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The Book of Alma as a Prototype for Teaching the Word of God

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Gerald Hansen, Jr.

The entire book of Alma emphasizes, in one way or another, the power of God's word and thus becomes a prototype pattern in trusting in the power for good in teaching the word of God. One of the best indications of this emphasis is Mormon's use of the leitmotif "the word of God." (A leitmotif is a dominant or recurring theme.) He uses that phrase 47 times in the first 42 chapters and also uses "the word," "his [God's] word," or "the word of the Lord," all meaning the word of God, at least another 50 times. In each of the major episodes of these first chapters, Mormon emphasizes a different aspect of the word of God. In the last 20 chapters, he recounts a long fourteen-year period of war both to accentuate the consequences of treating the word of God trivially and to highlight the protection that comes from heeding it. A brief overview will focus the emphasis on the word of God in the book of Alma more clearly:

1–16: Alma seeks to reform the Church by preaching the word of God.

17–29: The sons of Mosiah convert the Anti-Nephi-Lehies with the word of God.

30: Alma and the word of God silence Korihor and the word of the devil.

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- 31–35: Alma and Amulek teach the Zoramite poor the process of conversion through planting the word of God in their hearts.
- 36–42: Alma teaches his sons with the word of God to prepare them to teach it.
- 43–63: The wars dramatize the power of the word of God.

Alma 1–16: Alma Seeks to Reform the Church

The account of Alma's efforts to reform the Church bears witness, first and foremost, that teaching the word of God is ultimately the best solution to society's woes. In his eight years as chief judge, Alma sought to resolve the problems of society in a variety of different ways, most notably through strict laws and, when necessary, through military force. However, because most of the problems seem to have stemmed from the false doctrines and priestcraft of Nehor, no government solution was able to eradicate the seeds of that evil. Wickedness, persecution, false teachings, and corruption ran rampant among the Nephites in spite of strict laws, military victory, and economic prosperity (Alma 1:16–22, 4:6–9). Legislation succeeded in deterring some overtly committed crimes, but it failed to make the Nephites intrinsically good (Alma 1:32–33). Obviously, only a change of heart—not legislation—could truly reclaim the people. It is impressive that Alma recognized the Nephites' true needs and gave up the highest political office of the land (as the sons of Mosiah had done, and as Nephi, son of Helaman, would do later) to concentrate on preaching the word of God.

Alma's decision is even more impressive after we discover how much hardship and suffering he endured during his long preaching tour. Because Alma, like all who teach for God in righteousness, cannot guarantee conversions or control the results of teaching the gospel, he must have paid a terrific price in patience, dedication, and faith. Mormon's narrative of Alma's preaching shows that a person's free agency to accept or reject the teacher's message is beyond the teacher's

management. In each of the places to which he traveled, Alma found a different level of preparation and acceptance. In Zarahemla, the hearts of some of the people were lifted up in pride—some repented and some did not (Alma 6:3); in Gideon the hearts of the people were not set “upon riches and the vain things of the world,” and they did repent (Alma 7:6); in Ammonihah the people hardened their hearts, letting Satan have great hold on them (Alma 8:9, 11), and most of them rejected the word of God completely. Alma was helpless to do more than what God would have him do. He could invite the people to come unto Christ by persuasion, with clarity, and under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, and he could participate as a tool in God’s hand in the preparation process, but he had no special formula to use to make them accept the truth. Only God can completely prepare our hearts by pouring his Spirit into them (Alma 16:16), and yet he allows us agency to reject the Spirit if we so choose. Thus, as Alma himself later declared, he sinned in his wish to do more than preach as God directed him to. He had to be content with the results his preaching brought, with faith that an omniscient, omnipotent God would do the same (Alma 29:1–4).

Alma’s willingness to say whatever God wanted him to say regardless of the consequences qualifies him as a great teacher. He clearly understood both his role as a teacher and the true source of power in teaching. By portraying Alma in diverse circumstances, Mormon shows that while Alma tried to make his message interesting and persuasive, he did not try to win followers by flattering his listeners. Instead he taught God’s word with God’s Spirit and with God’s power.

In Zarahemla, Alma admonished the people to change their hearts and then called them to repentance with straightforward questions. When he finished his questioning, he did not invite the members to come to Christ, as he did the nonmembers, but commanded them to repent (Alma 5:62). He even found it necessary to excommunicate those who would not repent because of the pride of their hearts (Alma 6:3). Alma’s preaching,

the excommunications, and the ordination of new priesthood leaders were apparently all necessary to reestablish the order of the Church again in Zarahemla (Alma 6:2–4).

In Gideon, Alma spoke more kindly than he did in Zarahemla because the hearts of the people of Gideon were “not lifted up in . . . pride” nor “set . . . upon riches” (Alma 7:6). He encouraged them to be humble, submissive, gentle, patient, faithful, hopeful, and charitable (Alma 7:23–24), encouraging them to go even farther in their righteousness.

In Ammonihah, the apostate people rejected and abused Alma in spite of the fact that he had wrestled much in the Spirit for blessings in their behalf (Alma 8:8–10). Alma left the city dejectedly. God, however, knowing he had prepared receptive hearts, sent Alma back to preach his word “according to the spirit of revelation and prophecy” (Alma 8:24). He directed Alma to tell the people that they must repent or face God’s anger (Alma 8:29)—a message that made Alma very unpopular, but one he delivered anyway, knowing he spoke in God’s behalf. Alma knew he acted only as God’s agent. He knew this principle so well that later he stood and watched, constrained by the Spirit to do nothing, while the wicked inhabitants of Ammonihah burned converted women and children.

Like Alma, all who teach the gospel have to work within divinely set parameters. No one can coerce, exploit, or unduly flatter someone into accepting the truth. Those who seek to popularize themselves practice priestcraft as Nehor did. Because they do not control the conversion process, teachers can only prepare themselves to deliver the message God wants them to give and petition the Lord for help. They teach correct principles and allow their students the agency to govern themselves, as Joseph Smith prescribed (see Berrett 159). They know, as Alma knew, that some hearers may be angered by the message because their hearts are hard (Alma 9:31), and that the teacher may consequently have to suffer as Alma and Amulek eventually did in the Ammonihah prison. The Lord’s teachers also spend much time praying and fasting in behalf of those they

teach (Alma 6:6). However, those who teach for God do not demand any particular results from their teaching. They have faith that the results will be as the Lord wants them. They know that the word of God will ultimately prove victorious as it did in Ammonihah: God received the converted martyrs to himself and delivered Alma and Amulek from prison; Zeezrom repented and joined the Church; and the rebellious wicked of the city were killed by the Lamanites and sent to the Judgment.

The story of Alma in Ammonihah closes the account of Alma's trying to reform the Church during the first 14 years of the reign of the judges. His problems during this time were created by the false teachings of Nehor. Nehor and his followers, the Amlicites and the people of Ammonihah, tried to force their priestcraft on others with violence. Alma's ultimate weapon in this battle for souls was the word of God. In the end, the word of God won. The ruins of Ammonihah which was destroyed as prophesied and renamed the "Desolation of Nehors" (Alma 16:11), are no mean reminder of this truth.

Alma 17–29: The Sons of Mosiah Convert the Anti-Nephi-Lehies

The account of the mission of Mosiah's sons to the Lamanites shows the power of the word of God. It also contributes some excellent insights on the preparation needed by those who preach the word of God and examines the relationship between their preparation and their acting as God's instruments.

The first two things Mormon tells us about Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni is that they succeeded in bringing souls to Christ because they preached with power, and they had power because they had prepared themselves properly. By searching the scriptures, praying, and fasting, they became men strong in the knowledge of the truth and obtained the spirit of prophecy and revelation (Alma 17:2–3). Because of this preparation, God gave them power in their teaching (Alma 17:3): "By the power

of their words many were brought before the altar of God, to call on his name and confess their sins before him” (Alma 17:4).

Mormon underscores the need Mosiah’s sons had for God’s power by describing the Lamanites as “a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people; a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites, and robbing and plundering them” (Alma 17:14). Most Nephites thought the best way to deal with the Lamanites was to destroy the Lamanites in war (Alma 26:25). But the doctrinal and spiritual preparation of Ammon and his brethren allowed God to use them to save Lamanite souls. They were able to teach this “very indolent,” idol-worshiping, cursed people the plan of redemption, according to the word and power which God had given them (Alma 17:15–17).

To illustrate the connection between preparation and the ability to preach with power, Mormon records two stories. The first is the story of Ammon, a study in spiritual timing. Summoned before Lamoni, Ammon wisely forbore from asking Lamoni what he knew about the Nephite Church, preferring to wait until the king’s heart had been prepared. This does not mean that Ammon did nothing. He offered to serve the king and diligently went about that business. When the right moment came and the king agreed to believe all his words (Alma 18:23), Ammon, because of his spiritual and doctrinal preparation, was able to seize the opportunity to teach Lamoni. First, however, he waited for an opportunity to help open the Lamanites’ hearts. The occasion came when sheep thieves scattered the king’s flocks. Ammon’s heart rejoiced in this chance to show forth the power of God which was in him (Alma 17:29).

Like Ammon, most teachers assist their students by preparing their hearts to receive the word of God. Among other things, teachers contribute to the preparation process with personality, caring, and methodology. Caution, however, should be the watchword. Unless these tools are used with care, they can carry teachers into priestcraft. More often than not, as in Ammon’s case, a teacher’s participation in preparing the heart is spontaneous. Excessively elaborate or manipulative teaching

methods operate on the false premise that the teacher controls the conversion process. Such methods commonly serve as cover-ups for a lack of spiritual and doctrinal preparation on the part of the teacher. Ammon's preparation allowed him to participate in Lamoni's conversion as dictated by the Spirit. Even when the king and his servants were in obvious awe of the power he displayed, Ammon still waited for direction and help from God to say the right thing at the right time (Alma 18:16).

Ammon's teaching methods were not elaborate or excessive. He started on Lamoni's level with questions about very basic gospel principles. He then explained the doctrines of the plan of salvation—the Creation and the Fall—expounded the scriptures of ancient history, and finished with the plan of redemption. He used the scriptures from both the Old and New Worlds as his basic source (Alma 18:36–39). Ammon's straightforward doctrinal approach calls to mind President J. Reuben Clark, Jr.'s comment about how not to teach our spiritually alert youth, "There is no need for gradual approaches, for 'bed-time' stories, for coddling, for patronizing, or for any of the other childish devices" (7). If Ammon could teach doctrine from the scriptures to a wicked Lamanite who barely knew God existed, surely students in modern Zion deserve to be taught in the same way. Conversion comes, as Mormon explains in Alma 32, when we hear the word of God taught by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Mormon's second story, stressing the connection between preparation and teaching with power, is about Aaron. It ought to be noted here, that out of the entire 14 years of preaching by the sons of Mosiah, Mormon chose to relate only these two stories. It should also to be noted that these two stories, Ammon's and Aaron's, are almost identical in their basic elements. As with Ammon, Aaron's preparation allowed him to work by the Spirit: he went to the right place, the house of Lamoni's father in the land of Nephi; he went at the right time, after Lamoni's father's heart was softened; he preached the right things, the plan of salvation; and he preached in the right way,

from the scriptures. The outcome was the same as in Ammon's story: upon hearing the word of God taught with power, the king fell down as if dead, eventually arose born again, administered to the people, and converted many.

The notable difference between the two stories, that Aaron was at first rejected by the Lamanites before he came to Lamoni's father, simply confirms that teachers do not control the conversion process or its results. Aaron had little success with the hardened followers of Nehor who lived in Jerusalem. He fared no better in Ani-Anti, and he finally was thrown into prison in Middoni. In spite of these poor results, Aaron continued to preach the same thing: "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2; Alma 21:9). He did not change the message he was commissioned to carry just because his followers would not listen. Aaron's story works with Ammon's as a double witness of the principles the Lord is trying to teach.

Following these two great parallel teaching experiences, Mormon selects and arranges a few final items relative to this episode that also testify of the teaching principles he has been examining. First is an account of how the new Lamanite converts insist on laying down their lives rather than breaking their covenants—a witness of the power of their conversion through the word of God.

Next, Mormon juxtaposes an episode concerning the fulfillment of Abinadi's prophecy that the seed of the priests of Noah would be destroyed, with a summary of how God honors his promise of protection to the sons of Mosiah (Alma 25). Using this episode with this summary shows that God's words will be fulfilled. More to its purpose, however, it demonstrates that God's servants are only instruments in his hands. Mormon's statement that God "verified his word unto [the sons of Mosiah] in every particular" (Alma 25:17) coupled with the reminder of Abinadi's death (Alma 25:11) should cause us to note that God allowed Abinadi to die as a martyr yet protected the sons of Mosiah from death just as he had promised them

(Mosiah 28:7). Abinadi and the sons of Mosiah had different assignments; both fulfilled those assignments.

Finally, Mormon records the fairly long comments of both Ammon and Alma's gratitude for being God's instruments. Ammon states that he and his brethren could not have supposed before their missions the great blessings God had in store for them (Alma 26:1): they had been made instruments in God's hands (Alma 26:3); that thousands had been brought to repentance (Alma 26:12–15), the success was God-given (Alma 26:27), and by being God's instruments they had converted many more souls than they had supposed they could have (Alma 26:30–31). Ammon's words suggest that God's servants do not necessarily know beforehand all that they should do or what the results of their efforts will be. The implication is that they can only prepare to follow God's dictates.

Alma's words echo Ammon's sentiments but are arguably stronger. Lamenting that he cannot do more to make people accept the one plan that will end misery, Alma pines to be an angel, to shake the earth and declare repentance with the voice of thunder, so everyone will accept the gospel (Alma 29:1–2). Yet, he knows and states that God grants salvation or damnation to people according to their own desire (Alma 29:4). If Ammon's words do not get the point across, Alma's words should. He, like all gospel teachers, must allow people to exercise their agency. Thus he asks, "Seeing I know these things, why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?" (Alma 29:6). He concludes that he can only trust in God, be an instrument in God's hands, rejoice for the success God gives him, and pray for the souls of those he teaches (Alma 29:16–17).

Alma 30: Alma's Conflict with Korihor

The episode with Korihor, though recounted in only one chapter, acts as the focal point for the entire book of Alma. In it, the word of God triumphs over the word of the devil. A brief

retelling of the story may perhaps be the best way to examine how Mormon uses it.

Korihor came forth preaching against the prophecies of Christ, using arguments, as Professor Chauncey Riddle points out, similar to the modern philosophies of empiricism, relativism, and humanism (18, 20). Equally as faith-shaking to some Nephites was Korihor's claim that God's priesthood leaders were binding the people down by their words (Alma 30:23). Mormon makes it clear that the evil spread by Korihor's words could not be legally curbed because, in accordance with God's commandments, there was no law among the Nephites regulating a person's belief (Alma 30:7). The ultimate counter to Korihor's apostasy was, once again, God's word. Alma's first response—bearing testimony and placing the burden of truth on Korihor—is a response of faith, one that acknowledges the power of the Holy Ghost as well as the individual's responsibility for his or her own conversion. Alma will not be damned for not converting Korihor, only for not preaching when and what he should.

Rebutted by Alma's testimony, Korihor still demands a sign, presumably to discredit Alma's words. God does not always immediately justify those who teach of him, but in this case he does for the sake of others. Alma silenced Korihor. Those who had been led astray repented, and in the end Korihor was trampled to death. God's work went forward unfrustrated while Satan's follower came to his mortal end. Mormon editorializes, "Thus we see that the devil will not support his children" (Alma 30:60).

The story of Korihor reiterates several points already taught in the book of Alma: God wins in the end; his word will be fulfilled, and he allows people the agency to make poor choices and suffer negative consequences. It also illustrates that a teacher must teach, but the student is responsible for his or her own conversion.

Alma 31–35: Alma and Amulek Teach the Zoramites the Process of Conversion

Mormon opens his account of the mission to the apostate Zoramites by articulating the main theme of the book of Alma:

As the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God. (Alma 31:5)

The articulation of this theme at this point seems appropriate since Mormon has shown in the stories of Alma, Ammon, and Aaron just how powerful the word of God is: it can silence the devil, convert thousands of wild and hardened Lamanites, and reclaim a degenerate society. Having concentrated on the power of the word and what a teacher must do to obtain that power, Mormon now focuses on the conversion process and the responsibility of the listener in that process.

For at least two reasons, the mission to the Zoramites provides an excellent case study of these important concepts. First, it shows what the responsibility of listeners is not; listeners must do more than hear words, attend meetings, say the words of prayers, and participate in ritual as the wealthy, proud, and smugly dissenting Zoramites do. The Zoramites are religious but not righteous (Alma 31:8–25) as Alma's words help show them. Second, Alma and Amulek's answer to the humbled Zoramites' question, "What shall we do?" (Alma 32:5), examines the process of conversion and helps define where the teacher's accountability ends and the student's begins.

According to Alma, the process of conversion begins by hearing the word of God (Alma 32:22–23) thus making dedicated teachers necessary. Alma himself is a wonderful example of dedication, preaching continually (Alma 32:1) and begging the Lord in a prayer of faith (in obvious contrast to the Zoramites' condescending rameumpton prayer) for strength, power, and wisdom to bring back lost souls (Alma 31:26–35).

The next step in the conversion process moves from the realm of the teacher to that of the student: the student must desire to learn and gain faith, to plant the word in his or her heart (Alma 32:27). Without desire, true conversion cannot take place. True conversion must be a voluntary offering of the heart, which is one of the reasons why a teacher must not manipulate or coerce. Of course, if we remember Mormon's counsel, that the word of God is more powerful than anything else, then even the contemplation of coercion is foolish. The enlargement of the soul and enlightened understanding, which Alma says occurs as the word grows (Alma 32:28), must surely bring conversion—if anything can—to desiring, honest hearts.

Those who place the word of God in their hearts learn the will of the Lord. They begin to know how to worship God. They discern that something good is happening. As students nourish the word of God with spiritual food it grows larger; they learn more and progress in godliness, becoming increasingly more like the Savior through faith and diligence and patience. Finally, if students do not cut off the nourishment, the word of God becomes a tree of everlasting life (Alma 32:28–43); students find that by staying true to the knowledge given them they have become like God. And becoming like God is, as the *Lectures on Faith* say, precisely what exalts us: “Salvation consists in the glory, authority, majesty, power and dominion which Jehovah possesses and in nothing else” (7:9).

What must the teacher do, then? Teach. What must the student do, at least at some point? Desire to learn and search. If both teacher and students do their jobs with the spirit, then they understand each other and are edified (D&C 50:13–22). Alma did his job with the Zoramites; he taught them doctrine. He used the same methods that converted Lamoni, Lamoni's father, and Alma the Elder, teaching them they must plant the word, Christ and his atonement (Alma 33:11, 22–23), in their hearts and nourish it with prayer. He quoted and referred to the prophets Zenos, Zenock, and Moses as second, third, and fourth witnesses. Amulek offered a further witness, bearing testimony

that “the word is in Christ unto salvation,” that the Zoramites should call upon his holy name, repent immediately, and not harden their hearts any longer (Alma 34:6, 17–27, 31–36). The more humble of the Zoramites did repent and fulfilled their responsibility. They received the word, nourished it, and were reconverted. Persecuted by the unbelieving Zoramites, they, like the Anti-Nephi-Lehies and the converts of Ammonihah, proved the depth of Christ’s ability to convert souls by leaving their homes and lands rather than revert to their errant ways (Alma 35:14).

Alma 36–42: Alma Prepares His Sons to Teach

In spite of his successes, Alma still grieved at the number of Nephites who remained hard-hearted, offended because of the strictness of the word of God (Alma 35:15). It would seem natural for him to try a different approach since he had declared the word of God among all the people in every city (Alma 35:15). But he did not. Instead, he magnified his efforts, teaching his sons with the word of God so they would be better prepared to help him teach. A comparison of the separate counsel that Alma gave each of his sons will manifest several differences in what he said. The real contribution of the comparison, however, will be found in the similarities.

In counseling Helaman, Alma began with the story of his own powerful conversion—his deliverance from hell, so to speak. Several insights on the word of God emerge from this story. First, Alma, like each of us, was not worthy to have the word of God preached to him (Alma 36:5). God’s making himself known to us at all is a sign of his love and grace. Second, Alma was an exception—the angel got his attention with thunder. Still, it was the angel’s words that caused Alma to fear and want to repent (Alma 36:11). Third, remembrance of his father’s words concerning Jesus led him to pray, which led to spiritual relief and rebirth into the kingdom of God (Alma 36:17–18). Fourth, as a result of being born of God he was able

to help others learn the word of God so that they might be blessed as he was (Alma 36:26).

Alma also gave a charge over the sacred records and the Liahona to Helaman. The entire thirty-seventh chapter of Alma bears testimony to the power of the word of God. In it, Alma told Helaman not to underestimate the power of the words of the scriptures; they may seem small and inconsequential but “by small and simple things are great things [the restoration of the gospel] brought to pass; . . . and by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls” (Alma 37:6–7). Alma explained that had they not had the scriptures, the sons of Mosiah could not have converted so many thousands of Lamanites (Alma 37:9). He dramatized his counsel on the power of the word of God with an analogy to the Liahona. Both work by faith. Both lead to promised lands, the Liahona to America and the word of God to exaltation. Both seem small and simple. Both can cease to work because of neglect. With great reverence for the power of the word of God, Alma exhorted Helaman, “O my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way” (Alma 37:46). His instruction completed, he counseled Helaman, “Go unto this people and declare the word, and be sober” (Alma 37:47).

To Shiblon Alma gave a shortened version of his instructions to Helaman, leaving out the instructions concerning the records. The principles Alma taught Helaman were apparently important for both sons to hear. To both sons he recounted his conversion (Alma 36:5–23, 38:6–8). To both sons he gave counsel on preaching and prayer (Alma 37:33–37; 38:10–14). To both he testified of Jesus (Alma 36:17–18; 38:9). In his testimony of Jesus to Shiblon, Alma echoed his instructions to the Zoramites. Calling Jesus the “word of truth,” he exhorted his son to “teach the word” (Alma 38:9–10). After a few other brief instructions, Alma told Shiblon, “Now go, my son, and teach the word unto this people. Be sober” (Alma 38:15).

Because of Corianton’s moral difficulties, Alma taught him a different set of principles. Alma’s approach, however, did not

change; he still taught the word of God. Sensing that Corianton's moral problems resulted from a confusion over doctrine, Alma explained to him the serious nature of his sins, the coming of Christ, the resurrection, the spirit world, the restoration of good or evil to the souls of all people, the punishment of sinners, mercy and justice, agency, and other pertinent doctrines (Alma 39–42). Rather than preach to Corianton, Alma taught him the underlying doctrinal reasons for being chaste and then pleaded with him to repent, and then, as with his other sons, he exhorted him to preach the word in soberness (Alma 42:30–31).

The most important similarity in what Alma did with his sons is his “word-of-God” approach. He customized his instruction to each son according to that son's needs. He taught them all sound doctrine and bore strong testimony. And any personal counsel for each that Alma gave almost always had a doctrinal base. The second important similarity is the final counsel for each, “preach the word and be sober.” This similarity reveals the underlying reason for Alma's instructions: to prepare his sons to teach the word of God by first teaching them the word. The doctrine and testimony contained in this portion of the book of Alma would make it very valuable in and of itself. But the purpose behind Alma's instruction—to prepare his sons to better preach the word of God—considerably increases the value of these chapters, showing them as testimony to the power of the word of God in the teaching of teachers.

Alma 43–63: The Wars Dramatize the Power of the Word

In the last section of Alma, the lengthy description of war could, at first glance, seem to contradict the assertion that the theme of the book of Alma is the word of God. However, a careful reading of the war chapters reveals just the opposite. Mormon uses the drama of war to verify the old promise of prosperity if the Nephites keep God's word—and of adversity

and affliction if they do not. His purpose is to show that the Nephites as a whole brought their own problems upon themselves through iniquity and dissension, but God protected and delivered the faithful among them (Alma 50:20-22).

The irony of the wars in the book of Alma is that the Nephites were righteous enough to win the wars, but not righteous enough to prevent them from taking place. According to President Spencer W. Kimball, God had given a special promise to the Nephites which is valid to all the peoples of America: if they would stay sufficiently righteous, they would not have to fight (6). Obviously, the Nephites did not remain righteous. Both the war with Zerahemnah and the one with Amalickiah began at a time when many Nephites, including members of the Church, had hardened their hearts (Alma 35:15-16; 45:20-24). Amalickiah in particular found great success in flattering Church members away from the Church (Alma 46:7-10). Furthermore, no fewer than four different internal rebellions occurred among the Nephites during the time when all their forces should have been marshalled to fight against the Lamanites (Alma 50:25-36; 51:1-8; 53:8-9; 61:3-4). Mormon has every right to comment at the end of his war account: "There had been murders, and contentions, and dissensions, and all manner of iniquity among the people of Nephi," informing us that only "for the righteous' sake, yea, because of the prayers of the righteous" did God spare them (Alma 62:40).

Mormon's long report of this costly war almost gives us a distaste for war just by its sheer length, not to mention the account of suffering, destruction, and blood. It is almost as if Mormon were using the length of the account to help us feel the tedium of war. He certainly does not glorify war. He shows that men, women, and children suffer and die. He shows the great Nephite general, Moroni, angry and frustrated that the war drags on and that suffering and death continue (Alma 60). He also shows that the Nephites should have believed God's word and repented. He shows that the word of God is more powerful than the sword because it prevents the sword—it prevents sorrow

and suffering. It sanctifies the soul, and brings salvation. The best the sword can do is humble someone enough to pay attention to the word of God.

Mormon also shows that our only hope of deliverance, as individuals and as a society, comes from believing and trusting the word of God. He shows us this by holding up the sons of the Lamanite converts as the heroes of the war. Contrasted with all the other Nephite and Lamanite armies, these inexperienced adolescent “sons of Helaman” warriors, suffered no fatal casualties. God protected them because they were true at all times to God’s words (Alma 53:20–21).

For example, in their first battle the sons of Helaman chose to fight against overwhelming odds, believing “our God is with us, and he will not suffer that we should fall” (Alma 56:46). They did not fear death because they believed their mothers’ words that “if they did not doubt, God would deliver them” (Alma 56:47–48). None of them were killed. More impressively, these young, inexperienced fighters fought with such power that they frightened the seasoned troops of Lamanite warriors into surrendering (Alma 56:56). Their power came to them, Helaman says, because “they did obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness; yea, and even according to their faith it was done unto them” (Alma 57:21).

Not everyone receives this same promise of preservation. Abinadi, for example, did not. But having received this assurance, the sons of Helaman acted upon it. They stand as a great central symbol of God’s deliverance to those who trust in his word. Their preservation occurs even amidst a nation racked with turmoil. Their deliverance through believing and obeying the word of God offers hope and, at the same time, encourages us in our duty to preach the word of God according to the principles, and with the power of the word described in the book of Alma. As Mormon says after stating that transgression causes suffering: “Thus we see the great call of diligence of men to labor in the vineyards of the Lord” (Alma 28:14).

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