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Abinadi Interprets Isaiah

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**Abstract** When the prophet Abinadi preached repentance to the Nephites, the people were upset and turned him over to King Noah. While in the king’s presence, Abinadi explained to the king and to the priests the meaning of Isaiah’s messianic prophecies. Although they did not heed Abinadi’s teaching, modern readers of the Book of Mormon are now able to better understand the life of Jesus Christ and the key principles of the atonement through Abinadi’s teachings.



“What Meaneth the  
Words That Are Written?”

# Abinadi Interprets Isaiah

Ann Madsen

Book of Mormon character illustrations by Ronald Crosby



**I**N THE BOOK OF MORMON many prophets and Christ himself cite the words of Isaiah. At times they do not quote him directly but allude to his teachings, often using his own vivid language in the process. Abinadi is one such prophet. Intimately acquainted with Isaiah's prophetic messages, he opens before us a priceless treasure as he interprets one of Isaiah's most significant prophecies about the coming Messiah: Isaiah 53.



What is astonishing is that Abinadi makes this sublime discourse in the presence of hostile priests who, at the behest of their king, came to a council to determine the fate of Abinadi.<sup>1</sup> As he speaks, Abinadi presents a wonderfully clear view of the coming Christ and his atonement. The prophet's carefully crafted case for the fulfillment of the law of Moses culminates in his majestic witness of a living, acting Christ couched in Isaiah's inspiring words.

The writings of Isaiah were recorded on the brass plates, which were recovered by Nephi about a century after Isaiah's death.<sup>2</sup> The value of the brass plates to the children of Lehi cannot be overestimated.<sup>3</sup> Isaiah's writings, as copied thereon, would become a recurring thread running through the Book of Mormon, from one prophet to another, from Nephi to Moroni.

At the beginning of the Nephite record, for example, Nephi and his brother Jacob employ Isaiah's words to teach their people powerfully of the role of

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Christ and his atonement in the great plan of happiness. A thousand years later, when the record draws to a close, Mormon and Moroni are still consulting the brass plates or other copies of Isaiah's prophecies and admonishing their people to search and heed them. This late mention of Isaiah's writings underscores vividly the timeless quality of both Isaiah's prophetic message and its importance in the brass plates.

Just over 180 years after Abinadi, the resurrected Christ himself quoted Isaiah during his visit to the people of Nephi. At that time he quoted Isaiah 54 in its entirety (see 3 Nephi 22). Moreover, many of his other teachings during his ministry among the Nephites were expressed in phrases found in Isaiah's writings.

## The Setting

Abinadi's skillfully crafted discourse in response to the queries of King Noah's priests fits into a larger prophetic pattern in the Book of Mormon. This pattern will become clear as we consider the confrontation that sets the scene for Abinadi's careful interpretation of Isaiah.

About 148 B.C. King Noah's military forces drove back the Lamanites who had been attacking small groups of Nephites as they tended their flocks. The Lamanite marauders had killed a few men, stolen their animals, and driven many of their flocks out of the land. King Noah finally sent enough of his army to force the Lamanites into retreat for a time. The victorious Nephite forces returned from the battle "rejoicing in their spoil" and swelling with pride. They boasted that their "fifty could stand against thousands of the Lamanites"; but worse, they had come to "delight in blood, and the shedding of the blood of their [Lamanite] brethren, and this *because of* the wickedness of their king and priests" (Mosiah 11:18, 19; emphasis added).

As the Nephites were celebrating the shedding of Lamanite blood, the prophet Abinadi arrived on the scene. His message immediately dampened their celebratory mood. His message was simple: God has seen your wickedness and whoredoms, and unless you repent, you will be delivered into the hands of your enemies and brought into bondage. You have been slow to heed God's words; therefore God will be slow to hear you (see Mosiah 11:20–24).

Predictably, Abinadi's message angered his listeners, who by now were bloodthirsty. They sought to kill him but felt God's power and were afraid to touch him. When King Noah<sup>4</sup> heard of Abinadi's sharp criticism of his people, he said:

Who is Abinadi, that I and my people should be judged of him, or who is the Lord, that shall bring upon my people such great affliction? I command you to bring Abinadi hither, that I may slay him, for he has said these things that he might stir up my people to anger one with another, and to raise contentions among my people; therefore I will slay him. (Mosiah 11:27–28)

After King Noah's declaration, "the eyes of the people were blinded; therefore they hardened their hearts against the words of Abinadi, and they sought from that time forward to take him" (Mosiah 11:29).

For a time Abinadi eluded those who sought

him, but he appeared again two years later, this time in disguise and with an even more urgent message. One wonders whether the people recognized him as he suddenly appeared after two years. The scripture says the people “knew him not” (Mosiah 12:1). Even though he announced his name in his first sentence, after two years that name may have meant nothing to them. Perhaps they did not know him since they identify him simply as “a man” (v. 9). In any event, in their anger the people brought him bound to the king and reported:

Behold, we have brought a man before thee who has prophesied evil concerning thy people, and saith that God will destroy them. And he also prophesied evil concerning thy life, and saith that thy life shall be as a garment in a furnace of fire. . . . Behold, here is the man, we deliver him into thy hands; thou mayest do with him as seemeth thee good. (Mosiah 12:9–10, 16)

King Noah cast Abinadi into prison and called his priests to a council to decide his fate. At a certain point in the proceeding, agents brought Abinadi before the priests, who began to question Abinadi, trying to “cross him” so they could find evidence with which to accuse him. But he “answered them boldly and withstood all their questions” and “did confound them in all their words” (Mosiah 12:19). As the priests of Noah struggled to condemn Abinadi



for preaching “gloom and doom,” one of them sought to clinch the inquisition by asking a question regarding the writings of Isaiah. What does it mean, the priest asked, when Isaiah the prophet declares, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings; that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good; that pub-

lisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth”? (Mosiah 12:20–21, quoting Isaiah 52:7).

We naturally ask, why did the priest focus on the meaning of these particular verses? Perhaps he intended to show Abinadi that prophets—including Abinadi—are to speak beautiful, joyful messages of peace and good tidings. An “all is well in Zion” message would be appropriate, not a call to repentance.

Further, since interpreting Isaiah has never been a simple task, the priest may have felt that such a

One of the astonishing cultural dimensions of this long treatise is that it was spoken orally. Was it all in his head, or perhaps more truly, did he know it by heart? He turns the tables by asking them questions over and over again in an almost Talmudic manner. His response is methodical, carefully crafted, inspired, and ultimately sublime. Time and time again his listeners are astonished at his words.

passage would surely confuse Abinadi. Ironically, he was questioning one of the very persons about whom Isaiah was speaking—Abinadi—though peace was not his only message. Abinadi would explain these verses in detail later.

The priest went on to quote the next three verses, apparently intent on baffling Abinadi. Perhaps the priest was suggesting that “watchmen” sing and are joyful because all *is* well in Zion. The text gives us no hint of the priest’s immediate motives here except to reveal his general attempt to somehow gather evidence that will discredit Abinadi so that the society could be rid of him.

Thy watchman 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 12:22–24, quoting Isaiah 52:8–10)

Abinadi's answer before the priests and presumably the king is not a short one.<sup>5</sup> One of the astonishing cultural dimensions of this long treatise is that it was spoken orally. Was it all in his head, or perhaps more truly, did he know it by heart? <sup>6</sup> He turns the tables by asking them questions over and over again in an almost Talmudic manner. His response is methodical, carefully crafted, inspired, and ultimately sublime. Time and time again his listeners are astonished at his words. With occasional interruption, he reviews the Ten Commandments;<sup>7</sup> he then discusses the law of Moses, which was to keep them in remembrance of God and to point them forward to the Savior, about whom Moses and other prophets had prophesied. This discourse recalls the three farewell addresses of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, in which Moses "remembers" before all Israel God's long-suffering, his working with them, and ultimately his bringing them out of Egypt by his power.

### Abinadi Turns to Moses

Abinadi's answer may have been more than the priests could hear or were prepared to understand, but this is not the case for us. We have every advantage to help us examine these inspired words that il-

confront his accusers. The following dialogue, based on the account in Mosiah 12:25–16:15, is instructive.

**Abinadi:** Are you priests, and pretend to teach this people and to understand the spirit of prophesying, and yet you ask me what these things mean? Wo unto you for perverting the ways of the Lord! You have not applied your hearts to understanding nor been wise. What do you teach your people? (12:25–27)

**Priests:** We teach the law of Moses. (12:28) [One can picture the confidence with which this answer came. Could there be anything as safe as that?]

**Abinadi:** If you teach the law of Moses, why do you not keep it? (12:29) [Off balance they go!] Why do you set your hearts on riches? Why do you spend your strength with harlots and cause this people to commit sin? If you were living as you should, the Lord would not have sent me to prophesy against this people. You know I speak the truth. What do you know of the law of Moses? Does salvation come by the law of Moses? (12:29–31)

**Priests:** Yes, salvation does come by the law of Moses. (12:32) [First misconception. The law of Moses was to be kept only until it was fulfilled; see Alma 30:3.]

**Abinadi:** I know that if you keep the commandments of God, you will be saved. But you don't even keep the first two of the Ten Commandments. And you have not taught your people to do all these things either. (12:33–37)

Part of the message that Abinadi was sent to deliver may have been shown to them as they witnessed this radiant power, as they experienced it themselves. Without being fully aware, they were also learning about Moses in the mount.

luminate the mission of the living Christ and his atonement. So let us search his inspired discourse.

As Abinadi gives his powerful explanation to the priests of the king, he consistently focuses on the atonement and resurrection of Christ. The priests have asked barbed questions of Abinadi, who has brought their whole way of life into question. He will again prophesy of their destruction, but he begins by turning the inquisition around to squarely

At this point King Noah cries out that Abinadi is mad and impatiently demands that he be taken away and killed. But Abinadi commands, "Touch me not, . . . for I have not delivered the message which the Lord sent me to deliver; neither have I told you that which ye requested that I should tell" (13:3; emphasis added). In other words, he hadn't even answered their questions yet. At this juncture the people of King Noah dared not lay their hands on him, "for





the Spirit of the Lord was upon him; and his face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses' did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord. And he spake with power and authority from God; and he continued his words" (13:5–6). Part of the message that Abinadi was sent to deliver may have been shown to them as they witnessed this radiant power, as they experienced it themselves. Without being fully aware, they were also learning about Moses in the mount (see Exodus 34:29).

**Abinadi:** You see you have no power to slay me, so I finish my message. This much I tell you: what you do with me shall be a type of things to come. And now I will read<sup>8</sup> to you the rest of the commandments. (13:7–11)

After doing just that (see 13:12–24), Abinadi asks the priests if they have taught their people to keep these ten commandments. He answers his own question in the negative (see 13:25–26).

**Abinadi:** If you had served as proper teachers, I would not have been sent to you. You say that salvation comes by the law of Moses, and you are partly right—for it is important for you to keep the law of Moses for the time being. But the time will come when it will no longer be expedient to keep the law of Moses. Salvation does not come by the law alone, but by the atonement that God

himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people, notwithstanding the law of Moses. (13:26–28)

Strict laws were given to the children of Israel because they were a stiff-necked people. Performances and ordinances were to guide them from day to day in order “to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him” (13:29). Abinadi is careful to emphasize that “these are types of things to come” (13:31). Yet because of the hardness of their hearts, the children of Israel did not understand the higher purpose behind the law. They did not understand that no man could be saved “except it were through the redemption of God” (13:32).

**Abinadi:** Did not Moses<sup>9</sup> and all the prophets prophesy of the Messiah and that God would redeem his people? All the prophets since the world began have spoken more or less concerning this matter. Have they not said that God himself would come to earth in the form of man and go forth in mighty power? Have they not also said that he would bring to pass the resurrection of the dead and that he himself would be oppressed and afflicted? (13:33–35)

### Abinadi Turns to Isaiah 53

The preceding words set the stage for Abinadi to rehearse some of the most eloquent and probing of Isaiah's entire corpus of writings, the 12 messianic verses in Isaiah 53.

The beginning of this text has a double meaning as spoken by Abinadi: “Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (Mosiah 14:1). Surely he was delivering a report. This query might be a common cry from every prophet who ever revealed to his people the coming of the Messiah. In this instance it is both Isaiah's and Abinadi's cries that may echo Christ's own lament when he used Isaiah's words to describe the people's rejection of him even though he had done so many miracles in their sight (see John 12:37–38).

Abinadi continues by describing this Messiah as a “tender plant” growing “like a root out of dry ground” (Mosiah 14:2; compare Isaiah 11:1), referring perhaps to the thirsty land of his birth and continuing to explain that he had no special beauty to attract *us* to him. The Messiah is a tragic figure, rejected and despised by men, “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3 NIV). With

these words, Isaiah draws every human being into his account. We all are part of the eternal congregation who must choose to accept or reject this Savior. “He was despised, and *we* esteemed him not” (Mosiah 14:3; emphasis added). This rhetorical device is often used in Isaiah’s writing and in many Jewish texts. One can hear in the Passover seder this same self-inclusive notion: “Were *we* not strangers in the land of Egypt . . . ?” Through this language we are participants, joined with those who were there. We are with them.

Yet this Messiah was willing to “take up *our* infirmities” and “carry *our* sorrows.” Even though *we* “considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted, he was pierced for *our* transgressions, he was crushed for *our* iniquities; the punishment that brought *us* peace was upon him, and by his wounds *we* are healed” (Isaiah 53:5 NIV; emphasis added).

Again, we are all drawn into the account. “All *we* like sheep have gone astray, each of *us* has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of *us* all.” The themes of his taking upon himself all our sins and of our moving away from him along our own paths are a constant in the records of the prophets. But the idea of his “opening not his mouth” during the pain and anguish that he endured in Gethsemane is treated with exquisite tenderness in Isaiah. The vivid image of Christ’s suffering in silence is symbolized by a sheep, which makes no sound as it is being sheared. Even though all our in-

iquities have been laid on him, “yet he opened not his mouth.” We, the straying sheep for whom he paid the debt, can hardly understand such restraint. We cry out at the slightest hurt. He conserved his power for Gethsemane and the cross.

The vivid image of Christ’s suffering in silence is symbolized by a sheep, which makes no sound as it is being sheared. Even though all our iniquities have been laid on him, “yet he opened not his mouth.”

“And who can speak of his descendants?” asks Isaiah, because “he has been cut off from the land of the living” and stricken “for the transgressions of *my* people” (Isaiah 53:8 NIV; emphasis added). Here we note the sense of ownership or parenting—that is, we are bought with a price precisely because we belong to him and he to us. The connection is made sure by his matchless love that allows such a sacrifice not only to save us if we choose but also to draw us to him after we have felt the motivating magnetism of that love. Thus, “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32).

Though the Savior’s grave was with the wicked, he was the ultimate innocent one quietly meeting the demands of justice for the guilty. “He had done no evil, neither was any deceit in his mouth” (Mosiah 14:9; compare Isaiah 53:9). His soul was made an offering for the sins of *many* whom he would one day see and own. The *many* would be those who had chosen to seek and know him and give away their sins to become like him. The day would come when he, as heir, would divide all he had been given with those who had willingly taken upon them his name.



Modern shearers still find sheep to be passive and quiet. Photo courtesy Tana and Mac Graham.



## Abinadi's Interpretation of Isaiah

Abinadi begins his explanation<sup>10</sup> of Isaiah's words by reiterating a great truth:

**Abinadi:** I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God. (Mosiah 15:1–2)

So Abinadi explains that the holy Son of God will come to this earth to dwell in a body “conceived by the power of God” (15:3) so that the flesh could become subject to the Spirit of this resplendent being, “suffer[ing] temptation and yield[ing] not to the temptation” (15:5). Abinadi also describes the inseparable relationship of the Son of God and his Father, beginning with the expression “*having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father*” (15:2; emphasis added), a condition to which, through him, we all can aspire. This ultimate eternal subjection to the will of the Father is prefigured in the covenants we make. Promising future behavior, we move confidently away from temptations, learning to pay no heed to them in the pattern of Jesus. We not only say, “Thy will be done”; we mean it.

In this connection Brigham Young instructs us:

The spirit is influenced by the body and the body by the spirit. In the first place the spirit is pure, and under the special control and influence of the Lord, but the body is of the earth, and is subject to the power of the devil, and is under the mighty influence of that fallen nature that is of the earth. If the spirit yields to the body, the devil then has power to overcome both the body and spirit of that man, and he loses both. When you are tempted . . . and wish to yield to it, then stop and let the spirit, which God has put into your tabernacles, take the lead.<sup>11</sup>

We see this influence of spirit over body personified in Jesus. Abinadi explains how the Son of God even deflected the temptation to avoid suffering on our behalf and instead “suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged and cast out and disowned by his people” (15:5).

**Abinadi:** And after all this, after working many mighty miracles among the children of men, he shall be led, yea, even as Isaiah said, as a sheep before the shearer is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. Yea, even so shall he be led, crucified,

and slain, *the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father*. 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. (15:6–8; emphasis added)

Just as “the will of the Son [was] swallowed up in the will of the Father,” we too can choose to align our wills with our Father's will. This magnificent prophecy continues as Abinadi delivers his testimony of the atonement:

**Abinadi:** [Christ] ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; standing 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)

Christ paid for our sins, and we covenant to remember that the payment has been made in full. We take his name upon ourselves in the holiest of ways, walking of our own volition into the purifying waters of baptism to signify that we remember his cleansing act and participating in a sacred meal each Sabbath that reiterates our binding to him with cords that are stronger than death.

Abinadi cries out, “Who shall declare his generation? [and answers his own question] Behold, I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed” (15:10). Reference here may be to the descendants of a man, whose sons declare his generation. Jewish tradition is heavy with the idea that a son must somehow speak for his father after his death. There is a formal ceremony at the grave one year after the father's death in which the son speaks a formulaic prayer in his father's behalf, thus “declaring his generation” and the continuance of “his seed.”

At this point Abinadi asks—and answers—a question not covered in Isaiah 53: “Who shall be his seed?” (15:10). Now the answer to the question posed by King Noah's wicked priests begins to unfold in all its majesty. Abinadi first notes that the prophets are referred to in Isaiah's line “How beautiful upon the mountains . . .” but he goes on to explain that the passage refers to others as well:

**Abinadi:** Whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord—

I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God. *For these are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions.* And now, are they not his seed? (15:11–12; emphasis added)<sup>12</sup>

Those who believe in the Messiah's redemptive power are the ones who willingly take his name upon them after having heard the testimony of the prophets. They are his seed. As King Benjamin so eloquently explained to his people: "And now, because of the covenant which ye have made, ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters" (Mosiah 5:7). An example leaps to mind—the priest Alma who is listening to this very discourse. Abinadi asks rhetorically about the prophets themselves, ancient, present, and future—are they not his seed?<sup>13</sup>

**Abinadi:** 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! And O how beautiful upon the mountains were their feet! And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those that are still publishing peace! [Abinadi himself belongs to this sacred circle.] And again, how beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of those who shall hereafter publish peace, yea, from this time henceforth and forever! (15:14–17)

Modern-day prophets are singled out by Abinadi, and even prophets yet unborn. But these groups were only shadows of the coming Messiah, the Son of God whose feet would be the most beautiful upon the mountains:

**Abinadi:** 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 . . .* [and] bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead. (15:18, 20; emphasis added)

Abinadi now explains the order of the resurrection of the dead, including what he calls the "resto-

ration" promised to those who died before Christ came and to those who die as little children. Then he returns to his relentless message of repentance.<sup>14</sup>

**Abinadi:** 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 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. . . . The Lord hath redeemed none such; yea, neither *can* the Lord redeem such; for he cannot deny himself; for he cannot deny justice when it has its claim. (15:26–27; emphasis added)

A prophecy concerning our time introduces the rest of Abinadi's answer to the priest's queries. What of the watchmen who see eye to eye, those whose feet are beautiful?

**Abinadi:** The time shall come that the salvation of the Lord shall be declared to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. [He exults!] Yea, Lord, thy watchmen shall lift up their voice; with the voice together shall they sing; for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion. (15:28–29; v. 29 quotes Isaiah 52:8)

He expands on these ideas, stretching forth his hand, gesturing to the future, and explains:

**Abinadi:** The time shall come when *all* shall see the salvation of the Lord; when *every nation, kindred, tongue, and people shall see eye to eye* and shall confess before God that his judgments are just. And then shall the wicked be cast out, and they shall have cause to howl, and weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth; and this because they would not hearken unto the voice of the Lord; therefore the Lord redeemeth them not. For they are carnal and devilish, and the devil has power over them. (16:1–3; emphasis added)

Here Abinadi makes the convincing point that it is our choice whether we submit ourselves either to God or to the devil and thereby *deliver ourselves* to one or the other to govern us. If God had not redeemed his people—those who would follow him—they would have remained in their lost and fallen state, the devil gladly seizing power over them all.

**Abinadi:** But remember that he that persists in his own carnal nature, and goes on in the ways

of sin and rebellion against God, remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him. Therefore he is as though there was no redemption made, being an enemy to God; and also is the devil an enemy to God. (16:5)

As Abinadi testifies of Christ and opens to our view the essential elements of the atonement, he becomes an example of prophetic perception. We see the way in which prophets speak of things to come as if they have already happened. They are obviously describing something they have seen in vision. It is yet to happen, but for Abinadi it was vividly present. Moroni explains another aspect of this in Mormon 8:35: “Behold I speak to you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me and I know your doing.”

With the heavenly power that can attend such declarations, Abinadi speaks of the resurrection:

**Abinadi:** If Christ had not risen from the dead, or have broken the bands of death that the grave should have no victory, and that death should have no sting, there could have been no resurrection. But there is a resurrection, therefore the grave hath no victory, and the sting of death is swallowed up in Christ. He is the light and the life of the world; yea, a light that is endless, that can never be darkened; yea, and also a life which is endless, that there can be no more death. Even this mortal shall put on immortality, and this corruption shall put on incorruption, and shall be brought to stand before the bar of God, to be judged of him according to their works whether they be good or whether they be evil. (16:7–10)

After his impassioned profession of faith in the power of Jesus to save, Abinadi offers a last plea for his listeners to repent.

**Abinadi:** And now, ought ye not to tremble and repent of your sins, and remember that only in and through Christ ye can be saved? (16:13)

Then he ends as he began, having led his hearers—and us—full circle:

**Abinadi:** If ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a *shadow* of those things which are to come—teach them that redemption cometh through Christ, the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father. Amen. (16:14–15; emphasis added)

The account of Abinadi concludes as he is given the opportunity to recant his words. Ironically, the

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charge that emerges after three days of deliberations is that he has proclaimed that “God himself should come down among the children of men” (17:8). His response is courageous because he knows he has delivered a message of truth from God.

**Abinadi:** I will not recall the words which I have spoken unto you concerning this people, for they are true; . . . and they shall stand as a testimony against you. (17:9–10)

King Noah falters momentarily, fearful that the judgments of God will come upon him, but at the prodding of the priests, he turns Abinadi over to them to suffer death by fire.

### Abinadi’s Influence

“What meaneth the words that are written and have been taught by our fathers?” (Mosiah 12:20). Who will believe our report? On that day, only one believed.

But there was one among them whose name was Alma. . . . He was a young man, and he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken, for he knew concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them; therefore he began to plead with the king that he would not be angry with Abinadi, but suffer that he might depart in peace. But the king was more wroth, and caused that Alma should be cast out from among them, and sent his servants after him that they might slay him. (17:2–3)

Alma escaped and hid himself, and “being concealed for many days, [he] did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (v. 4). Thus we have Alma to thank for preserving Abinadi’s stirring in-

terpretation of Isaiah. Perhaps he carefully recorded these words just as we keep records of moving testimonies that have changed our lives. Records for remembering invite the Spirit to reiterate the original impact and sweetness felt when a truth was first discovered.

Alma’s profound encounter with Abinadi continued to influence the entire membership of the church. More than 60 years later, Alma the Younger testifies of his father’s eyewitness account:

Did not my father Alma believe in the words which were delivered by the mouth of Abinadi? And was he [Abinadi] not a holy prophet? Did he not speak the words of God, and my father Alma believe them? And according to his faith there was a mighty change wrought in his heart. (Alma 5:11–12)

Thus Alma the Younger points to the transformation of his father as he himself pleads for the mighty spiritual change to come into the hearts of his own people.

I ask of you my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?<sup>15</sup> (Alma 5:14)

The Lord’s image in one’s countenance? Alma had seen it (see Alma 36:5–27, especially v. 22). He knew his father had seen it on a courageous prophet who was willing to suffer in the pattern of his Redeemer to the last moments of his life.

Now it came to pass after Abinadi had spoken these words that the people of king Noah durst not lay their hands on him, for the Spirit of the Lord was upon him; and *his face shone with exceeding luster*, even as Moses’ did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord. (Mosiah 13:5; emphasis added) ❏









## ENDNOTES

### The Editor's Notebook

1. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:1 (3 July 1859).
2. *Ibid.*, 2:94 (6 Feb. 1853).

### "What Meaneth the Words That Are Written?" Abinadi Interprets Isaiah Ann Madsen

1. For an in-depth study of Hebrew law in Abinadi's trial, see John W. Welch, "Judicial Process in the Trial of Abinadi" (FARMS, 1983).
2. The brass plates version of Isaiah pre-dates the earliest extant version of Isaiah, the Dead Sea Scrolls document called the *Great Isaiah Scroll*, by about 450 years and the Masoretic Text by about 1,500 years. This latter text is what we call the Hebrew Bible, from whence came the KJV Old Testament. So the writings of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon become the earliest text of Isaiah available to us.
3. 1 Nephi 3:17–20 implies that the record on the brass plates would have perished if Nephi had not recovered it. On the importance of this record, see 1 Nephi 5:17–19. 3 Nephi 10:17 offers an example of other precious material found in the brass plates concerning the "seed of Joseph."
4. Hugh W. Nibley, in *Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester 2* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1993), 67–68, 75 passim, cleverly describes the relationship he sees between Abinadi and Noah, comparing it to other prophet-king confrontations.
5. In my edition of the scriptures, Abinadi's response runs for nearly five pages, including the last half of Mosiah 12 and the entirety of Mosiah 13–16.
6. See Matthew 10:19–20.
7. For more on this see David R. Seely, "The Ten Commandments in the Book of Mormon," in *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon: The 1991 Sperry Symposium on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).
8. Until now was he reciting? He may have turned to read at that moment from a scroll, plates, or book of some kind containing Exodus. The brass plates contained this material.
9. See Moses 1:6, 32; 5:9; 6:57–59.
10. From this point on in the dialogue, I quote rather than paraphrase Abinadi's powerful words.
11. In *Journal of Discourses*, 2:248.
12. Joseph Fielding Smith also refers to the "seed of Christ"; see *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:25–26. Also see Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 360–61, wherein McConkie states that an awareness of who Christ's seed are "is essential to a full understanding of what Isaiah and Abinadi really mean."
13. Hugh W. Nibley offers an additional view: "Why would help come from the mountains? That is explained very well in those wonderful verses of Isaiah which the prophet Abinadi uses so effectively, Isaiah 52:7. . . 'How beautiful upon the mountainside are the feet of

him who brings good tidings"—literally, are the legs of the runner who brings good news and who causes us to hear that there is peace. . . . Abinadi is announcing that from the other side of the mountain, from the other world, comes the good news. This is revelation. It's the welcome messenger from the other world, the angel who brings us the gospel—who brings us the message of salvation, who brings us the message of peace, which you don't find on this side of the mountain" ("The Mountain of the Lord's House," lecture 16 of *Ancient Documents and the Pearl of Great Price* [series of videotaped lectures from a 1986 honors class at Brigham Young University on the Pearl of Great Price], transcript pp. 8–9).

14. See Doctrine and Covenants 19:15–20.

15. In Alma 32, Alma expounds the method whereby this change can occur.

### How Witnesses Described the "Gold Plates" Kirk B. Henriksen

The descriptive material for this article was compiled by Kirk Henriksen, of the staff of the Museum of Church History and Art in Salt Lake City, who kindly offered it for use in the *Journal*.

1. Joseph Smith Jr., "Church History," *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842 (also known as the Wentworth Letter); "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses," Book of Mormon; and Orson Pratt, in a pamphlet titled *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Ballantyne and Hughes, May 1840), 12–13. The Wentworth Letter, the Prophet Joseph Smith's sketch of the history and faith of the Latter-day Saints written for the editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, utilizes much of the same language found in Pratt's pamphlet. Although Pratt did not see or handle the plates, he learned much about them through his close association with Joseph Smith.
- Nowhere in the documentary evidence did the witnesses or other key participants in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon describe the plates as being made of solid or pure gold.
2. David Whitmer interview, *Kansas City Journal*, 5 June 1881, in *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1993), 60.
3. William Smith (Joseph's younger brother) interview, *The Saints' Herald*, 4 October 1884, 644.
4. Martin Harris interview, *Iowa State Register*, August 1870, as quoted in Milton V. Backman Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 226.
5. William Smith, *William Smith on Mormonism* (Lamoni, Iowa: Herald Steam, 1883), 12.
6. William Smith interview with E. C. Briggs. Originally written by J. W. Peterson for *Zions Ensign* (Independence, Mo.); reprinted in *Deseret Evening News*, 20 January 1894, 11.
7. William Smith interview, *The Saints' Herald*, 4 October 1884, 644.
8. "Interview with Martin Harris," *Tiffany's Monthly*, May 1859, 169.
9. *Ibid.*, 168.
10. Emma Smith interview, published as "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *The Saints' Herald*, 1 October 1879.
11. I. B. Bell interview with H. S. Salisbury (grandson of Catherine Smith Salisbury), Historical Department Archives, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
12. Joseph Smith Jr., "Church History" (Wentworth Letter), *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842, 707.
13. Martin Harris interview, *Tiffany's Monthly*, May 1859, 165.
14. Martin Harris interview, *Iowa State Register*, August 1870, as quoted in Backman, *Eyewitness Accounts*, 226.
15. David Whitmer interview, *Chicago Tribune*, 24 January 1888, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, ed. Cook, 221.
16. Pratt, *An Interesting Account*, 13.
17. Martin Harris interview, *Tiffany's Monthly*, May 1859, 165.
18. Martin Harris interview, *Iowa State Register*, August 1870, as quoted in Backman, *Eyewitness Accounts*, 226.
19. David Whitmer interview, *Kansas City Journal*, 5 June 1881, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, ed. Cook, 64.
20. Pratt, *An Interesting Account*, 13.
21. William Smith, *The Saints' Herald*, 4 October 1884, 644.
22. Emma Smith interview, *The Saints' Herald*, 1 October 1879.
23. Pratt, *An Interesting Account*, 13.
24. Martin Harris interview, *Tiffany's Monthly*, May 1859, 165.
25. The method by which a portion of the record was sealed is not specified in the documentary evidence.
26. David Whitmer interview, *Chicago Tribune*, 24 January 1888, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, ed. Cook, 221.
27. David Whitmer interview, *Deseret Evening News*, 16 August 1878, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, ed. Cook, 20–21.
28. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:347, 13 April 1856. Orson Pratt was not an eyewitness of the plates.
29. *Ibid.*, 19:211–12, 9 December 1877.
30. David Whitmer interview, Edward Stevenson diary, 22–23 December 1877, Historical Department Archives, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Original capitalization and punctuation have been modernized. In Stevenson's interview, Whitmer recounted his mother's description of the rings.
31. David Whitmer interview, *Kansas City Journal*, 5 June 1881, 1.
32. David Whitmer interview, *Chicago Tribune*, 24 January 1888, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, ed. Cook, 221.
33. Martin Harris interview, *Tiffany's Monthly*, May 1859, 165.
34. Pratt, *An Interesting Account*, 13.
35. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:31, 2 January 1859.
36. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:71. One can surmise from Joseph's statement that when the full stack of plates was positioned on a table, the open rings would be located on the reader's right side. The sealed portion would probably be located at the bottom on the left-hand side with the unsealed plates on top so that they would open to the right.

37. Joseph Smith Jr., "Church History" (Wentworth Letter); Pratt, *An Interesting Account*, 13. Pratt's description is slightly different, adding, for example, the following italicized words: "[The plates] were filled on both sides with . . . Egyptian characters. . . . The characters or letters upon the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved."
38. John Whitmer to Theodore Turley, "in the presence of his anti-Mormon friends." As reported in Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 131.
39. "Testimony of the Eight Witnesses."
40. William Smith interview, *The Saints' Herald*, 4 October 1884, 644.
41. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:31, 2 January 1859.
42. Letter from Charles Anthon to E. D. Howe, 17 February 1834, as printed in B. H. Roberts, ed., *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1965), 1:100–101. The version of the letter published in Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise, and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton, 1867), 44, contains slight variations.
43. Charles Anthon to Rev. T. W. Coit, 3 April 1841, as printed in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 1:101.
44. From Charles W. Brown, "Manchester in the Early Days," *Shortsville Enterprise* [sic] 35 (ca. 1883), based on Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, N.Y.: Alling, 1851), 215.

### Of What Material Were the Plates?

1. "Were the Plates of Mormon of Tumbaga?" *Improvement Era*, September 1966, 788–89, 828–31; also in Ross T. Christensen, ed., *Papers of the Fifteenth Annual Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures* (Provo, Utah: Extension Publications, BYU Division of Continuing Education, 1964), 101–9. Putnam's findings are summarized in "The 'Golden' Plates," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 275–77.
2. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 283–84; and his "Metals and Metallurgy Relating to the Book of Mormon Text" (FARMS, 1992).
3. William Smith interview, *The Saints' Herald*, 4 October 1884, 644.
4. "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses," Book of Mormon; and Joseph Smith Jr., "Church History," *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842.
5. David M. Pendergast, "Tumbaga Object from the Early Classic Period, Found at Altun Ha, British Honduras (Belize)," *Science* 168, 3 April 1970, 117.
6. Putnam, "Were the Plates of Mormon of Tumbaga?"; and Heather Lechtman, "Pre-Columbian Surface Metallurgy," *Scientific American* 250 (June 1984): 56–63.
7. It is also possible that other metallurgical treatments such as a hammered copper-silver-gold alloy could have fur-