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# Notes

## Untangling Alma 13:3

*Kimberly M. Berkey*

THE SHORT SERMON ON PRIESTHOOD CONTAINED in Alma 13 is among the most topically unique and theologically significant chapters in the Book of Mormon. This chapter is practically the only explicit discourse on the topic of priesthood to be found in the Book of Mormon, and it contains a number of additional concepts important to Mormon theology—including, for instance, extrabiblical information about the priest Melchizedek (Alma 13:14–19)<sup>1</sup> and the missional task of angels (Alma 13:21–26). On close inspection, however, Alma 13 also proves remarkably dense and confusing, and many of its complexities seem to stem from a single verse. In this brief note, I will provide a preliminary analysis that clarifies the organization and terminology of Alma 13:3 and propose a corollary implication for a common Latter-day Saint interpretation of this verse.

Alma 13 contains a portion of Alma’s words to the people of Ammonihah, primarily part of his response to the question raised by a “chief ruler” named Antionah (see Alma 12:20–21). Attempting to correct certain misunderstandings about the fall of Adam and Eve and the possibility of resurrection, Alma begins to outline God’s “plan for

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1. See John W. Welch, “The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13–19,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:238–72.

redemption,” a crucial component of which involves communicating commandments to humankind (see Alma 12:22–34). Priests, Alma indicates, were chosen early on as the means for “teach[ing] these things unto the people” (Alma 13:1) in order that “the children of men . . . might enter into [God’s] rest” (Alma 13:6).

As part of his exposition of this point, Alma dwells briefly on the nature of the priestly office and the characteristics of the individuals who occupy it, initially stating that “they were called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works” (Alma 13:3). But as Alma continues, he appears to introduce unnecessary redundancies. Although this repetition initially seems to be a rhetorical gesture intended simply to emphasize the claims in the first part of verse 3, further inspection reveals that Alma may be *clarifying* his previous statement. In fact, examined closely, verse 3 divides cleanly into two halves, and each of the key words and phrases from the first half of the verse are repositioned and developed in the second half of the verse,<sup>2</sup> with two exceptions (to be discussed below) whose clarification is postponed until verse 7. These are laid out in table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparing Alma 13:3a and 3b

Initial phrase from verse 3a	Subsequent clarification in verse 3b
“being called”	“called with a holy calling”
“[the priests were] prepared”	“[the calling was] prepared with . . . a preparatory redemption”
“foundation of the world”	<i>clarification delayed until verse 7</i>
“according to the foreknowledge of God”	“according to a preparatory redemption”
“foreknowledge of God”	<i>clarification delayed until verse 7</i>
“exceeding faith”	“exercising exceedingly great faith”
“good works”	“left to choose good or evil . . . they have chosen good”

2. Indeed, James Duke identifies several chiasms that intersect at Alma 13:3. See James T. Duke, “The Literary Structure and Doctrinal Significance of Alma 13:1–9,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 103–18.

The repetition of so many phrases, each time reworked with clarifying details, suggests that Alma may be distancing himself in certain ways from his initial formulation. After stating his basic point in verse 3a, it is as if Alma realizes that he has unintentionally obscured his message about priesthood and feels it necessary to introduce some nuances before moving on. It seems, in fact, that all of verses 3b–9 constitute a lengthy aside meant to clarify the first half of verse 3.

Consider, for example, the following points of clarification. Alma states in verse 3a that priests were both “called and prepared,” but verse 3b clarifies that the preparation in question refers less to individual priests than to the calling itself; it was, in fact, “*that holy calling* which was prepared.” Similarly, although Alma initially refers in verse 3a only briefly to the “good works” of these priests, verse 3b expands this reference to further develop the theme of agency addressed earlier in the sermon, explaining that individual priests chose good and became qualified for their calling only after “being left to choose good and evil.”<sup>3</sup> As these examples illustrate, it seems Alma, in verse 3b, systematically clarifies each of the terms introduced in verse 3a, correcting potential misunderstandings that might result from his initial brevity.

If Alma thus quickly distances himself in certain ways from his too-compact presentation of priesthood in Alma 13:3a, there is reason to be wary of overinterpreting what Alma says there, as Latter-day Saints often do. When verse 3a states that priests were “called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God,” some Latter-day Saint commentators hear a reference to premortal foreordination to priesthood office, with the prefix “fore-” in both “foreordain” and “foreknowledge” etymologically cementing

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3. Brant Gardner makes much of this reference to agency, arguing that it provides the key difference between Nephite priesthood and the Israelite priesthood Lehi and his family inherited from biblical tradition: “The Hebrew priesthood known from the post-Mosaic religion was lineage based, not the agency-based priesthood Alma is describing. . . . Alma implies that the Nephites functioned under this agency-based priesthood, a sound argument since the Nephites had no lineal connection to the Levites.” See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:214.

the connection.<sup>4</sup> The idea of premortal ordination originated with Joseph Smith himself, who first articulated the doctrine as follows: “Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was. I suppose that I was ordained to this very office in that Grand Council.”<sup>5</sup> Although the doctrine of foreordination is thus found in the words of Joseph Smith and consequently stakes a legitimate claim in Latter-day Saint theology, in my view there is good reason to doubt that foreordination is taught or referred to in Alma 13.

This is made especially evident when Alma continues his clarification of verse 3a, which appears later in verse 7. Verse 3a introduces two phrases that are both crucial to the standard Latter-day Saint interpretation of this verse: “from the foundation of the world” and “the foreknowledge of God.” Like every key phrase in Alma 13:3a, however, these two phrases are also repeated and developed later in the chapter, albeit in verse 7 rather than in verse 3b. Crucially, the grammatical subject of verse 7 is “this high priesthood,” and when the verse is quoted in full, it is clear that God’s premortal preparation and foreknowledge, so far as Alma is concerned, center not on individual priests but on the priesthood itself: “This high priesthood being after *the order of his Son, which order was from the foundation of the world; or in other words, being without beginning of days or end of years, being prepared from eternity to all eternity, according to his foreknowledge of all things.*”<sup>6</sup> Thus, although the doctrine of foreordination has a legitimate place in Mormon theology, it appears

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4. As representative examples, see Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 3:329; Robert L. Millet, “The Holy Order of God,” in *Alma, the Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992), 61–88; Andrew C. Skinner, “Nephi’s Ultimate Encounter with Deity: Some Thoughts on Helaman 10,” in *Helaman through 3 Nephi 8: According to Thy Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992), 116.

5. *History of the Church*, 6:364.

6. David Wright comes to the same conclusion regarding the clarifying role verse 7 plays with respect to verse 3a, but he nonetheless insists, unconvincingly, that there is a pre-creational ordination of priests at issue in Alma 13. See David P. Wright, “In Plain Terms That We May Understand’: Joseph Smith’s Transformation of Hebrews in Alma

that some Latter-day Saint commentators may have misread the text in finding justification for this doctrine in the Book of Mormon. Because Alma 13:3a introduces several key terms to Alma's discussion of priesthood only to further elaborate, clarify, and develop them, anything verse 3a says regarding God's foreknowledge must be read in conjunction with the reformulations to be found throughout verses 3b–9. It seems clear, at any rate, that Alma intended to connect God's foreknowledge not with individual priests but with the "order of the Son" (Alma 13:9), painting a picture in which God prepared the priesthood in conjunction with the plan of redemption as one of the plan's key mechanisms for salvation.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the obvious care with which it addresses the topic of priesthood, this chapter clearly deserves further sustained attention. Although Alma 13 does not outline foreordination as clearly or simply as many Latter-day Saints have assumed, what this chapter has to say about priesthood is still of key theological importance to Mormonism. When Alma 13:3b is understood as a preliminary clarification and expansion of the terminology introduced in verse 3a, we not only gain a greater appreciation for Alma's exceptional care and precision in this sermon, but also lay key groundwork for continuing interpretive work on Alma 13.

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12–13," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 190–91.

7. Brant Gardner arrives at a similar conclusion; see *Second Witness*, 4:214.