

The Destruction of Ammonihah and the Law of Apostate Cities

John W. Welch

Alma 16:9 "Every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed."

Alma 16:9-11 records the utter destruction of the wicked city of Ammonihah by Lamanite soldiers. Recent research has uncovered several striking affinities between that account and the ancient Israelite law regarding the annihilation of apostate cities. That law is found in Deuteronomy 13:12-16:

If thou shalt hear say in one of thy cities, . . . Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which we have not known; then shalt thou enquire, and make search, and ask diligently; and, behold, if it be truth, and the thing certain, that such abomination is wrought among you; thou shalt surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly. . . .And thou shalt gather all the spoil of it into the midst of the street thereof, and shalt burn with fire the city, and all the spoil thereof every whit . . . : and it shall be an heap for ever; it shall not be built again.

Alma, who had been the Nephite chief judge, was most likely well aware of this provision, since the law of Moses was contained on the plates of brass, which were in his possession. Accordingly, Alma's concept of justice would have included the idea that an apostate city should be destroyed and anathematized in the specific way set forth in their governing law.

While Alma clearly lacked both the desire and the power to have the city of Ammonihah destroyed by a Nephite military force, and certainly no legal decree was ever issued calling for the extermination of the city, Alma carefully recorded and documented the fact that the inhabitants of Ammonihah had satisfied every element of the crime of being an apostate city. When the justice of God destroyed that city, Alma effectively showed in the record that this fate befell them in accordance with divine law. Consider the following elements:

1. The Deuteronomic law pertains to "certain men [who] are gone out from among you." Alma clearly states that the leaders in Ammonihah were Nephite apostates: "If this people, who have received so many blessings from the hand of the Lord, should transgress contrary to the light and knowledge which they do have, . . . it would be far more tolerable for the Lamanites than for them" (Alma 9:23).
2. The law applies when men have led a city to withdraw from God to serve other gods. Alma explains that certain men in Ammonihah, the followers of Nehor, had undertaken to pervert their people, to turn them away from the statutes, and judgments, and commandments of the Lord (see Alma 8:17).
3. Deuteronomy describes the offenders as "the children of Belial." Likewise, Alma made it a matter of record that "Satan had gotten great hold upon the hearts of the people of the city of Ammonihah" (Alma 8:9).
4. The law required officers to investigate the situation thoroughly, to enquire, search, and ask, to be sure that the offensive condition in fact existed. Alma did this too. After being rejected, Alma was instructed to return to preach in the city, to give them the necessary warning that they would be destroyed if they did not repent (see Alma 8:16).

Then, acting as the two required eyewitnesses (see Deuteronomy 17:6), Alma and Amulek stood and witnessed the abominable scene of the burning of the faithful, innocent wives and children of their followers (see Alma 14:9). This was a revolting experience, but it completed the case against the city and sealed its fate (see Alma 14:11).

5. The prescribed mode of execution for an apostate city was by “the sword, destroying it utterly.” This is the only place in the law of Moses where slaying by the sword is required. When the day of judgment came upon Ammonihah, the Lamanites did “slay the people and destroy the city” (Alma 16:2), presumably by the sword, their primary weapon of hand-to-hand combat.

6. The law demanded that the city should be destroyed completely by fire, “and it shall be a heap for ever.” Alma records, “Every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed, and also their great city, . . . [and] their dead bodies were heaped up upon the face of the earth” (Alma 16:9-11). Alma does not say how Ammonihah was destroyed, but that fire was involved would have been normal.

7. Finally, the law stated that the ruins “shall not be built again.” In the case of Ammonihah: “the people did not go in to possess the land of Ammonihah for many years. . . . And their lands remained desolate” (Alma 16:11). These lands were deemed untouchable for just over seven years, a ritual cleansing period (there are eight years, nine months, and five days between Alma 16:1 and Alma 49:1). Apparently, the prohibition against reinhabitation could expire or be revoked. In a similar fashion, an early Christian synod removed a ban that the island of Cyprus remain unoccupied seven years after its inhabitants had been annihilated.¹

Thus, the destruction of Ammonihah conforms quite thoroughly with the legal provision of Deuteronomy 13, making this a remarkable case of the falling of the vengeful sword of God’s justice (see Alma 54:6).

*Based on research by John W. Welch, July 1987. Further research on this topic has been published in John W. Welch, “Law and War in the Book of Mormon,” in Stephen Ricks and William Hamblin, eds., Warfare in the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 91-95, and in Stephen D. Ricks, “Holy War’: The Sacral Ideology of War in the Book of Mormon and in the Ancient Near East,” *ibid.*, 110-14.*

Footnotes

1. Constantinus Prophyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio* 47, in *Patrologia Graeca* 113:366.