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# Answering for His Order

## Alma's Clash with the Nehors

Matthew Scott Stenson

From the beginning, Lehigh culture was richly oral and often divided over the question of authority (see Alma 1–2, 8–14, 30). On one side of the conflict stood the *prophets*, and on the other side stood “popular” opportunistic figures, wise in their own eyes, who resemble in a general way classical *sophists* (Alma 1:3; see 2 Ne. 9:28).<sup>1</sup> The classical

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1. Susan C. Jarratt in the introduction to *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991) describes the classical sophists’ profession: “The first sophists [fifth-century B.C. Athens] were the first to offer systematic instruction in the arts of speaking and writing in the West” (xv). According to Jarratt, sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias were “well traveled, charismatic teachers” who would impart their particular secular wisdom to others for a “substantial fee” (xv). The sophists, in contrast to the prophets, also travelers on occasion, embraced such rhetorical principles as “*kairos* (timeliness) and *to prepon* (fitness)” (xv). This meant that some sophists were effectively moral relativists and worked in probabilities instead of in absolute/objective truths. George A. Kennedy, not himself entirely unsympathetic toward the classical sophists, explains, “The crucial issue in [sophistic rhetoric] was often the antithesis between what the Greeks called *physis*, or nature (i.e., that which is objectively true), and *nomos*, which means ‘law,’ but which included all man-made institutions and conventions.” George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 25. Kennedy continues, “[The sophists’] controversial moral views illustrated the potential of rhetoric for social change and also for amoral self-aggrandizement” (25–26). Hugh Nibley, more critical than Kennedy, variously describes the classical sophists as prone to excess, half-truths, probabilities, bombast, irreverence, sarcasm, and feigned

sophists, some of whom were philosophic pretenders, sought to subvert on occasion the moral authority and epistemological methods of the actual philosophers. In contrast, the Nephite “sophists” (an encompassing term for our purposes that describes a certain kind of proud, intellectual antagonist in the Book of Mormon), many of whom during one period were after the order of Nehor, “[bore] down against the church” for “riches and honor” (Alma 1:3, 16). Cleverly, they channeled the prophets in word and deed even as they challenged their authority and repurposed their teachings (see 1:3–4), “stir[ring] up the people to riotings, and all manner of . . . wickedness” for success and money (11:20). These Nehors (teachers, priests, politicians, lawyers, and judges, for instance) often used the prophets’ words against them, ironically portraying them as pretenders and liars, and vice versa (see 1 Ne. 16:38; Mosiah 12:12; Alma 10:28; 11:25, 36; 12:1–4; 30:28). In the book of Helaman, Nephi, son of Helaman, following Alma’s earlier example, valiantly defends his authority just years before the Lord’s coming by calling upon “many prophets” and “many evidences” (Hel. 8:19, 24; see 8:11–24).<sup>2</sup> Thus,

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piousness. See Hugh W. Nibley, *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 243–86. In contrast to Kennedy and, especially, Nibley, Jarratt and other moderns view classical sophists more favorably. The critics who perceive the sophists in a positive light see them as intelligent, practical, politically effective, and “serious thinkers.” Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists*, 6. Jarratt claims that the modern recovery of the seriousness of sophistic thinking began with Friedrich Hegel in 1832. I find it interesting that the recovery corresponds in time so closely to the Restoration.

2. The ancient divide between the prophets (and saints) and the sophists in the Book of Mormon has been examined at length by Hugh Nibley. He argues that the mantic-sophic divide can be traced backward through the Book of Mormon to Jerusalem: “For the Old World an exceedingly enlightening tract on the ways of the intellectuals is Justin Martyr’s debate with Trypho, which is also an interesting commentary on the Book of Mormon intellectuals whose origin is traced directly back to the ‘Jews at Jerusalem.’” Hugh Nibley, “The Way of the ‘Intellectuals,’” in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988), 361. According to Nibley, the “two views” are announced “at the outset” of the record (361–62). Lastly, he explains that “Lehi’s people inherited a tradition of intellectual arrogance from their forebears. ‘The Jews,’ says Jacob, in a searching passage, ‘were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand.’” Nibley, “Way of the ‘Intellectuals,’”

Nephi situates his prophetic witness, likening himself to such persons as Abraham and Moses. The multiplication of witnesses does not add to the “power and authority of God” he possesses (see Alma 17:3), however much the association may appease those who require such evidence. Similarly, Alma’s power and authority to preach is not merely inherited but is a gift of God following many days of fasting and praying (5:46). It is that quest and forthcoming special witness of Christ by “the spirit of prophecy” that allows Alma to preach with the spirit of power in his own generation (see 5:47). The method of comparison Nephi employs for the sake of his audience was not uncommon among the prophets, nor is defending one’s authority against sophistic pretenders unique to the Book of Mormon.<sup>3</sup>

The two ideologies are in conflict in a limited way in the Nephite record even before Nehor’s “sharp” confrontation with aged Gideon (1:7) and Alma’s subsequent regulation of the church (see 5–16; see also W of M 1:15–16). Nevertheless, the philosophies first come into full scope in the early chapters of the book of Alma, due in part to an increased

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363–64. Nibley has identified the most obvious intellectuals/sophists in the New World: Sherem, Alma the Younger, Nehor, Amlici, Korihor, and Gadianton. To this list might be added others such as Laman and Lemuel and the priests of King Noah (including Alma the Elder). As is, the list is sufficient to demonstrate the range of sophists in the record. For the purposes of this study, I analyze Alma’s defense of his authority against those trained in Nehor’s sophistry in Ammonihah. This is interesting given that Alma himself, the prophet of the Lord in Alma 5–16, is now in conflict with those he formerly sympathized with (see Mosiah 27:16). They attacked his authority as he once attacked the authority of both God and his fathers (27:30). Joseph M. Spencer has indicated that the question of authority may be at the heart of a rift that runs through the Book of Mormon, one not resolved by the Lord until 3 Nephi. In this article, I focus on Alma’s defense of his authority in Ammonihah and do not attempt to wade into the larger question. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, Ore.: Salt Press, 2012), 106–10.

3. Patrick Gray, *Opening Paul’s Letters: A Reader’s Guide to Genre and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012), 55–56. Contention and dissention over authority are not only major themes in the Nephite record, but are also themes in the New Testament (see Luke 20:1–8). The Apostle Paul (a man whose conversion story resembles Alma’s), for instance, defends his authority and priesthood order (“the measure of the rule”) against opposition from Old World schoolmen, or sophists (see 1 Cor. 2–4; 2 Cor. 2:14–7:4; 10:1–12; Gal. 1:11–2:21).

amount of individual freedom of “belief” under the judges (Alma 1:17).<sup>4</sup> (Mormon slows down the narrative at this point to draw our attention to the conflict.) Before that inspired political development, itself occurring nearly sixty years after the founding of the Nephite church (see Mosiah 18), it appears that the Nephite sophists acted as rogue, religious individuals (for example, Sherem) or as quorums of priestly aristocrats (such as Noah’s priests). After the new government’s inspired institution, however, Nehorism for “the first time” “spread . . . through the land; for there were many who loved the vain things of the world” (Alma 1:12, 16). Nehorism’s dissemination as “priestcraft” or statecraft and the like in law courts leads in large part to the decline of the Nephite state (see Alma 1:12, 16; see also 2 Ne. 26:29). This is no surprise, given that Satan is the chief sophist (see Hel. 6:26–30), and sophistry for our purposes is synonymous with opposition to the monarchy of God and the authority of his legitimately chosen servants. The value of associating Nehorism with universal aspects of classical sophistry is to submit that the phenomenon in one form or another crosses cultural and historic borders, manifesting itself most recently in what Nephi terms the “days of the Gentiles” (2 Ne. 27:1), a period characterized by “lyings and deceivings, . . . priestcrafts, and . . . strifes” (3 Ne. 30:2). As we proceed, generalizations, although not ideal, will at least allow us to situate the Nehors among a broader trend that has contemporary relevancy.

The claim that Nehorism, among other factors, leads to societal decline and destruction is illustrated by the story of Alma in Ammonihah and Mormon’s subsequent history. All sophistlike figures, no matter their cultural situation, understand that whoever controls language effectively controls society. This is not to say that the Nephite prophets did not also possess a deep understanding of language and learning; they simply used them for higher purposes—preaching the word of truth, itself much more demanding than Nehor’s easy doctrines. In this analysis, I focus solely on Alma’s conflict with the various Nehors inhabiting

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4. As in Greece, Rome, and Italy, where freedom increased sophistic activity, the inspired creation by Mosiah of the system of judges unfortunately also opened a door to the flowering of sophistic rhetoric, which itself is adverse to certain kinds of traditional authority. It can run against religious authority, as in the case of Nehor, or political authority, as in the case of Amlici, and effectively hasten the political end of a nation such as is portrayed in 3 Nephi. Although Abinadi faced aristocratic sophists before his death, the ancient conflict between the prophets and the sophists is perhaps best illustrated in Alma 4–14, a block of scripture that is not often seen as unified.

Ammonihah, whose study apparently jeopardizes the new “liberty” of the people (Alma 8:17; 10:18, 27).<sup>5</sup> Fundamental to this perennial struggle between emerging orders is the question of who holds political and ecclesiastical authority and why that matters. In an era of great political and cultural change, therefore, I argue that, among other subjects, Alma passionately defends his prophetic and priestly order in three interconnected sermons; however, he is ultimately unsuccessful in persuading his detractors (minus Zeezrom), even though he typologically aligns himself with presumably acceptable and important ancient prophets and high priests, especially Lehi and Melchizedek. Consistent with the plan of redemption, Alma locates himself in this larger prophetic/priestly tradition (both broadly representative of ecclesiastical or priesthood power) in the hopes that his detractors’ accusation that he is but “one man” will be overturned by his common association with the many messengers

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5. Taking scattered but consistent cues from earlier material as our guide (Mosiah 24:1–7; 27:8–10; Alma 2:1–4), I argue that a synthetic reading of the larger Book of Mormon story intimates that these learned men were most likely studying subversive rhetorical skills that they might undermine “the liberty of [the] people” (Alma 8:17), “pervert the ways of the righteous” (10:18–19), or cause them to become unruly and “wicked” (11:20). Losing such freedom and “fall[ing] into transgression” (a major theme in the block of scripture [see 9:19, 23; 10:19]) would jeopardize the city/nation. As Mosiah 24:7 (and Alma 2:1–4) indicates, fair play can be undermined by those who know how to use language shrewdly to their economic or political advantage. And as Mosiah 27:8–10 suggests, a man who has a mastery of flattery can cause many “to do after the manner of his iniquities” (Mosiah 27:8), thus jeopardizing the church, and therefore, the nation, as did Amlici (Alma 2). This applies to several men of similar sort, particularly if their wealth allows them to travel widely, speaking to others as did Alma and his companions before and after their conversion (Mosiah 27:10–11, 32–35), Nehor (Alma 1:3), Nehor’s many imitators (1:16), and perhaps Amlici in his broad campaign to become king (2:2, 9). For negative social sea changes in a democratically arranged society to occur, it takes only the more part of the people choosing “that which is not right” to invite judgment (Mosiah 29:26–27; Alma 10:19). Of course, “rhetoric” (a classical word not used in the Book of Mormon per se) is a neutral term since it merely describes how one employs linguistic devices with the aim of purposefully communicating with an audience. As a result, one can properly speak of prophetic rhetoric and sophistic rhetoric, as one might speak of business rhetoric or political rhetoric. Alma’s distinct prophetic rhetoric may be influenced by his early experimentation as a young man with sophistic dissent rhetoric. That is, his prophetic rhetoric seems on occasion more complex than other prophets’ rhetoric (see Alma 13 and 40 for examples).

(angelic, priestly, and prophetic) among the living and dead (Alma 9:2, 6). The privileging of the *many* over the *one* by the Nehors coincides in part with the political tenor of their times. This detailed account, as Mormon knew, would become a source of spiritual strength to his modern readers, who face similar challenges to ecclesiastical/priesthood authority in a sophistic environment of moral decline led by those who also happen to have a mastery of language. This study is not an indictment of political forms such as democracy, which is upheld by the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 29:26), but of certain factions that flourish in free societies. The value of this rhetorical analysis in part is to reconstruct through inference Alma's first sermon and to draw significant doctrinal and theological connections between his first, second, and third sermons, all of which together comprise a defense of his authority in Ammonihah.

### How Alma Describes His Order

Aside from how Alma typically uses the word “order” in his extended defense (Alma 8–14), the word (and its variants) is used to express a spectrum of spiritual truths connected to the Nephite church. Understanding more about how Alma primarily perceives his ancient priesthood order, the Melchizedek order after the Son of God, makes it clear that he believes that he has prophetic responsibility even for those who no longer believe themselves to be members of the church founded by his father, such as the Ammonihahites. Alma describes his calling to the prophetic/priestly order at some length in chapter 5 to the humble saints and Nehorist-leaning teachers among them in the church in Zarahemla:

And now, my brethren, I would that ye should hear me, for I speak in the energy of my soul; for behold, I have spoken unto you plainly that ye cannot err, or have spoken according to the commandments of God. For I am called to speak *after this manner, according to the holy order of God*, which is in Christ Jesus; yea, I am commanded to stand and testify unto this people the things which have been spoken by our fathers concerning the things which are to come. (5:43–44; emphasis added; see 4:20; 8:4)

Alma concludes the description of his priesthood order, “which is in Christ Jesus,” by demonstrating that his authority to boldly “stand and testify . . . concerning the things which are to come” reaches well beyond the church and its fractious members:

And now, I say unto you this is the *order* after which I am called, yea, to preach unto my beloved brethren, yea, and 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 the middle aged, and the rising generation; yea, to cry unto them that they must repent and be born again. (5:49; emphasis added; see also 8:24)<sup>6</sup>

One reason these passages describing Alma's order are remarkable is that before the angel had appeared to him and the sons of Mosiah, Alma, once himself a master of dissent rhetoric (see Mosiah 26 and 27:8), had fought against the priesthood authority of his fathers and the church (see Mosiah 27:14–15, 30). However, he now explains that fundamental to his order is a loyalty to those who have belonged to it historically: "I am commanded [by God] to stand and testify . . . [of] the things which have been spoken by our fathers" (Alma 5:44). This same loyalty was fundamental to Nephite preaching in the church (see Mosiah 18:19). After Alma's earthshaking angelic experience under "the power and authority of God," his commitment to his prophetic predecessors becomes emphatic and consistent (Mosiah 27:14–15). Through him his prophetic fathers' voices are again heard. The "spirits of the prophets," as Alma's New Testament parallel, the Apostle Paul, taught, are "subject to the prophets" (1 Cor. 14:32). Although some prophets may understand more than others, there is no doctrinal rift between them, only continuity. Moreover, this Melchizedek order of the high priesthood that Alma holds and his specific office of high priest over the church require and enable him to teach "according to the commandments of God" with "energy" and in "plain[ness]" the truth "according to the spirit of revelation and prophecy" (Alma 5:43; 4:20). This divine commission sharply

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6. President Ezra Taft Benson followed this definition strictly during his ministry. He saw himself as called to preach after the same order. This is evident because in the mid to late 1980s he "[bore] down in pure testimony against [the Church]" on more than one occasion and systematically prepared conference discourses for "all, both old and young . . . the aged, and also the middle aged, and the rising generation" (Alma 4:19; 5:49). This prophetic parallel is striking when one considers the spiritual renewal that resulted from President Benson's focus on "the word of God" and when one considers that he, like Alma, set aside his significant persona as a political figure to lead the Church (Alma 4:15–20). See *Sermons and Writings of President Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003). Similar to how President Benson may have served as a second Alma, Joseph Spencer argues that Zeniff (a righteous man, however overzealous he once was) may have considered himself as a "reborn" Nephi, and Abinadi functions as a second or "reborn" Jacob. Spencer, *Other Testament*, 131–32.



contrasts with the sophistic order that, inspired by the father of lies, relies on “arts and cunning” and seeks to make others “contradict [their own] words” to “destroy that which [is] good” (Alma 10:15–16; 11:21). The Nehors, “skilful in their profession,” make knowledge appear true that corresponds to human wisdom but not divine law through employing the “traps and snares” of language (10:13, 15, 17). These observations on Alma’s prophetic office and high priestly order will become more important when later in Ammonihah he “cites [his listeners’] minds forward” (13:1) from the time of Adam’s fall to those high priests who preceded him in the messianic order as “preachers of righteousness” (Moses 6:23).

In addition to Alma’s description of his priesthood order, the word *order* is used in a variety of ways in Alma 5–14, all of which have to do with the Nephite church. Several examples follow of the word’s meaning in its narrative context:

1. *first principles and ordinances* of the gospel, including the gift of the Holy Ghost (see Alma 5:54);<sup>7</sup>
2. *priesthood ordination* to general offices in the high priesthood (see 6:1);
3. *priesthood government/discipline* and *church organization* (see 6:4; 8:1); and
4. *ordination to the specific “office of the high priesthood”* (see 13:18; emphasis added).

Almost all of these variant usages commence with or contain the letters “o-r-d,” as does the word “order” itself, and have to do with the order after the Son of God, the same passed from Adam to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to Lehi and Alma. As Elder Boyd K. Packer has instructed, order is the essence of the priesthood.<sup>8</sup> Even though the word *order* is used in a variety of ways in the account, it is important to realize that its most common meaning is what I pointed out earlier—Alma is called of God to testify of Christ and his coming kingdom and to teach the “commandments” by the “spirit of revelation and prophecy” to as many as will listen. As did others who were called

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7. President Lorenzo Snow repeatedly used the word “order” in this sense in his teachings. See “Baptism and the Gift of the Holy Ghost,” in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 47–58.

8. Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 144–45.

after this manner, he is to declare the necessity of being “baptized unto repentance” (Alma 5:43–44; 8:10; 9:27). This prophetic pattern is according to the plan of redemption and is the divine order that Alma primarily speaks of in his record.<sup>9</sup>

To assist the reader, I have divided this study of Alma's three main sermons defending his authority into three chronologically arranged sections: section 1, through inference, attempts to reconstruct part of Alma's missing first sermon on authority (see 8:8–13) before analyzing in more depth his second recorded sermon, in part on the same subject (9:1–30); section 2 interprets Alma's doctrinally rich and structurally complex third sermon (ch. 12–13) in a way that unifies it more than ever with the earlier parts of the narrative (ch. 8–11), making special note of Alma's typology in chapter 13 as it connects to Christ and Melchizedek; and section 3 identifies significant ways in which the end of the sermonic sequence (ch. 14–16) punctuates the confrontational dialogue and confirms with poetic justice the argument for Alma's authority. Arguing that one prominent theme in the scripture block is Alma's defense of his authority in no way intimates that it is the *only* important theme present, however much it threads through and coheres the whole. Lastly, no serious attempt is made in this study to examine Amulek's three speeches and fascinating dialogue with Zeezrom, even though it is acknowledged that Amulek's contributions hold keys to understanding the material and are theologically significant.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Alma 12:36 may allude to Jacob 1:7 (both are references to the “provocation” at Mount Sinai), and Alma says much about entering into the “rest of God” at one point (Alma 12:34–37), but that part of Alma's message is framed by his larger efforts to encourage his listeners to avoid the “second death” by receiving his basic gospel message of faith and repentance (12:16). Alma apparently spends time explaining the “rest of the Lord” because Zeezrom has asked about the “kingdom of God” (12:36, 8), a question prompted by Amulek's earlier teaching on the “kingdom of heaven” (see 11:37). It is my judgment that the sophistic intellectuals of Ammonihah, however, generally receive a “lesser portion of the [intended] word” due to their relentless opposition to Alma (12:10; see 9–11).

10. For instance, Amulek's first sermon is itself a defense of Alma's calling and character, for the angel instructs him, “Thou shalt feed a prophet of the Lord; yea, a holy man of God” (Alma 10:7). Additionally, as indicated in note 9, how can anyone fully understand Alma's frequent references to “rest” in sermon three without linking the doctrine to its origin in the dialogue with Zeezrom (see 11:21–41, especially verse 37), or how can anyone fully appreciate Alma's frequent use of the phrase “plan of salvation” in the same sermon

## Alma's First Sermon on Authority and the Block's Introduction (Alma 8:8–13, 30–32)

The conflict over the prophet Alma's authority is, for our purposes, first recorded in chapter 8, where we also find a general introduction to the full block of scripture (8:30–32). Alma's first sermon at Ammonihah (8:8–13) can easily be overlooked by readers since its beginning and end are only lightly bracketed and the sermon is never actually recorded for us by Mormon. Mormon refers to the beginning of the sermon with the statement, "he [Alma] began to preach the word," and indicates its ending with "and [the people] withstood all his words" (8:8–13). Near the beginning of the sermon, we also learn that "they [Nehors] would not hearken unto the words of Alma" (8:9). The sermon is delivered in Ammonihah. Alma has entered the city after "wrestling with God in mighty prayer," as he had done elsewhere, that he might "baptize [its residents] unto repentance" (8:10). Importantly, on this first visit to the "great city," the issue of authority is immediately raised by the Ammonihahites after Alma begins to deliver the "word of God unto them" (8:8; 9:4). He apparently delivers a relatively lengthy sermon intended to persuade, because the account reports that the Nehors ultimately "withstood all his words" (8:13). The word "withstood" suggests the use of forceful rhetorical appeals such as those scattered throughout Alma 5 (see 5:53). As he did in Zarahemla (5:3) and as he would do again later in Amulek's home (8:23), once Alma identifies himself by name, he briefly describes for the Ammonihahites his priesthood authority (8:24). Impatient with him and, presumably, his claims to authority, they immediately interrupt him, proudly objecting:

Behold, we know that thou art Alma; and we know that thou art high priest over the church which thou hast established in many parts of the land, according to your tradition [the spirit of revelation and prophecy]; [but] we are not of thy church, and we do not believe in such foolish traditions. And now we know that because we are not of thy church we know that *thou hast no power [authority] over us*; and thou hast delivered up the judgment seat unto Nephihah; therefore *thou art not the chief judge over us*. (8:11–12; emphasis added)

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without connecting it to the central point of contention in the earlier dialogue—"shall [the Son of God] save his people in their sins?" (11:34). If Alma primarily appeals to the spirit of prophecy and prophetic tradition/angelic ministration for knowledge acquisition, Amulek, his careful student, is no less centered on the "Spirit of the Lord" and angelic instruction (11:22, 31; 12:3, 7).

From the Nehors' response to Alma, it is clear that they respect him neither as the high priest nor as the most recent chief judge. This is because "Satan had gotten great hold upon [their] hearts" (8:9). He had taught them to trust in their own perceptions of power and to reject God's servants and word. The sophists' repeated use of the phrase "we know" in this passage indicates their intellectual arrogance and their overconfidence in their own learning and perceptions of truth. This phrase usage is also ironic given Mormon's emphasis on the Ammonihahites' ignorance of God's word and ways in Alma 10:2–6. As they make explicit, these Nehors see themselves as "not of thy church" (8:11–12), and as a result, they desire to challenge Alma on the question of his authority to preach to them repentance through Christ. They are at pains to disassociate themselves from Alma's authority over them: "We know that thou hast no power over us" (8:12). They erroneously see him as operating outside of his order, while he knows himself to be operating within the bounds of his authority and for their benefit.

Mormon memorably revisits the Ammonihahites' objection that Alma has ecclesiastical authority over them in Alma 9:2–6, after Alma, "command[ed]" by the same angel as before, "returned speedily" to the city that previously rejected him (8:14–18). This time, however, Alma preaches repentance as a means for them to avoid destruction in the flesh. Importantly, Amulek becomes another "witness" of Alma's authority to these apostates (10:12),<sup>11</sup> apostates who have become forgetful of the many gifts and blessings that they enjoyed as members before they left the church (9:8–10). In this early part of the block of scripture, Mormon emphatically cements the theme of prophetic authority and spiritual power in the reader's mind by effectively introducing and heavily framing the subsequent extended dialogue on the heels of Alma's first sermon. Here is the block's unmistakable prologue, focused on priesthood power:

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11. Welch says that the law of witnesses operates in this case (see Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1; and 1 Tim. 5:19). The Ammonihahites would not recognize the testimony of just one witness. They would have been looking for two or three witnesses given that the "accusation" was that the city had apostatized and would be destroyed if its people did not repent. Welch continues, in establishing their authority, prophets would "sometimes call . . . on heaven and earth or prior prophets as their corroborating witnesses." John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2008), 241–43. Alma invokes Melchizedek in Alma 13 for just this purpose. Amulek also confirms Alma's prophetic authority (10:7–11). Zeezrom may be doing the same in chapter 14, verse 7.

And Alma went forth, and also Amulek, among the people, to declare the words of God unto them; and they were filled with the Holy Ghost. And they had *power* given unto them, insomuch that they could not be confined in dungeons; neither was it possible that any man could slay them; nevertheless they did not exercise their *power* until they were bound in bands and cast into prison. Now, this was done that the Lord might show forth his *power* in them. And it came to pass that they went forth and began to preach and to prophesy unto the people, according to the spirit of *power* which the Lord had given unto them. (Alma 8:30–32; emphasis added)

In this introductory passage to the account, Mormon both reminds his reader of the Ammonihahites' direct challenge to Alma earlier in the chapter, "thou hast no power over us" (8:11–12), and lays a foundation for the scriptural material that reaches as far as Alma 14, by vigorously repeating the word "power" five times in only two verses plus the subsequent heading that introduces chapters 9 through 14.<sup>12</sup> This introduction heavily foreshadows the events in the prison recounted in chapter 14, inasmuch as authority, or power, is also the issue in the prison that eventually falls to the ground. Chapter 14 concludes, therefore, what commences in Alma's first sermon on his authority (see 14:14–26).<sup>13</sup> Evidence of challenges to priesthood authority over the church (and by extension God's ultimate authority) go at least as far back as Mosiah 27, the chapter that describes Alma's mighty change initiated by an angel sent to him from God to shake the earth and to shake his paradigm of power. At the time, Alma (along with the sons of Mosiah) fought the authority of God and his chosen servants (see Mosiah 27:14–15) and "rejected his Redeemer" (27:30) in the spirit of sophistic intellectualism. Alma knows firsthand how much dissenters hate priesthood authority and its attendant "foolish traditions" (Alma 8:11). He knows of the clash

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12. Two of the five references to "power" refer to God's power, while the other three refer to Alma and Amulek's power as delegated to them from deity. As we shall see, the Nehors challenge God's power when they challenge that of his chosen servants, for their authority and power is derived from him.

13. As Zeezrom takes the phrase "in your sins" from Alma's opening speech and uses it against Amulek in Alma 11:34–37, so "the chief judge of the land" uses Alma's teachings on the second death (see 12:17) against him and Amulek in Alma 14:14. It appears that the chief judge considers the martyrdom of the believers as an ironic rebuttal of Alma's teachings, which are still fresh in his mind. These are further examples of this scripture block's rhetorical and doctrinal continuity.

of the newly emerging orders and now finds himself on the other side of the conflict over authority.

### **Alma's Second Sermon on Authority (Alma 9:1, 8–30)**

Understanding that the primary point of stasis in Ammonihah is Alma's authority to preach repentance is important if we are to understand the complete block of scripture. In further accordance with the angelic message he received after his first sermon (see 9:29), near the beginning of his second sermon (see 9:1–30) Alma has promised "great and marvelous" destruction if repentance does not occur in preparation for the kingdom of God on earth (9:6). This same message has been made known to many throughout the land (see 9:25). Alma's second sermon, unlike his first, is an explicit defense of God's authority and goodness patterned after 1 Nephi 2:19–24 and Alma 5 (see 9:8–24), and although containing digressions (comparisons) on the Lamanites' future (9:14–17, 23), it naturally arcs into the content of Alma's final great sermon in Ammonihah (12:9–13:20). God's goodness is illustrated through the many gifts he has given the Nephites (9:20–21). In fact, at the beginning of the second sermon, three fundamental questions are raised by the Ammonihahites, even if all of them are not fully answered by Alma. Questions one and two: "*Who art thou? Suppose ye that we shall believe the testimony of one man . . . ?*" (9:2). Question three: "*Who is God, that sendeth no more authority than one man . . . ?*" (9:6). These questions deal with Alma's authority, since Alma stands alone as the leader of the church and derives his authority from God. If God lacks authority, then so does Alma. To answer his sophistic opposition, Alma points to Lehi and his role in leading his people under God's direction though he was but one man (9:9, 13, 22).

In addition to this glancing reference to Lehi (not unusual for Alma), chapter 9 lays down various thematic threads that Alma cannot resolve until chapters 12 and 13. The interpretative problem is that the dialogue grows much more complicated as the former threads are woven into the later sections of the defense.<sup>14</sup> Most remarkable, however, is that in

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14. For instance, "the kingdom of God" reference in 9:12 and 12:8 becomes "the rest of the Lord" material found later in chapters 12 and 13, and the phrase "in your sins" from 9:15 (actually found earlier in Nephite history) becomes a significant theological sticking point in 11:34–37. Another thread, much larger this time, is laid down in chapter 11 when Amulek describes the temporal death, resurrection, and final judgment for Zeezrom's sake. Alma later advances

chapter 9 Alma attempts to defend his authority before he is shouted down again by his interlocutors (see 9:7, 31–34). By the end of chapter 9 he has answered the first part of the third sophistic question, “Who is God . . . ?” (9:6). Nevertheless, he has not yet been able to answer to his own satisfaction the remaining questions, “Who art thou?” and its follow-up, “Suppose ye that we shall believe the testimony of one man . . . ?” (9:2). Given that the Ammonihahites know who he is (this is his second time to the city, and he was known throughout the land as the first chief judge), the first two questions (and the second part of the third) must be about his authority to teach and testify to them as he does. In other words, they effectively ask him, “Who do you think that you are to come here and teach us since you are but one man and we no longer belong to the church?” Or rendered another way: “What is your authority?”

As further evidence of the narrative, sermonic, and theological continuity in this block of scripture on authority, one can compare several significant verbal and thematic connections between chapters 9 and 12. The connection highlighted here suggests that Alma chooses to resume his remarks on his own authority only after he fields Zeezrom’s intervening theological questions (see 12:8). That chapter 12 complexly resumes the much earlier material in chapter 9 is indicated by such phrases as “of which has been spoken” (12:25) and “of which we have spoken” (12:27). These referential phrases recommend a layering of doctrinal ideas across the whole structure. However, what is emphasized here is that underlying it all is Alma’s sincere desire to defend his prophetic authority and to teach the Ammonihahites repentance and redemption through Christ, the Only Begotten Son, so that they might avoid God “utterly destroy[ing]” them and the loss of their eternal rest in the “kingdom of God” (9:12). But in his attempts, as has been demonstrated, Alma is often violently opposed and hindered. For that reason, his second speech on authority ends prematurely: “And now, my beloved brethren, . . . seeing that your hearts have been grossly hardened against the word of God, and seeing that ye are a lost and fallen people” (9:30). Alma here is interrupted again, which Mormon allows him to report in his own voice: “Now it came to pass that when I, Alma, had spoken these words, behold the people were wroth with me because I said unto them that they were a hard-hearted and a stiffnecked people. And also because I

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Amulek’s remarks on the temporal death with remarks on the second or spiritual death (12:1). Amulek’s and Alma’s teachings on the temporal and spiritual deaths shape the dialogue through its midsection.



said unto them that they were a lost and a fallen people they were angry with me, and sought to lay their hands upon me, that they might cast me into prison" (9:31–32).

From this passage it is clear that, as they did at the beginning of the second sermon (see 9:1–2), the sophists interrupt Alma mid-message. Indeed, he has just begun to answer the questions left on the table with a new sermonic salutation: "And now, my beloved brethren . . ." (9:30). Nevertheless, Alma is unable to enter into his full message until chapter 12. After his junior companion, Amulek, has responded at length to his interlocutors' concerns and questions, including Zeezrom's "traps and snares" (10:17), Alma fortuitously sees Antionah's subversive question about the immortality of the soul as a window into revisiting his former remarks, which had only begun to tend toward prophetic authority as derived from angelic ministration (9:25–28). Near the end of chapter 9, Alma declares that "the Lord has sent his angel to visit many of his people" (9:25). These chosen people, some of whom may have also been women and children (32:23), were commanded to "prepare . . . the way of the Lord" by declaring the gospel of repentance as Alma himself does (9:28). The angel of the Lord taught these chosen men (Amulek is but one example) among the Nephites to declare the gospel as directed by priesthood authority. Apparently, the sophists disrupt Alma just as he returns to the earlier questions about who he is and by what authority, as one man, he presumes to teach them. Before he can answer the latter question, however, the sophists drive him from the stage.

Although more complexly now, the same basic sermon in chapter 9 resumes in chapter 12, but instead of solely teaching repentance and redemption, Alma dwells on the subject of prophetic authority and his own right to preach repentance. The original sermon resumes with these words: "Now Alma said unto him [Antionah]: This is the thing [the fall of man in need of redemption] which I was about to explain [before I was driven from the stage]. Now we see that Adam did fall by the partaking of the forbidden fruit, according to the word of God; and thus we see, that by his fall, all mankind became a lost and a fallen people" (12:22). This statement returns us to the very subject he was addressing when he was booed off stage at the end of chapter 9.

It is no surprise then that Alma takes this second opportunity to unmistakably universalize the doctrine of the Fall (thus not making it appear that he insults the Ammonihahites) and to defend his authority in context with the plan of redemption, given the accumulation of subjects in the foregoing dialogue. Presumably, Alma had initially



attempted to make the point that the Ammonihabites were “fallen” and “hardened” so that he might encourage repentance among them. This is in fact what he does in chapter 12. The Ammonihabites’ chief sin is intellectual pride. Near the end of the block, Alma exhorts his antagonists to humility and invites them repeatedly to repent (see 13:13–30). In Alma 12 and 13, he continues the defense of his authority by appealing, as he already has, to many other witnesses. In this way, Alma appeals to the sophists, who presumably value democratic majorities and increasingly see authority as more acceptable when widely shared. Hence, their inclination since chapter 9 has been to ask whether God gave “one man” such authority as Alma claimed. Alma’s answer to them is “yes” and “no”: yes, he has prophetic authority, but no, he is not alone; he is but one of a cloud of witnesses past and present.

He takes a similar approach when later in the Book of Mormon the sophist Korihor accuses him of misusing his authority: “ye have the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets” (30:44). In contrast to the sophistic stereotype that casts the prophets as hierarchical and tyrannical, Alma’s best defense is to democratize the blessings and experience of the gospel as he often does. “For because of the word which he has imparted unto me, behold, *many* have been born of God, and have tasted *as I have tasted*, and have seen eye to eye *as I have seen*; therefore they do know of these things of which I have spoken, *as I do know*; and the knowledge which I have is of God” (36:26; emphasis added; see also 32:27). The prophetic order to which Alma belongs is as ancient as Adam or Melchizedek and yet is as muscular as ever in his own day, which can be attested by the activity of the angels among the people (and throughout the earth), this angelic activity being in preparation for the coming of Christ and his kingdom in not many years (see 9:25–28; 10:20–21; 13:21–26). In Alma’s epistemology, *all* people may come to know of the truthfulness of his words if they will but humbly conduct the “experiment” (32:27). In this connection, it should be remembered that the sophists were of a rational orientation as opposed to a revelatory orientation.

### Alma’s Final Sermon on Authority (Alma 12:3–6, 9–18; 12:22–13:30)

Once Amulek has spoken of his companion’s authority (see Alma 10:7–11),<sup>15</sup> Alma returns to his earlier comments before he is shouted down

15. Before we hear Alma defend his authority further (Alma 12:22–13:30), we hear Amulek speak of the power of God (10:5) and of Alma’s angelically declared status and ability to bless Amulek’s household (10:7–12). He vouches for Alma’s authority by first establishing his own ethos (10:2–4). As indicated,

by the sophists (12:22). Alma resumes his defense of his authority in Ammonihah by teaching, among many other truths, about the role of prophets in the plan of redemption (see Moro. 7:22–32). In chapter 12, Alma, in his distinct style, seeks “to explain things beyond, or to unfold the scriptures beyond that which Amulek had done” (12:1). The passage at this juncture is midway through a section on the doctrines of the temporal and spiritual death (see chapters 11–12). Zeezrom, “one of the most expert” of Alma’s enemies (10:31), becomes “convinced more and more of the power of God” (12:7). In a careful return to his earlier remarks (see 9:31–33), Alma explains to a now sincerely curious Zeezrom (and all present), “It is given unto many [the prophets/high priests] to know of the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him” (12:9). In other words, the faith

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John W. Welch has pointed out that Amulek is a second witness to his companion’s authority and message. Welch, *Legal Cases*, 241–43. Amulek calls Alma a “prophet of the Lord,” a “holy man” and a “chosen man of God” (10:7, 9). This description is telling since being holy and chosen conveys authority. The word “holy,” or its equivalent “spotless,” becomes important from this point on in the dialogue. In Alma 10:2–11, 17–23, and 25–27, and on through chapter 11, Amulek, now more confident than before, allows himself to enter into any number of topics, including the value of the prayers of the righteous (see 10:22–23), the nature and number of the persons in the Godhead (see 11:22–44), and temporal death and the resurrection (see 11:42–45). What is of interest to this study is the sophists’ epistemological question to Amulek: “How knowest thou these things?” (11:30). The sophists want to know in essence by what authority he claims such knowledge. Without hesitation, Amulek answers these men who favor rational, relative, humanly constructed knowledge: “An angel hath made them [truths] known unto me” (11:31). Shortly after Amulek clarifies the source of his knowledge, the cunning sophists accuse him of believing that he has more authority than God (11:35). This pious hypocrisy and imagined idea is planted by the sophist Zeezrom in the minds and hearts of the many onlookers. Amulek, partly in his own defense and partly to justify God, explains that he has not taken on himself authority to command God as charged, but has taken God at his word, which is that no one who dies “in [his] sins” can “inherit the kingdom of heaven” (11:36–37). The word of God he speaks is, in part, evidence of his authority. Like Alma, he is called to teach the word of God. The sophists, familiar with the scriptures, do not accept their *author* or his *authority*. In effect, Amulek’s defense prepares the ground for Alma, who has yet to finish his defense. The result of Amulek’s powerful defense against the destructive strategies of these intellectuals after the order of Nehor is to cause Zeezrom to fear and tremble (12:1).

of the people in a sense controls the prophetic message. At this stage of the exchange, a malicious and clever bystander, and “a chief ruler among them,” Antionah, challenges Alma by questioning his claim to the soul’s immortality (12:20), which fortunately allows the prophet to more fully return to his message on prophetic authority and redemption (12:22). This passing of the conflict from sophist (Zeezrom) to sophist (Antionah) is reminiscent of the movement of the overall dialogue.

In the remainder of chapter 12, Alma primarily expounds on the role of the prophets in the plan of redemption.

And after God had appointed that these things [fall, repentance, redemption, death, judgment, and resurrection] should come unto man, behold, then he saw that it was expedient that man should know concerning the things whereof he had appointed unto them; Therefore he sent angels [authoritative heavenly witnesses] to converse with them [prophets], who caused men to behold of his glory [rest]. And they began from that time forth to call on his name; therefore God conversed with men [prophets], and made known unto them the plan of redemption. . . . Therefore God gave unto them commandments, after having made known unto them the plan of redemption, that they [men] should not do evil, the penalty thereof being a second death. . . . But God did call on men [through his servants the prophets], in the name of his Son, (this being the plan of redemption which was laid) saying: If ye will repent, and harden not your hearts, then will I have mercy upon you, through mine Only Begotten Son. (Alma 12:28–30, 32–33)

This explanation of the intercessory role of prophets in the plan of salvation responds to the earlier material in Alma 8 and 9 and prepares the reader for the complexity of Alma 13. These authoritative preachers known as prophets received their callings after having themselves manifested “faith,” “repentance,” and “holy works” (12:30). Their role is to teach the plan of redemption and the commandments, so that those who hear their words and repent may not only avoid destruction in the flesh but, more importantly, find redemption and ultimately enter into “the rest of the Lord” (12:32–37; see also D&C 84:24). As part of the block’s continuity, Alma reiterates in chapter 12, much as in 9:13–14, that keeping the commandments in strict obedience is central to returning to the rest of God through Christ’s atonement (see 12:34–37). As indicated earlier, Alma is “one man” among many sent of God to teach his disobedient people repentance and redemption that they might find rest. These themes continue into the next chapter, where they are amplified and further complicated. In chapter 13, Alma continues the case that his mission is not unique in sacred history, since many have been “called

and prepared” to preach repentance through Christ even before his day (13:3), including angels.

The reader of Alma 13 more fully returns to the questions encountered as early as Alma 9:2, questions that Amulek also attempted to answer in chapter 10: “Who art thou? Suppose ye that we shall believe the testimony of one man . . . ?” Chapter 13 is Alma’s attempt to describe his divine order in response to the much earlier questions, questions that he has yet to fully answer (chapter 12 was just the groundwork). Whether intentional or not, Alma’s indirectness and delay on this occasion may protect him from harm.<sup>16</sup> In chapter 13, Alma defends his calling and authority to preach in Ammonihah even while teaching repentance and redemption. There is, however, apparently enough faith among some of those listening to Alma to justify his in-depth treatment of priesthood authority. Alma sees himself as one of many “ordained priests” who have been “prepared from the foundation of the world” to teach the commandments of God (13:1, 3). He perceives his calling as being “in and through the atonement”; and his calling, properly understood, is but a type of the calling of the “Only Begotten Son, who was prepared” (13:5). Alma describes his priesthood order, boldly associating himself with “many” before him, especially Melchizedek, and one greater than Melchizedek, the Son of God (13:10):

And again [this continues from Alma 12], my brethren, I would cite your minds forward [from the Fall to Melchizedek and other priests before Alma] to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children; and I would that ye should remember that the Lord God ordained priests, after his holy *order*, which was after the *order* of his Son, to teach these things unto the people. And those priests were ordained after the *order* of his Son, in a manner that thereby the people

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16. Michael Murrin and Mindele Anne Treip discuss this subject in their books on allegory and audiences. Murrin argues that prophets often endanger their lives by speaking too plainly. This is arguably the case for Alma in Ammonihah. In contrast, allegorists learned from the prophets to disguise their truths from the *many* while attempting to communicate with the *few*. As the day wears on in Ammonihah, Alma seems to work in a less plain style and with more attention to his sophisticated audience. Treip points out that Edmund Spenser and others used the veil of allegory to protect themselves while sharing political or otherwise risky ideas. Alma 13 is a difficult teaching and, in my judgment, contains an argument for Alma’s prophetic authority. Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 21–53; Mindele Anne Treip, *Allegorical Poetics and the Epic: The Renaissance Tradition to Paradise Lost* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 23.

might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption. And this is the manner after which they were ordained—being called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works. (13:1–3; emphasis added)

Like those before him, Alma has been foreordained to teach on earth “according to the foreknowledge of God,” in part because of his “exceeding faith and good works” while in the “first place,” or first estate (13:3).<sup>17</sup> “As great privilege” would have been given to others who were initially “on the same standing,” but they “harden[ed] their hearts” and lost the opportunity (13:4, 5). Alma’s re-ordination on earth, something that came in his case by the Atonement and the faith of his father and others (5:3), is but a type of the foreordination and re-ordination of him who called Alma—Jesus Christ. Alma is just one of many priests who have been sent forth among the people since the beginning to preach faith, repentance, and redemption through Christ. This is the “order” (5:43–44, 49) after which Alma has been called, and it is the source of his “power and authority” (5:3), an authority passed to him by his father. Near the second half of chapter 13, it becomes clear that Alma sees his efforts on a parallel with Melchizedek, whom he admires; for, as he says of this one man, “there were many before him, and also there were many afterwards, but none were greater” (13:19). Melchizedek is but one of the “many” called “after this manner”—a preacher of righteousness—one of “an exceedingly great many”<sup>18</sup> prepared from the foundation of the world to teach the commandments in plainness and power (see 13:3, 6, 10, 12).<sup>19</sup>

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17. Although he does not supply the evidence for his assertion, Terryl Givens claims that “Joseph Smith and his contemporaries” probably did not see in Alma 13 the doctrine of “human preexistence.” Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 360 n. 21.

18. This last phrase, “an exceedingly great many,” from the last third of verse 12, may also refer to those whom these priests helped enter into God’s rest.

19. The “preachers of righteousness” in Moses 6 (Adam, Seth, Enos, and Enoch) are described in the same rhetorical terms as is the prophet Alma in chapters 12 and 13 (and the ancient high priests that he refers to, probably these same ones, and many others subsequent to those [see Moses 6:23]). Moses 6 is a discussion on priesthood (and the first principles and ordinances of the gospel), as is Alma 13 (see Moses 6:7, 53). There is a strong rhetorical relationship between Moses 6 and Alma 13. They seem to be parallel chapters. It is very

### Alma's Appeal to Melchizedek's Authority

Near the end of Alma's doctrinally eclectic discourse primarily on the role of holy prophets in the plan of redemption, Alma appeals to the scriptural history of his intimate parallel: Melchizedek (Alma 13:14–19). Apparently likening himself to Melchizedek, he shares the history of Melchizedek's mighty efforts in Salem to demonstrate that "one man," having "received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God," did have the power by the grace of God to turn a people "strong in iniquity and abomination" from rebellion to righteousness, contrary to what the Ammonihahites have tragically supposed (13:17–18). Even if the source of his and his father's immediate authority is not identified in the Book of Mormon account, Alma understands that he is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek and that what he attempts to do in Ammonihah, Melchizedek did once before him when he preached under the same authority to the people of Salem. Given that Alma declares repentance to a wicked city as did the former famous high priest, it is understandable that he likens himself to Melchizedek (13:17, 18). This typological transfer of authority among prophets/priests across generations is an appropriate appeal, given his righteous intention to save a city from destruction by invoking a familiar figure and scriptural story.

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common to see the doctrine of baptism and the phrase "the kingdom of God" in the same passage of scripture (see John 3:5). In the context of chapter 12, the phrase "first provocation" (12:36) appears to especially refer to the fall of man and not primarily to Moses's attempt to sanctify his people in the wilderness (see Jacob 1:7; D&C 84:23–24).

To "enter into the rest of God," a phrase found in various ways repeated in the block of scripture, especially in Alma 12 and 13, can be understood in at least four ways: (1) it may mean entering the church on earth (see Alma 5:54); (2) it may mean living the gospel of peace in meekness (see Moro. 7:3); (3) it may mean entering paradise (see Moro. 10:34); or, (4) it may mean entering the kingdom of God (see Alma 12:37). Not all of these usages fit well with what is known about Alma 12. Alma 13 closes with an emphasis on the first principles and ordinances of the gospel, especially repentance (see 13:27–30). In fact, it does not only read much like Alma 7:22–25 (a passage grounded in baptism), but it reads much like 2 Nephi 31:20 and Mosiah 3:19, other passages on first principles. Alma seeks to "pull down" the Ammonihahites' "pride and craftiness," thus Alma concludes his third sermon, repeating three times the phrase, "humble yourselves" (Alma 4:19; 13:13, 14, 28). In my judgment, Alma 12 and 13 is a text that encourages entrance (or re-entrance) into the church through baptism so that salvation may be obtained. This was Alma's message to all the churches at this season.

Nevertheless, this bold prophetic parallel is not unusual or unprecedented. For instance, Nephi, an advocate of likening the scriptures unto himself, defends his father (himself one man) against his rebellious brothers by comparing Lehi to Moses (also one man) leading Israel (see 1 Ne. 17:23–44) before boldly likening himself also to Moses (17:50). But what is bolder, Alma’s indirectly likening himself to Melchizedek, or his saying that all the prophets and priests after this order were ordained in such a manner so as to point the people to Christ (Alma 13:2)? If prophets can prefigure Christ, then surely they can suggest each other without blame. Did not Lehi and Nephi see their exodus from Jerusalem into the wilderness near the Red Sea as patterned after Moses (1 Ne. 4:2–3)? Or for that matter, was Brigham Young any less of a Moses than was Lehi or Nephi when he led the Saints from Nauvoo to the West? The priestly/prophetic parallel is complete when Alma leaves his detailed account of Melchizedek and Salem and cries to those still standing near him in Ammonihah, “Now is the time to repent” (Alma 13:21). It is as if Alma declares, “Now it’s your time to repent just as it once was the people of Salem’s time to do so. God sent one man to Salem, and he has sent one man to you. Now the choice is yours.” Specifically, Alma testifies that Christ is coming to earth to set up his kingdom (13:22–26). The Ammonihahites have an account of this man Melchizedek (“the scriptures are before you”), making it clear that Alma has only sought to liken the scriptures unto them for their benefit and not for any personal reason (13:20).<sup>20</sup> However, many of them ultimately reject the word and burn the scriptural books.

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20. Robert L. Millet (and others such as Welch) has explored the Melchizedek literature extensively. See Robert L. Millet, “The Holy Order of God,” in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992), 61–88; John W. Welch, “The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13–19,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 2:238–72. Melchizedek is seen as a mysterious figure to most Bible scholars, appearing in Genesis 14:18–20 and Hebrews 5 and 7. A most interesting connection surfaces in Hebrews 5:7, 8. In this passage, the reader encounters a reference to Melchizedek in terms that reflect Alma’s conversion story, or at least serve as an illustration of Melchizedek’s “mighty faith” as compared to Alma’s “mighty voice” (Alma 13:18, 21).



In addition to what has been said about this connection across time and between prophets, it is easy to see how Alma could and would have associated himself with the great high priest of Salem. They both had served in high positions of government (Melchizedek was a king of Salem, later Jerusalem, and Alma had been Nephite chief judge); each had exercised “mighty faith” to save his people (JST Gen. 14:30, 32; Alma 13:18); each had “preached repentance” in power and authority (JST Gen. 14:36; Alma 13:18); each had cared for the poor (JST Gen. 14:37–38; Alma 4:12–13); each had served as the successor to his father; and, perhaps unbeknownst to Alma, he, like Melchizedek, would in time be translated (JST Gen. 14:34; Alma 45:18–19). By the time of the burning of the believers and their books, Alma had preached to the cities of Zarahemla (Alma 5), Gideon (Alma 7), Melek (Alma 8), and Ammonihah (Alma 8–14). Like Melchizedek, he had had relative success in all of them, but not without “labor[ing] much in spirit” and fasting and praying (8:10). Even in Ammonihah, the dialogue’s reader learns of the effect of prophetic plainness and power: “Many of [the Ammonihahites] did believe on [Alma’s and Amulek’s] words, and began to repent, and to search the scriptures” (14:1). Nevertheless, Ammonihah would suffer desolation because of abomination. Alma’s whole goal, as was his priestly predecessor’s (13:18), had been to put down contention and establish order and peace (Alma 1:22–24, 7:27; see also Mosiah 27:37). This was done that they in the city might be spared utter destruction and prepared to “inherit the kingdom of God” (Alma 9:12). Alma’s in-depth theological discussion of the role of the prophets and high priests in the plan of redemption, including Melchizedek’s own particular role, answers the basic question of Alma’s authority.

### **The Focus on Authority in Prison**

For further evidence of the claim that Alma defends his authority against sophists/rationalists enamored with the still relatively new political arrangement, one simply needs to consult the conclusion of the block’s material. Chapters 14 and 15 dramatically recount the fate of Alma and Amulek and of the believers in Ammonihah. It completes the narrative that commenced in chapter 8, when Alma first attempted to preach in Ammonihah. In chapter 14, the reader sees Zeezrom suffer the “pains of hell” while adding his own witness (14:6–7; see also 15:3–5). His witness of the prophets’ authority and message is so powerful that he is even accused by his fellow sophists of being “possessed with the devil” like



the prophets who have convinced him (14:7; see also 15:15). In so doing, Zeezrom vouches for Alma's and Amulek's divine ethos: "These men," he cries to his former peers, "are spotless before God" (Alma 14:7). This is the same language Alma used when he made his case in chapter 13 that all those after his order were beneficiaries of the Atonement and therefore could preach repentance with authority and power from God (13:12). Personal experience is also a form of authority. Having once become "pure and spotless before God" themselves through repentance, these ancient high priests could assist others to be "made pure" (13:12) and qualified to enter into "the presence of the Lord" (9:14). Chapter 14 recounts the burning of the believers and their books and the violent persecution of Alma and Amulek. The final image of prophetic authority is that of Alma and Amulek emerging from the rubble of the fallen prison like "two lions," striking terror into the hearts of the sophists of the doomed city (14:29).

Additionally, the final chapter of the block (14) gives us to understand some of what the most wicked among the Ammonihahites had tellingly taken away from Alma's and Amulek's teachings. Alma has spoken to them of their suffering a second death if they do not repent, and he does so while also less directly, but emphatically, providing them a defense of his right to preach the same in conjunction with the plan of redemption and commandments of God. He is sent from God to help them turn from their many sins and apparent studies in subversive rhetoric (Alma 8:17; see also 10:15). The power and authority of Alma remains either directly or indirectly at issue throughout chapter 14, in which the unit ends in sophistic sarcasm (moral equivalence) and contempt of the wickedest sort. After watching the martyrdom of so many innocent souls, the chief judge speaks to his prisoners: "After what ye have seen, will ye preach again unto this people, that they shall be cast into a lake of fire and brimstone? Behold, ye see that ye had not power to save those who had been cast into the fire; neither has God saved them because they were of thy faith" (14:14–15).

The terrible scene, fires still smoldering, has overwhelmed the local Amulek, but Alma, although also pained, is accustomed to the abuse. He has suffered persecution since his awakening prompted by the earth-shaking power of the angel sent to turn him and his friends from their destructive course (Mosiah 27:32–37). The chief judge in his taunting of the prisoners cleverly alludes to Alma's earlier claim that he (the judge) and his peers (lawyers, judges, priests, and teachers from Ammonihah) would suffer a second death in a "lake of fire" if they did not repent

(Alma 12:17). What has happened is just the reverse. Where is the manifestation of Alma's power? Where is the power of Alma's God? Later the same judge commands his prophet-prisoners to speak in answer to further questions. However, because they answer "nothing," he threatens them with his puny political authority: "Know ye not that I have power to deliver you up unto the flames?" (14:19).

The last day of the prisoners' captivity is particularly revealing. It is the day that the Lord plans to deliver Alma and his companion, but not before having their authority challenged further. In what seems to be clear evidence of the effect of Alma's difficult final sermon on the Nehorist sophists, the same judge comes in with the others and smites the prisoners again and again. Alma and Amulek say nothing. The judge, frustrated that his intellectual interrogations and civil power and authority cannot persuade these insolent, so-called prophets/priests to speak, hurls at them yet another proud and deceptive question: "Will ye stand again and judge this people, and condemn our law?" adding in contempt, "If ye have such great *power* why do ye not deliver yourselves?" (14:20; emphasis added). The first question suggests that these sophists understood that Alma had called them to repentance for their sins. The reference to the condemning of their law was part of their own dishonest challenge to Amulek's authority, derived in part from his familiarity with the word of God (11:34–37). The charge is pure fiction, originally based on a subtle distinction between the prepositions "in" and "from." The distinction has theological implications that also center on "authority" (11:36), for Christ either saves us *in our sins* or *from our sins*. To accept the latter phrase and to reject the former is to believe in the authority of God and his word. Nevertheless, what is of even more direct interest is the judge's nearly final unprovoked question, "If ye have such great power why do ye not deliver yourselves?" a question that must have to do with Alma's last words on the priesthood in chapter 13, since neither he nor his companion have spoken while in prison for four days (14:20). The question assumes that Alma and Amulek (and all present in the prison) understand that Alma has made, among other things, an unmistakable case for his right to preach repentance and redemption through Christ to these people in Ammonihah, even though they do not recognize him as a Nephite chief judge or that as high priest over the church he has any authority over them.

Out of necessity, as the Apostle Paul did, Alma has engaged in "self-recommending" prophetic rhetoric, a rhetoric that has not drawn attention to himself so much as pointed to his contemporaries, his fathers,

the angels, and the Son of God, who is the Great High Priest. From the time of his conversion, Alma has rejoiced in the universal availability of the gifts of the gospel (Mosiah 27:30; see also Alma 36:24–26). For effect in his account, Mormon repeats the word “power” three more times in this chapter (Alma 14:24, 25, 28). This concentrated repetition of the word “power” near the end of the dramatic sermonic sequence/dialogue reminds Mormon’s reader of its heavy use in the introduction of the same unit (8:3–32). Power was the issue at the end of chapter 8, and it remains the issue. This continuity speaks to the unity and integrity of the material. The confrontational dialogue occurring in and around Ammonihah is part of a larger unit of material describing Alma’s regulation of the church (ch. 4–16). Moreover, power remains a conspicuous textual issue throughout the chronologically parallel story of Ammon and his brethren, recounted in the first half of the book of Alma (ch. 17–26). The calling and authoritative role of prophets serves as one of the great themes of the Book of Mormon.

Alma’s order has been the issue (or one of the main issues) since chapter 8. The material in question, although doctrinally diverse, is unified or coherent as it relates to authority. Almost nothing can compare with the wickedness of Ammonihah, and yet in this place, Alma, like Melchizedek, made converts. Those converts, if they did not flee to Sidon, were stoned or burned, along with their scriptural books, but their souls were received into glory (14:11). This last word, “glory,” refers to the kingdom of God, a doctrine, for our purposes, introduced in 9:12, and threaded throughout the sequence thereafter (see 12:8). As martyrs, the innocent and repentant of Ammonihah will enter the kingdom of God and have their ultimate rest. The mostly tragic episode in Ammonihah illustrates the depth apostasy can reach. Mormon delays the full resolution of his narrative that features the collision of the prophets and the sophists, but in the end prophecy is fulfilled and poetic justice served. Ammonihah is destroyed and becomes a “Desolation of Nehors,” not fit for human habitation for some time thereafter due to its stench (16:9–11). According to the record, the people’s great stumbling block in Ammonihah is their proud opposition to God, his commandments, and prophetic authority due to their inordinate interest in their professions, freedom, and language. The wicked of Ammonihah twice reject Alma, whom God sent to turn them to their former blessings. Alma has defended his prophetic order against sophistic attacks since the early part of the scriptural block. Significantly, for the equivalent of five

chapters Alma has defended his authority to preach. The Lord prepared the dialogue for our times, a time anticipated by Mormon wherein the Gentiles would deny the spirit of prophecy and revelation. The Book of Mormon confirms that God has called, calls, and will yet call prophets to teach his message of redemption through Christ, even at this late date in human history when freedom (itself dependent for its endurance on morality) and sophistic rhetoric again rise while so much else declines.

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