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Alma’s Hell: Repentance, Consequence, and the Lake of Fire and Brimstone

Kylie Turley

Alma the Younger’s missionary journey to Ammonihah is one of the most disturbing episodes in the Book of Mormon: scriptures are burned (Alma 14:8); converted males are “cast out” and stoned by former friends (Alma 14:7); Amulek, a respected citizen, and Alma, high priest of the church and retired chief judge, are spit upon, mocked, imprisoned, stripped naked, humiliated, starved, and beaten (Alma 14:4–22); and innocent women and children are “cast into the fire” and burned to death (Alma 14:8). Alma and Amulek are “carried . . . forth to the place of martyrdom,” and forced to “witness” (Alma 14:9) the “pains of the women and children” as they are “consuming in the fire” (Alma 14:10). These events, the Ammonihahite disregard for human life, and the fire are horrifying and extraordinarily cruel.

Trying to unravel why Ammonihah happened is not a new topic of inquiry; the array and quantity of approaches highlights the ongoing struggle to locate causes, much less the effects of this tragedy. Scholars have blamed broad-based political or social structures as well as religious disagreements, and these macro-level arguments explain some

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all references in this paper to “Alma” refer to “Alma the Younger.”

aspects of the plot. Previous scholarship has also focused readers on Mormon, his goals, and his editing process; or on to Alma and the doctrines he preaches. Yet Ammonihah remains baffling. Fully comprehending the violent end of Alma’s mission may be impossible, yet further consideration from a literary perspective demonstrates that the “impact of what the Book of Mormon says often is created through how it is said.” As Charles Swift argues, a literary approach is much more than finding “decorative add-ons included by the prophets to make reading the book more interesting.” Considering how things are said adds insight into what is said, and why and when it is said, as well as additional insight into the person who is speaking or writing.


Approaching Ammonihah from this perspective emphasizes Mormon's use of literary techniques. As others have suggested, editor and sometimes-narrator Mormon seems to have a goal or “imperative”5 of bringing readers to Christ, and he relies on “narrative theology”6 to teach a faith-promoting lesson of prophecy and fulfillment in Ammonihah. His effort largely succeeds: he accurately portrays a story of miraculous fulfillment of prophecy and deliverance using a variety of methods to keep readers focused on this narrative. Yet Mormon does not sidestep more difficult issues, such as the people’s hostile and reactionary responses; the unbalanced plot those unprovoked responses create; Amulek’s losses; the inconsistent, even conflicting characterization of Alma; and the deaths of innocent women and children. Focusing on these narrative aspects shifts the narrative into a disturbing and disruptive story, one that threatens to escape its boundaries and potentially undermine faith; Ammonihah devolves into a disaster of epic proportions for which neither the broad-based proposals nor the self-contained story that Mormon frames can adequately account. Mormon seems to blame Nehor for the tragedy, but the Ammonihahites blame Alma himself—a surprising, but not unreasonable allegation. While the text insists that Alma was “not hurt” when he “came forth out of the prison” (Alma 14:28), this article argues that the experience left Alma with significant psychological and emotional wounds. What Alma says in his speech to Amulek in front of the fires may portray the side of Alma that John Welch calls “Judge Alma,” an unflinching sinner-turned-prophet.


6. According to Grant Hardy (Understanding the Book of Mormon [New York: Oxford University Press, 2010]), narrative theology is “showing how theological points are manifest or illustrated in particular events” (91). Hardy argues that Mormon might use “prophecies and their fulfillments to persuade his readers that God is directing history” (91) or to use “stories to convince readers of the power of God, the consequences of sin, the reality of prophecy, and so forth” (119).
with a “strong sense of justice and accountability.” Yet textual evidence suggests that these events at Ammonihah impact him throughout the rest of his life. Moreover, despite writing hundreds of years after Alma and purposefully attempting to “show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers,” Mormon seems to acknowledge Alma’s pain and the tragic consequences of the fires at Ammonihah.

Mormon’s Imperative and His Editorial Techniques

How readers understand the Ammonihah story is suggested and even urged by “Mormon’s imperative,” the phrase S. Kent Brown uses to explain Mormon’s stated purpose of helping his readers “repent and come to Christ.” As Brown, Hardy, and others suggest, Mormon’s aim to “convince readers of the power of God” leads him to tell his stories in a way that foregrounds faithful narratives and de-emphasizes or “partially obscures . . . political and other issues.” This is a natural process; Leland Ryken claims that “every person is the protagonist” in his or her own life story, struggling to make sense of the “situations that test him or her.” Ryken argues that Christianity in particular “highlights the narrative quality of life” and that believers—and authors—“organize” and “understand” life “in narrative terms.” Readers should “avoid customary abstractness” and instead “do justice to this narrative quality.” Adriane Leveen, biblical scholar and student of the noted Robert Alter, argues that “biblical stories aim to have an effect on the reader,” and thus wise readers should “learn to recognize the techniques” writers and

editors use to create that impact. Like Leveen, Brigham Young University religion professor Eric Huntsman suggests that readers should ask “what” the author or editor was “trying to teach or emphasize” when he decided to tell “the story the way he did,” noting that questioning why the passage was included and why it was written in that genre are important, as those choices will “produce different effects on the reading audience.” To convey Alma’s mission to Ammonihah, Mormon chooses to write a narrative. His use of framing techniques and repetitive diction create a story arc that focuses readers on the themes of fulfillment of prophecy and deliverance.

Mormon uses frames to circumscribe the story, effectively placing “metanarrative” markers to denote the “beginning and ending or opening and closing formulae of narrative” and to set off this smaller segment from the ongoing narrative. For example, after Alma establishes the church in Gideon, he “return[s] to his own house at Zarahelma to rest himself from the labors which he had performed” (Alma 8:1) before going to Ammonihah; after Ammonihah, Alma “administers” and “strengthens” the devastated Amulek in the same place—in Alma’s “own house” in the “land of Zarahemla” (Alma 15:18). Thus, Alma’s

16. Eric Berlatsky notes that “one of the most difficult and confusing of narratological concepts is that of ‘narrative frames,’” arguing that the “definition remains elusive” in part because of the “sheer quantity of concepts and ideas” that different scholars have referred to as “frames” (Eric Berlatsky, “Lost in the Gutter: Within and Between Frames in Narrative and Narrative Theory,” Narrative 17/2 [2009]: 162–87, quote: 162). Despite the narratological complexity, Michael Ryan claims that a “frame story” can be defined simply as a “story within which another story is told” (Michael Ryan, ed., Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction [Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2017], 127). Ryan points out that such stories tend to “invite reflections on psychological interiority, the way the mind exists apart from the world, or the way the mind harbors within it unconscious feelings, thoughts, and urges” (127).
home becomes a frame. It acts as a specific geographic space that ini-
tially marks the ending of Alma's mission to Gideon and the simultane-
ous beginning of the missionary story to Ammonihah, and then marks
the ending of Ammonihah (and the beginning of the Lamanite mission
of the sons of Mosiah), bringing natural closure to the Ammonihah
episode.

Interestingly, Mormon uses oddly placed naming references to set
off a slightly different story with a slightly different ending. This frame
moves the Ammonihah conclusion past the respite in Alma's home and
into Alma 16, the chapter in which readers learn that Ammonihah is
renamed "Desolation of Nehors" because "[the people] were of the pro-
fession of Nehor" (Alma 16:11). While the information initially seems
extraneous, it balances an equally odd interruption regarding names
that begins the story. Relating Alma's journey from Gideon to Melek
to Ammonihah, Mormon suddenly halts the story to tell readers about
the Nephite "custom" of naming "their cities, and their villages, yea,
even all their small villages, after the name of him who first possessed
them" (Alma 8:7). Readers should ask themselves why, out of all places
in the Book of Mormon that this information could be shared, did Mor-
mon decide to include it here. Taken at face value, Mormon's intrusion
disrupts the plot's forward motion with a random detail. Even more
disruptive is the verse's onamastical message, which problematically
alludes to a non-existent person: there is no one named "Ammonihah"
in the Book of Mormon. 18 Yet what seems to be a confusingly random

18 While Paul Y. Hoskisson appropriately cautions against assuming that the "ihah"
suffix indicates "son of," the Book of Mormon Onomasticon concludes that -ihah can
be "son of," and Tvedtnes, Gee, and Roper (John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew
Roper, "Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions," Journal
of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration History 9/1 [2000]: 41–51) think it could
possibly be a Hebrew hypocoristic name. It seems possible that Ammonihah is named
after and settled by Ammon, himself, or possibly his son, though the Book of Mormon
never indicates that the sons of Mosiah have children of their own. Interestingly, when
Alma leaves Ammonihah the first time, he "journey[s] towards the city which was called
Aaron" (Alma 8:13). Perhaps it is merely coincidental that Ammon-ihah and Aaron are
next to each other, and that it is here—of all places in the entire Book of Mormon—
Mormon chooses to comment on Nephite naming tendencies and draw attention to the
comment acts to create a separate frame that overlaps but is not congruous with the frame formed by the specific references to Alma’s house. These textual interruptions regarding acts of naming bookend the story within another frame, setting it apart from the ongoing plot while indicating that names are meaningful—but changeable—signifiers of origin, identity, and destiny. Mormon’s use of this doubled framing sets Ammonihah off as a story within a story, highlighting the way a single narrative event can contain various beginning and ending points, each of which then presents a slightly different conclusion, foregrounding the multiple ways in which the editor has read the story and bringing those distinct readings to his readers’ attention, thus highlighting the conclusion(s) that the editor wants readers to understand.

In his work on narrative framing, William Nelles explains that “every embedded narrative” has the “strong potential for structural, dramatic, and thematic significance” simply by virtue of being embedded. He quotes eminent literary theorist Gregory Bateson, who succinctly states that “a frame is metacommunicative” and who further argues that “a frame, ipso facto gives the receiver instruction or aids in his attempts to understand the message within the frame.”

The superscription above Alma 9, possibly written by Mormon or perhaps by
Alma himself,\(^{21}\) is likely the strongest frame of this story. It prepares readers to view the narrative as “the words of Alma, and also the words of Amulek, which were declared unto the people who were in the land of Ammonihah. And also they are cast into prison, and delivered by the miraculous power of God which was in them, according to the record of Alma.”\(^ {22}\) This “preface” to the story focuses readers on the “words” the men declared, rather than on the effect those words had, and on Alma and Amulek’s deliverance from prison “by the miraculous power of God,” rather than on the believers’ non-deliverance when they are cast into the fire. The next superscription occurs before Alma 17 and provides a strong metanarrative clue indicating that the story of Ammonihah begins in Alma 9 and ends in Alma 16, regardless of smaller chapter breaks.

The superscription seems to work as the theorists predict, predisposing readers to see exactly what they were told they would see. For example, in his article about Alma’s record, Fred E. Woods breaks up the text using the superscriptions to guide him; he then argues that Alma 9–16 is about the “Law of Witnesses unto Life or Death.” Of course, Woods recognizes that people were “burned by fire,” yet he argues that this story is one in which “the people of Ammonihah sealed their imminent destruction when they shed the innocent blood of... the few remaining repentant and righteous Saints.” Woods notes the tragedy, but does so in order to highlight how the prophecy of destruction was fulfilled—evidence that the superscription has power to influence

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21. Referring to the fact that superscriptions only exist over chapters 1, 5, 7, 9, 17, 21, 36, 38, and 39 of Alma, Sidney B. Sperry argues that “the fact that they [the superscriptions] are found over the chapters enumerated and over no others would seem to indicate that Mormon took them from Alma’s original text” (quoted in Fred E. Woods, “The Record of Alma: A Prophet Pattern of the Principles Governing Testimony,” in The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. [Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992], 305–20, https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/book-mormon-alma-testimony-word/19-record-alma-prophetic-pattern-principles-governing [accessed April 10, 2017]).

22. Superscription above Alma 9, Book of Mormon, 228.
one to view the story in a particular light.23 Where the story begins and where it ends not only circumscribe the narrative, making it seem complete, but also give readers an understanding of what the story is about and how they should read and interpret thematic elements.

Word echoes and repetitions, specific dates further underscore themes of deliverance and prophecy. In Alma 9:19, Alma declares that the Lord will allow “that the Lamanites might destroy all his people” if his people become wicked (Alma 9:19). Seven chapters later, in Alma 16:2–3, Mormon reports the fulfillment of that prophecy with wording that echoes Alma’s original statement, declaring that the “Lamanites” attack Ammonihah and “slay the people and destroy the city” (Alma 16:2). Alma prophesies of “utter destruction” (Alma 9:18), and Mormon reports that the Lamanites destroy “every living soul of the Ammonihahites” (Alma 16:9). The resonance is understated but unmistakable: Alma’s prophecy is fulfilled. Ironically, Mormon draws attention most directly to the unwittingly prophetic words of the Ammonihahites. The people tell Alma that they will not believe him if he says that their “great city” will be “destroyed in one day” (Alma 9:4)—wording so precise that it seems possible that Alma might have prophesied that God could destroy their great city in one day. In this instance, the resonance is not subtle or understated; in Alma 16:9–10, Mormon reminds his readers that the Ammonihahites said God could not destroy their “great city” because of its greatness, yet that city is “in one day . . . left desolate.” The word echoes should be enough to remind readers that this event was predicted, and yet the text further emphasizes the fulfillment of prophecy by explicitly noting that “they said” God could not destroy the city.

Mormon also uses a rather obvious “duplication”24 of dates to emphasize his theme of prophecy fulfillment: readers are told the pre-

24. Duplication is “a figure of speech that features a word or expression that is twice repeated in an immediate sequence” (Donald W. Parry, “Glossary of Poetic Forms,” in Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon [Provo, UT: Neal A Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007], xlv; s.v. “duplication”). Alma 16:1 provides a clear example
cise date of the fulfillment not once but twice in the same sentence, so there is no doubt that the prophecy is fulfilled in the “eleventh year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, on the fifth day of the second month” (Alma 16:1). Bounded by the date inclusio, the notion of “much peace” matches the phrasing of “no wars” in a short, chiastic-like structure that accentuates and draws attention to the precise day on which the Lamanites destroy Ammonihah, just as Alma prophesied they would. Mormon’s editorial choices are powerful: the frames tell readers where this narrative begins and where it ends, the superscription tells readers what to see within that frame, and the repetitious diction reinforces the message of prophecy that readers were told they would find.

Unruly Literary Elements and the Resulting Tensions

The story arc framed within Alma 9–16 (with its predisposed themes of prophecy/fulfillment and deliverance) does not prepare readers to notice literary elements that do not fit the theme or narrative structure. Therefore, readers may overlook unbalanced plot development, unresolved subplots, and unprovoked violence in Ammonihah. Notably, Mormon does not emphasize the elements that undermine his imperative. For example, in Alma 25, long after the original prophecy-fulfilling portrayal of the town’s destruction (Alma 16), Mormon divulges the politico-militaristic explanation: the prophetic “Lamanite” army (that is actually comprised of far more Nephite apostates than Lamanites\(^\text{25}\)) is propelled to war against the Nephites “because [the Nephites] had slain their brethren,” the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. In their wrath, they “swear vengeance upon the Nephites” (Alma 25:1), cross into Nephite territory, and slaughter the townspeople (Alma 25:2). Hardy points out that the original and politico-militaristic explanations seem “equally valid,”

and contends that "Mormon, as a historian as well as a moral guide, is interested in promoting both perspectives."\(^{26}\) While Mormon does acknowledge both sides, the second explanation's diction is straightforward and terse, devoid of poetic expression such as the chiastic structure that Mormon employs to highlight the other version of events. Mormon does not hide the Lamanite/Amalekite/Amulonite motivations for killing the entire citizenry as they unintentionally administer God's justice and fulfill Alma's prophecy, but he delays it for chapters, does not include it within the framed story arc, does not emphasize it with a specific date, and does not use word echoes to remind readers of the original prophecy or his previous report of fulfillment.

Another problematic narrative feature is an apparently faith-promoting subplot that crumbles into a troubling conclusion—a subplot so disturbing that Charles Swift's discussion of the "Reticent Narrator in the Story of Alma and Amulek" focuses almost wholly on the "Amulek narrative."\(^{27}\) When Alma approaches Amulek and asks for food, Amulek agrees to feed him, asserting that an angel told him to do so and also told him that Alma would "be a blessing unto me and my house" (Alma 8:20). Amulek confirms this to the people of Ammonihah, drawing attention to the angelic visit with a specific date ("fourth day of this seventh month, which is in the tenth year of the reign of the judges" [Alma 10:6]). He also draws attention to the "blessedness" promise by again quoting the angel, who told Amulek that Alma would "bless thee and thy house; and the blessing of the Lord shall rest upon thee and thy house" (Alma 10:7). This plot seems balanced when Amulek proclaims to the Ammonihahites: "Behold, [Alma] hath blessed mine house, he hath blessed me, and my women, and my children, and my father and my kinsfolk; yea, even all my kindred hath he blessed, and the blessing of the Lord hath rested upon us" (Alma 10:11). The narrator emphasizes what is said—a promise of blessedness and a statement of its fulfillment—with the use of polysyndeton.

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\(^{26}\) Grant Hardy, *Understanding*, 118.

However, the story is not over; Amulek leaves Ammonihah with nothing, having “forsaken . . . all of his gold, and silver, and his precious things” and having been “rejected by those who were once his friends and also by his father and his kindred” (Alma 15:16)—an ironically complete listing of loss that encompasses everything Alma and the angel originally blessed. The notable exception is Amulek’s “women” and “children.” If they are alive, they apparently rejected him as well, since he did not leave with them. If they are not alive, then, according to Swift, Amulek not only saw “the martyrdom of many innocent women and children” but also the horror of “his own wife and children . . . being burned alive, one of the most torturous ways to die.”28 As they are not listed as rejecting him nor ever mentioned again, it seems most likely that they were burned. The angelic promise of blessedness initially appears fulfilled, but the subplot actually ends with Amulek despised for his faith and deprived of family, friends, financial wealth, and home. Rather than blessed, readers may wonder if Amulek feels cursed. Was the angel wrong? The Book of Mormon is silent, leaving an unsettling subplot imbalance.

The main plot is rife with similar asymmetry. At both times when Alma enters Ammonihah, the text merely summarizes that Alma “began to preach,” bland phrasing that quotes no first-person rhetoric and, surprisingly, does not even summarize the content of that preaching. Though readers know Alma spoke, he is textually silent.29 The people’s answer to textual silence is aggressive: to ensure Alma knows that he has no ecclesiastical or political power over them, they assert: “We are not of thy church,” and “Thou art not the chief judge over us” (Alma 8:11, 12). The text balances a lone speaker against “the people,” and Alma’s textual silence against the people’s antagonistic direct speech. The result is a lopsided story line in which the people’s responses seem unwarranted and overly dramatic—a pattern that recurs continually. Though Alma’s rhetoric escalates, the people consistently respond in

29. See Alma 8:8; 9:1.
overly dramatic, disproportionately hostile, and even physically violent ways.\footnote{\textit{Alma}’s rhetoric becomes much stronger as his speeches in Ammonihah continue. He calls the people “lost and fallen” (Alma 9:30) and a “wicked and perverse generation” (Alma 9:8), and prophesies that they “shall utterly be destroyed from off the face of the earth” (Alma 9:24). Instead of angrily calling him names in return, the people try to “lay their hands upon [Alma], that they might cast [him] into prison” (Alma 9:32). There is only a remote chance that Alma pontificated belligerently or angrily about Melchizedek and the holy order of God in Alma 13, though he concludes his speech by “stretch[ing] forth his hand unto them and [crying] with a mighty voice” that the people must repent (Alma 13:21) or be “bound down to by the chains of hell” (Alma 13:30). A counterbalanced response might be yelling back in a “mighty voice,” threatening in return, and possibly imprisoning Alma and Amulek. If the people’s accusations of blasphemy and reviling are accurate (see Alma 14:2, 5), the judges may be justified in sentencing the men to death according to the Law of Moses (see John W. Welch, “Sherem’s Accusations against Jacob,” in \textit{Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon}, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne [Provo, UT: FARMS, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 1999], https://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1121&index=23). However, the response of stoning the men and killing innocent women and children is still extreme.}

The pivotal plot marker that precedes the fires is Zeezrom’s initial step toward repentance and conversion. The proverbial “last straw” is when Zeezrom switches allegiance and vows that he is “guilty, and these men are spotless before God” (Alma 14:7). A balanced response might be to tell their former cohort that he is wrong and try to convince him to recant, but the people respond irrationally and aggressively, gathering together “all the men who believed” and “cast[ing] them out and send[ing] men to cast stones at them” (Alma 14:7). More than another unmerited overreaction, the stoning appears to be a personal mockery of Amulek; he warned the people of God’s displeasure if they “cast out the righteous from among” them (Alma 10:23), and they did it anyway. The stoning is apparently a deliberate display of contempt for Amulek and a strong message concerning the people’s disbelief in Amulek’s God and his God’s punishments.

The lawyers and judges of Ammonihah are “also angry,” and they want to “put” Alma and Amulek “away privily” (Alma 14:3). With angry “people” and angry “lawyers and judges,” readers cannot be certain
which group decides to burn the women and children and which group
decides to take Alma and Amulek to the burning (Alma 14:10). What
is clear is that “they” take the missionaries “forth to the place of mar­
tyrdom” and cause Alma and Amulek to “witness” the “pains of the
women and children” as they are “consuming in the fire” (Alma 14:9,
10; emphasis added). Though directly quoted speech is recorded in the
present verb tense in this chapter, the rest of the story is in the past
tense. This phrase stands out as one that is not directly spoken but is
still in the present tense—a simple yet horrifying verb tense change that
leaves no ambiguity: Alma and Amulek are not brought to the scene as
the fires die down and forced to see “bodies” being “consumed,” as one
could assume from verse 14, but, rather, they are present as the women
and children are in the process of dying.

Charles Swift argues that by not describing “the sounds, the smells,
the heat, the crying”31 the “reticent narrator” of this story “opens up
the opportunity for [readers] to imagine” the scene, which makes this
moment “much more experiential” and “powerful.”32 Swift may be
entirely accurate about a reticent narrator allowing readers the oppor­
tunity to imagine the scene. Alternatively, the “narrator” of this event
may, like Mormon at the end of the Book of Mormon, be uncommu­
icative about “the suffering of our women and our children” because
“tongue cannot tell” and “neither” can the truth of such moments “be
written”; perhaps, as in their time period, Mormon and Moroni do
not describe such horrific events because such words would “weigh”
readers “down unto death” (Moroni 9:19, 25). Whatever motivated the
exclusion of vivid sensory details, the narration continues the lopsided
plot development. Alma and Amulek’s words provoke an unjustified
and shockingly disproportionate reaction among the Ammonihahites:
throwing innocent women and children into a fire.

Amulek cries out, “How can we witness this awful scene?” and
declares, “Let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of
God . . . and save them from the flames” (Alma 14:10). The response

seems natural, considering the likelihood that he is watching personal friends, and likely his own wife and children, die a grisly death. Alma, apparently not doubting his ability to save the people, refuses, explaining:

The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day. (Alma 14:11)

Alma explains his refusal with a reference to the Spirit's “constraint,” a word that implies a compulsion bordering on “force,” not a simple feeling or prompting. Yet, unlike every other time the Spirit constrains someone in the Book of Mormon, Alma is not compelled to act but, rather, compelled not to act, something that seems to require explanation. The rest of the sentence expounds the reasoning for the inaction—but does so in unsatisfactory ways.

From a literary perspective, Alma’s speech is oddly uncharacteristic in terms of doctrine, audience awareness, and emotional style. As a former unbeliever and repentant reprobate, Alma is, according to Richard Rust, someone who “repeatedly sets forth alternatives” and who believes that “people . . . [can] choose their destiny.” Yet Alma’s doctrine of choice falls short in Ammonihah, both in universal applicability

34. See 1 Nephi 4:10; 7:15; 2 Nephi 4:14; 9:46; 28:1; Jacob 2:9; Alma 60:34; Helaman 8:11; 4 Nephi 1:48.
35. Rust, Feasting, 131.
36. Rust, Feasting, 131. See, for example, his sermon in Zarahemla with its fifty rhetorical questions and underlying assumption that the people of Zarahemla have the ability to choose whether they “trample the Holy One under your feet” or “follow the voice of the good shepherd” (Alma 5:53, 57).
as well as in genuine efficacy. The questions of who has the ability to choose and how much power they have to enact those choices becomes a life or death issue—for some. Alma seems to recognize the problematic nature of agency and attempts to explain. He states that God “doth suffer that [the women and children] may do this thing,” possibly implying that God “suffers” or “allows” the women and children to die even though he does not want to, or possibly implying that God allows the women and children to choose to die as if they “may” or may not do so. Perhaps realizing that statement is inadequate, Alma explains that “the people” “do this thing,” clarifying that the women and children are not choosing to die, but are being killed. The explanation is that, in allowing the murders, God is ensuring that “the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just” (Alma 14:11). While the doctrine of the righteous suffering at the hands of the wicked is not without foundation in the Book of Mormon, it is especially disturbing in Ammonihah. Those who are “innocent” have no choice but to be victims, so that their “blood” can “stand as a witness against” the people of Ammonihah. Despite his reputation as a “man of many words” whose “rich and timeless” words are arguably the “doctrinal epicenter of the Book of Mormon,” Alma preaches difficult doctrine in Ammonihah. A decade later, Alma teaches his son that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 42:10), but readers may wonder if righteousness is happiness either. The women and children are burned as the people exercise their agency, and God “suffer[s]” the women and children to be burned with his agency, but the women and children are

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37. See, for example, the women in Jacob 3 whom God will “console” in their “afflictions, and he will plead [their] cause, and send down justice upon those who seek [their] destruction” (Jacob 3:1); or the people of Alma (Senior) who are captured by Lamanites, persecuted by Amulon, and “put to death” if they are found “calling upon God” in prayer (Mosiah 23–24; Mosiah 24:11); and Jacob, the brother of Nephi, who “suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of [his] brethren” (2 Nephi 2:1).


victims—killed by the people of Ammonihah with God’s allowance—a rather merciless and choice-less positioning for the righteous. Robert Rees’s study of Alma leads him to conclude that Alma is unmatched in “intellect, learning, complexity and rhetorical sophistication,” but Alma has no pithy insights in front of the fire; the “profound” or “penetrating” doctrinal statements that Robert Millet argues are typical in Alma’s words are absent here.

Nevertheless, Amulek seems to trust Alma implicitly; there is no indication that he questions Alma’s refusal to intervene or his reasoning. And yet, one wonders whether Amulek will be consoled to know that God “doth suffer that [the women and children] may do this thing” (Alma 14:11). Given the setting—literally watching loved ones burn to death—will Amulek be comforted by Alma’s clarification “or that the people may do this thing unto them”? The explanation seems rational, even clinical, considering that Alma is addressing a friend suffering the greatest catastrophe of his life in the moment it is happening. Although S. Kent Brown implicitly argues that Alma is adept at adapting his message, and John W. Welch estimates that Alma is a sensitive rhetorician who “knows his audience and tailors his words to meet their particular needs and circumstances,” Alma seems uncharacteristically unaware of his audience and does little to “tailor his words” to Amulek’s “needs and circumstances” while


41. Millet, Encyclopedia of Mormonism.

42. Though technically focused on the various conversion motifs that Alma incorporates into his public and private sermons, S. Kent Brown (“Alma’s Conversion: Reminiscences in His Sermons,” in The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr. [Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992], https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/book-mormon-alma-testimony-word/9-almas-conversion-reminiscence-his-sermons) consistently notes the differences in presentation, even the absence of the motifs, depending upon whether Alma’s audience is, for example, his “faithful friends” at Gideon, the “contentious conditions in the city of Ammonihah,” or the “audience of the poorer classes of the Zoramite people.”

watching people burn in the fires. To have said these words at this time to a good friend is callous at best.

Alma’s rhetoric also seems unlike the “impassioned, personal” speech he typically delivers. Of course, it is possible that Alma’s statement in front of the fire was highly emotional; Alma may have been enraged, yelling that “the judgments which [the Lord] shall exercise upon them in his wrath” are “just.” Alternatively, he could have been despondent, weeping when he said that “the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day” (Alma 14:11). However, the statement seems calm. As a believer, Alma rightly obeys the “Spirit” telling him he “must not stretch forth [his] hand,” but his pause to offer an explanatory clause in regard to who is doing what to whom (“or that the people may do this thing unto them”) appears rational, a self-corrective aside in the middle of a crisis. The convoluted phrasing with its clarifying clauses seems flat, possibly even apathetic. Swift notes that Alma’s words juxtapose sharply with Amulek’s emotional pain and argues that the contrast between “Amulek’s plea” and “Alma’s faithful but very logical response” increases audience “awareness of the emotions Amulek is feeling.” In Swift’s estimation, “Amulek cries out in agony, but Alma responds with doctrine.” Notably, the text records that Alma simply “said” these words in contrast to his speech’s conclusion, in which he “stretched forth his hand unto them and cried with a mighty voice” (Alma 13:21). The Alma who bellows “now is the time to repent” is consistent with the one who wakes from a three-day coma with flamboyant verbs and colorful comparisons on the tip of his tongue, declaring that “after wading through much tribulation” and “repenting nigh unto death,” he has been “snatched” from an “everlasting burning” (Mosiah 27:28). The Alma who speaks in front of the sacrificial fires in Ammonihah seems rhetorically rational rather than verbally intense or metaphorically evocative and effusive;

44. Rust, *Feasting*, 119.
he does not seem like the person Robert Rees describes, whose "ultimate strength" is his "emotional power."46

The uncharacteristic speech is presented as a direct quotation, though that is highly improbable. Written by Alma and edited by Mormon, the Ammonihah story weaves back and forth between embedded documents, Alma's first-person account and Mormon's summarizing of Alma's account. Alma 14 appears to be Mormon's summary of Alma's firsthand account, except for the dialogue, which is presented as direct quotation. Nevertheless, it does not seem possible that Alma or Amulek could watch converts being burned to death and simultaneously take notes on their conversation. Even if the men were emotionally capable of such an act, it would have been impossible, since Alma and Amulek were “bound with strong cords” in verse 4—well before the fire was started; are still “bound” in verse 14 while the fires finish burning; and remain “bound with strong cords, and confined in prison” (Alma 14:22) until the day of the prison collapse. Moreover, verse 9 indicates that the men must be “carried” to the fire, suggesting that their feet are bound as well as their hands. It is likely that this speech was written after the prison collapse, possibly months after it occurred. There is a break in structure between Alma’s short answer (“The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand” [Alma 14:11]) and the much longer doctrinal statement explaining that answer. This break may suggest that Mormon or someone else added the clarification as an afterthought—something that would make Alma's speech here even more uncharacteristic.

However, assuming that it is Alma who speaks and that the recorded words are accurate, then the Alma who speaks before the fire does not seem as doctrinally insightful, rhetorically inventive, audience-aware, or emotionally dramatic as readers have come to expect from him. Were this speech the beginning of a permanent rhetorical decline, readers would assume that Ammonihah impacted Alma. However, Heather Hardy points out in her study of Alma's teachings to the Zoramites that his “general teachings on faith become increasingly focused on Jesus

Christ” and his doctrine increasingly “draws upon scriptural witnesses,” while his “rhetoric” is “expertly and gracefully” applied after careful contemplation of “audience and situation.” The events at Ammonihah seem to shock Alma into momentary platitudes and insensitivity, but the hallmark features of his great talent remain intact or even increase in power. Were Alma’s speech the only unruly literary element in this story, readers could be lulled into misunderstanding the events as heart-breaking but not tragic; difficult, but not life-changing. But Alma’s break in characterization, the unresolved subplot, the unprovoked violence, and the unbalanced plot development work together to challenge any simplistic explanation of this story.

The fires are the most unbalanced, violent, and reactionary aspect of the plot, distinctly disturbing because they are a pointed and perverse mockery of Alma. As is typical of his rhetorical style, Alma used vivid imagery in speaking to the Ammonihahites; he warned the people that they were risking the “second death,” explaining that those who die this “spiritual death” shall find “their torments shall be as a lake of fire and brimstone, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever” (Alma 12:17). Bound at the “place of martyrdom” and witnessing the last of the “bodies” be “consumed,” the “chief judge of the land” slaps Alma and Amulek and asks: “After what ye have seen, will ye preach again unto this people, that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone?” (Alma 14:14). The chief judge is obviously equating Alma’s doctrinal fire with Ammonihah’s literal fire.

As with Amulek, the people are portrayed as reacting to Alma in a personalized and violent manner, but their extreme reaction is far beyond that of a people mistakenly making a scriptural metaphor literal. The people do not merely threaten to kill or try to kill Alma and Amulek, nor do they simply kill the converts, nor do they kill the converts in a random but vicious way. Instead, they use Alma’s “words of God” and twist them into a method of mass killing that will cause the victims acute suffering before death. They then choose not to inflict

this manner of death on the adult male converts, but on those converts’ “wives and children” and “whosoever believed or had been taught to believe,” wording that encompasses not only anyone who “believed,” but also those who merely “had been taught to believe,” a group that potentially included some who were taught to believe, but chose not to (Alma 14:8). Not yet satisfied, the people ensure that Alma does not learn retrospectively about the fire but, instead, witnesses it with his own eyes, and they furthermore ensure that he knows his words ignited the micro-genocide he is witnessing while he is standing before the smoldering fires. This violence alone would make Ammonihah one of the darkest moments in the Book of Mormon; instead, it becomes almost indescribably horrific: premeditated violence perpetrated on innocent victims in a manner specifically designed to mock, humiliate, and cause intense physical, emotional, and psychological pain to the victims and to those forced to watch.

Nehor’s Alleged Culpability and Alma’s Overlooked Responsibility

The excessive violence makes the plot lopsided and confusing, especially since the people’s depravity is not a sweeping hatred of humanity or a generalized anger toward their Nephite society, but rather an intense and mystifying animosity directed at Alma. Moreover, the literal deaths of innocent believers are thematically inappropriate. Mormon risks much by including these elements, since they could overpower the plot, disrupt the story arc, and undermine the faith of readers. If the editor of this troubled story had wanted to tell a smoother narrative, he could have skipped the fires with little disruption. In the narrative arc framed by Alma 9–16 and told in what may have been “artistic structuring” created by “deliberate editing,” the fire is merely a stepping stone in the rising action. Though it is obviously a crisis point fraught with physical, emotional, and psychological complexity of its own, it is not the climax. The series of steps in the rising action, such as Alma’s initial visit and rejection, the angel’s

intervention, Alma’s return to Ammonihah, the people’s hostile reception, and Zeezrom’s questioning lead to this crisis, but the martyrdom is downgraded to a conventional plot twist leading up to Alma’s and Amulek’s miraculous deliverance and to the Lamanite destruction of Ammonihah.

Even with a strong frame and a narrative arc that does not emphasize the fires, the burning episode is powerful. Perhaps still concerned that including this element could undermine faith, Mormon explicitly labels the people of Ammonihah as “Nehorite,” vilifying them as followers of Nehor, the “first” person to practice “priestcraft” and “enforce it by the sword” (Alma 1:12). Mormon chooses to share that information at a critical moment. When the chief judge slaps Alma and Amulek and taunts them about being powerless to help the women and children, the judge insists that God did not save them “because they were of thy faith” (Alma 14:15). Then—after hitting them again—he demands, “What say ye for yourselves?” This moment is charged with tension, yet instead of a dramatic answer to the question or a continuation of the stressful rising action, Mormon suddenly informs readers that “this judge was after the order and faith of Nehor, who slew Gideon” (Alma 14:16). Readers should ask themselves if they needed to know this. And if they did, did they need to know it right now? Mormon’s decision to label the judge as a Nehorite shifts the focus to Nehor, and the ill-timed intrusion ensures that readers will notice.

Thomas Valletta generalizes the personal accusations, arguing that the “enmity” evident at Ammonihah is the “age-old confrontation between priestcraft and true priesthood,” namely, Alma’s priesthood and Nehor’s “false priesthood.” Valletta is likely basing this argument on Mormon’s labeling of the Ammonihahite judge and on Mormon’s three other comments about Nehor in the Ammonihah story.  


50. See Alma 14:18; 15:15; 16:11. Similar to the “Nehor” reference in Alma 14:16, these other references to Nehor are intrusive, bizarrely placed, and confusing. After Alma 14:16, Mormon interrupts the story line again in Alma 14:18, reiterating a mere
claims four other groups as devotees of Nehor: the dissenters during the first year of the reign of the judges; Amlici and his followers; and the Amalekites and Amulonites.51 Daniel Belnap questions this apparent pervasiveness, arguing that “the presence of ‘Nehor’ had become the Nephite explanation behind any and every misfortune, whether historically accurate or not.”52 J. Christopher Conkling similarly concludes that “not all apostates in the book are the same,”53 even while arguing for a broad-based Nehorite contingent.

two verses later that the “lawyers, and judges, and priests, and teachers” of Ammonihah are “of the profession of Nehor” (Alma 14:18). Again, a chapter later, he explains that, despite Alma and Amulek’s miraculous escape from prison, the people refuse to repent “for they were of the profession of Nehor” (Alma 15:15). It seems impossible that readers could miss the interruptions and forceful linking of Ammonihah to Nehor, but Mormon concludes the Ammonihah episode by telling readers that the destroyed city is renamed “Desolation of Nehors” because the “[the people] were of the profession of Nehor” (Alma 16:16).

51. See Alma 1:16 (first-year dissenters); Alma 2:1 (Amlici); Alma 21:4 (Amalekites); and Alma 24:28 (Amulonites). In his insightful article, “Alma’s Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites,” J. Christopher Conkling argues persuasively that the Amlicites and the Amalekites are the same group of people (see Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 14/1 [2005]: 108–17, 130–32, esp. 110–13).

52. See footnote 35 in Dan Belnap, “And It Came to Pass . . . : The Sociopolitical Events in the Book of Mormon Leading to the Eighteenth Year of the Reign of the Judges,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 23 (2014): 101–39; quote: 128. Belnap’s arguments make sense. Even if two of the four are the same group, the connection between Nehor and these dissenters is somewhat baffling. For example, unlike Nehor with his priestcraft, Amlici seems wholly interested in gathering political power and becoming king. The text intimates that he would use his kingship to “destroy the church of God” politically (Alma 2:4), but that has no real connection with Nehor challenging the church doctrinally. Mormon’s hint that Amlici is “after the order of the man that slew Gideon by the sword” (Alma 2:1) seems to be the totality of the connection between Nehor and Amlici. Even though Mormon interrupts stories, interjects with labels that explicitly villainize Nehor, and claims that Nehor’s death “did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft” (Alma 1:16), his reasoning for claiming these dissenters are “Nehorite” is unclear.

53. Conkling argues that “the record of Alma’s ministry (Alma 1:1–45:19) begins and ends in the same place, embroiled in problems resulting from the apostasy of Nehor and the Amlicites,” yet he hesitates to establish Nehorite philosophy as monolith because “not all apostates in the book are the same” (see footnote 4 in Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies,” 131).
Proving conclusively that the people in Ammonihah are or are not Nehorite is unlikely, since the text brushes past Nehor’s beliefs in a mere two verses\(^{54}\) while magnifying their supposed effects. Nehor’s philosophies appear to be somewhat similar to the philosophies of the people in Ammonihah and to the other dissenters.\(^{55}\) Yet Nehor tries to “establish a church after the manner of his preaching” (Alma 1:6), while Nehorism in Ammonihah presents as a “profession” of “lawyers and judges, and priests, and teachers” (Alma 14:18). Moreover, Nehor is alien to Ammonihah geographically and temporally, as well as spatially in the text. Mormon’s interruptions implicate Nehor, but the people never mention their supposed leader, his doctrine, his church, nor his death. Mormon condemns the Ammonihahite chief judge as someone “after the order and faith of Nehor,” but the people never mention Nehor. It is unlikely that readers would connect Nehor and Ammonihah were it not for Mormon’s labels.

Interestingly, whether readers believe Nehor is the cause of the Ammonihahites’ violent tendencies or believe the label of “Nehor” is a red herring, they are pushed beyond the bounds of this city’s story in search of explanation. The only other story about Nehor occurs in the first year of the reign of the judges when Alma, as chief judge of the Nephites, condemns Nehor to die for priestcraft. Perhaps Alma’s decade-past condemnation of their leader triggers the fires rather than Alma’s words, Amulek’s words, or Zeezrom’s defection. Conkling pushes Nehor’s story further into the past, arguing persuasively that the “problems with Nehor” must have been going on long before the first year of the reign of the judges, and, furthermore, Conkling ventures that Alma and Nehor could “have been old friends or allies, even disciples.”\(^{56}\) The

\(^{54}\) See Alma 1:3–4.

\(^{55}\) See table 1, “Belief comparison: Nehor vs. Nehorite dissenters.” There are overlapping beliefs, though perhaps not as many as would be expected between Nehor’s and Ammonihahite beliefs.

\(^{56}\) See Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies,” 108–17, 130–32. Conkling makes the same argument about Amlici. If Nehor and Amlici simply arrived in Zarahemla in the second and fifth years of the reign of the judges, then they would have to accomplish the following during a one-year time period: Nehor would need to arrive in Zarahemla,
high-profile positioning of the two men and the fact that each seems to be based in Zarahemla supports a prior relationship.

Establishing that relationship conclusively is impossible, given the lack of a direct statement; however, Mormon's labeling of the people of Ammonihah as Nehorite suggests the possibility of comparing Nehor's (sparse) beliefs, the Ammonihahite beliefs, and the Unbeliever beliefs (including those held by pre-conversion Alma, who was "numbered among the unbelievers" prior to his conversion [Mosiah 27:8]). In particular, the Unbeliever beliefs enumerated in Mosiah 26–27 connect Unbelievers/Alma and the people in Ammonihah through parallel behaviors and beliefs, and those groups are connected to Nehor by Mormon's explicit reference and also with some minimal overlapping beliefs and behaviors. 57 Interestingly, both Nehor and the Ammonihahites show evidence of Unbeliever impact, though not in the same behaviors or beliefs, suggesting that if the people in Ammonihah are Nehorite, as Mormon says, then Nehor was most likely an Unbeliever. If Mormon was mistaken when he labeled the Ammonihahites as Nehorite hundreds of years after the events, then the Ammonihahites are most likely Unbelievers with some ties to Nehor. Either scenario suggests that dissenter commonalities pre-date Nehor and that the overlap is rooted

begin preaching, persuade many people to the extent that they begin giving him money, establish a church, fight with Gideon, have a trial before Alma, be condemned to death, and be killed—all within the first year of the reign of the judges while still leaving time that year for the “spreading of priestcraft through the land” (Alma 1:16). Amlici would need to arrive in the fifth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 2:1), build up a faction among the Nephites (Alma 2:2) that grows large enough that he could conceivably gain the voice of the people (Alma 2:4), hold an election (Alma 2:5), crown himself king when he is not elected chief judge (Alma 2:9), raise an army of supporters and battle with the Nephites who still want Alma as chief judge (Alma 2:10–18), almost instantaneously defect to the Lamanites, create an alliance with them, and convince them to war with the Nephites too (Alma 2:24–36), and then be killed by Alma in battle (Alma 2:29–31)—and still leave time during the fifth year for Lamanite-Amlicite alliance to come up to war again (Alma 3:20).

57. See table 2, “Belief comparison: Unbelievers vs. Nehor vs. Ammonihah.” This table does not list every possible idea that can be derived from the interactions at Ammonihah, but only those that explicitly tie to the Unbelievers’ beliefs. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the people at Ammonihah and the Unbelievers have much in common.
in the Unbeliever movement in the years leading up to the reign of the judges.

While overlapping beliefs do not signify personal relationships between Alma, Nehor, and priests in Ammonihah, it seems possible that some of them crossed paths in the Unbeliever movement before the reign of the judges. Supporting this notion is the people's initial response to Alma's visit: they begin by insisting that they "know" who he is. They may simply be indicating that they know Alma was recently the chief judge, but their hostility from the moment Alma enters their city may indicate that they "know" Alma was an Unbeliever. Considering that Amulek speaks of "our last king" and references Mosiah having "no one to confer [the kingdom] upon" (Alma 10:19), it is not unreasonable to think that other people, like Amulek, would be aware of political action from the previous decade and "know" who Alma is and that his former beliefs correspond with their current beliefs.

From this perspective, the people of Ammonihah are responding to a former friend or leader whom they likely see as a traitor. To them, Alma condemned Nehor to death for doing what he, Alma, had done a few years before: preach Unbeliever doctrine, persecute the Saints, and try to "destroy the church" (Mosiah 27:10). Alma coming to preach his "new" belief in a Christian faith would be presumptuous, making the people's choice to "cast [him] out of their city" more understandable. Alma returning to say their sins caused him "great anxiety even unto pain" and commanding them to "repent" would be offensive (Alma 13:27, 21). If some of the "many people" Alma persuaded to "do after the manner of his iniquities" are standing in the crowd at Ammonihah (Mosiah 27:8), then what initially appears as unprovoked, disproportionate hostility still appears unbalanced, though less so. Linking the people in Ammonihah and Nehor with the Unbelievers—and thus to pre-conversion Alma—provides explanations for the unprovoked initial hostility, the unwarranted overreactions, the personal directedness of that hostility, the similarity in beliefs, and the people’s silence about their supposed leader.

If Alma was a leader (or the leader?) of the Unbelievers, then Mormon has a difficult choice: Should he avoid the connections, making the
story's action lopsided and strange? Should he include the connections, knowing that it may undermine his effort to lead readers to Christ? Will readers be able to hear the messages of an Unbeliever-turned-high priest? Mormon seems to waver between the options before settling on a middle-ground approach that coincides with his imperative as well as a commitment to truth. The beliefs of the various individuals and groups are available, but Mormon's editorial decisions effectively "hide" the connection behind a massive break in structure from one book (Mosiah) to another (Alma), and the (re)labeling\textsuperscript{58} of Unbeliever beliefs as "Nehorite,"\textsuperscript{59} possibly because Nehor was the first to establish an official church based on these beliefs.

Alma's Ammonihah-Caused Character Change and Mormon's Acknowledgment of Alma's Pain

The simple fact that Alma entered Ammonihah the second time "by another way" indicates that he knew he was returning to a hostile situation (Alma 8:18). Nevertheless, Alma's odd, out-of-character speech at the scene of the martyrdom suggests that even he was stunned by the hellish depths of that hostility. Though his rhetorical talent revives, there are numerous reasons to believe that Alma was changed. Moreover, Mormon again demonstrates a commitment to a more complete and complex story even though it could undermine his goal to affirm

58. The practice of labeling groups as Nehorite disappears about the same time that Alma does, though the label of "Unbelievers" is still used as late as 3 Nephi 1:19. Alma encounters the Sons of Mosiah returning from teaching the Anti-Nephi-Lehies in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 17:4). The Anti-Nephi-Lehies had just been slaughtered by the "Amalekites and Amulonites, the greatest number of which were after the order of Nehor" (Alma 24:29). This is the last mention of Nehor in the Book of Mormon, and Alma dies a short five years later (Alma 45:19).

59. See table 3, "Belief comparison: Unbeliever beliefs vs. Nehor and Nehorite dissenters." This table demonstrates that the Unbelievers' beliefs correlate with Nehor's beliefs and Nehorite dissenters' beliefs. Although the correlated beliefs are not always the same between groups, all groups overlap with the Unbelievers.
faith: he appears to honor Alma’s pain through the use of a variety of subtle literary techniques.

As noted, Mormon used duplication of dates to emphasize the fulfillment of prophecy. This is just one example of Mormon’s “explicitly strict chronology,” a timeline so meticulous that Hardy calls Mormon “scrupulous” for including the date when Alma and Amulek survive the prison collapse. Mormon’s use of dates may be even more deliberate: neglecting one embedded document, only seven dates in the Book of Mormon have the specificity of day, month, and year. The day that Teancum kills Amalickiah is recorded in Alma 52:1, and the day that the great storm begins, marking the death of Christ, is recorded in 3 Nephi 8:5. The other five dates all reference events at Ammonihah. It seems clear that Alma knew and recorded to the day what happened in this city, an inclusion that indicates the impact on him; that Mormon chose to include Alma’s precise dates at five times the rate of any other event in the Book of Mormon may be coincidental, although the “scrupulous” attention to dates in the rest of the text suggests Mormon knew and deliberately chose to underscore the significance and effect of Ammonihah.

That Alma was mindful of Ammonihah until his last moments seems clear from his final words to his son, Corianton. Alma “perceive[s]” that Corianton is “worried concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Alma 40:1), a worry that Mormon ties with repetitive word choice to the Unbelievers of twenty years earlier (Mosiah 26:2). The exact phrase, “concerning the resurrection of the dead” is first used by Alma’s father (Alma the Elder) at the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18:2). Years later, the Unbelievers explicitly reject the “tradition of their fathers” in doctrines such as those “concerning the resurrection

60. Grant Hardy, Understanding, 103.
61. Grant Hardy, Understanding, 115.
62. See Alma 10:6; 14:23 (one date mentioned twice); 16:1; 49:1. The day that Teancum kills Amalickiah is recorded in Alma 52:1, and the day that the great storm begins, marking the death of Christ, is recorded in 3 Nephi 8:5. Beyond those dates, one letter from Helaman to Moroni has two references to day, month, and year dates, as well as a few references to month and year dates. See Alma 56:1, 7, 20, 27, 42; 57:5.
of the dead” (Mosiah 26:2). Aaron, a former Unbeliever, is also described as teaching “concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Alma 21:9), while, in Ammonihah, Zeezrom becomes fearful for his salvation and begins “to inquire . . . diligently, that he might know more concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Alma 12:8). Resurrection is taught throughout the text, but Alma’s acknowledgment that his son is “worried concerning the resurrection of the dead” is a subtle hint: that specific phrase is only used in conjunction with Unbelievers or former Unbelievers. Corianton’s “concern” is apparently not a passing question; it prompts the most extensive discussion of resurrection in the Book of Mormon.

Alma does not tell Corianton the history of this doctrine, nor does he say that it was one of the problematic beliefs in Ammonihah, but it seems that Alma is thinking about Ammonihah as he speaks to Corianton. Alma says that “some have wrested the scriptures” about the doctrine of the restoration of the body, and that they “have gone far astray because of this thing” (Alma 41:1). The allusion is understated, yet unambiguous: the only other use of the word “wrest” in the Book of Mormon is when Alma warns the people of Ammonihah that “the scriptures are before you; if ye will wrest them it shall be to your own destruction” (Alma 13:20). The repetitive diction links Ammonihah and Corianton, at least in Alma’s mind, and also highlights intricate irony: Alma, as an Unbeliever, questioned resurrection and restoration personally and used his talent in speaking to persuade “many of the people” to similarly question that doctrine (Mosiah 27:8). He converts to the church of God and begins preaching the resurrection of the dead, but is

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63. Though the Unbelievers’ beliefs are described as a rejection or disbelief in King Benjamin’s doctrine (Mosiah 26:1), King Benjamin never discusses a resurrection of the mortal body and, moreover, does not even use the word “resurrection.” It seems more likely that the Unbelievers are rejecting the senior Alma’s preaching on this particular doctrine (Mosiah 18:2, 9), which he likely learned from Abinadi’s preaching on the subject (see Mosiah 13:35; Mosiah 15; Mosiah 16).

64. One indication of the extent of Alma’s teachings is that thirty of the eighty-one uses of the word “resurrection” in the Book of Mormon are found in Alma’s speech to Corianton.
rejected by the unbelieving people of Ammonihah, who question resurrection as he did prior to his conversion. That Alma unintentionally provokes a tragedy while preaching about the resurrection of the dead, and that the tragedy he provokes involves people dying, heightens the irony. That his last recorded sermon, a personal address to his youngest son, details the Book of Mormon's most comprehensive explanation of this doctrine presses an already heightened irony. The sum total of these ironies is nothing short of heartbreaking. The fire at Ammonihah must be an Abrahamic-sized test of Alma's faith and conversion, considering his former alliance with the Unbelievers and their questions “concerning the resurrection of the dead.”

But the test does not stop when the fires burn out. Alluding to specific questions and concerns discussed at Ammonihah, Alma insists not once but twice that he has “inquired diligently” of God to “know” these things “concerning the resurrection” (Alma 40:3, 9). Alma spends the last decade of his life searching determinedly to “know” whether “there is a time appointed that all shall rise from the dead,” even while preaching that doctrine to everyone from fallen church members in the ninth and fourteenth years of the reign of the judges to the people in Zarahemla and in Ammonihah, to the anti-Christ Korihor, the apostate Zoramites, and his own rebellious son. With the fiery deaths of women

65. Resurrection is a key aspect of the doctrinal debate at Ammonihah, with Antionah, one of the “chief rulers,” challenging Alma outright: “What is this that thou hast said, that man should rise from the dead and be changed from this mortal to an immortal state?” and claiming that “there [is] no possible chance” that people “should live forever” (Alma 12:20–21).

66. See, for example, Alma 42:2–7, an explication of the meaning of the cherubim and flaming sword placed to keep the way to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. In answering Corianton, Alma is directly answering the question asked by Antionah in Alma 12:20–21.

67. Alma must preach continuously about resurrection: to fallen church members in the eighth and ninth year of the reign of the judges (see Alma 4:6–14, esp. 14); to church members in Zarahemla (see Alma 5:15–25); to those at Ammonihah (see Alma 11:42, 44; 12:21); to struggling church members in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges (see Alma 16:19–20); to the Zoramites (see Alma 34:33–35); and to Corianton (see 40:1, 2–26; 41:1–9).
and children and an unbelieving chief judge’s condemnation haunting him, Alma diligently seeks knowledge about what happens in the “space between the time of death and the resurrection” (Alma 40:9). Corianton is clearly not alone in his worry about the afterlife (Alma 40:1).

Unlike the doctrine of resurrection, Alma’s interest in the doctrine of rest seems to fade as he becomes more and more restless. At Ammonihah, Alma urged the people to “enter” into the “rest of the Lord” nine different times, but this urging tapers off. By the time he preaches to the Zoramites, Alma seems exhausted; he preaches about having “patience” and “bear[ing] with all manner of afflictions” (Alma 34:40) and urges the few Zoramite converts to believe that they “shall one day rest from all [their] afflictions” (Alma 34:41; emphasis added). After his final words to each of his sons, Mormon reports that Alma, aged and sorrowful, “could not rest” (Alma 43:1), but instead continues proselytizing to Nephite dissenters. While this may be the sorrow of any righteous person watching wickedness, it may be the unique sorrow of a leader whose former Unbeliever philosophies link him to an anti-Christ and to the “wicked and perverse” people he is trying to reclaim (Alma 9:8).

That Ammonihah impacted Alma also seems evident in Alma’s increasing agitation. Little information is provided about Alma’s feelings during the first years of the reign of the judges, despite some situations that were laden with psychological dissonance. In the eighth year of the reign of the judges, Alma’s emotions intensify to the point

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68. At Ammonihah alone, Alma refers to the “rest” entered into by the righteous nine times. See Alma 12:34–37, 13:6, 12–13, 16, 29. Alma also refers to this “rest” in Alma 7:27; 34:41; 37:34; 40:12. Mormon refers to rest in Alma 16:17, connecting it with those who choose to “not be unbelieving.”

69. Little information is provided about how Alma felt to judge and condemn Nehor, to watch escalating political unrest caused by unbelievers, and to fight in hand-to-hand combat with Amlici and kill him (Alma 2:29). Conkling asks, “What was Alma’s first reaction to Nehor and Amlici, this new generation of apostates?” and suggests that “in killing Amlici,” Alma was in essence “killing a version of his old self” and notes that “Alma faced Amlici’s dissenters until his last battle” (see Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies,” 115).
that Mormon feels compelled to comment that the people's wickedness is the "cause of much affliction to Alma" \(70\) and to note that Alma "began to be very sorrowful" (Alma 4:15). Mormon reassures readers that "the Spirit of the Lord did not fail" Alma, an encouraging statement of faith, but one that can potentially backfire: Why the need to reassure readers if there is no concern that the Spirit might fail him? The phrase offers reassurance of the power of God, but does so by underscoring Alma's sadness.\(71\)

That sadness lingers with Alma and then increases. After being "cast out" of Ammonihah the first time, Alma is described as being "weighed down with sorrow" and also as "wading through much tribulation and anguish of soul" (Alma 8:14), emotions with which he is familiar, since he also "wad[ed] through much affliction" and "repent[ed] nigh unto death" (Mosiah 27:28) when he was first converted, and he again "wad[ed] through much affliction and sorrow" in his efforts to teach the people in Zarahemla (Alma 7:5). He insists that "great is his joy" in the people in Gideon, yet in some ways, Alma seems almost despondent as he approaches his last missionary encounter to the Zoramites. Twice labeled as "exceedingly sorrowful" (Alma 31:2, 31), Alma describes his own anguish multiple times as physically manifested "infirmities": his "heart ... sicken[ing]" (Alma 31:1) and being "grieved" (Alma 31:24) and his "soul" being "pained" (Alma 31:20). Alma's sorrow is deep enough that he wonders "how long" God will "suffer" him to "dwell here below in the flesh, to behold such gross wickedness among the

\(70\). Mormon hastens to add that "many" of the other leaders were "sorely grieved," as well (Alma 4:7), though the seeing of "the persecutions which were heaped" upon church members by the unbelievers seems to impact Alma especially (Alma 4:15).

\(71\). This sorrow causes Alma to resign as chief judge and appoint Nephihah in his place (see Alma 4:16–20). Alma discusses further emotions with the people in Gideon, explaining that he has had "exceedingly great joy" in seeing the people of Zarahemla "established again in the way" and that he hopes to have a similar "joy" in the Gideonites re-commitment to the church (Alma 5:4–5). Yet that full expression of joy is followed by Alma's statement that he does "not desire that [his] joy over [the people] should come by the cause of so much afflictions and sorrow" and his reiterating in the same verse that his "joy cometh over them after wading through much affliction and sorrow" (Alma 5:5).
children of men” (Alma 31:26). Readers are told that Alma suffered “no manner of afflictions” while preaching to the Zoramites that were not “swallowed up in the joy of Christ” (Alma 31:38), but, after the mission, Alma is again “grieved.” He is so “exceedingly sorrowful” about the people’s wickedness that the scriptures predicate his decision to give his final words of advice to his sons on the depths of that sorrow (Alma 35:15–16). Alma struggles with sorrow for his own sins during his conversion and struggles with sorrow for others’ sins after his conversion, eventually struggling so much that his sorrow manifests physically.

Part of his sorrow may be his realization that his perspective on women was faulty. Before watching women and children burn in a fire, women appear in lists as an afterthought, as a possession, or not at all. Alma almost forgets women when, for example, he mentions that the men buried those killed in war, then returned to their “lands” and “houses” and “wives” and “children” (Alma 3:1). Similarly, Alma blesses the righteous men of Gideon that “peace” will be upon their “houses and lands, and upon [their] flocks and herds, and all that [they] possess, [their] women and children” (Alma 7:27), seemingly suggesting that women and children are possessions. In Zarahemla, Alma declares that he is “called, yea, to preach unto my beloved brethren” (Alma 5:49). The statement could literally mean that Alma was only called to preach to men, except that he then clarifies that he has been called to take the gospel to “every one that dwelleth in the land, yea, to preach unto all, both old and young, both bond and free, yea I say unto you the aged, and also the middle aged, and the rising generation” (Alma 5:49). Alma neglects to mention women in his list of whom he should preach to, an oversight that might itself be overlooked, had Amulek not used Alma’s phrasing in Ammonihah when he explains that the “restoration shall come to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female” (Alma 11:44). Alma regularly disregards women before Ammonihah, though Amulek does not.

After Ammonihah, Alma recognizes women as agents in their own lives—both for good or for ill, noting, for example, that Korihor was
“leading away the hearts of many... [both] many women, and also men” (Alma 30:18). In Ammonihah, Alma says that the “joyful news” of Christ’s birth would be declared by angels unto “just and holy men” (Alma 13:24–25). But after Ammonihah, in one of the most egalitarian verses in scripture, Alma claims in “overly emphatic” language that “angels” speak to “not only men but women also” and even “little children” (Alma 32:23). Though the sampling size is small, the results are consistent: pre-Ammonihah, Alma does not notice women; post-Ammonihah, Alma not only notes women, but also acknowledges them as individuals with their own agency.

That makes the portrayal of Alma’s “death or burial” especially poignant. In his speech in front of the fire, Alma tells Amulek that the “Lord received [the women and children] up unto himself in glory” (Alma 14:11). Echoing that description, Alma later tells his son, Helaman: “I know that [God] will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory” (Alma 36:28). Less than a year later—though physically separated by extra scenes and stories—church members rumor that Alma was “taken up by the Spirit or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses.” The narrator counters that the “scriptures saith the Lord took Moses unto himself” and that the Lord has also “received Alma in the spirit unto himself” (Alma 45:19). Given the delicacy of the echo, the interlocking links of similar phrasing may be unplanned, but they are mentioned by Alma in reference to the women and children at Ammonihah, by Alma in reference to himself, and by the narrator in reference to Alma.

If the words are connected, the women and children form the base of this connection. Alma’s explanation to Helaman repeats “up... in glory,” and the church rumors about Alma’s passing also use “up.” The

narrator concludes that Moses and Alma are received/taken by the Lord “unto himself” in a slightly different but still intersecting phrasing, and does so in words that stand out because of their repetition and the awkward, convoluted construction. The overt duplication within Alma 45:19 thus draws attention to itself, to Alma’s prophecy of his own fate, and to the much more delicate duplication between Alma 45:19 and Alma 14:11. Notably, no other physical deaths of persons in the Book of Mormon are described as people being taken or received or raised up unto the Lord, though such references exist in the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Pearl of Great Price. 74 “Unto himself” is mentioned yet again during the same year that Alma dies by Moroni in reference to the “remnant of the seed of Joseph.” 75 The phrasing is reinforced by Alma when he connects his own fate with that of Moses in his explanation to Helaman, 76 a comparison that asserts itself in the official description of his death in poetic form. 77 The interlocking phrases and

74. See, for example, 2 Kings 2:1–2, 11 (Elijah prepares to be “taken up”); Mark 16:19 (the Lord is “received up”); Luke 24:51 (Jesus is “carried up”); Acts 1:2, 9–12, 22 (Jesus was “taken up”); Acts 10:16 (Peter dreams of a vessel being “received up”); 1 Tim 3:16 (God in the flesh was “received up”); Moses 7:21 (Zion is “taken up”); and Moses 7:69 (God “receives” Zion “up”). The Book of Mormon speaks of Moses being “raised up” (2 Nephi 3:9–11) and also speaks of one who is “like unto Moses” whom God will “raise up” (see, for example, 2 Nephi 3:17; 1 Nephi 22:20, 23; and 3 Nephi 20:23; 1 Nephi 10:4), and Christ teaches that anyone who “remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them” will also be “raise[d] up at the last day” (3 Nephi 15:1), but no other person who dies is described in similar terms.

75. See Alma 46:23–25. Moroni quotes biblical Jacob as saying that a “remnant of the seed” of his son, Joseph, will be “preserved by the hand of God and be taken unto himself” and repeats the phrasing, saying that he has “joy . . . because of that part of his seed which shall be taken unto God” (Alma 46:24–25).

76. See Alma 36:28. Alma tells his son that he will “praise [God] forever” because he delivered Moses’s people out of bondage.

77. The construction of Alma 45:19 is poetic and repetitive. Whether written by Mormon, Helaman, or Alma himself, it is clear that someone spent considerable time and effort composing the sentences. The circumstances of Alma’s disappearance are framed by the statements “as to his death or burial we know not of” and “we know nothing concerning his death and burial.” The slight change from or to and draws attention to itself, especially since the same construction explains that Alma was “taken up by the Spirit or buried by the hand of the lord, even as Moses” and then that “the
Moses allusions may be coincidental, or they may depict Alma’s ongoing sorrow and/or Mormon’s sensitivity. Alma’s final presence in the Book of Mormon appears to be quietly presented in terms of the women and children killed at Ammonihah.

When Alma disappears, he is last seen “depart[ing] out of the land of Zarahemla, as if to go unto the land of Melek” (Alma 45:18). Like many of Mormon’s other intrusions, the detail calls attention to itself with its odd placement. Also like Mormon’s other intrusions, this is not an irrelevant detail, but a meaningful naming and framing technique. In this case, the

lord took Moses unto himself and . . . has also received Alma in the spirit unto himself.” Interestingly, the center element framed by what the Lord did with Moses is “But behold, the scriptures saith”—another light echo of Ammonihah and the people who “wrested the scriptures.”

78. The name of Melek may also be an oblique allusion to Molek (Molech), the transliteration of the Hebrew mlk, a word with a highly debated meaning. Some argue that Molek is a “particular type of offering, a votive sacrifice made to confirm or fulfill a vow,” while others argue that the word refers to a “pagan deity to whom human sacrifices were made,” which would be a sadly appropriate name for the town one must pass through on the way to Ammonihah (see Paul E. Robertson, “Malech,” in Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England [Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003], 1148). Notably, Anthony J. Frendo contends that the word mlk can be interpreted as “Melek” in his article arguing that “the Israelites had burnt their children in honour of their king, Yahweh, just as their neighbours had done in honour of their gods, such as Ba’al, whose epithet was often Melek, which eventually became Molek” (Anthony J. Frendo, “Burning Issues: mlk Revisited,” Journal of Semitic Studies 61/2 [2016]: 364). Jeffrey H. Schwartz is one of many who dispute the child sacrifice theory, at least in regard to the Phoenician settlement of Carthage. Using one of the largest samples of cremated bone-containing urns, Schwartz concludes that many bones are prenatal bones and that “the overall mortality distribution . . . [is] consistent with present-day fetal/infant mortality rates” (Jeffrey H. Schwartz, “The Mythology of Carthaginian Child Sacrifice: A Physical Anthropological Perspective,” in Diversity of Sacrifice: Form and Function of Sacrificial Practices in the Ancient World and Beyond, ed. Carrie Ann Murray [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016], 122). That Ammonihah may have been practicing human sacrifice is suggested by a small word choice: readers learn of the fires when they are told that the “wives and children” are “cast into the fire” (Alma 14:8; emphasis added). Since this is the first time this fire is discussed, the appropriate article would be “a.” In other words, the text would say that the women and children were cast into a fire—and then, after that initial description, a reference to “the” fire would refer back to that specific fire. That this fire is labeled as
framing does not circumscribe the story of prophecy and fulfillment, but instead defines Alma's other life, a life that begins and ends in Ammonihah. Unlike the extensive records of Zarahemla, Gideon, and Ammonihah, Mormon merely summarizes Alma's stay in four short verses, but those verses refer to Melek by name five different times, the last of which explains that Melek is a three-day journey to the south of Ammonihah.\footnote{See Alma 8:3-6. Melek is referenced in Alma 8:3, Alma 8:4 (twice), and Alma 8:6 (twice).}
The repetition makes it difficult to forget that Alma went to Melek, even though no sermon is recorded. Melek is mentioned by name only eight times in the Book of Mormon, all of which are between Alma 8:3, when Alma arrives and lingers on his way to Ammonihah, and Alma 45:18, when both Alma and Melek disappear.\footnote{Besides the five uses in Alma 8:3-6, Melek is referenced in Alma 31:6, when Alma gathers those men he wants to go to preach to the Zoramites, the text noting that “Amulek and Zeezrom . . . were at Melek” at the time. When that missionary endeavor mostly fails, the Zoramites join the Lamanites to war against the Nephites, which necessitates that “people of Ammon depart out of the land of Jerushon, and [come] over into the land of Melek” (Alma 35:13). The last use is reporting Alma’s disappearance in Alma 45:18. It is interesting that Amulek and Zeerom were back visiting “Melek” before the people of Ammon moved there. Perhaps they were visiting converts or initiating the process that allowed the people to move there. It is conceivable that they were back visiting the desolate remains of Ammonihah as well.} Melek metaphorically acts as a symbol for Alma's journey to the hell of Ammonihah, a hell that remains with him until he is last seen walking back there. That Melek is never mentioned again is a weighty textual silence.

Mormon uses one more crushing silence to indicate what Ammonihah meant to Alma, perhaps because ultimately words fail to explain what happened. As noted previously, the chief judge of Ammonihah stands before Alma and Amulek while they are still in front of the smoldering fires, and, slapping them across their faces, asks: “After what ye have seen will ye preach again unto this people, that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone?” (Alma 14:14). He does so as a way

“the fire” from the beginning suggests that it was an already established fire. Moreover, Alma and Amulek are taken forth to “the place of martyrdom” (Alma 14:9; emphasis added).
of drawing Alma's attention to the people's grotesque wit, making sure
that Alma knows that his rhetorical flourish about a metaphorical lake
of fire is responsible for the literal lake of fire and brimstone burning
in front of his eyes. In the text, Alma remains silent. And Alma stays
silent. The answer is no. Alma, the “man of many words,” will never use
this phrase again.

The silence created by Ammonihah is broader and deeper and far
more encompassing than Alma. Prior to this event, the “lake of fire and
brimstone” imagery is used multiple times by multiple prophets—refer-
cenced by Nephi, by Jacob in multiple sermons, by King Benjamin, and
by Alma— in what seems to be a well-known doctrine and a well-used
metaphor. Yet when the chief judge asks if they will teach about burning
fires again, the answer is silence not just for Alma and Amulek, but for
the entire Book of Mormon. The sudden extinction of this phrase could
be the unspoken rule implemented by an entire nation for hundreds of
years, but is more likely the work of a careful editor. The sudden stillness
seems to be Mormon's personal tribute to those who died in the fires;
to the family members who were cast out; to Amulek who watched his
family die; and to Alma, who was forced to watch the torture knowing
that his words, and conceivably his former beliefs and actions, catalyzed
the people's malice. The Book of Mormon does not explain nor draw
attention to the abrupt halt in usage of the phrase; it simply stops. Read-
ers are left with a story about a fire, the deaths of an untold number of
women and children, a chief judge's question hanging unanswered in
the air, and a haunting silence that lasts for hundreds of years. No one in
the Book of Mormon will ever preach of a “lake of fire and brimstone”
again.

81. The references to a lake of fire and brimstone are as follows: Nephi (2 Nephi
28:23); Jacob (2 Nephi 9:16, 19, 26; Jacob 3:11; 6:10); King Benjamin (Mosiah 3:27);
Alma (Alma 12:27); and the judge in Ammonihah (Alma 14:14).

82. Notably, no one ever uses the phrase “lake of fire and brimstone” again, though
the metaphor of fire and burning continues to be used. It seems as if a few people almost
say the phrase, but there are actually two separate wickedness/fire metaphors working
in the Book of Mormon: one concerning “lake” imagery and the other concerning
“tree” imagery. Both Jacob and Alma use both of the metaphors, but they do so without
Conclusion

The tragedy at Ammonihah should challenge readers both emotionally and spiritually, but it may fail to do so; readers may focus on Alma and Amulek miraculously emerging unscathed from the prison and find what Ryken calls the “surface meaning that no one can miss.” This faithful reading is credible and is fostered by Mormon’s editorial choices regarding what to include and what to exclude, as well as his literary choices concerning framing and diction. Some may believe that literary analysis is reading into a text something that simply is not there, that a straightforward, “surface-level” reading is all that is available. It is possible that Mormon could be as unsophisticated an editor as he occasionally appears, and the framing, duplication of dates, poetic diction at key points, interruptions at strangely timed moments, word echoes, and other literary devices could be happenstance. Others may believe that Mormon’s editorial choices are unfairly biased, though that interpretation requires readers to condemn what Amy Easton Flake describes as the natural “narrative necessity of selection, arrangement, and interpretation” of a text and the basic meaning-making that any person engages in when deciphering life experience. Nevertheless, readers should consider the possibility that the Ammonihah narrative is as

mixing them (see 2 Nephi 9:16, 19, 26; Jacob 3:11; 5: 42, 46–47, 49, 66; 6:7, 10; see also Alma 5:35, 52, 56; 12:17). Thus, while Samuel the Lamanite seems to almost say the forbidden phrase in Helaman 14:18 when he preaches that “whosoever repenteth not is hewn down and cast into the fire;” he is actually using tree imagery rather than lake imagery. Notably, except for the chief judge, every speaker in the Book of Mormon who uses the actual “lake of fire and brimstone” phrasing also uses at least two other key indicator phrases. The phrases used in conjunction with the lake metaphor are the following: ascendeth up, endless torment, everlasting fire, death and hell, and flames that are “unquenchable.” Interestingly, the word “lake” is solely used in this metaphoric context; there are no geographic features named “lake” in the Book of Mormon.

83. Ryken, “And It Came to Pass,” 140.

multi-layered and complex as the Bible, as Ryken argues, and that it can profitably be read with careful and critical analysis of literary features.  

From a literary perspective, how the Ammonihah narrative was written complicates the story in perilous ways. Mormon appears not as a moralistic editor of unsophisticated stories and “and thus we see” didactic conclusions, but as a skillful author and editor who can portray himself as inexperienced while simultaneously weaving depth and nuance into his stories, rounding out flat characters, and creating silences that speak louder than words. Readers who only see his unsophisticated side may wonder why, at Alma’s “death or burial,” the narrator asserts: “This we know, that [Alma] was a righteous man” (Alma 45:19). Obviously, there is no need for the claim if everyone interprets Alma as a two-dimensional, repentant-and-then-perfect caricature of a man. Making the claim implicitly asks readers to question Alma and his righteousness, which opens up the possibility of finding a deeply sorrowful high priest who spends years repenting and searching diligently, only to discover that some damage is irreparable, that some consequences play out regardless of personal repentance, that a child may grow up to be like his parent in distressing ways, and that God may ask His servants to do (or not do) unthinkable things.

Despite the miracles and the deliverance, the faith and the faithfulness, this story remains deeply troubling. It calls on empathetic readers to “suffer . . . great afflictions” (Alma 14:26); to “witness the destruction of those who were consumed by fire” as well as the pains of those forced to watch (Alma 14:9); and to “answer nothing” (Alma 14:19) when they wish to cry out “How long . . . O Lord?” (Alma 14:26). The fire of Ammonihah burns innocent women and children, and readers who attempt to more fully engage with that narrative may find themselves burning their superficial notions of “free” universal agency; a shallow theology of repentance; and naive ideas regarding who God is and what he may require. Even Alma—the man John Welch says is “crucial to any understanding of the Book of Mormon,” the man whose “testimony . . .

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85. Ryken, “And It Came to Pass,” 140.
is the spinal cord that runs through the backbone of Nephite prophetic history”⁸⁶—even Alma is overwhelmed by Ammonihah. The chief judge’s unanswered question marks the moment the fire and its personal accusations and blame devastate Alma, as well as the moment that a long-lasting horror begins to burn the conscience of a civilization, or at least the conscience of a proficient editor. That editor’s deep and quiet empathy for a fallible prophet of God is shown—ironically—not by what is said and how it is said, but by what is not said and how it is not said. Despite his “many words,” Alma is seared into silence by the lake of fire and brimstone, and so is the rest of the Book of Mormon. It is no wonder he is last seen walking toward Melek.

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Table 1. Belief comparison chart: Nehor vs. Nehorite dissenters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nehor (Alma 1)</th>
<th>Nehorite Dissenters*</th>
<th>Amlici and Amlicite/Amalekite Followers</th>
<th>Ammonihah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>believes that &quot;all mankind should be saved at the last day&quot; (Alma 1:4).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:20)</td>
<td>(Alma 13:28)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>believes in inequality. Priests and teachers &quot;ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people.&quot; Nehor was &quot;lifted up in the pride of his heart&quot; and began to &quot;wear very costly apparel&quot; (Alma 1:3, 6).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:32)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>believes &quot;every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people&quot; (Alma 1:3).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:20)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:19)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>believes in persecution of believers (Alma 1:7–9).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:22)</td>
<td>(Alma 2:4)</td>
<td>(Alma 12:3–4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>believes in proselytizing. Nehor had &quot;gone about among the people, preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God.&quot; He also &quot;began to establish a church after the manner of his preaching&quot; (Alma 1:3, 5).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:16)</td>
<td>(Alma 2:1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The people in Alma 1 are not specifically labeled as "Nehorite dissenters." However, the text notes that Nehor's death "did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft" and explains that "many" continued to be influenced by his ideas and methods (Alma 1:16). Some "did not belong to the church" (Alma 1:19); some had "their names . . . blotted out" so that they were no longer part of the Church (Alma 1:24); and "many withdrew themselves from among" the Church (Alma 1:24).
Table 2. Belief comparison: Unbelievers vs. Nehor vs. Ammonihah

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbelievers</th>
<th>Nehor (Alma 1)</th>
<th>Ammonihah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>did not believe “concerning the coming of Christ” (Mosiah 26:2).</td>
<td></td>
<td>One of Zeezrom’s first questions is “Who is he that shall come? Is it the son of God?” (Alma 11:32). Amulek answers directly, “Yea” (Alma 11:33). Zeezrom continues to question Christ, and Amulek explains that Christ “shall come into the world to redeem his people” (Alma 11:40).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“did not believe the tradition of their fathers” (Mosiah 26:1).</td>
<td></td>
<td>The people of Ammonihah say: “We do not believe in such foolish traditions” (Alma 8:11); Alma calls them a “wicked and perverse generation” and asks “How have you forgotten the tradition of your fathers?” (Alma 9:8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“did not believe what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Mosiah 26:2).</td>
<td></td>
<td>Amulek’s answer to Zeezrom’s questions about God are focused on Christ and the fact that “the death of Christ shall loose the bands of this temporal death, that all shall be raised from this temporal death” (Alma 11:42); Amulek continues by explaining that “the spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame” (Alma 11:43). Every person’s body will be resurrected such that “not so much as a hair of their heads be lost” (Alma 11:44).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not believe in “call[ing] upon the Lord their God” to repent of their sins (Mosiah 26:4).</td>
<td>“All mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but they might lift up their heads and rejoice” (Alma 1:4).</td>
<td>Alma calls on the Ammonihahites to “humble [themselves] before the Lord, and call on his holy name,” suggesting that they have not been doing this (Alma 13:28).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unbelievers</td>
<td>Nehor (Alma 1)</td>
<td>Ammonihah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>did not believe that “there should be an equality among all men” (Mosiah 27:4).</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Ties to idolatry and idleness.)</td>
<td>Priests and teachers “ought not to labor with their hands” (Alma 1:3).</td>
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<tr>
<td>did not believe that “all their priests and teachers should labor with their own hands for their support” (Mosiah 27:5).</td>
<td>“Every priest and teacher ought to become popular; they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people” (Alma 1:3).</td>
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<tr>
<td>did believe in persecution—especially against the Church of God (Mosiah 26:38; 27:1–3; 27:32).</td>
<td>“He began to contend with him [Gideon] sharply, that he might lead away the people of the church” (Alma 1:7).</td>
<td>The people “withstood all his words, and reviled him, and spit upon him, and caused that he should be cast out of their city” (Alma 8:13); they “revile” Zeezrom and “spit upon him, and cast him out from among them, and also all those who believed in the words which had been spoken by Alma and Amulek; they cast them out, and sent men to cast stones at them” (Alma 14:7); burned the women and children (Alma 14:8); torture Alma and Amulek in the prison (Alma 14:17–25).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did believe in proselytizing, especially with “flattering words” (Mosiah 26:5–6).</td>
<td>“He did teach these things so much that he many did believe on his words” (Alma 1:5).</td>
<td>The lawyers were learned in all the arts and cunning of the people; and this was to enable them that they might be skillful in their profession (Alma 10:15); their profession is explicitly named as “the profession of Nehor”; Zeezrom speaks with “lying in craftiness” and has a “very subtle plan, as to the subtlety of the devil” (Alma 12:3–4).</td>
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Table 3. Belief comparison: Unbeliever beliefs vs. Nehor vs. Nehorite dissenters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbeliever Beliefs</th>
<th>Nehor (Alma 1)</th>
<th>Beliefs of Dissenters* (Alma 1)</th>
<th>Amlici + Amlicite/ Amalekite Followers</th>
<th>Ammonihah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>do not believe “the tradition of their fathers” (Mosiah 26:1).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Alma 11:33)</td>
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<tr>
<td>do not believe “concerning the coming of Christ” (Mosiah 26:2).</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 1:19)</td>
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<td>(Alma 11:40)</td>
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<tr>
<td>do not believe “what had been said concerning the resurrection of the dead” (Mosiah 26:2).</td>
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<td>(Alma 3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 9:8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>do not believe in “call[ing] upon the Lord their God” to repent of their sins (Mosiah 26:4).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Alma 11:42)</td>
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<tr>
<td>do not believe that “there should be an equality among all men” (Mosiah 27:4).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:3)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:20)</td>
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<td>(Alma 11:44)</td>
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<tr>
<td>do not think that “all their priests and teachers should labor with their own hands for their support” (Mosiah 27:5).</td>
<td>(Alma 1:3)</td>
<td>(Alma 1:16)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Alma 12:21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Alma 2:1)</td>
<td>(Alma 12:3–4)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*The people in Alma 1 are not specifically labeled as “Nehorite dissenters.” However, the text notes that Nehor’s death “did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft” and explains that “many” continued to be influenced by his ideas and methods (Alma 1:16). Some “did not belong to the church” (Alma 1:19); some had “their names . . . blotted out” so that they were no longer part of the Church (Alma 1:24); and “many withdrew themselves from among” the Church (Alma 1:24).