

CHAPTER 16



ALMA THE YOUNGER'S SEMINAL SERMON AT ZARAHEMLA

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The book of Alma is a microcosm of the cosmic conflict between the forces of good and evil. The stage for this conflict is set in the very first chapter when two men on opposite sides claim to preach the word of God. Nehor, inspired by Satan, introduces priestcraft for the first time among the Nephites, preaching “that which he termed to be the word of God” (Alma 1:3) and testifying that “all men should have eternal life” (v. 4). Immediately, Nehor is confronted by Gideon, a righteous teacher and former military leader. “Because Gideon withstood him with the words of God” (v. 9), Nehor killed him with his sword. The conflict in Alma between word and sword thus commences. And while in the beginning the victor in this conflict may seem in doubt, Alma later assures us that “the preaching of the word had a . . . more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword” (Alma 31:5).

The contest for the souls of the people ensues over the entire sixty-three chapters of Alma, with Alma the Younger and his sons, the sons of Mosiah, and their companions “bearing down in pure testimony” (Alma 4:19) against the Nephites, Lamanites, Amulonites, Amalekites, and Zoramites, and with such figures as Nehor, Amlici, Korihor, and Zeezrom attempting to undermine their work

at every step. The dramatic struggle plays out as powerful men fight one another with words and with weapons of war.

It is fascinating to note the degree to which the archetypal conflict in Alma is a contest of words. Alma, who might be considered the great intellectual in the Book of Mormon, has impressive persuasive power, as do the sons of Mosiah. They are all adept in using language to call members of the church to repentance or to convert the Lamanites and other nonbelievers. Those who oppose these preachers of the word are also sophisticated in the use of language. One after another they lead people astray by their sophistry. These language merchants “were learned in all the arts and cunning of the people; and this was to enable them that they might be skilful in their profession” (Alma 10:15). By the use of intellectual argument, cross-examination, contradiction, and verbal deception, these men try to undermine the work of the Lord’s servants. For example, when Korihor appears before Alma, we are told “he did rise up in great swelling words” (Alma 30:31).

That the contest between good and evil is waged with words is seen in the way *word* is used in Alma’s narrative. Nearly half the instances of *word* in the Book of Mormon are found in this one book, including such phrases as *the word*, *the word(s) of God*, *the word of the Lord* (Alma 9:14), *the word(s) of Christ* (Alma 37:44-45), and so forth. Together, they constitute a leitmotif running throughout the narrative. *The word* is used so frequently and in such a variety of ways and contexts that it begins to take on powerful symbolic significance. By the end of the book the accumulated associations of *the word* with Christ (see, for example, Alma 37:44-45 and Alma 44:5) may remind us of John’s opening declaration, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Both testaments of Christ confirm that he is the embodiment of God’s power and love.

Central to understanding the conflict between good and evil are the five sermons of Alma the Younger directed to (1) the members

of the church and potential converts at Zarahemla (Alma 5); (2) the people in Gideon (Alma 7); (3) those in Ammonihah (Alma 9:8-30); (4) Zeezrom and “the people round about; for the multitude was great” (Alma 12:2, 12:3-13:30); and (5) the Zoramites (Alma 32:8-33:23). This paper examines in detail the first of these, Alma’s great sermon at Zarahemla.

It is important to establish the context for this sermon. The Nephites had recently passed through a crisis that nearly destroyed their civilization. The wickedness of King Noah and his corrupt priests resulted in a cultural crisis of such dimensions that had it not been for Alma’s father rescuing the church, the society might have disintegrated into the kind of mutual annihilation that destroyed the Jaredites.

At the waters of Mormon, Alma the Elder began a small but ultimately triumphant reformation that transformed Nephite society by reestablishing ecclesiastical primacy and social coherence. While Alma the Younger was blessed to come of age during this period of peace and stability, he and the sons of Mosiah rebelled against their fathers and “went about . . . seeking to destroy the church of God” (Alma 36:6). As the formerly sinful son of a prophet, Alma, addressing the people at Zarahemla, knows the societal dangers of discord. More significantly, he knows the personal price that must be paid by those who rebel against God, for as he later recalls to his own son Helaman, “I [was] racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sin. . . . I was racked, even with the pains of a damned soul” (Alma 36:12, 16).

A repentant Alma becomes the high priest upon the death of his father, which puts him in “charge concerning all the affairs of the church” (Mosiah 29:42). He is also appointed chief judge and thus inaugurates the reign of the judges. Immediately, Alma has to deal with political dissent, treason, social unrest, ecclesiastical divisiveness, and armed conflict with the rebellious Amlicites, who have

joined forces with the Lamanites. Although Alma is successful in defeating his enemies, the war exacts a great cost to the Nephites: “Now the number of the slain were not numbered, because of the greatness of their number. . . . Now many women and children had been slain with the sword, . . . and also many of their fields of grain were destroyed” (Alma 3:1-2). These losses produce a brief period of retrenchment during which thousands join the church, a condition that creates social stability. This stability, however, quickly starts to erode when the wealthier members of the church begin setting themselves above their poorer brothers and sisters and persecuting them. These prideful members infect not only the church, but also “lead those who were unbelievers on from one piece of iniquity to another, thus bringing on the destruction of the people” (Alma 4:11).

It is against this backdrop of external threat and internal discord that Alma surrenders his position as chief judge and, retaining his office of high priest, goes “forth among his people . . . that he might preach *the word of God* unto them, to stir them up to remembrance of their duty, and that he might pull down, by *the word of God*, all the pride and craftiness and all the contentions which were among his people, seeing no way that he might reclaim them save it were in bearing down in pure testimony against them” (Alma 4:19). The repetition of the phrase *the word of God* foreshadows the importance of this expression in the narrative that ensues.

Alma’s sermon to the unrepentant church members in Zarahemla as recounted in Alma 5 is a verbal symphonic composition of complexity and elegance. Its skillful blending of various rhetorical devices makes it a virtual sermonic tour de force. These devices include parallelism, allusion, repetition, imagery, symbolism, contrasting pairs, rhetorical questions, and so forth. Suggesting his skill and power with language, Alma is described earlier in the narrative as “a man of many words” (Mosiah 27:8).

Alma begins his sermon with a clear statement of his identity and authority. He echoes Nephi’s words at the very beginning of

the Book of Mormon when he declares: “I, Alma, having been consecrated by my father, Alma” (Alma 1:3). By echoing Nephi, he reminds his hearers of the deliverance of their ancestors from the destruction at Jerusalem and their blessings in being brought to a land of promise. By invoking his father, he reminds them of the dramatic turn in Nephite history brought about by his father’s faith and courage: “He [Alma the Elder] having power and authority from God to do these things, behold, I say unto you that he began to establish a church in the land which was in the borders of Nephi; . . . yea, and he did baptize his brethren in the waters of Mormon” (Alma 5:3). By alluding to the rebaptism of lapsed members at the waters of Mormon, Alma is hoping his hearers remember the dramatic contrast between life under the wicked King Noah and that under King Mosiah and his father. He skillfully brackets his sermon by invoking the baptismal renewal at the waters of Mormon at the beginning of his sermon and returning to it at the end when, alluding also to Lehi’s powerful dream, he invites his hearers to “Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life” (v. 62).

To emphasize the significance of his father’s restoration of the church after the wickedness of King Noah and his own personal rescue from “the pains of hell” (Alma 36:13), Alma introduces the first of his themes and one of the central themes of the Book of Mormon and of Hebrew history—the contrast between captivity/bondage and deliverance/liberation. He reminds his listeners of the social and political bondage their people suffered under King Noah and the physical bondage and captivity they suffered at the hands of the Lamanites: “Behold, I say unto you, they were delivered out of the hands of the people of king Noah, by the mercy and power of God. . . . They were brought into bondage by the hands of the Lamanites; . . . yea, . . . they were in captivity, and again the Lord did deliver them out of bondage” (Alma 5:4-5). Here Alma is echoing Mosiah, who, just before Alma was chosen as leader, told the

people: “Yea, remember king Noah. . . . Behold what great destruction did come upon them [the people]; and also because of their iniquities they were brought into bondage” (Mosiah 29:18).

Just as Jews traditionally have been admonished to remember the captivity and subsequent deliverance of their forebears in Egypt, so Alma asks his fellow Nephites, “Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers? Yea, and have you sufficiently retained in remembrance his mercy and long-suffering towards them? And moreover, have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell?” (Alma 5:6). Captivity and deliverance is just one of the themes Alma continues to weave throughout his narrative. He uses powerful images to dramatize the difference between bondage and freedom, including “bands of death” and “chains of hell,” both of which can be loosed as people repent and turn to God (v. 9). His use of such imagery undoubtedly is related to his own personal spiritual captivity, for he speaks of being bound himself by the chains of iniquity.

In this sermon, Alma presents his hearers with a series of contrasting pairs that throw into bold relief the choice before them of choosing salvation or damnation, life or death. These include God or the devil; birth/life or death; light or dark; white or stained; pure or filthy; truth or lies; awake or asleep; saved or damned/destroyed; rejoice or mourn/wail; accept or deny; righteous or wicked; faithful or unfaithful; faith/belief or doubt/unbelief; remember or forget; hearken or ignore (not listen); humility or pride; rich or poor; guilty or guiltless; good shepherd or bad shepherd; sheep or wolves; and tree of life or tree of death. Alma uses such a long catalogue of opposites not only to demonstrate that his listeners have been making the wrong choices at the peril of their souls, but also to remind them that they have the agency and the power to choose which way they will live on the very day he addresses them: “Can ye feel so *now*?” (Alma 5:26).

One of Alma's chief rhetorical devices is repetition. Not only does he repeatedly present contrasting choices, but he continually repeats words and phrases for emphasis. In fact, one gets the impression that nearly every word or phrase is repeated at least once in the sermon. One of the most important of these repeated phrases is "I say unto you." This phrase is found an amazing thirty-five times in this sermon (along with one variant, "I can tell you," at Alma 5:11). The effect of such repetition is not only the affirmation of Alma's authority but also the depth of his personal witness. That is, he is speaking to them not only as high priest and leader of the church but also as a reformed sinner ("a very wicked and an idolatrous man," Mosiah 27:8). He thus speaks out of ecclesiastical as well as personal authority. Toward the end of the sermon as he continues to use this phrase, Alma cleverly expands it from "I say unto you" to "thus saith the Spirit" (Alma 5:50), "the Spirit saith unto me" (v. 51), and "the Spirit saith" (v. 52), extending the authority of his words to that of the Holy Spirit and ultimately to Christ: "I say unto you, can you imagine to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord?" (v. 16) and, "I say unto you, all you that are desirous to follow the voice of the good shepherd" (v. 57). Then, cleverly altering his phraseology, he shifts the burden to them: "What have ye to say against this?" (v. 58). The accumulated force of his multiple uses of "I say unto you" and his one "What have ye to say?" would, one would guess, leave his hearers speechless. What could they say against such a fortress of logic and testimony?

Counterbalanced by the rhetorical declarative "I say unto you" are a series of thirty-five rhetorical questions, most at the beginning of his sermon. The majority of these questions take the form, "I ask" or "I ask of you." These are often interwoven with "I say unto you," as in the following example:

And now *I ask of you*, my brethren, were they destroyed? Behold, *I say unto you*, Nay, they were not. And again *I ask*, were the bands of death broken, and the chains

of hell which encircled them about, were they loosed? *I say unto you*, Yea, they were loosed, and their souls did expand, and they did sing redeeming love. And *I say unto you* that they are saved. (Alma 5:8-9)

Most instances of Alma's use of "I say unto you" are followed by a question, as in the following example: "I say unto you, can you imagine to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord?" (Alma 5:16). This constant saying and questioning creates a powerful accumulation of emotional logic, especially as Alma brings it to the present moment. He knows he is speaking to members of the church who are aware of the teachings and practices that once were but no longer are a part of their spiritual observances. Thus, as pointed out above, he asks, "If ye have experienced a change of heart, . . . can ye feel so now?" (v. 26).

Not satisfied with a general call to repentance ("Have ye spiritually been born of God?" Alma 5:14), which might allow his hearers to excuse certain sinful behaviors, Alma zeroes in on their specific transgressions: "Have [ye] been sufficiently humble?" (v. 27), "Are ye stripped of pride?" (v. 28), "Is there one among you who is not stripped of envy?" (v. 29), "Is there one among you that doth make a mock of his brother, or that heapeth upon him persecutions?" (v. 30). Such questions bridge the old and new laws.

That Alma is concerned with an inner sanctification and not just an outward show of obedience can be seen in his most penetrating question, one that cuts to the heart of his listeners: "And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Alma 5:14). Alma here is suggesting that evidence of one's spiritual repentance and renewal is visible. And Alma is suggesting as well the idea of "Christogenesis" articulated by the Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin: in Christ is the power for us to radically change our lives, to transform them through his loving

atonement and thereby to transform the world itself.¹ Alma asks his hearers not simply to consider or think about their repentance (“Can ye *think* of being saved when you have yielded yourselves to become subjects to the devil?” v. 20), but to use their imaginations as well: “Can you *imagine* to yourselves that ye hear the voice of the Lord?” “Do ye *imagine* to yourselves that ye can lie unto the Lord?” “Can ye *imagine* yourselves brought before the tribunal of God?” (vv. 16–18). This constitutes an invitation to be wholly engaged in an examination of their lives in relation to the standards of gospel adherence—feeling, doing, and thinking: “Can ye look up to God at that day with a *pure heart* and *clean hands*? . . . can ye *think* of being saved?” (vv. 19–20).

Another clever strategy Alma employs to call his hearers to repentance is to invoke the fathers—that is, the ancient prophets and patriarchs—but he does so by moving from the personal “my father” and “your fathers,” to the collective “our fathers” (Alma 5:21), to specifically naming the three great fathers of Israel: “Behold, my brethren, do ye suppose that such an one [i.e., an unrepentant sinner], can have a place to sit down in the kingdom of God, with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob?” (v. 24). Nothing in the history of Israel is more calculated to get people’s attention than to remind them of the great figures with whom God established Israel through covenant. Even though this is a pre-Christian-era Christian community, recognizing that they have refused to abide by the new law of Christ, Alma points them to the old law, the one closer to the literalistic gospel that seems to be governing their lives. Later, he says, “I am commanded to stand and testify unto this people the things which have been spoken by our fathers concerning the

1. “Teilhard’s aim has been to reformulate the theology of creation in terms of a genesis, a ‘becoming’ of the universe, in Christ. The word he finally makes up after years of reflection is ‘Christogenesis,’ an awkward word perhaps, but a word that sums up the evolutive structure of the universe as Teilhard sees it: a dynamic movement directed to the final unity of all things in Christ, directed to Christ in the fullness of the Pleroma.” Robert L. Faricy, “Teilhard De Chardin on Creation and the Christian Life,” *Theology Today* 23/4 (1967): 516.

things which are to come” (v. 44); “And moreover, I say unto you that it has thus been revealed unto me, that the words which have been spoken by our fathers are true” (v. 47).

This invocation of the fathers was deeply ingrained in the consciousness of every father in Israel, who was expected to teach his children to remember these first patriarchs. Later in speaking to his son Helaman, Alma says, “I would that ye should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Alma 36:2).

Alma also invokes the first fathers of the Book of Mormon, Lehi and Nephi, by using the central image of their remarkable shared vision—the tree of life: “Yea, he [the Lord God] saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and waters of life freely” (Alma 5:34). By invoking this central Book of Mormon story, Alma is reminding his hearers of the dramatically contrasting choices made by Lehi’s sons—those who chose righteousness and those who chose wickedness—and of the unfolding of their respective histories from these seminal decisions. Alma’s hearers have just suffered the consequences of the kinds of choices made by Lehi’s sons Laman and Lemuel.

Alma expands his reference to the tree by alluding to ancient tree imagery, including the central tree at the heart of Eden and Jesus’s parable of the tree, as recounted in Matthew 3:10. Thus he includes two contrasting tree images: the tree of life from Genesis (which alludes to the primal gift of agency) and the tree of death: “Behold, the ax is laid at the root of the tree; therefore every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit shall be hewn down and cast into the fire, yea, a fire which cannot be consumed, even an unquenchable fire” (Alma 5:52).

As noted earlier, to signify their spiritual captivity, Alma employs images of bondage: “They were encircled about by the bands of death, and the chains of hell” (Alma 5:7). In fact, Alma increases

the force of these images through repetition. Having introduced them in verse 7, he asks, “Were the bands of death broken, and the chains of hell which encircled them about, were they loosed?” (v. 9). He then asks how they could have been loosed: “What is the cause of their being loosed from the bands of death, and also the chains of hell?” (v. 10).

Alma next introduces images having to do with purity and impurity: “Can ye look up to God at that day with a pure heart and clean hands?” (Alma 5:19); “How will any of you feel, if ye shall stand before the bar of God, having your garments stained with blood and all manner of filthiness?” (v. 22). Contrasted with the blood that stains is the cleansing and purification that come through the blood of Christ: “For there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until they are cleansed from all stain, through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers, who should come to redeem his people from their sins” (v. 21). The unclean to whom Alma addresses his remarks are set against “all the holy prophets, whose garments are cleansed and are spotless, pure and white” (v. 24).

Another archetypal image used by Alma in this sermon is that of the shepherd and his sheep. Emphasizing the role of the caring and beneficent shepherd, Alma uses the term *good shepherd* seven times, most instances coming at the end of his sermon.

Echoing both Isaiah 53:6 and Matthew 9:36, he speaks to those who “are not the sheep of the good shepherd” (Alma 5:38) but rather “sheep having no shepherd, notwithstanding a shepherd hath called after [them] and is still calling after [them], but [they] will not hearken unto his voice!” (v. 37). Instead of listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd, these Nephites have chosen “the devil [as their] shepherd” (v. 39). Not only is the devil seen as a bad shepherd, his undershepherds are seen as “wolves [that] enter . . . and devour his flock” (v. 59).

Alma's attitude toward his hearers is seen in his frequent reference to them as "my brethren," an appellation which occurs seven times in the beginning and middle of the sermon. At the end of the sermon when the logic of his argument reaches its climax—that is, when he hopes that the accumulated pleas and threats will bring his hearers to true repentance, Alma shifts to the more endearing "My beloved brethren," which he repeats three times. This is similar to the way Alma ends his second sermon, delivered not long after this one: "And now, my beloved brethren, for ye are my brethren, and ye ought to be beloved" (Alma 9:30). Thus, not only does Alma remind his hearers of their kinship and spiritual relationship, he reveals the charity he feels toward them in spite of his strong language condemning their recalcitrant wickedness.

There is a definite shift in the middle of the sermon when Alma begins to modulate his more accusatory and condemnatory language with the softer invitation to accept Christ: "Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of his mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you. Yea, he saith, Come unto me" (Alma 5:33-34). Christ is the "good shepherd [who] doth call you; yea, and in his own name he doth call you" (v. 38).

Alma's language continues to be strong, undoubtedly motivated by what he must sense is the reluctance of some of his hearers to respond to his message. "O ye workers of iniquity; ye that are puffed up in the vain things of the world" (Alma 5:37). He accuses them of being "liar[s] and . . . child[ren] of the devil" (v. 40).

His words indicate that he senses the pride and stubbornness of his hearers, especially evident in his repetition of "persist": "*Will ye still persist* in the wearing of costly apparel and setting your hearts upon the vain things of the world, upon your riches? Yea, *will ye persist* in supposing that ye are better one than another; yea, *will ye persist* in the persecution of your brethren. . . . Yea, and *will you persist* in turning your backs upon the poor, and the needy, and in

withholding your substance from them?” Perhaps sensing that his hearers are inclined to answer in the affirmative, Alma shifts from rhetorical questions to an affirmative statement: “And finally, all *ye that will persist* in your wickedness, I say unto you that these are they who shall be hewn down and cast into the fire except they speedily repent” (Alma 5:53-56) .

Perhaps anticipating that his hearers are forming arguments against his words, Alma makes an attempt to disarm them when he says, “I have spoken unto you plainly that ye cannot err” (Alma 5:43). And, as did Abinadi before him, he makes sure his hearers know the ultimate authority behind his words: “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” (v. 44).

The ultimate strength of Alma’s sermon is seen not in the logic of his argument, not in his many rhetorical devices, but in the emotional power of his personal witness. He reveals this in a number of instances: First, as emphasized at the beginning of this paper, by establishing the authority he has received at the hands of his father; second, by indicating that these things have been revealed to him: “Behold, I say unto you they [the things he has told them] are made known unto me by the Holy Spirit of God” (Alma 5:46); and by divine commission: “I speak by way of command unto you that belong to the church” (v. 62). Alma seals all of this with his personal witness (“I speak in the energy of my soul,” v. 43): “Do ye not suppose that I know of these things myself? Behold, I testify unto you that I do know that these things whereof I have spoken are true” (v. 45). To dramatize the difference between the apparent indifference of his listeners and his own willingness to sacrifice for the knowledge he has gained, he tells them exactly how he knows: “Behold, I have fasted and prayed many days that I might know these things of myself. And now I do know of myself that they are true; for the Lord God hath made them manifest unto me by his Holy Spirit; and this is the spirit of revelation which is in me” (v. 46).

Of course, Alma's hearers would know the spiritual trajectory of his life. As the notorious son of a famous father, his story would be familiar to everyone in the culture. His life is a dramatic example of someone who sank to the lowest depths and rose through the mercy of Christ to the preeminent position in his society. They likely would have heard him testify on previous occasions that "after wading through much tribulation, repenting nigh unto death, the Lord in mercy saw fit to snatch me out of an everlasting burning, and I am born of God. . . . I was in the darkest abyss; but now I behold the marvelous light of God" (Mosiah 27:28-29).

Everything in Alma's sermon at Zarahemla—his invitation to his hearers to repent of their sins, to break their bonds of iniquity, to cleanse their garments, to remember God's long-suffering and mercy toward them—is designed to bring his hearers to Christ so that they might repent of their sins and gain salvation. This includes the rhetorical devices he uses—the multiplication of images, the repetition of words and phrases, the allusions to past Israelite and Nephite history, the rhetorical questions and declarative statements, the references to scripture, the symbolism, and the invocation (by direct reference or by implication) of Lehi, Nephi, Abinadi, Mosiah, and Alma the Elder, as well as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The language he uses indicates that he sees this as an ultimate decision. That is, he expects his hearers not merely to make an outward show of their devotion or even a half-hearted commitment, but rather to undergo a total conversion, one involving "a mighty change" of their hearts (Alma 5:12-14) that would result in God's image being engraved on their countenances and cause them "to sing the song of redeeming love" (v. 26).

Alma ends his sermon at Zarahemla by making a distinction between those who are members of the church and those who are not. To the former he says, "I speak by way of command," and to the latter he says, "I speak by way of invitation, saying: Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life" (Alma 5:62). The effect of Alma's sermon is immediate, both

for those who accept his message and for those who reject it. As soon as he finished his address, “he ordained priests and elders, by laying on his hands according to the order of God, to preside and watch over the church. . . . And thus they began to establish the order of the church in the city of Zarahemla” (Alma 6:1, 4). Those who refused to repent “were rejected, and their names were blotted out, that their names were not numbered among those of the righteous” (Alma 6:3). Having fully succeeded in cleansing and reforming the church, Alma relinquishes his ecclesiastical responsibilities at Zarahemla and departs for Gideon to continue his mission.

In his subsequent sermons, Alma uses many of the devices he employed in his great sermon at Zarahemla, but in none as extensively or as impressively as in his first sermon, and none reflects the intellect, learning, complexity, and rhetorical sophistication of this one. It is as if Alma, sensing the pivotal role he will play in Nephite history for the next two decades, wants to make as certain and as strong a statement as possible, to nail, as it were, his theses to the door. In a way, this sermon can be seen as his inaugural address. And it can be seen as defining his ministry. The themes he introduces here will continue to be emphasized throughout his ministry, and the language he uses with such skill and sophistication will continue to echo in his role as chief priest. All in all, it is one of the most brilliant sermons in sacred literature.

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