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## A Preparatory Redemption: Reading Alma 12-13

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In this sermon, Alma essentially calls the wicked people of Ammonihah to repentance. After warning them of the consequences of sin and laying out the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, he relates that God ordained priests to teach this plan to Adam’s posterity. Further, Alma explains how the ordination of these priests was typological of the way the people were to look to Christ for redemption. He touches on several key doctrinal concepts in his sermon, many in novel and profound ways, including the Fall, the Atonement, revelation, moral agency, repentance, obedience, sanctification, God’s rest, and the order of God.



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*A Preparatory Redemption: Reading Alma 12–13*  
 Edited by Matthew Bowman and Rosemary Demos  
 Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018

*Reviewed by Charles Harrell*

**A** *Preparatory Redemption: Reading Alma 12–13* is a collection of essays written by eight scholars as part of the summer 2016 Mormon Theology Seminar, hosted by the Maxwell Institute, to explore the theological significance of Alma’s sermon to the people of Ammonihah, in Alma 12:19–13:20. Few passages of scripture have intrigued me over the years as much as these, so I personally looked forward with great anticipation for this volume to be released.

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The back cover describes Alma 12–13 as “a theologically rich and often misunderstood text.” Indeed, the abstruse language of the text tends to obscure as much as the language clarifies. It seems apropos, therefore, that the introduction cautions readers to take these essays “as theological and speculative, rather than as definitive” (viii). The essays are clearly exploratory and experimental, and some interpretations are more persuasive than others.

As accomplished scholars from a range of disciplines, the contributors bring a diversity of perspectives to the essays, which cover a range of topics, including revelation, free will, foreordination, priesthood, pre-existence, the Atonement, and the plan of salvation. Overall, the essays

are thoughtful, balanced, and creative, and evoke new and insightful ways of thinking about the text.

### General Criticisms

In this collection of essays, occasionally, the intertextual meaning of a word or phrase is adopted instead of the meaning apparent from the immediate text. For example, a few essays analyze the “first provocation,” found in Alma 12:36, which echoes the language of Psalm 95, Hebrews 3, and Jacob 1, which all describe the Israelites’ “provocation” of God during the Exodus. The interpretation of the “first provocation” as the disobedience of the children of Israel during the Exodus appears in the summary report (xviii) and is reaffirmed by contributors Matthew Bowman (10) and Rosemary Demos (33). But Alma 12 makes no mention of the Exodus in reference to the “first provocation”; the chapter speaks only of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden, which is thus the most straightforward allusion of the “first provocation.” Another contributor, Sheila Taylor, while acknowledging that the phrase may have reference to the Exodus, at least accedes that, based on the immediate context, “one might also make the case that ‘first provocation’ here refers to the fall” (62). This latter interpretation is essentially made at the end of verse 36: “therefore, according to his word, unto the last death, as well as the first” (Alma 12:36)—that is, just as Adam and Eve provoked God, resulting in a first or physical death, so shall those of their posterity who provoke God suffer a last, or spiritual, death.

This particular instance of predilection toward intertextuality may have been the result of the contributors’ influence on one another. Meeting together as group to consider such difficult chapters undoubtedly helped stimulate and refine individual thinking about the text, but some interpretations made by dominant voices may have led to interpretive conformity. In this instance, three essays interpret the “first provocation” as a reference to the disobedience of the children of Israel during the Exodus rather than the transgression of Adam and Eve in the Garden, which is the more internally consistent and generally accepted reading.

Several of the essays evince a lack of familiarity with early nineteenth-century literature that might have a bearing on the text of Alma 12–13. In some cases, the writers seem to be unfamiliar with word usage contemporaneous with the advent of the Book of Mormon. To give one example, Adam Miller takes a pivotal verse in Alma’s sermon that states, “Now these ordinances were given after this manner” (Alma 13:16), and assumes that the word *ordinances* refers to “laws or rituals” (88). As

used in Alma 13, however, the term *ordinance* refers specifically to the ordination of priests.<sup>1</sup> This usage is apparent in other passages of the Book of Mormon as well<sup>2</sup> but is most apparent in early Church literature in which one's divine appointment or ordination is referred to as an *ordinance*, at least until 1832, when it began to be supplanted by the now familiar term *ordination*.<sup>3</sup>

Another intertextual issue found in several essays is the appeal to ancient Hebrew and Greek word forms to illuminate terms and phrases in Alma's sermon. David Gore, for example, spends over a page presenting

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1. Grant Hardy makes a convincing argument, based simply on context, that *ordinances* in Alma 13:16 is essentially synonymous with priesthood *ordinations*. Grant Hardy, "The Book of Mormon as a Written (Literary) Artifact," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 107–9. Interpreting *ordinance* as *ordination* means that verse 16 reprises verse 3, providing matching bookends to Alma's description of the manner in which priests were ordained. This *inclusio* seems to signal where the explanation of the type starts and where it ends in order to help the reader decipher the typology of which it is a part.

2. The term *ordinance* is used in the Bible to refer to rules and regulations under the law of Moses, which is also its general usage in the Book of Mormon. An exception to this is Alma 13:8, 16 and Alma 50:39, where *ordinance* is used to denote a divine appointment or ordination.

3. Doctrine and Covenants 21:11 speaks of Oliver Cowdery's priesthood calling as an "ordinance unto" him. In summer 1832, Joseph Smith listed among the spiritual blessings Cowdery received from on high "a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance [*sic*] from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit." "Letterbook 1," 1 (ca. summer 1832), The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 17, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-1/7>. The revelation found in Doctrine and Covenants 68:1, received November 1, 1831, originally read that Orson Hyde "was called by his ordinance to proclaim the everlasting Gospel." A note in the Joseph Smith Papers reads, "'Ordinance' likely refers to Hyde's ordination to the high priesthood. 'Ordinance'—which, according to Webster's 1828 dictionary, could mean 'appointment'—was changed to 'ordination' in the 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants." "Revelation, 1 November 1831-A [D&C 68]," 113, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 17, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-1-november-1831-a-dc-68/1>. Doctrine and Covenants 53:3 similarly instructed Sidney Gilbert in June 1831 to "take upon you mine ordinances [later changed to 'ordinance'] even that of an Elder." "Revelation, 8 June 1831 [D&C 53]," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 13, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/203>. This was also later changed to "ordination." For other examples in the Doctrine and Covenants, see 77:14; and 124:134.

ancient Hebrew and Greek equivalents (or near equivalents) to the word *converse* in order to lay out the full semantic range of possible meanings to consider for its use in Alma 12:29–30 (21–22). Such an exercise has its merits, but given that the only extant source document available for the Book of Mormon is modern English, the utility of such an effort is questionable. The relevance of appealing to ancient Hebrew and Greek to illuminate the Book of Mormon could have been better clarified.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these concerns, I applaud the acknowledgement of terms and phrases in Alma’s sermon that have an actual correspondence to verbiage in the English King James Version, and I praise the effort made to comparatively analyze their meanings in each context. I would have personally liked to see a similar effort made for the phraseology in Alma’s sermon that isn’t found in the King James Version but is native to the religious discourse of Joseph Smith’s day (for example, *probationary state*, *holy order*, *from eternity to all eternity*, and so on).

Only so many topics in Alma’s sermon could be addressed given the constraints of the seminar. However, the relationship between foreknowledge and foreordination could have been explored in more depth, especially given that this is a teaching rather unique to Alma 13. Though a few essays touch on the topic, several questions remain unexplored. What does one’s ordination “according to the foreknowledge of God” mean? Does God have provisional or absolute foreknowledge of one’s choices in mortality? And what does that imply for moral agency? Is foreordination conditional or unconditional?

Given these few qualms that admittedly reflect my own personal biases, what follows is a brief review of each individual contribution to the volume. Since some essays are more narrowly focused than others, my treatment of the former tends to be shorter.

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4. The penchant to search for Hebrew terminology in the Book of Mormon seems to be based on the assumptions that (1) the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, (2) the language of the source text was Hebrew, and (3) New World Hebrew at the time of Alma was the same as or close to Old World Hebrew. We can’t be certain of any of these assumptions, and the Book of Mormon itself claims to have been written in the “language of the Egyptians” (1 Ne. 1:2). Book of Mormon studies need to come to terms with the issues surrounding these assumptions and establish appropriate guidelines accordingly. Relying on Greek equivalents to Book of Mormon terms to establish meanings seems even more questionable, since Book of Mormon people didn’t speak or write in Greek. For further discussion of the Book of Mormon source language problem, see Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2011), 165–76.

## Introduction (Matthew Bowman)

Bowman introduces Alma's sermon and briefly summarizes each of the contributed essays. He cautions that Alma's sermon should not be taken "in abstraction as a universal discourse on priesthood applicable in all times and places" but as "a specific response to the specific problem of Ammonihah," which, according to Bowman, revolves around "the practical question of order" (vii–viii)—that is "social" order. This rather specific and practical framing does not prevent him from waxing more philosophical, stating that Alma "spins" the story of Adam and Eve into "broader lessons about the nature of reality itself." "In its fullest measure," he summarizes, "his sermon is a description of the ways in which the order God has built into reality is made manifest" (viii).

According to Bowman, the people of Ammonihah were languishing in "religious and social decay," which he attributes to their social and theological disorder. They "are in social disorder," he explains, "because they are in theological disorder; they do not understand God's message, so they do not know how to run their society" (vii). Bowman seems to suggest that the people of Ammonihah's fundamental problem is a lack of theological understanding, not a lack of moral or spiritual rectitude, but I'm not entirely persuaded by this assessment, particularly since the record states that "Satan had gotten great hold on their hearts" (Alma 8:9), and they had become increasingly "gross in their iniquities" (Alma 8:28).

Overall, the introduction provides coherence to an otherwise diverse set of essays.

## Summary Report (Collaboratively Written)

The summary report is best described in a prior Mormon Theology Seminar volume: "a collaborative document designed to orient the reader to the overarching questions, themes, and conclusions that emerged from the seminar's discussions."<sup>5</sup> Though the Summary Report is a collaborative document, not all contributors and essays seem to agree with the conclusions that are reported.

The six questions raised in the summary are (1) What was the social, political, and ideological climate in Ammonihah? (2) What role does scripture play in Alma's sermon? (3) What does it mean to be called and prepared from the foundation of the world, and does this imply human preexistence? (4) How does God communicate with humans? (5) How

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5. Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb, eds., *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: Reading 2 Nephi 26–27* (Salem, Ore.: Salt Press, 2011), 3–4.



does agency figure into death and judgment? (6) How is priesthood or “holy order” understood in Alma 13?

The responses to these questions are often insightful and even provocative, challenging traditional readings of Alma 12–13. For instance, the summary report calls into question the common assumption that the calling of priests “from the foundation of the world” (Alma 13:3) implies preexistence.<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, their calling could be viewed as “anticipatory” and understood “in terms of God’s foreknowledge, rather than in terms of human premortal existence” (xix). Along these same lines, a full page is devoted to arguing that the phrase “in the first place” (Alma 13:3) most likely refers to logical sequence (that is, “firstly”) rather than temporal sequence (that is, “in the preexistence”). However, the summary doesn’t completely rule out premortal existence in Alma’s sermon, noting that “the contemporary Mormon doctrine of human premortal life is partially mirrored in [Alma’s sermon]” (xxiii), conceding at least an indirect reference to preexistence.

The summary also clarifies, I think correctly, that the “high priesthood” or “holy order” in Alma 13 is different from the “Melchizedek” or “high priesthood” as understood in the Church today. Rather, the summary states, “it seems to be something largely local within the Book of Mormon,” some sort of “quasi-monastic” order “that took as its sole responsibility to teach [God’s] commandments” (xxxii). This is a good example of refraining from reading more into the text than what it allows. The summary’s inference, however, that individuals were ordained to the holy order “by being baptized” (xxxii) is not warranted by the text or context of these verses (see Alma 49:30 and Moro. 6:1). This interpretation is also controverted by other descriptions of ordination in the Book of Mormon, where it occurs as a ritual separate from and subsequent to baptism (see Mosiah 18:18; Alma 6:1; and Moro. 3:1–4). In the case of the ordination of priests described by Alma, it seems unlikely that he would have failed to mention baptism, since he seemed to take great care in setting forth “the manner after which they were ordained” (Alma 13:3).

The authors describe references in Alma 13 to “the foundation of the world” and “entering into God’s rest,” among other phrases, as

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6. The assumption of preexistence in Alma 13:3 appears in many commentaries, *Ensign* articles, and Church lesson manuals. The passage is also referenced in “Man, Antemortal Existence of,” Topical Guide, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed September 22, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/tg/man-antemortal-existence-of?lang=eng>.

“appropriation[s] . . . of formulas native to the book of Hebrews” (xxi). The summary provides an insightful analysis of the intertextuality between Alma 12–13 and Hebrews 3–4, 7, noting that both use similar language but sometimes with different meanings and unrelated ends. For one example, “where Hebrews reads ‘foundation of the world’ as a reference to God’s past tense and completed act of creation, Alma takes up this language of creating the world, declares this foundation to be the holy order after the Son of God, and then reads this holy order as being always already ‘prepared from eternity to all eternity’ (Alma 13:7)” (xxii).

What is arguably the most salient question regarding Alma’s sermon surprisingly wasn’t among the six central questions in the summary. In Alma 13:2–16, Alma describes at length a typology between the manner in which priests were ordained (the type) and the manner in which people were to look forward to Christ for redemption (the antitype). The question begging to be answered, of course, is how the type informs the antitype. What, exactly, does the ordination of priests teach us about looking to Christ for redemption? This exclusion is particularly puzzling given that the summary acknowledges that “the entire sermon turns on an elaboration of this ‘manner’ of looking forward” (xxii). The summary touches on this typology under question three (about being called from the foundation of the world) but seems to unnecessarily complicate the typology by suggesting that there are actually *three* types: (1) “the holy order,” (2) “the ordinances proper to that order” (see Alma 13:16), and (3) the way “priests were ordained” (Alma 13:2) (xxii). On my reading of Alma, however, only one type is explicitly identified, which is the way priests were ordained (see Alma 13:2, 16).

In contrast to reading more types into Alma’s typology than the text expressly warrants, the summary seems to shortchange the parallels Alma intends to draw between these types and the antitype, or manner in which one should look forward to Christ for redemption. Specifically, the summary states only that “people are . . . to relate to their redemption typologically as already prepared and accomplished from the foundation of the world” (xxii). Drawing this one parallel is a beginning to unpacking Alma’s typology, but Alma’s care to lay out multiple aspects of the priests’ ordination seems intended to evoke more than just a single parallel. Consider Alma’s elaboration that the ordination or calling of these priests was (1) from the foundation of the world, (2) based on God’s foreknowledge of their faith and good works, (3) predicated on the exercise of their own free will, (4) according to a preparatory redemption, and (5) instrumental to their being admitted into God’s



rest. Though not all the parallels in Alma's typology are perfectly clear, a little more investigative inquiry into the typology would have been more appreciated than the curtailed explanation put forth in this volume.<sup>7</sup>

The discussion of Alma's explanation of the nature and purpose of humankind's preparatory state in mortality is clear and precise, except concerning Alma's remark in 12:36 that in the Judgment the wicked will suffer "the everlasting destruction of [their] souls." Alma's pronouncement sounds like annihilationism and, therefore, begs clarification. The summary, however, offers little help, explaining only that, just like the first death is the end of one's mortality, "this second, spiritual death can also be seen as an end" (xxviii). But an end to what—the human soul? Life with God? The summary further falls short, stating that, "like temporal death, it [spiritual death] can also be overcome by the plan of redemption" (xxviii)—but, on Alma's account, spiritual death is death to righteousness pronounced on the wicked at judgment and is permanent; therefore, it *can't* be "overcome," at least not in the same sense that physical death is overcome. Spiritual death can only be *prevented* or *avoided* by repenting and keeping God's laws while in mortality (see 12:18). A little more clarity, precision of language, and fidelity to the text would spare the reader from drawing unintended conclusions.

**"The Profession of Nehor and the Holy Order of God:  
Theology and Society in Ammonihah" (Matthew Bowman)**

*Order* and *disorder* are the operative terms in Bowman's assessment of Alma's sermon, and Bowman brings his expertise in American history and government to bear on his analysis. Drawing on material extending back into Mosiah and on through to later chapters in Alma, Bowman paints a detailed picture of the spiritually impoverished state of the Ammonihahites, which helps explain why Alma delivered this particular sermon.

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7. The typology is by no means simple and straightforward. Alma leaves the connection between the type and antitype vague. I have personally read at least eight different explanations of this typology in various commentaries. These include (1) the ordination of priests symbolizes obtaining salvation, (2) the foreordination of priests symbolizes the foreordination of Christ, (3) priests themselves symbolize Christ, (4) ordination of priests symbolizes ordination opportunity for Ammonihahites, (5) priests before Christ preached symbolically of his coming as though he had already come, (6) the holy order symbolizes the plan of redemption, (7) the holy order symbolizes Christ, and (8) gospel ordinances symbolize Christ and his Atonement.

Bowman repudiates the traditional labeling of the Ammonihahites as sophists, countering that such a label fails to recognize “the complex belief and social order” that had developed within the movement. A more accurate label, he suggests, would be a “Nephite dissenting movement” (2). Nehor, who preached universal redemption, stating that “the Lord had . . . redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4), was effectively the founder of this movement, and thus disciples of Nehor, such as the Ammonihahites, are often assumed to also be universalists. Bowman, however, points the reader to passages showing that some of these followers didn’t believe in a redeemer at all and some didn’t even believe in an afterlife. Thus, he dispels any notion that these Nephite dissenters were monolithic in their doctrinal beliefs.

He devotes much of his essay to addressing Alma’s use of *holy order*, which, Bowman states, should be understood as having broad reference to “a righteous society” in contrast to the corrupt “disordered society” of the people of Ammonihah (12). This “social organization,” as he calls it, consists of “priests and people, organized ‘after’ something called a ‘holy order’” (9). His substitution of the word “organized” for “ordained” nicely accommodates his treatment of the holy order as an organization to which one belongs rather than a ministry to which one is ordained.

Bowman’s take on *holy order* is considerably broader than what most Latter-day Saint commentators would allow and what can be confidently gleaned from the text. Indeed, in almost every occurrence of *holy order* in the Book of Mormon, the term is tied to a ministerial calling, which many Latter-day Saint commentators anachronistically equate with the Melchizedek Priesthood.<sup>8</sup> Though perhaps atypical, Bowman’s more expansive interpretation of *holy order* brings out a potentially significant nuance of the term, which could open up a more comprehensive

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8. Bowman inaccurately characterizes Robert Millet as asserting that “the holy order is a reference to ordinance work” (9). Along the lines of most other Latter-day Saint commentators, Millet’s actual claim is that the term refers to the Melchizedek Priesthood, which one receives by the laying on of hands and, in its fulness, through the endowment and sealing blessings of the temple. 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: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 61–88. This claim, however, is anachronistic and reflects a later (post-1834) theology. The notion of Melchizedek Priesthood, its reception by the laying on of hands, or the reception of the fulness of the priesthood in the temple is nowhere attested in the Book of Mormon.

understanding of the Book of Mormon in general and Alma's sermon in particular. This nuance is entirely legitimate given the absence of the contemporary notion of priesthood and any clear delineation of *holy order* in the Book of Mormon.<sup>9</sup>

### **“Conversion and Calling in Alma 12 and 13” (David Charles Gore)**

Gore, whose specialty is rhetoric, examines what he calls “communication theology” in Alma's sermon, including “conversing, calling, and sharing gifts” (14). Most intriguing was the different implications Gore saw in the three different prepositions—*with*, *to*, and *by*—used to describe callings in Alma 13. Priests were called “with” a holy calling (v. 8), “to” a holy calling (v. 4), and “by” a holy calling (v. 6). Each preposition, according to Gore, expresses a different aspect about the calling of priests, which he elaborates.

Gore's explication of Alma's doctrine of a preparatory or probationary state of mortality, in which one prepares for the endless state that follows, is faithful to the text, and he refrains from extending Alma's probationary state into the spirit world as many Latter-day Saint commentators have been prone to do. In the Book of Mormon, there is no concept of repentance in the spirit world; there is “this day of life [that is, mortality],” followed by “the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:33).

Gore's appeal to ancient Hebrew and Greek to illuminate the meaning of *converse* in Alma 12:29–30 is problematic, as already described, but he also delves too deeply into the philosophical and psychological aspects of communication that seem to be only tangentially relevant to Alma's sermon. Overall, however, I found his essay thought provoking, and I appreciated the way he expanded my thinking about the text.

### **“Angels and a Theology of Grace” (Rosemary Demos)**

Demos, whose background is in comparative literature, takes a somewhat enigmatic allusion in Alma 12:28–30 (God “sent angels to converse

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9. In the Book of Mormon, no one “holds” the priesthood, but rather offices and commissions are given after God's order or system of offices and callings. The word *priesthood* appears in the Book of Mormon only in reference to the “office of the high priesthood” (Alma 13:18), which refers to non-Levitical high priests living before the time of Moses. There is no mention of priesthood as an abstract principle of authority, like the terms *Aaronic* and *Melchizedek Priesthood* suggest.

with them, who caused men to behold of his glory”) and attempts to identify the scriptural event or narrative that this allusion references. She identifies “four distinct narrative possibilities” and evaluates how well each one aligns with key terms from the verses in Alma (32). These possible narrative scenarios are summarized in the following table.

Scenario	Reference	<i>angels</i>	<i>converse</i>	<i>them</i>	<i>glory</i>
1	Genesis 3:24	cherubim	confront	our first parents	the flaming sword
2	Exodus 13–14	God’s miraculous power	guide, defend	Moses and the Israelites	God’s miraculous power
3	Mosiah 27; Alma 36	literal angel	speaking with voice of thunder	Alma and his companions	visible power and prescience of judgment
4	Alma 12	Alma	preach	people of Ammon	God’s power

Demos justifies these particular scenarios, two of which are found in the Bible and two in the Book of Mormon, because Alma 12 is “densely intertextual, rich with allusions to both Old and New World scriptural traditions” (31).

She is resourceful in assembling this list of possible candidates, and her assessment of each one is well reasoned. While all of the candidates can be made to fit the text, an unmentioned candidate is the most promising fit but is one without a narrative precedent in either the Bible or Book of Mormon: it is a new scenario spelled out in the immediate text itself—namely, that soon after the Fall, God sent angels to Adam and Eve and their posterity to reveal to them the plan of salvation so they could repent and behold God’s glory (Alma 12:28–30).<sup>10</sup>

10. This event seems to be reiterated in Moses 5:58 (“And thus the Gospel began to be preached, from the beginning, being declared by holy angels sent forth from the presence of God”) and *Lectures on Faith* (“God continued [after man’s transgression] to manifest himself to him and his posterity. . . . Which laid the foundation for the exercise of their faith, through which they could obtain a knowledge of his character and also of his glory”). “Lecture 2,” in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University), 30–31.

The primary significance of Demos's contribution is the awareness she provides of angelic ministry and the role of angels in revealing and bringing humankind to God's grace and glory. She characterizes angelic ministry as ongoing and personal, concluding that "within the holy order of God, angels are among us, and glory is continually made manifest" (43).

### **"The Heart in Alma 12 and 13" (Robert A. Rees)**

Rees has a background in literature and humanities and is a seasoned scholar in Book of Mormon studies. His topic is the symbolism of the heart in Alma 12 and 13, which takes him into a rather comprehensive treatment of how the heart is used in the Book of Mormon and explained in Bible commentary, psychology, philosophy, physiology, and neurocardiology. Though I found the survey fascinating, I question the extent to which it informs Alma 12 and 13.

Aside from echoing Hebrews 4:12, which refers to "the thoughts and intents of the heart," all of the references to *heart* in Alma's sermon concern hardening or softening one's heart. Those with hard hearts reject God's word; those with soft hearts embrace it. This concept seems fairly simple and straightforward.

Rees also makes the tenuous case that *remembering* in the Book of Mormon is an operation of the heart, but his justification is one of inference only. He does not cite any specific passages that explicitly make this connection. Nonetheless, he is effective in elevating the reader's understanding and appreciation of "heart" theology in scripture.

### **"Obtaining Divine Mercy" (Sheila Taylor)**

Taylor's background in systematic theology is clearly reflected in her essay, which was the most exegetically satisfying of all the contributions. She addresses two key concepts in Alma's sermon: God's mercy and God's wrath. In Alma 12, she astutely points out that the opposite of *mercy* is not *justice*, but *wrath*. Essentially, one either receives mercy through embracing the Atonement or suffers God's wrath through rejecting the Atonement; in both cases, justice is satisfied.

Taylor, like Demos, explores the meaning of Alma 12:29–30, especially the quandary of how God made known the plan of redemption to humans only "according to their faith and repentance and their holy works" (Alma 12:30). How is it, she asks, that one can exercise faith and repentance without first having a knowledge of the plan of redemption?

Taylor theorizes that perhaps humans knew *about* the plan, but it could only be “made known” in the sense of being either personally revealed to them, or, alternatively, experientially manifested in their lives, after exercising faith.

Taylor wrestles to reconcile Alma’s Pelagian-like, free-will expressions with the preponderant Augustinian (moral depravity) teachings of the Book of Mormon. Alma declares that after the Fall, Adam and Eve could “act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good” (Alma 12:31). Yet, a few verses earlier we find Alma explaining that because of Adam and Eve’s transgression, “all mankind became a lost and a fallen people” (v. 22). How can Adam and Eve have unfettered free will after the Fall if their inclination is to do evil? Taylor reconciles this seeming contradiction by suggesting that “Alma’s description [in v. 31] does not preclude the possibility that the will is oriented in a particular direction” (58). That is, even if Adam and Eve are *inclined* to do evil over good, no one is forcing them to do evil.

Taylor’s ability to identify and constructively address seemingly illogical or inconsistent statements in Alma’s sermon is a good model of how to productively engage scripture.

### **“Seams, Cracks, and Fragments: Notes on the Human Condition” (Joseph M. Spencer)**

Joseph Spencer leads the reader into two narrow and deep crevices: one tracing what he calls Alma’s *anthropotheology* (a theology of human nature) and another examining Alma’s *cosmotheology* (a theology of time and eternity). Spencer introduces his topic by drawing on the metaphor of Christ’s death and attendant rock fragmentation (see 3 Ne. 8:18) to extrapolate the concept that “Christ’s virtual death” (before the foundation of the world) fractured eternity into time. This *cosmotheology*, he suggests, set up a particular *anthropotheology*, which sees humans as being caught in this time fragmentation. This, he contends, is the real essence of the human condition.

His verbal dexterity and ability to mine profound meanings from a single word or phrase is most impressive. Spencer is eminently analytical in his approach to scripture, raising second- and third-order questions that most readers would never think to ask of the text. But he is also a tenacious semantic sleuth who pushes the text to its limits and is able to wring out meaning beyond the *prima facie* meaning. Alma 12–13, with its inherent ambiguity and elasticity, provides the perfect grist for grinding out Spencer’s theology.



Processing the philosophically oriented theological writings of Joseph Spencer is mentally taxing. I had to read his essay in a quiet place, free from distraction, in order to digest it. His rarefied, cosmotheological reading of Alma's sermon can easily dizzy the intellect. Consider his summation of Alma's cosmotheology: "Perhaps time is a kind of detotalization of eternity that then organizes a movement—through so much preparation—toward retotalization or renewed wholeness" (81). This abstract, philosophical reframing of Alma's sermon is both novel and mind bending.

Spencer takes the first two and a half pages to roundaboutly introduce his essay topic, which is Alma's view of the human condition as described in Alma 12:31. Here Alma explains that the Fall resulted in Adam and Eve "becoming as gods, knowing good from evil, placing themselves in a state to act, or being placed in a state to act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good." Spencer highlights this pericope's ambiguity, which he attributes to the original unpunctuated manuscript, noting that the passage's meaning "turns on the scope and function of the *or* that appears more or less at the center of the text" (67). He then proceeds over the next eleven pages to give four possible interpretations of Alma 12:31 depending on the scope of the word *or* (that is, whether it connects only the immediate phrases surrounding it or the extended phrases) and the word's function (that is, whether it is inclusive or exclusive).

Spencer covers much of the same ground as Taylor with respect to the Pelagian vs. Augustinian tension in Alma 12:31. Interestingly, Taylor makes nothing of the ambiguity of the word *or* in Alma 12:31 over which Spencer obsesses. For her, the human condition is simple: Adam and Eve transgressed, so they ended up "in a state where they could 'act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good' (Alma 12:31)" (57). Spencer, however, wants to get to the bottom of *how* Adam and Eve arrived at that state. Did they place themselves in that state? Did God place them in that state? Was it the combined effect of both God and Adam and Eve? Did Adam and Eve paradoxically both place themselves and *not* place themselves in that state?

Spencer also muses at length over a subtle irony in the human condition, noting that when we know God's will, we are powerless to act on it; and when we *do* have power to act, we can't really know if we are doing God's will. Thus, we go back and forth between being either "knowingly impotent or ignorantly active" (76). He corroborates his take on human nature in Alma's sermon by invoking his own experience as well as that of Paul, Nephi, and Lehi.

Although not explicitly, Spencer seems to assume an *actual* rather than an *ideal* human preexistence in his reading of Alma 13—that is, he assumes a real preexistence rather than one that exists only in the mind of God. One’s preparatory state, according to Spencer, reaches back to the preexistence and, for some, extends into the coming eternity. Though ponderous thoughts to consider, both of these ideas lie outside of Alma’s sermon. This mortal life is the only state Alma expressly designates as a preparatory state, which is followed by death, the beginning of one’s endless state (Alma 12:24).

Spencer engages in a bit of philosophical musing on humankind’s fallen condition that, although thought provoking, appears on the surface to be contrary to Alma’s core message. “Generally speaking,” Spencer states, “we prepare so that we do not have to be redeemed” or “so that we can ignore the fact that we have already been redeemed” (77). Such an assertion, perhaps given for effect, is perplexing in light of Alma’s plea that we prepare precisely so that we can be redeemed (Alma 12:24).

In an appendix to his essay, which is essentially another (smaller) essay, Spencer presents his *cosmotheological* reading of Alma, noting an intentional distinction between (1) things “prepared from the foundation of the world” (namely, the plan of redemption, priests, and the holy calling), which Spencer takes to mean that they had their beginning at the time the world was created, and (2) the holy order, which was “prepared from eternity to all eternity” and, therefore, existed *before* the foundation of the world (Alma 13:3, 5, 7). “Clearly,” Spencer states, “Alma wishes his hearers . . . to understand that the holy order is in some fundamental way distinct from the other things he discusses” (80).

In making this distinction, Spencer may be holding the text to a higher level of grammatical precision than what the text warrants. For example, one could interpret “from the foundation of the world” as simply a figurative way of saying “from all eternity to all eternity.” After all, Alma himself seems to equate the two when he says that the holy order was “from the foundation of the world; *or in other words* . . . from eternity to all eternity” (Alma 13:7, emphasis added). Adam Miller concurs, noting in his essay that this “explicit explanation” in Alma 13:7 makes the two expressions equivalent (86). From a purely exegetical standpoint, I believe Spencer is correct to hold the text to a high standard of precision, but only until or unless common sense dictates otherwise, as when a contradiction, absurdity, or other untenable implication occurs.

Spencer's essay is an excellent example of how to approach a text with analytical rigor and attention to detail. He methodically takes readers through a highly disciplined thought process, enabling them to see the text as he does. The real payoff from Spencer's essay is the way he seeks to uncover the theological subtext of Alma's sermon to a level that I would have never considered otherwise.

### **“A Preparatory Redemption” (Adam S. Miller)**

Like Spencer, Miller takes a philosophical approach to Alma's sermon, and I found his essay to be the most mind expanding of the bunch. Those familiar with his prior works will recognize many of the phrases he uses here, like “grace is not a backup plan” and “early onset postmortality.”<sup>11</sup> Incorporating these evocative phrases into his exegesis of Alma's sermon challenges readers to think in new ways about the text.

Miller starts by turning Alma's sermon on its head. On a normal reading, Alma seems to be advocating that this life is specifically granted to humans as a time to repent in preparation for the day of judgment (Alma 12:24). (David Gore is careful to emphasize this point in his essay.) Miller, however, inveighs against living our lives preparing for death and judgment, contending that doing so brings only alienation and premature spiritual death. Always preparing for the Judgment, humankind never really lives, so “even before we die our first death, we experience a second death” (83). Alma urges the people of Ammonihah to follow the example of those priests who became sanctified and cleansed from sin “on account of their exceeding faith and repentance, and their righteousness before God, they choosing to repent and work righteousness rather than to perish” (Alma 13:10). Miller, however, asserts that redemption is not “something that comes *after* we have exercised our agency and demonstrated obedience” (83, emphasis added). Miller's freewheeling commentary is not bound by convention, nor evidently by the text. He is, nevertheless, relentless in fortifying his thesis and making it imminently applicable, which are important and useful exegetical skills to possess.

I was intrigued by the way Miller takes all of the events that Alma places at either the beginning or the end of the world, and collapses

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11. See, for example, Adam S. Miller, *Grace Is Not God's Backup Plan: An Urgent Paraphrase of Paul's Letters to the Romans* (self-pub., Amazon Digital Services, 2015); and Adam S. Miller, “Early Onset Postmortality,” chap. 4 in *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016).

them to an ever-present now, if not in a literal sense, at least in a way that provides a useful perspective. Miller even asserts that “the foundation [the creation] of the world is *now*” and that God is “founding the world right now, from moment to moment” (88, emphasis in original). These ideas are nowhere explicit in Alma’s sermon, but they form the basis of what Miller perceives to be at the very core of it.

Though Miller evinces a rather idiosyncratic reading of Alma, I am actually quite sympathetic to his ideas, and precedents for many of his assertions can be found in other Book of Mormon passages,<sup>12</sup> just not, at least overtly, in Alma 12–13.

Miller is one of only two contributors who attempt to explicate Alma’s unique and evocative phrase, and inspiration for the volume’s title, “preparatory redemption” (Alma 13:3). Miller matter-of-factly asserts that this term refers to “a redemption that, in Christ, has already been prepared” (84). This interpretation has some merit given Alma’s earlier discussion of the plan of redemption that was prepared (Alma 12:30), but why should “preparatory redemption” denote a redemption that *has been prepared* rather than, as contributor Bridget Jeffries and other Book of Mormon commentators contend, a redemption *that prepares*?<sup>13</sup> Webster defines *preparatory* as “serving to prepare for something,”<sup>14</sup> which is the meaning of *preparatory* a few verses earlier when referring to a “preparatory state” (12:26), presumably signifying a state that prepares one for something future. Thus, a *preparatory redemption* would be a redemption that prepares one for something future, in this case, presumably the calling of the high priesthood. Indeed, Alma 13:5 explains that one can only receive “this holy calling . . . in and through the atonement of the Only Begotten Son.” Even so, it is entirely possible that Miller’s interpretation of the phrase is correct, in spite of the standard lexical definition. Perhaps both meanings were intended, or maybe there is some other reasonable interpretation. The lack of precision in the language of Alma’s sermon sometimes opens itself to multiple defensible interpretations, any one of which should be advanced with some caution and qualification.

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12. Moroni 7:3 asserts that we can enter God’s rest in the here and now; Ether 3:13 shows that we can become redeemed from the Fall while in this life.

13. See, for example, Hardy, “Book of Mormon as a Written (Literary) Artifact,” 107.

14. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “preparatory,” accessed September 25, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/preparatory>.

Miller's treatment of the primacy of the plan of redemption, though effective in centralizing the role of the Atonement, also raises some questions. Miller is emphatic in extolling the primacy of the plan of redemption, placing it above and before everything else, including the Fall. He asserts, as in his prior writings, that the plan of redemption was "not a backup plan," but "is what comes *first*. . . . being lost and fallen always and only comes second" (84–85, emphasis in original). I feel like I am missing something vital in this distinction. That the plan of redemption was prepared before the Fall seems clear enough from Alma's sermon, but what does this have to do with it not being a backup plan? I can see one saying that the plan of redemption was God's *intended* plan, rather than a plan put in place just in case of an unexpected Fall. But if it is God's intended plan from the beginning, and not just a backup plan, then isn't the Fall essential to that plan and therefore not at all a secondary consideration or event? I feel like I am missing a subtlety here.

In one instance, Miller switches subject midstream. He states, "On Alma's account, redemption is not what comes after commandments and obedience. *Redemption* is not what comes after death. Rather, as Alma repeatedly insists, the *plan of redemption* was, instead, prepared 'from the foundation of the world'" (84, emphasis added). Notice that Miller begins by talking about "redemption" but then suddenly switches to the "plan of redemption" as though the two are equivalent. Could he be suggesting that *redemption* comes before one's obedience and death simply because the *plan of redemption* came before one's obedience and death? On my reading, what Alma repeatedly insists is that redemption from spiritual death comes only after repentance and obedience, and redemption from physical death comes only after one actually dies, even though the *plan* of redemption was laid from the foundation of the world.

Miller also notes that the plan of redemption and the holy order of God were both prepared from the foundation of the world, and that, therefore, "the plan of redemption is, in some crucial way, synonymous with the holy order of God" (86). He seems to be assuming an equivalency in meaning based on sharing a common property. If this is the case, his logic is questionable.

After exploring the concept of redemption, Miller attempts to ascertain the meaning of the word *manner* in Alma 13:2, 16. Miller spends seven paragraphs giving the Latin etymology and exploring Hebrew and Greek forms found in several Old and New Testament passages.

Strangely, however, he completely ignores examples of how the word is used in the Book of Mormon itself, which has twenty-two more occurrences than the entire KJV Bible. For a definition of *manner* that would have been familiar to people contemporaneous with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, he turns with good effect to Webster's 1828 dictionary, which essentially states that *manner* is a method, way, or mode of doing something (89). Unless shown to be nonsensical in the text or inconsistent with other uses in the Book of Mormon at large, this seems like a reasonably good starting point for understanding the word *manner* in Alma's sermon.

Though Alma 13:2–16 is touched on in the summary report, Adam Miller and Bridget Jeffries are the only contributors to specifically address at length this passage, which lays out a typology between the manner in which priests were ordained and the manner in which people were to look forward to Christ for redemption. Miller notes that there is “something crucial” about this particular typology but does not define what that something is. As noted earlier, he misconstrues *ordinances* in 13:16 to mean “laws or rituals” (88), which leads him in a different direction than Alma seems to be heading, and Miller winds up explaining how tithing and baptism are typological of looking forward to Christ, though neither of these linkages are made in the text. Ultimately, Miller appeals to Paul to substantiate the assertion that baptism is “the typological ordinance par excellence” of Christ. Though baptism may be a strong typology of Christ, it is a typology explicit in Paul's teachings but not Alma's.

While Miller's perspective of Alma's sermon is problematic on multiple counts, Miller succeeds in doing what he does best, which is taking a sermon that is set in a remote time and place and making it both timeless and imminently relevant to the modern reader. His essay reaffirms Richard Bushman's characterization of Miller as “the most original and provocative Latter-day Saint theologian practicing today.”<sup>15</sup>

### **“Called and Ordained: A Priesthood of All Believers in Alma 13” (Bridget Jack Jeffries)**

Bridget Jeffries, whose specialty is American religious history, asks how Alma 13 might be understood when read with an evangelical assumption of the *priesthood of all believers*, rather than the Latter-day Saint

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15. Richard L. Bushman, preface to *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* by Adam S. Miller (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), xi.



assumption of a male-only, ceremonially ordained priesthood. She succeeds in showing that such a reading is not only defensible but in some ways results in a better reading of the text.<sup>16</sup> Her task is facilitated by the vagueness of Alma's language, which allows for considerable latitude of interpretation. She contends, for example, that "others" in 13:4 could mean *all* other humans (regardless of race or gender), and "brethren" in 13:4–5 could be gender inclusive.

She observes that "in Alma 13, the function of the priests is more evangelistic than sacerdotal" (95)—that is, Alma explains the priests' calling in terms of teaching saving principles, with no mention of administering saving ordinances. Jeffries is the only contributor who addresses the identity of the mysterious "priests" alluded to by Alma, explaining that they could not have been of the Levitical order like those described in the Old Testament. She is also the only one who notably addresses the role of foreknowledge in these ministerial callings.

Unlike Adam Miller, Jeffries interprets the "preparatory redemption" in Alma 13:3 as a redemption that prepares or empowers priests to be able to choose good from evil. In this regard, she sees the redemption as "a nod to the Arminian concept of 'prevenient grace,' where God preemptively liberated humanity from the 'total depravity' of original sin and enabled humankind to choose his salvation" (96–97).

Jeffries is the only contributor who attempts to break down Alma's description of "the manner after which they [ancient priests] were ordained" (Alma 13:3), which seems crucial to understanding Alma's typology. Reading the sermon as an evangelical, she recognizes that the language related to the calling of priests echoes the Wesley Arminian doctrine of the calling of the elect, a concept with which Joseph Smith and early converts were likely familiar. In both doctrines, God calls individuals from the foundation of the world according to his foreknowledge of their faith and good works in this life. That is to say, those who use their agency in this life to repent and work righteousness are sanctified by the Spirit and become priests (as per Alma) or God's elect

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16. In arguing for a priesthood of all believers in Alma 13, Jeffries follows in the footsteps of Kathryn H. Shirts, "Priesthood and Salvation: Is D&C 84 a Revelation for Women Too?" *Sunstone* 15 (September 1991): 20–27; and Margaret and Paul Toscano, *Strangers in Paradox: Explorations in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 160. A similar argument is made in Kristeen L. Black, "A Capacious Priesthood," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 3 (2017): 73–87.

(as per Arminianism), all just as God had foreseen. Hence Jeffries states, “In my view, Alma 13 might best be read as an Arminian soteriology that has then been creatively fused with a doctrine of priesthood” (98).

I would add that Alma’s language is also reminiscent of the New Testament’s description of how the elect are “afore prepared” (Rom. 9:23) and “chosen . . . before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), “according to the foreknowledge of God” (1 Pet. 1:2). The Arminian doctrine of election actually adopts this New Testament language in its formulation. Whether or not Arminianism influenced the shaping of Alma 13, Jeffries should be given credit for substantively engaging with early nineteenth-century religious discourse that intersects with Alma’s sermon. In fact, she engages with early eighteenth-to-nineteenth-century literature and religious discourse more than the other essayists, which helps open a window to the way the earliest Saints might have read the text. And her essay helps modern Latter-day Saint readers see beyond what tradition has conditioned them to see.

Though Jeffries acknowledges that Alma doesn’t explicitly advance the idea of a priesthood of all believers, she makes a good argument for it based on inference. Alma 13 gives no definitive description of the race or gender of those who became priests nor of the “others” who could have become priests. So, Jeffries argues, one has to allow for the possibility in Alma’s sermon that everyone had equal opportunity to be a priest, “regardless of their lineage, race, or even gender” (98). She acknowledges that the overall narrative of the Book of Mormon is dominated by patriarchal privilege and a male-dominated ministry, but, in principle, the Book of Mormon teaches that “all are alike unto God” (2 Ne. 26:33).

Observing that Alma 13 makes no mention of any ceremonial ordination, like the laying on of hands, she suggests that ancient priests might have been ordained through baptism (102). This is also noted in the summary report (xxx), which was addressed earlier. Of course, if this conjecture is correct, it plays directly into the notion of a priesthood of all believers.

Jeffries demonstrates a sound grasp of the particular theological concerns of Joseph Smith’s day that she believes may have had a bearing on the phraseology, if not the shaping, of Alma 13. In the end, she acknowledges that Alma’s sermon has aspects that resemble the traditional Latter-day Saint model of the priesthood and also some that are suggestive of the Protestant notion of the priesthood of all believers. She makes a case that would be difficult to repudiate based solely on the loose language of Alma 13.

## Conclusion

This volume, despite a few shortcomings, is an important contribution to Book of Mormon scholarship. These essays are intended to be viewed as exploratory and, in some instances, even speculative, which is precisely what makes them so intriguing and thought provoking. One could argue that serious theological inquiry often requires this type of free exploration of ideas, especially if real theological breakthrough is to occur. The value of the volume isn't that it provides a definitive exposition or approved Latter-day Saint interpretation of scripture, but rather this volume shows the reader how to approach a Book of Mormon text with analytical rigor and open theological inquiry. A book devoted entirely to this theologically rich text is a most welcome addition to Book of Mormon studies.

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