

General Comments on Alma

The book of Alma is quite long and is a lengthy historical account of Nephite battles. It is easy to assume Mormon's personal involvement in the Nephite military affairs would have influenced his choice in how to collect, edit and present Nephite history. However, Mormon carefully crafts consistent themes and symbolism through the text to convey spiritual messages.

Theology: Forty Years of Internal Conflict

The book of Alma presents a series of conflicts, as follows:

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Good Guys</u>	<u>Bad Guys</u>
1	Alma	Nehor
2-3	Alma	Amlici
4-6	Alma	Apostates
8-16	Alma, Amulek	Nehors at Ammonihah
17-25	Ammon, etc.	Lamanites, Amalekites
30	Alma	Korihor
31-35	Alma, Amulek, etc.	Zoramites
43-44	Moroni	Zerahemnah
46-51	Moroni, et al.	Amalickiah, king men
52-62	Moroni, et al.	Ammoron, king men

There are brief intervals where the Nephites humble themselves and things go well and rejoice (e.g., 3:24, 4:1-5, 7:3-5, 16:13-18, 26:1-9, 29:10-17, 49:28-30). But, the text emphasizes the conflict and presents the good times as hard-won peace as a result of humbling by difficult circumstances.

The consistent message through the book is "inasmuch as they shall keep my commandments they shall prosper in the land. But remember, inasmuch as they will not keep my commandments they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord." (cf. 9:13-14, 36:30, 37:13, 38:1, 9:13-14, 50:17-22, also cp. 53:8-9). In all cases of conflict, the problems are caused by bad Nephites, either religious apostates or power-seeking monarchists. The Lamanite involvement in the conflict is presented as being a

result of bad Nephites. Mormon's inclusion of the missionary efforts of Ammon, et. al. show plainly that while the Lamanites harbor deep resentments against the Nephites, owing to long-running cultural bias, they largely repent when the gospel is preached to them (note how much text Ammon receives where the other brothers who have little or no success among the unrepentant Lamanites are passed over quickly). The exception among the Lamanites are those who have been hardened further by apostate Nephites. The underlying message is the Nephite problems are caused by their own wickedness, and this is spelled out in considerable detail over some 40 years of Nephite history. The Nephite's failure to repent and reconcile themselves to the Lord results in persistent internal conflict and wars.

Sociology

Through the book of Alma the Nephite and Lamanite populations are in varying degrees of conflict. Note Mormon's presentation of the two populations is largely unbiased, as apostate Nephites and repentant Lamanites provide for the majority of the narrative. Mormon's editorializing is not a diatribe against apostate Nephites and militarized Lamanites, it remarkably even-handed in its presentation.

From the larger perspective, Mormon's intent is to display the impact individuals and relatively small groups of people can have on entire populations. A handful of Nephite missionaries proselyte a relatively large group of Lamanites, who then leave the Lamanites and move into Nephite territory. This leaves the larger Lamanite population with no repentant individuals. Groups of apostate Nephites leave the Nephites and move into the Lamanite territories and motivate the Lamanite population to attack the Nephites. Mormon is exploring the social impact of religion on these populations.

While the later chapters spend a considerable amount of time on military matters, Mormon is always exploring the theology of the people involved and how it impacts the larger populations.

Symbolism

There are three pervasive symbols used through the book of Alma to convey spiritual messages. The first two would be obvious during a wartime setting. The last is not. There might

be others which I have missed, but these are the ones I have caught.

As is the case with Nephi's small plates, they are a history of events, but focused on spiritual things. Mormon does the same in the book of Alma. It is easy to miss the spiritual message given the pervasive theme of conflict and war, but we should keep our focus on the spiritual intent of the text.

Death

With a significant portion of the history recounting conflict and wars, we should not be surprised by pervasive references to death. The spiritual and eternal consequences of death caused by the wars is presented plainly in 3:26, as follows:

And in one year were thousands and tens of thousands of souls sent to the eternal world, that they might reap their rewards according to their works, whether they were good or whether they were bad, to reap eternal happiness or eternal misery, according to the spirit which they listed to obey, whether it be a good spirit or a bad one.

Alma appeals to the apostates within the church to repent and remember their own history of accepting the Messiah and being redeemed from death (5:7-10). Alma and Amulek discuss death and the resurrection at length, preaching to those of the order of Nehor in the city Ammonihah to accept the doctrine of resurrection and judgement in ch. 11-12. Alma explains the doctrine of resurrection and the justice that attends it with his son Corianton in ch. 40. See also 4:14, 16:19-20, 21:9, 27:8, 33:21-23 for additional discussions over the resurrection with various groups.

Blood

Again, with the history being largely driven by wars, the subject of blood fits the context. Mormon has a lengthy discussion in Alma 3 about the mark the Amlicites voluntarily made on themselves. The "mark of red upon [the] foreheads" of the Amlicites is emulating the Lamanite practice. The Lamanites also shave their heads, which the Amlicites didn't do, presumably because they didn't have time in the heat of battle. Mormon includes a lengthy quotation of the Lord given to Nephi, which must have been on the large plates, in 3:14-17 where the Lord says those who fight against the Nephites will be marked.

The Amlicites, being apostate Nephites who are now trying to murder the Nephites, voluntarily marked themselves with red in the forehead, according to the curse of the Lord. The red on the forehead is likely blood, or at least symbolically representative of blood (cp. 3 Ne. 4:7).

Mormon also notes in 21:9 that Amalickiah swore an oath to drink Moroni's blood.

Drinking blood is explicitly prohibited in the Law of Moses (cf. Gen 9:3-5, Lev. 4, Lev, 7:26-27, Lev. 17:10-14, Deut. 12:16) and is considered particularly reprehensible, not just because of the connection to idolatrous acts of blood drinking. This is explained in Lev. 17:11

For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.

The blood of the sacrifice represents the atonement, the life given for the expiation of your sins. When an Israelite makes a sacrifice for sin, the blood represents the life of the animal being given for the life of the one making the sacrifice. It represents the expiation of sins. Clearly, in a Messianic context, it represents the blood Christ sheds for us so we may be forgiven in an eternal context.

When the Amlicites put blood on their foreheads, they mean to ally themselves with the Lamanites to murder Nephites, they reject the Law of Moses, they reject the Messiah. When Amalickiah swears to drink the blood of Moroni, he is violating the Law of Moses in the most egregious manner possible. Alma in ch. 5:21-22 says:

I say unto you, ye will know at that day that ye cannot be saved; for there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until they are cleansed from all stain, through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers, who should come to redeem his people from their sins.

And now I ask of you, my brethren, how will any of you feel, if ye shall stand before the bar of God, having your garments stained with blood and all manner of filthiness? Behold, what will these things testify against you?

Alma is saying if you are not cleansed from your sins by the Messiah, then your sins are still on you, and you will remain in your sins at Judgement. These people who are putting blood on themselves violate the Law of Moses and mark themselves publicly and eternally for destruction. Mormon's intent is clearly to say those who reject the blood of the Messiah will die with their own blood on them to condemn them.

Clothing

Mormon talks quite a bit about appearances, for both good and bad. The most frequently occurring phrase is "costly apparel" (cf. 1:6, 1:27, 1:32, 4:6, 5:53, 31:28, also cp. 2 Ne. 13:22, Jacob 2:13, Hela. 13:28, 4 Ne. 1:24) and one "coarseness of their apparel" (cf. 32:2). The reference in 1:27 is in the negative and used to contrast with 1:6 and 1:32, in that members of the church do not wear costly apparel while Nehor and the nonmembers do. Mormon uses "costly apparel" as an indicator of selfish materialism and elitism, which strongly correlates with apostasy. The single instance of coarse apparel is presented as a contrast among the impoverished humble Zoramites who end up listening to Alma and Amulek.

In contrast to this is Moroni, who uses the title of liberty, written on a torn coat, as a banner against the king men, and those who rally to him also tear their clothes and pile them up at his feet (46:13-27). After being forcefully subjugated, the king men are forced to hoist the banner of liberty on their towers (cf. 51:20).

Mormon's intent is to contrast the elite's selfish use of clothes to promote themselves with Moroni's selfless use of clothes to promote the Lord's words and the freedom of the people.

Comments on Alma 1

This chapter presents a rather violent and arrogant priestcrafter named Nehor. Priestcraft is condemned in the Book of Mormon, cf. 2 Ne. 26:29, also cp. Mosiah 29:40. This is particularly the case with the example of Alma senior, cf. Mosiah 18:26-28, Mosiah 27:4-5. Thus, less than a year after Alma's death, Nehor is directly challenging the church Alma established with his own version of religion. Nehor, as well as others, probably aspired to such a thing prior to Alma's death (cf. v. 16), but Alma's presence and strength in the ministry would have been too great to permit them to succeed. His death would have been the opportunity for self-promoting persons such as Nehor to attempt to fill the void left by Alma as spiritual leader.

1 NOW it came to pass that in the first year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, from this time forward, king Mosiah having gone the way of all the earth, having warred a good warfare, walking uprightly before God, leaving none to reign in his stead; nevertheless he had established laws, and they were acknowledged by the people; therefore they were obliged to abide by the laws which he had made.

2 And it came to pass that in the first year of the reign of Alma in the judgment-seat, there was a man brought before him to be judged, a man who was large, and was noted for his much strength. 3 And he had gone about among the people, preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God, bearing down against the church; declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people. 4 And he also testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life.

5 And it came to pass that he did teach these things so much that many did believe on his words, even so many that they began to support him and give him money. 6 And he began to be lifted up in the pride of his heart, and to wear very costly apparel, yea, and even began to establish a church after the manner of his preaching.

7 And it came to pass as he was going, to preach to those who believed on his word, he met a man who belonged to the church of God, yea, even one of their teachers; and he began to contend with him sharply, that he might lead away the people of the church; but the man withstood him, admonishing him with the words of God. 8 Now the name of the man was Gideon; and it was he who was an instrument in the hands of God in delivering the people of Limhi out of bondage. 9 Now, because Gideon withstood him with the words of God he was wroth with Gideon, and drew his sword and began to smite him. Now Gideon being stricken with many years, therefore he was not able to withstand his blows, therefore he was slain by the sword.

10 And the man who slew him was taken by the people of the church, and was brought before Alma, to be judged according to the crimes which he had committed. 11 And it came to pass that he stood before Alma and pleaded for himself with much boldness. 12 But Alma said

unto him: Behold, this is the first time that priestcraft has been introduced among this people. And behold, thou art not only guilty of priestcraft, but hast endeavored to enforce it by the sword; and were priestcraft to be enforced among this people it would prove their entire destruction. 13 And thou hast shed the blood of a righteous man, yea, a man who has done much good among this people; and were we to spare thee his blood would come upon us for vengeance. 14 Therefore thou art condemned to die, according to the law which has been given us by Mosiah, our last king; and it has been acknowledged by this people; therefore this people must abide by the law.

v1-14 These verses recount the history of Nehor. The text is presented in a loose parallelism, as follows:

A - (v. 1) ... [Mosiah] had established laws, and they were acknowledged by the people; therefore they were obliged to abide by the laws which he had made.

B - (v. 2) And it came to pass that in the first year of the reign of Alma in the judgment-seat, there was a man brought before him to be judged, a man who was large, and was noted for his much strength.

C - (v. 3a-c) And he had gone about among the people, preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God, bearing down against the church;

D - (v. 3d-4) declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people. 4 And he also testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life.

E - (v. 5) And it came to pass that he did teach these things so much that many did believe on his words, even so many that they began to support him and give him money.

E - (v. 6) And he began to be lifted up in the pride of his heart, and to wear very costly apparel, yea, and even began to establish a church after the manner of his preaching.

D - (v. 7-8) ... he met a man who belonged to the church of God, yea, even one of their teachers; and he began to contend with him sharply, that he might lead away the people of the church; but the man withstood him, admonishing him with the words of God. Now the name of the man was Gideon; and it was he who was an instrument in the hands of God in delivering the people of Limhi out of bondage.

C - (v. 9) Now, because Gideon withstood him with the words of God he was wroth with Gideon, and drew his sword and began to smite him ... [and] ... he was slain by the sword.

B - (v. 10) And the man who slew him was taken by the people of the church, and was brought before Alma, to be judged according to the crimes which he had committed.

A - (v. 11-14) ... thou art condemned to die, according to the law which has been given us by Mosiah, our last king; and it has been acknowledged by this people; therefore this people must abide by the law.

The parallelism in the story primarily contrasts the A's and the E's. While there is a minority among the Nephites who accept Nehor's words (the subject of the E's) the majority uphold the laws of the land (the subject of the A's). This falls in line with the subject of Mosiah 29:26-27.

v7-10 Exactly what happened here is not clear, but it seems to be the case that Nehor confronted Gideon in the audience of the church so as to lead them away (v. 7). Nehor was angered that Gideon humiliated him, so he lashed out in a fit of rage and murdered Gideon (v. 9). The people of the church apparently witnessed the whole thing, and perhaps subdued him, and then took him to Alma (v. 10). If it was an act of rage it might have occurred so quickly and unexpectedly that the people of the church couldn't intervene quickly enough to prevent Gideon from being struck.

v11-14 It would be difficult to imagine what kind of defense he claimed in such a case (v. 11). Regardless, Alma presents three convictions against him: priestcraft, enforcing priestcraft by the sword (v. 12), and murdering an innocent man (v. 13). The verdict is the death penalty, according to the law (v. 14).

15 And it came to pass that they took him; and his name was Nehor; and they carried him upon the top of the hill Manti, and there he was caused, or rather did acknowledge, between the

heavens and the earth, that what he had taught to the people was contrary to the word of God; and there he suffered an ignominious death. 16 Nevertheless, this did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft through the land; for there were many who loved the vain things of the world, and they went forth preaching false doctrines; and this they did for the sake of riches and honor. 17 Nevertheless, they durst not lie, if it were known, for fear of the law, for liars were punished; therefore they pretended to preach according to their belief; and now the law could have no power on any man for his belief. 18 And they durst not steal, for fear of the law, for such were punished; neither durst they rob, nor murder, for he that murdered was punished unto death.

v15-18 The execution of Nehor (v. 15) does little to stem the tide of priestcrafts because there are many who will deceive in order to get rich (v. 16). But, the priestcrafters do have to act within the boundaries of the law, or they are punished, as was Nehor (v. 17-18).

19 But it came to pass that whosoever did not belong to the church of God began to persecute those that did belong to the church of God, and had taken upon them the name of Christ. 20 Yea, they did persecute them, and afflict them with all manner of words, and this because of their humility; because they were not proud in their own eyes, and because they did impart the word of God, one with another, without money and without price. 21 Now there was a strict law among the people of the church, that there should not any man, belonging to the church, arise and persecute those that did not belong to the church, and that there should be no persecution among themselves.

22 Nevertheless, there were many among them who began to be proud, and began to contend warmly with their adversaries, even unto blows; yea, they would smite one another with their fists. 23 Now this was in the second year of the reign of Alma, and it was a cause of much affliction to the church; yea, it was the cause of much trial with the church. 24 For the hearts of many were hardened, and their names were blotted out, that they were remembered no more among the people of God. And also many withdrew themselves from among them. 25 Now this was a great trial to those that did stand fast in the faith; nevertheless, they were steadfast and immovable in keeping the commandments of God, and they bore with patience the persecution which was heaped upon them.

v19-25 Division arises between those after the order of Nehor and those of the church because of their differences, with the people of the church being persecuted (v. 19-20). And, while there were strict laws among those of the church that there should not be any persecutions returned (v. 21), some of the people in the church become filled with pride and end up in fights with their persecutors (v. 22).

The result is there are a lot of hard feelings within the church over the matter (v. 23) and some people end up leaving the church as a result (v. 24). It was a time of trial to those of the church, but those with firm faith weathered the problems (v. 25).

26 And when the priests left their labor to impart the word of God unto the people, the people also left their labors to hear the word of God. And when the priest had imparted unto them the word of God they all returned again diligently unto their labors; and the priest, not esteeming himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength. 27 And they did impart of their substance, every man according to that which he had, to the poor, and the needy, and the sick, and the afflicted; and they did not wear costly apparel, yet they were neat and comely.

28 And thus they did establish the affairs of the church; and thus they began to have continual peace again, notwithstanding all their persecutions. 29 And now, because of the steadiness of the church they began to be exceedingly rich, having abundance of all things whatsoever they stood in need--an abundance of flocks and herds, and fatlings of every kind, and also abundance of grain, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious things, and abundance of silk and fine-twined linen, and all manner of good homely cloth. 30 And thus, in their prosperous circumstances, they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished; and they did not set their hearts upon riches; therefore they were liberal to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need.

31 And thus they did prosper and become far more wealthy than those who did not belong to their church. 32 For those who did not belong to their church did indulge themselves in sorceries, and in idolatry or idleness, and in babblings, and in envyings and strife; wearing costly apparel; being lifted up in the pride of their own eyes; persecuting, lying, thieving, robbing, committing whoredoms, and murdering, and all manner of wickedness; nevertheless, the law was put in force upon all those who did transgress it, inasmuch as it was possible.

33 And it came to pass that by thus exercising the law upon them, every man suffering according to that which he had done, they became more still, and durst not commit any wickedness if it were known; therefore, there was much peace among the people of Nephi until the fifth year of the reign of the judges.

v26-33 The church practices the Law of Consecration (v. 26-28, cp. Mosiah 18:27-28), and the Lord blesses them for it (v. 29). In their blessed condition they in turn help others in need, turning none away (v. 30).

Those in the church are generally much better off materially than those who are not in the church because of their respective choices (v. 31). While those in the church are doing good, those not in the church are engaging in self-destructive and antisocial behavior (v. 32). But, by applying the law to those who broke it the people were less likely to commit the sins knowing they would be punished for it. So, there is peace in the land for a few years (v. 33).

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