

General Comments on Alma 17-22

The overall message of these chapters is Lamanite hostility towards the Nephites can be overcome by selfless service and preaching the gospel. There is no substantial difference when it comes to accepting the gospel with respect to the Lamanites, as compared to the Nephites. The superficial difference is historical bias on both sides (cf. Jacob 3:5, Mosiah 10:12-17, Alma 20:10-13), which can be overcome by people willing to let go of the bias.

Contrasted with the service that Ammon and Aaron provide, is the negative influence of apostate Nephites, which hardens the local Lamanites further (cf. 21:1-10).

A clear underlying message through the text is the Lord is guiding and protecting the sons of Mosiah on their mission, as promised to their father, king Mosiah (cf. Mos. 28:7). All of the sons face significant opposition and mortal threats, but all persevere and ultimately experience extraordinary success.

Comments on Alma 17

Chronology

This chapter initially follows the chronology from the preceding chapter in v. 1, but v. 2-6 jump back some 14 years (cf. v. 4) to the start of the ministry to the Lamanites performed by sons of Mosiah in 77BC. From verse 6 on, the text goes backwards in time to 91BC. The text returns to the chronology of v. 1-5 in 27:16.

Geography

The setting of the latter part of the chapter, with the conflict surrounding the scattering of the flocks, suggests a geography that is open and relatively flat, as Ammon is successfully casting stones at a large number at a considerable distance. This would not be possible in a forested area or rugged terrain with a lot of natural cover. There being pasture with few open water bodies suggests it is relatively arid or summer, as if there were other water sources available, those would have been used instead, given the threats involved. The pasture could be up in the hills, and then they would have to descend into the flats to water the flocks, leaving them open to attack. The horses and chariots referenced in the next chapter also suggest a flat and open geography.

Acceptance of Ammon by Lamoni

Mormon sets up the Lamanites as generally hostile (v. 14-15), and he then tells us the typical response to Nephites is to kill, imprison or throw out Nephites (v. 20). But, when Ammon shows up, Lamoni asks him one question and he is then pleased with him and offers him one of his daughters to marry (v. 21-24). This is seemingly a very quick turnaround from the expected response. What is going on here?

It is likely Mormon omitted some details of the initial conversation. The question Lamoni asks Ammon is loaded, as most Nephites taken captive would be fearful and wanting to leave, given the threat of death or imprisonment. Ammon's response is the opposite of what the typical Nephite would say, so this would have been in Ammon's favor.

Two additional details in the text suggest there was additional information exchanged. First, Lamoni offers a daughter in marriage to Ammon, which he declines. Lamoni being a king, and his daughter a princess, suggests Lamoni understands Ammon to be a prince. It seems unlikely Lamoni would offer his daughter to a commoner Nephite. Supporting this reading, is after the entire ordeal with the flocks at the watering hole, during the report to Lamoni, the servants refer to Ammon as "Rabbanah, which is, being interpreted, powerful or great king, considering their kings to be powerful" (cf. 18:13). Note the preceding conversation is Ammon's connection to the Great Spirit. There is no conversation over him being a king or not. However, that is what the servant is calling him, "powerful king". This suggests Ammon's connection to royalty was known, he being the son of the Nephite king Mosiah, a literal prince. If there is a tradition among the Lamanites that kings are powerful, then, clearly, Ammon fits that tradition. Recall that Lamoni is a prince and king, he is the king over the people of Ishmael, but his father is king over all of the Lamanites, so Lamoni is both prince and king. This suggest in the initial conversation with Lamoni, it came out that Ammon was a Nephite prince. This would explain why Lamoni offers his daughter in marriage, because Ammon is royalty, and it could benefit Lamoni and the people of Ishmael to have royal connections to the Nephites.

Second, Mormon notes Ammon in referring to the Lamanite servants as "those whom he termed to be his brethren" (v. 30). Ammon is speaking to them as his brothers and equals, whom he

labors with, and whom he wants to save and whom he shares an equal fate with (v. 31). Ammon does not see himself as separate from or better than them. Ammon explicitly identifies them as "brothers". It seems likely this feeling would have been made known at the initial interview with Lamoni. Ammon is not fearful of them, he considers them brothers, and wants to live among them.

These details together help fill in why Lamoni was pleased with Ammon. With respect to Ammon's refusal to take Lamoni's daughter to wife, it doesn't appear to have caused any offense. Perhaps Ammon's inability to pay bride price (Israelite tradition of mattan and mohar, typically negotiated by the groom's father) would have been connected to his request to be Lamoni's servant. Since Ammon couldn't pay, and his father, Mosiah, was absent, Ammon could serve Lamoni in lieu of bride price. Now, how much of all of this Israelite tradition persisted among the Nephites and Lamanites after some 300 years of separation from the Israelite population in general is impossible for us to discern. But, this at least fits the context, and may help explain some of the obscurities of the text.

1 AND now it came to pass that as Alma was journeying from the land of Gideon southward, away to the land of Manti, behold, to his astonishment, he met with the sons of Mosiah journeying towards the land of Zarahemla. 2 Now these sons of Mosiah were with Alma at the time the angel first appeared unto him; therefore Alma did rejoice exceedingly to see his brethren; and what added more to his joy, they were still his brethren in the Lord; yea, and they had waxed strong in the knowledge of the truth; for they were men of a sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God.

3 But this is not all; they had given themselves to much prayer, and fasting; therefore they had the spirit of prophecy, and the spirit of revelation, and when they taught, they taught with power and authority of God. 4 And they had been teaching the word of God for the space of fourteen years among the Lamanites, having had much success in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth; yea, 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. 5 Now these are the circumstances which attended them in their journeyings, for they had many afflictions; they did suffer much, both in body and in mind, such as hunger, thirst and fatigue, and also much labor in the spirit.

v1-5 Alma and the sons of Mosiah meet by happenstance (v. 1-2), and Mormon comments on how the mission to the Lamanites had made the sons of Mosiah spiritually strong (v. 3-5).

6 Now these were their journeyings: Having taken leave of their father, Mosiah, in the first year of the judges; having refused the kingdom which their father was desirous to confer upon them, and also this was the minds of the people; 7 Nevertheless they departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and took their swords, and their spears, and their bows, and their arrows, and their slings; and this they did that they might provide food for themselves while in the wilderness. 8 And thus they departed into the wilderness with their numbers which they had selected, to go up to the land of Nephi, to preach the word of God unto the Lamanites.

v6-8 Mormon returns the reader back chronologically some fourteen years to the time of the departure of the sons of Mosiah by recapping the events of Mosiah 28-29 (v. 6). He informs us they left Zarahemla taking only hunting weapons, not weapons of war, (v. 7) and they went up to the land of Nephi to preach the gospel to the Lamanites (v. 8).

v7 Mormon explicitly identifies potentially offensive weapons as tools for hunting, not fighting. Note the absence of armor. Them traveling a considerable distance into uninhabited lands necessitates them bringing hunting gear, so they will not starve. The lands between Zarahemla and the Lamanites had formerly been inhabited by the people of Limhi, but they abandoned the land, so the likelihood of finding friendly populations willing to share food was poor. They also knew from the two relatively recently returned groups that the distance to travel to Lamanite lands was significant.

9 And it came to pass that they journeyed many days in the wilderness, and they fasted much and prayed much that the Lord would grant unto them a portion of his Spirit to go with them, and abide with them, that they might be an instrument in the hands of God to bring, if it were possible, their brethren, the Lamanites, to the knowledge of the truth, to the knowledge of the baseness of the traditions of their fathers, which were not correct. 10 And it came to pass that the Lord did visit them with his Spirit, and said unto them: Be comforted. And they were comforted. 11 And the Lord said unto them also: Go forth among the Lamanites, thy brethren, and establish my word; yet ye shall be patient in long-suffering and afflictions, that ye may show forth good examples unto them in me, and I will make an instrument of thee in my hands unto the salvation of many souls. 12 And it came to pass that the hearts of the sons of Mosiah,

and also those who were with them, took courage to go forth unto the Lamanites to declare unto them the word of God.

13 And it came to pass when they had arrived in the borders of the land of the Lamanites, that they separated themselves and departed one from another, trusting in the Lord that they should meet again at the close of their harvest; for they supposed that great was the work which they had undertaken. 14 And assuredly it was great, for they had undertaken to preach the word of God to a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people; a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites, and robbing and plundering them; and their hearts were set upon riches, or upon gold and silver, and precious stones; yet they sought to obtain these things by murdering and plundering, that they might not labor for them with their own hands. 15 Thus they were a very indolent people, many of whom did worship idols, and the curse of God had fallen upon them because of the traditions of their fathers; notwithstanding the promises of the Lord were extended unto them on the conditions of repentance. 16 Therefore, this was the cause for which the sons of Mosiah had undertaken the work, that perhaps they might bring them unto repentance; that perhaps they might bring them to know of the plan of redemption.

v9-16 The sons of Mosiah traveled a considerable distance through the wilderness to the land of Nephi. While they were traveling they fasted and prayed to have the Spirit with them on their mission to the Lamanites (v. 9). The Lord did bless them with His Spirit to comfort them (v. 10), and tells them to be patient in the afflictions they will suffer because by doing so they will help bring many people to salvation (v. 11).

The sons of Mosiah and those with them take courage from the blessing by the Lord and proceed with the mission (v. 12). When they come to the borders of the lands of the Lamanites they split up and go their separate ways. They are filled with faith concerning the success of their mission and trust they will be reunited at the end of it (v. 13).

Mormon then explains why it is they fasted and prayed and needed the Lord to comfort them. The Lamanites were "a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people" who were steeped in wickedness and violence (v. 14), as well as idolatry.

Thus, they were cursed by God because of the wicked traditions passed down to them by their fathers. But, despite all of this, the Lord would forgive them if they repented (v. 15). And this is why the sons of Mosiah taken it upon themselves to preach the gospel to the Lamanites, so that some

of them might possibly learn about the plan of redemption (v. 16).

Their concern was the same as king Mosiah's in Mosiah 28:6-8, and until their receive revelation from the Lord endorsing their mission and granting them support, they aren't encouraged about the conditions they are going into. We are later informed in 26:27 that they had become so doubtful about their mission that they had become depressed and were seriously considering turning back and giving up.

This suggests king Mosiah did not share the revelation in Mosiah 28:7 with them, as had they known that already it seems unlikely they would have required this additional promise from the Lord.

v9 "fasted much", on an arduous journey through the wilderness it is safe to assume their fasting was limited to Sabbaths when they wouldn't have traveled.

v12 "and also those that were with them", the only two explicitly referenced in the ensuing account are Muloki and Ammah. In 21:11 it says "Muloki...and also Ammah and his brethren". We can assume from this the initial missionary party was at least 8 people (four sons of Mosiah, Muloki, Ammah, and at least 2 "brethren" to make it plural, although if the "his" in "his brethren" is referring to Aaron and not Ammah then this would suggest the part was composed of only six).

17 Therefore they separated themselves one from another, and went forth among them, every man alone, according to the word and power of God which was given unto him. 18 Now Ammon being the chief among them, or rather he did administer unto them, and he departed from them, after having blessed them according to their several stations, having imparted the word of God unto them, or administered unto them before his departure; and thus they took their several journeys throughout the land.

v17-18 The group separates and each one goes alone into the land of the Lamanites to preach (v. 17). Ammon was the leader among them, so he blessed them and admonished them, and then they all left on their respective journeys (v. 18).

v17 Given license I would insert a chapter break between v. 16 and 17.

19 And Ammon went to the land of Ishmael, the land being called after the sons of Ishmael, who also became Lamanites. 20 And as Ammon entered the land of Ishmael, the Lamanites took him and

bound him, as was their custom to bind all the Nephites who fell into their hands, and carry them before the king; and thus it was left to the pleasure of the king to slay them, or to retain them in captivity, or to cast them into prison, or to cast them out of his land, according to his will and pleasure. 21 And thus Ammon was carried before the king who was over the land of Ishmael; and his name was Lamoni; and he was a descendant of Ishmael. 22 And the king inquired of Ammon if it were his desire to dwell in the land among the Lamanites, or among his people. 23 And Ammon said unto him: Yea, I desire to dwell among this people for a time; yea, and perhaps until the day I die. 24 And it came to pass that king Lamoni was much pleased with Ammon, and caused that his bands should be loosed; and he would that Ammon should take one of his daughters to wife. 25 But Ammon said unto him: Nay, but I will be thy servant. Therefore Ammon became a servant to king Lamoni.

v19-25 Ammon travels to the land of Ishmael (v. 19), where is captured and taken to the king (v. 20), a descendant of Ishmael named Lamoni (v. 21). King Lamoni asks Ammon if he wants to live among his people (v. 22), and Ammon says he does (v. 23). King Lamoni is pleased with this, and offers him one of daughters as wife (v. 24). Ammon declines and offers to be his servant (v. 25).

v20-24 Given the typically hostile responses detailed in v. 20-21 it seems odd there is such a quick change in Lamoni's attitude in v. 24 given the relatively simple question and answer in v. 22-23. I would assume there is a lot of culture dependent meaning with implications not immediately apparent to us in the exchange in v. 22-23.

Perhaps something to the effect that the Lamanite perception of Nephites was they were elitists who looked down on the Lamanites (which historically has been the case, cf. Jacob 3:3-9) and would therefore seek release rather than want to live among them. Lamoni's question in v. 22 would then be a set up for any typical Nephite producing a negative response, resulting in the hostile treatment detailed in v. 20. So, when Lamoni asks him if he wants to live among them he is disarmed by Ammon's emphatic response to the affirmative. If this is the case, he would have been doubly impressed by Ammon's rejection of marriage with a request to be his servant.

v24-25 "he would that Ammon should take one of his daughters to wife. But Ammon said unto him: Nay", this exchange gives us insight into the marriage practices of the Lamanites and probably the Nephites as well. Lamoni attempts to arrange a

marriage, but Ammon declines without causing any real offense. This informs us arranged marriages were not out of the question, but there was no strong social convention about exercising choice in the matter.

It also clearly indicates Ammon is single, as his reason for declining the marriage is not that he is already a married man. While Alma has settled down in Zarahemla as chief judge and high priest and is married and has children, the sons of Mosiah all apparently forestall marriage in favor of the missionary service.

Perhaps Lamoni recognizes Ammon as a Nephite prince and is looking to make an alliance with the Nephites via marriage?

And it came to pass that he was set among other servants to watch the flocks of Lamoni, according to the custom of the Lamanites. 26 And after he had been in the service of the king three days, as he was with the Lamanitish servants going forth with their flocks to the place of water, which was called the water of Sebus, and all the Lamanites drive their flocks hither, that they may have water—

27 Therefore, as Ammon and the servants of the king were driving forth their flocks to this place of water, behold, a certain number of the Lamanites, who had been with their flocks to water, stood and scattered the flocks of Ammon and the servants of the king, and they scattered them insomuch that they fled many ways. 28 Now the servants of the king began to murmur, saying: Now the king will slay us, as he has our brethren because their flocks were scattered by the wickedness of these men. And they began to weep exceedingly, saying: Behold, our flocks are scattered already. 29 Now they wept because of the fear of being slain.

Now when Ammon saw this his heart was swollen within him with joy; for, said he, I will show forth my power unto these my fellow-servants, or the power which is in me, in restoring these flocks unto the king, that I may win the hearts of these my fellow-servants, that I may lead them to believe in my words. 30 And now, these were the thoughts of Ammon, when he saw the afflictions of those whom he termed to be his brethren. 31 And it came to pass that he flattered them by his words, saying: My brethren, be of good cheer and let us go in search of the flocks, and we will gather them together and bring them back unto the place of water; and thus we will preserve the flocks unto the king and he will not slay us. 32 And it came to pass that they went in search of the flocks, and they did follow Ammon, and they rushed forth with much swiftness and did head the flocks of the king, and did gather them together again to the place of water.

v25-32 Ammon is among the servants who watch the king's flocks and then bring to water (v. 25-26). While watering the king's

flocks, men already there at the watering hole deliberately scatter the flocks (v. 27). Ammon fellow servants complain about the loss, fearing they will be killed for it (v. 28-29). Ammon sees this as an opportunity to favorably impress the other servants and win them over, so he tells them to gather the flocks, and they do (v. 29-32).

v25 "according to the custom of the Lamanites", being a shepherd is normally a solitary profession in the Bible where the shepherd protected the flocks from wild animals. However, it is plain from 18:7 that more than one servant was necessary because of the "practice of plunder among them".

v26 "the waters of Sebus", there were apparently enough different separate pastures such that once the flocks were in their respective pastures there was no problem of them being scattered and mixed with other people's flocks, cf. v. 39. However, when it came time to water the flocks it would appear there was only one watering hole and all had to share it. Thus, the offenders could sit and wait at this place where they knew others would have to bring their flocks. If the flocks were unmarked, then scattering them and collecting them afterwards would be an easy way to plunder (cf. 18:7), especially if the scatterers had no flocks themselves. They would just lie in wait.

v28 "the king will slay us", the king was apparently having the shepherds executed for failing to defend his flocks from plunder. One would think the threat of execution would have been more of an incentive to protect the animals from those who would scatter them, but given the hostile nature of scatterers, who clearly outnumbered the shepherds, it is pretty clear the shepherds were trapped in a situation where they faced death either way, hence their response.

33 And those men again stood to scatter their flocks; but Ammon said unto his brethren: Encircle the flocks round about that they flee not; and I go and contend with these men who do scatter our flocks. 34 Therefore, they did as Ammon commanded them,

and he went forth and stood to contend with those who stood by the waters of Sebus; and they were in number not a few. 35 Therefore they did not fear Ammon, for they supposed that one of their men could slay him according to their pleasure, for they knew not that the Lord had promised Mosiah that he would deliver his sons out of their hands; neither did they know anything concerning the Lord; therefore they delighted in the destruction

of their brethren; and for this cause they stood to scatter the flocks of the king.

36 But Ammon stood forth and began to cast stones at them with his sling; yea, with mighty power he did sling stones amongst them; and thus he slew a certain number of them insomuch that they began to be astonished at his power; nevertheless they were angry because of the slain of their brethren, and they were determined that he should fall; therefore, seeing that they could not hit him with their stones, they came forth with clubs to slay him. 37 But behold, every man that lifted his club to smite Ammon, he smote off their arms with his sword; for he did withstand their blows by smiting their arms with the edge of his sword, insomuch that they began to be astonished, and began to flee before him; yea, and they were not few in number; and he caused them to flee by the strength of his arm. 38 Now six of them had fallen by the sling, but he slew none save it were their leader with his sword; and he smote off as many of their arms as were lifted against him, and they were not a few. 39 And when he had driven them afar off, he returned and they watered their flocks and returned them to the pasture of the king, and then went in unto the king, bearing the arms which had been smitten off by the sword of Ammon, of those who sought to slay him; and they were carried in unto the king for a testimony of the things which they had done.

v33-39 Ammon has the other servants surround the flocks to prevent them from being scattered again (v. 33), and Ammon deals with the scatterers (v. 34), who think they are going to deal with him the way they deal with everyone else (v. 35). Ammon starts casting stones at them with his sling, with great results. The scatterers throw stones back at him, but they don't hit him, so they try to rush him (v. 36). All those who tried to attack him with clubs had their arms hacked off, so the scatterers flee (v. 37). After the threat has been eliminated, Ammon returns to watering the flocks, and his fellow servants collect the arms of the attackers to show King Lamoni what has happened (v. 38-39).

v35 "they delighted in the destruction of their brethren", it is made plain the scatterers knew the servants were being executed because of losing the flocks, and not only did they not care, they even took pleasure in it. This is why Ammon's response is lethal, because the people he is facing are murderous.

v36-37 "clubs", the brother of the leader of this group has a sword in 19:22. Unclear why this group has clubs and not swords. Perhaps they didn't anticipate any real resistance, so they didn't bring real weapons. So, they improvised weapons and grabbed whatever was laying around to try to beat down Ammon.

v36 There is an exchange of sling stones between Ammon and the scatterers with only Ammon hitting them and them missing him. They were likely throwing stones back, hence their inability to hit him. Sling stones have a much greater range than thrown stones. This forces them to close the distance in order to attack him. It is likely they ran at different speeds, so Ammon wouldn't have to fight all of them at once, but as they arrived. Ammon could have easily moved around in the process, so as to manage how many he fought at once.

v37 While Ammon enjoyed a literal technological edge in the sword versus clubs, Mormon makes it clear in his opening remarks in v. 35 that the real reason he wasn't harmed was because of the promise the Lord had made to king Mosiah.

v38 Ammon could have killed considerably more of them, but chose not to. Why he killed only the leader with the sword is unclear, but perhaps he was most dangerous of the scattering group and this necessitated his being killed as opposed maimed. Or, perhaps he was the only one who bled to death as a result of his wounds.

It is likely Ammon wanted to permanently deal with this group once and for all. Killing the leader and maiming his group would leave them in no position to continue the practice of plunder.

v39 "bearing the arms", while it is a grisly display one would have to assume it was to prove their impossible sounding story was literally true and not hyperbolic.

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