the covenant which I made with your father Jacob; and it shall be a New Jerusalem. And the powers of heaven shall be in the midst of this people; yea, even I will be in the midst of you. Behold, I am he of whom Moses spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass that every soul who will not hear that prophet shall be cut off from among the people. Verily I say unto you, yea, and all the prophets from Samuel and those that follow after, as many as have spoken, have testified of me. (3 Nephi 20:21–24)

These words are plain enough in themselves. But, as if to make it clearer still, Christ returns to the same text in 3 Nephi 21:11:

Therefore it shall come to pass that whosoever will not believe in my words, who am Jesus Christ, which the Father shall cause him to bring
forth unto the Gentiles [in the shape of the Book of Mormon at the dawn of the gathering], and shall give unto him power that he shall bring them forth unto the Gentiles, (it shall be done even as Moses said) they shall be cut off from among my people who are of the covenant.

What should be made of this remarkable reversal, this return—by Christ himself—from Abinadi back to Nephi? More specifically, what does this reversal suggest about Nephi’s and Abinadi’s notions of typology? Does Third Nephi imply that Nephi’s typological method is to be preferred over Abinadi’s?

**Nephi and Abinadi**

First, it is necessary—in the spirit of Christ’s above-mentioned subtle approbation of Abinadi in 3 Nephi 15—to notice a few points that counter any strong indictment of Abinadi. (1) Christ never, in Third Nephi, explicitly mentions either Abinadi or Nephi. That is, he never directly instructs his hearers to abandon the Abinadite tradition in a return to the small plates. The return to Nephi is entirely implicit. (2) Similarly, Mormon never suggests that the Abinadite tradition was misguided, either in his abridgment or in his editorial asides. Moreover, he includes words of divine approbation throughout the Abinadite tradition, making clear that the Abinadite shift was one God (rather than Abinadi) instigated. (3) Finally, there is no return, after Christ’s visit, to the early Nephite monarchy. Instead, at Christ’s own behest in 3 Nephi 27, the tradition of the church is continued, though some of its doctrines and rituals—as well as its hermeneutical focus—were altered (or at least clarified). It may in fact be, in the end, that 3 Nephi 27 marks a rehabilitation of the Abinadite tradition that heals the Nephi/Abinadi breach.

As a result, any idea that Christ came to undo the Abinadite tradition or to rescue Lehi’s children from two centuries of ecclesiastical apostasy is misguided. Some other, more nuanced approach is called for. But how could Abinadi be both right and, it seems, wrong?

A place to start, I believe, is this: Christ’s sermons mark a return to Nephi, not to Noah’s priests. Abinadi seems to have broken with the small plates tradition, but he did so because Nephi’s tradition, ideologically usurped by Noah and his priests, had become fully corrupted. Abinadi was—as any faithful figure in his position would have been—backed into a theological corner by the circumstances of his time and place, and thus his reinterpretation of the small plates may well have been the only way to salvage the tradition. In
other words, it may have been that the only way to rescue what Nephi had begun was for Abinadi to read the small plates against themselves, retrieving the soteriological thread running through the small plates material associated with Jacob, and making this thread the whole focus of the Nephite tradition. Abinadi, in short, seems to have have seen it necessary—expedient, Abinadi himself might say—to replace the “higher law” of likening Isaiah with the “lower law” of soteriological interpretation.

This approach to the difficulty places unprecedented importance on the moment when Abinadi’s “face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses’s did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord” (Mosiah 13:5). Whatever other significance that moment may hold—and commentators have found a good deal of significance in it—its greatest significance may yet have been overlooked. Under what circumstances specifically did Moses’s face shine? The story is recorded in Exodus 32–34. It begins with Moses “delay[ing] to come down out of the mount,” in response to which the Israelites ask Aaron to “make [them] gods” (Exodus 32:1). Meanwhile, the Lord, speaking with Moses in Sinai, decides to “consume” Israel and begin again with Moses, until Moses intervenes and reminds the Lord of the Abrahamic covenant (Exodus 32:9–14). Moses then hurries down from the mountain with “the two tables of the testimony” in his hand (Exodus 32:15).

Arriving at the camp, Moses finds Israel worshipping a golden calf, and “he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount” (Exodus 32:19). After a harsh purging of Israel, Moses returns to Sinai and offers himself as a sacrifice for all of Israel: “Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written” (Exodus 32:32). After some further exchange, the Lord instructs Moses to create new “tables of stone like unto the first,” a law apparently to replace the law the idolaters were unprepared to receive (Exodus 34:1). Moses produces the tables, returns to Sinai, and receives “the words of the covenant,” but “when he came down from the mount, . . . Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone” (Exodus 34:29). It is thus, at the very moment that Moses returns to Israel with the replacement Law, that “the skin of his face shone; and [all the children of Israel] were afraid to come nigh to him” (Exodus 34:30).

A whole series of parallels between this story and the narrative of Abinadi’s speech deserves attention: the idolatry of Israel and Noah’s people, the apostasy in each case of the priesthood, the parallel announcements of destruction, the willing sacrifice of the prophet, etc. But the most crucial
parallel is the one most likely to be missed. Just as Moses’s face shines at the very moment he replaces the first, higher law—written by the hand of God himself—with a lower law, it is precisely when Abinadi’s face shines that he replaces covenantal theology and its associated “higher” approach to the Law with a strictly soteriological theology and its associated “lower” approach to the Law. I do not believe this is a coincidence. (Indeed, it is obviously significant that Paul also uses this same Old Testament story to draw a distinction between two ways of reading scripture, one “higher” and one “lower” in 2 Corinthians 3).

At once right and “wrong,” the Abinadite turn—significantly reversed by Christ himself in Third Nephi—was expedient. Ironically, it is thus possible to see in Abinadi’s discussion of the Law an outline not only of what Abinadi took to be Moses’s relationship to Israel, but also of Abinadi’s relationship to the Nephites. Indeed, Mosiah 13:29–32 might be paraphrased (with changes in italics) to highlight this point:

And now I say unto you that it was expedient that there should be a new typological methodology given to the children of Nephi, yea, even a very strict version of anticipatory Christianity; for they were a stiffnecked people, quick to do iniquity, and slow to remember the Lord their God. Therefore there was this new way of making sense of the small plates given them, yea, an understanding of the small plates as laying out an interpretation of the Law focused on typological performances and ordinances, making the Law of Moses a law which they were to observe and typologically interpret strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of the coming Christ and their duty towards him. Thus, behold, I say unto you, that all these things were types of things to come—specifically of the event of the visit, to the Lehites, of Christ himself. And now, did the Nephites understand what had thus taken place? I say unto you, Nay, they did not all understand (really, it was only the few consistently righteous—mostly the high priests—who understood what Abinadi had done); and this lack of general understanding was because of the hardness of the Nephites’ hearts; for they understood not—despite all that had been told them—that there could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God. (Mosiah 13:29–32)

Perhaps it was Abinadi’s inspired desire to help the Nephites survive long enough to witness the coming of Christ.
Notes

1. See McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 2:208; Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, 2:71; Dana Pike, “How Beautiful upon the Mountains,” 264; Welch, *Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, 176. This kind of case against negative prophets seems to have been relatively common among the Nephites, at least common enough for Samuel the Lamanite to make it a basic formula some decades later (see Helaman 13:24–28).


3. It is important that, as John Welch notes, Noah and his priests were innocent of direct violation of the (letter of the) Law of Moses. Welch, *Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, 147–151. This is even true, shocking as this might sound to modern ears, of the royal and priestly employment of prostitutes. As Roland de Vaux explains: “The man who goes after prostitutes [according to the wisdom writings of the Old Testament] dissipates his wealth and loses his strength (Pr 29:3; 31:3), but he commits no crime in the eyes of the law.” Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 36–37. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, moreover, points out that “In the ancient Near East, prostitutes could be hired as surrogate wombs as well as sexual objects... A man could acquire a child in many ways—with his wife, by using a slave as surrogate womb, by marrying a second wife, by going to a prostitute, by adopting a foundling,” all this without violating the Law of Moses. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 103.


5. Note that the phrase “these things” clearly refers to the Isaiah passage presented by the priests. Thus, to “understand these things” in verse 26 is to understand Isaiah 52:7–10.

6. It is unlikely that the priests would have countered the claim that Isaianic interpretation was a question of the “spirit of prophesying.” In their own small plates, Nephi had written that Isaiah’s words “are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy” (2 Nephi 25:4).


paraphrase of Deuteronomy reflects the New Testament rendering of the text; but Nephi also introduces phrases as distinct from the rendering in Acts as from the rendering in Deuteronomy.

10. Reynolds and Sjodahl, Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 1:225, emphasis added. Even Reynolds and Sjodahl here make a problematic claim, since Nephi speaks of the eschatological gathering but never says anything about the Second Coming. Indeed, the Book of Mormon’s relationship to the Second Coming is quite complex.


13. Ibid., 2:277.

14. Ibid.

15. See the discussion in Childs, Isaiah, 420–423. Note, however, that most Latter-day Saint scholars take Abinadi’s understanding of Isaiah 53 to be proof that Isaiah had direct reference to Christ’s suffering. Exemplary is Daniel Ludlow: “Biblical scholars have long disputed whether or not chapter 53 of Isaiah really pertained to the life and mission of Jesus Christ. The fact that Abinadi quotes this chapter in an attempt to convince the people of the coming of the Messiah would indicate that these particular writings of Isaiah definitely do pertain to Jesus Christ.” Ludlow, Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon, 183. See also Sperry, Book of Mormon Compendium, 301; and Reynolds and Sjodahl, Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 2:152–153. Against this stands the more recent, careful discussion of the point by John Welch: It is “much easier for Christian readers to perceive the relevance of Isaiah 53 on the mission and passion of Jesus Christ. . . . [However, certain] ambiguities [in the text] would have been . . . a source of uncertainty about the meaning of Isaiah 53 in the minds of people like the priests of Noah, who lived before the time of Christ. . . . Because of the open texture of Isaiah 53 in this regard, Abinadi was textually vulnerable on this very point.” John W. Welch, “Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon,” in Parry and Welch, Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, 309–310, emphasis added.

16. This is not to say, importantly, that Nephi would not have seen in Isaiah 53 an anticipation of the life/death of Christ. Indeed, it is significant—from the perspective of Nephi—that Isaiah 53, like Isaiah 51:9–10, speaks in the past tense. It is quite possible that Nephi would have seen Isaiah 53 as an eschatological looking back to Christ’s life/death, as a song to be sung by Israel at the end of history. If this speculation is not without merit—Nephi unfortunately never says anything about Isaiah 53 in his own writings—it must be recognized that Nephi as much as Abinadi breaks with the perspective of modern scholarship embodied in von Rad’s interpretation. While Abinadi links Moses and Isaiah because he sees them as jointly announcing the coming of Christ, Nephi links Moses and Isaiah because he sees them entangled in a relationship much more complex than the one von Rad identifies.


20. It would be highly speculative, but interesting, to suggest that it is precisely this difficulty that drives Abinadi’s theological discussion of Christ’s Father/Son unity in Mosiah 15.

21. Note that Nephi never uses the plural word “types” in his writings.

22. Note that neither Abinadi nor any member of the Abinadite church ever speaks of “likening” scripture.

23. One might, of course, point out that Abinadi’s typological methodology can lend itself to a kind of readerly laziness, since anyone can force a symbolic relationship between this or that scriptural element and some universal soteriological truth (anything good is comparable to Christ; anything bad to Satan). However, Abinadi’s model is not so simplistic, since for him typology is always predicated on some kind of prophetic knowledge.

24. It should be noted that Grant Hardy actually makes a very convincing case against any general recognition among the Nephites and Lamanites that Christ would come to visit them specifically. See Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, 182–183.

25. That Christ even bothered with the Prophets is itself a mark of the “return to Nephi,” since the Prophets—and Isaiah in particular—had largely been ignored after Abinadi’s Christological treatment.