

The Book of Alma

Alma 1

Book of Alma: Header

The account of Alma, who was the son of Alma, the first and chief judge over the people of Nephi, and also the high priest over the Church. An account of the reign of the judges, and the wars and contentions among the people. And also an account of a war between the Nephites and the Lamanites, according to the record of Alma, the first and chief judge.

Comments

When the 116 pages were lost, we lost the beginning of what Mormon intended to be his book. We also lost the beginning of the book of Mosiah. That means that the first time we see the way Mormon edits a whole book from the plates of Nephi is in the book of Alma. We will see that in this book, as well as all other books that he edits, Mormon provides a book header that will give us information about what comes in the book.

In the book of Mosiah, we also saw that Mormon will, at times, provide similar headers for chapters. We will see that again in the book of Alma. Those instances are times when Mormon is letting his readers know that what comes in that particular chapter has a different source than the plates of Nephi. Nephi and Jacob also provided book synopses, but the practice died out on the small plates. Mormon was consistent in everything we have from him; therefore, we expect that he was also consistent for what was lost on the 116 pages.

An interesting change occurred in this header that points out the nature of the task that John Gilbert, the compositor, had when he turned the printer's manuscript into a published book. He had to create the sentences and paragraphs himself without guidance from the manuscript. Generally, he did an excellent job. The last sentence of this header is a place where he made a mistake. It was a reasonable mistake, but a mistake nonetheless.

The 1830 edition was punctuated as: "according to the record of Alma the first, and chief judge." There were two Alma's, and this Alma was going to be the ruler, so Gilbert set it similar to names of European royalty. He saw it as "Alma the first." It has been corrected to "Alma, the first and chief judge." A small thing, but it points out how important small points of punctuation can be.

Alma 1:1

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.

Comments

The book of Alma begins a new phase in Nephite record keeping. It is the first time that we begin to see consistent listing of the years. In the small plates, dates had been given according to the time after Lehi's family left Jerusalem, if they were given at all. Now, we will begin to see consistent listing of the years from a new starting point. The beginning of the reign of the judges was seen as a reformulation of Nephite society, and apparently supported by a change in the way dates were recorded.

The new method of record keeping appears to come from the large plates and represents a change that organized the historical information on those plates. From this time forward, information is organized according to years. Mormon will provide the accounting of time from the beginning of the reign of the judges until the record of the birth of the Messiah, which will provide another new beginning date.

Mormon's work itself will follow the basic organization of collecting information, either by single years, or sets of years. We will see that he pays attention to time, and if there is no other reason for ending a chapter, he will end a chapter to correspond to a five-year period. Among the Maya, this was a *hotun*, a period of five years. The Maya later raised stone stelae on five-year anniversaries to summarize the history of those five-year periods. Mormon does not organize his record into five-year periods, but he does pay attention to them when he has no more important reason for ending one chapter and beginning a new one.

Nehor Introduces Priestcraft

Alma 1:2–6

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.

Comments

At the very beginning of the reign of the judges comes an important case. Where King Mosiah₂ had separated government from church, the two functions had been reunited in the person of Alma₂ as both leader of the church and the chief judge. This particular case covers both the religious and the political issues. The religious issues are the first to be described.

There are two critical aspects to this man's teaching. The first is that he encourages social stratification. This happens first by creating a position where religious officiators are set apart by being paid for their labors, rather than laboring with their own hands. This separation had, in the past, and now in the present case, led to being "lifted up on the pride of his heart, and to wear very costly apparel." The appearance of costly apparel in the Nephite record is a harbinger of apostasy. This is not due to the apparel, but the social division that creates a situation where one might have costly apparel and another may not be able to have anything similar.

The second problem is even more critical. This man denies the need for the atoning mission of the Messiah. This was the message of Abinadi, which was brought to Zarahemla and reinforced in the creation of churches by Alma₁. This was also divisive to the point where there was a competing church founded. Where Alma₁ brought a church based on Abinadi, this man appears to bring a church based on the beliefs of the priests of Noah, as will be noted later.

Alma 1:7–10

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.

Comments

After introducing the man and his religious crimes, we arrive at his social crimes. The beginning of the incident is incited by religious differences, and the hero Gideon contends with this currently unnamed man. They come to blows, and the man slays Gideon.

Thus, there are two crimes. The judge for both crimes is Alma₂, in his position of simultaneously being the chief judge and the high priest of the church. We should note that verse 10 tells us that it was the people of the church who brought him to Alma₂. In essence, it is a hate crime murder. The murder itself was reason for judgment, but it was a crime incited by religious division.

Alma 1:11–14

11 And it came to pass that he stood before Alma and pled 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.

Comments

Verse 12 notes that “this is the first time that priestcraft has been introduced among this people.” That statement must refer to the people under Nephite government. We do not know if it existed in Zarahemla prior to the time that the Nephites arrived, but the undercurrents we see in Zarahemla suggest that it was.

Alma₂ is defining priestcraft as teaching that the priests should be paid and not work with their hands. The implicit indictment is that this is also the introduction of a significant form of social inequality.

The second crime is attempting to enforce his religious beliefs through force, which resulted in Gideon’s death. There was no apparent controversy over whether or not the man had slain Gideon. Therefore, the law applied, and, as Alma₂ declares: “thou art condemned to die, according to the law which has been given us by Mosiah, our last king.”

Alma 1:15–16

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.

Comments

Only after the sentence is passed do we learn the name of the condemned man. It is Nehor. After the listing of his crimes, judgment is passed quickly, and he is executed. We know his name only in the short notice that he died “an ignominious death.” Nevertheless, this will not be the last we hear of the name of Nehor, or of his teachings.

Mormon prepares his readers for what will come by noting that Nehor’s death did not end the teaching of the religious ideas that Nehor had taught. Mormon uses this incident to tie Nehor’s name to the movement of increasing the ideas of priestcraft, and for the coming desires for social inequity. Mormon declares that those engaging in priestcraft did so “for the sake of riches and honor.” Thus, Mormon declares that they perpetuate the problem of social inequality that leads to internal strife throughout the Book of Mormon.

Although Mormon tells Nehor’s story succinctly, he does so intentionally. First, he tells it generically, and then associates the name only when Nehor is already convicted and on his way to an ignominious death. Mormon will begin to use Nehor’s name as a shorthand reference to these teachings whenever we see them. Although this gives the impression that these teachings had begun with Nehor, that is clearly not the case. The priests of Noah taught very similar things. What Mormon is doing is using Nehor’s name as a prejudicial association. Nehor was a convicted murderer, and therefore, we, as Mormon’s readers, are to understand that when we see a reference to the Order of the Nehors, it cannot be good.

Alma 1:17–18

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.

Comments

These comments on law and consequences come right after the execution of Nehor. The purpose is to reiterate that the reign of the judges was also a reign of law. There were laws that were set down, but they

were laws related to actions, not beliefs. Thus, Nehor was executed for murder, not for his religious teachings, even though the Nephite nation was under a much greater social threat from the divisive teachings than it was from the single murder.

Alma 1:19–22

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.

Comments

In verse 16, Mormon reminded his readers that Nehor's execution did not stop others from preaching as Nehor had. In these verses we see the beginnings of the social divisions that resulted from those teachings. Although modern readers easily see this as religious persecution, we must remember that religion and political beliefs were not clearly separated in the ancient world. Even in Zarahemla, where the creation of churches allowed for more distinction than perhaps in other cities, the connections to the right of rule would have remained. Thus, these persecutions were more than for beliefs, they were divisions in the fabric of society and the definitions of what the right way to do things should be.

While Mormon indicates that the persecution began with those not in the church persecuting those who were, those persecutions had the effect of creating further tensions. Thus, those in the church responded in kind.

What is important for Nephite society is that, because of surrounding persecutions and retaliations for beliefs, there was an increasing tendency for both those in and outside the church to become proud. In Book of Mormon terms, pride is manifest by social divisions.

Alma 1:23–25

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.

Comments

The result of the persecutions and social divisions was that many who were in the church were affected. They withdrew from the church. Accordingly, their names were “blotted out” of the church records. This does not mean that they abandoned religious thought, but rather that they shifted their religious thinking to align with the teachings that Mormon labeled with the name Nehor. This was not a major shift, but one that was probably seen as a return to an older form of religion: obeying the law of Moses but denying the Nephite emphasis on the coming Messiah. It could even have been seen as a reform.

In verse 25, Mormon begins a shift to show the more appropriate response of those in the church. They were not moved by those who persecuted, nor by those who left. They continued in their commitment to Yahweh’s commandments, certainly as pertaining to the law of Moses, but also to the understanding of the coming Messiah.

The Church of God Prospers

Alma 1:26–28

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.

Comments

The response Mormon writes for the priests of the church is that they continue to uphold the Nephite standards of egalitarianism. They impart both the word of God and of their substance. They do not esteem themselves better than another. Not that they specifically were “all equal, and they did labor, every

man according to his strength.” That is virtually the definition of what Benjamin and Mosiah₂ preached about how Nephite society should be structured.

Included in the list of bad things they did not do, is they did not wear costly apparel. It isn’t the apparel that was bad, it was the idea that when clothing is costly, there is something about it that creates divisions in society.

Finally, in verse 28, the result of this particular righteous behavior is that they begin “to have continual peace again.” They obeyed Yahweh, and they began to prosper.

Alma 1:29–31

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.

Comments

The result of obeying Yahweh’s commandments was that those who were in the church, or those who were living those commandments, began to receive the benefit of the promise of the land. They were righteous; therefore they prospered.

Mormon makes certain to point out that the reason for their prosperity was that they had the things that they needed, and shared with all who were in need (although presumably only those in the church). He concludes that they therefore became more wealthy than those who did not belong to the church. Mormon mentions “good homely cloth.” Webster’s 1828 dictionary indicates that something that is “homely” is “plain, like that which is made for common domestic use.” Since we also have the adjective “good” in the description of the cloth, it is probably intended to indicate that it is made in the home, as was much clothing in antiquity. It is an interesting contrast to the “silk and fine-twined linen.”

This is an interesting point because prosperity is typically the issue that begins to create social inequity. That is the reason that Mormon stressed that they became wealthy through their egalitarian sharing with the needy. It is also important to note that most of what made them wealthy was that they had “whatsoever they stood in need.” They had food and shelter. They did have precious things, but the emphasis is

not on the trappings of wealth, but rather that the true definition of wealth is the ability to provide for both one's own needs and to assist with others who might yet be in need.

Alma 1:32–33

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.

Comments

The contrast with the egalitarian members of the church is seen in the description of those who are not in the church. Mormon does not paint a pretty picture of them. They “indulge themselves in sorceries, and in idolatry or idleness . . . in envyings and strife; wearing costly apparel.”

What is hard to see behind the way Mormon paints this picture is that there is prosperity in all the community. Even though Mormon declared that those in the church were wealthier, the very fact that those not in the church could wear costly apparel tells us that they, too, were prospering. The difference is that Mormon defines prosperity differently. It is not simply possessions, but the nature of the person who might have possessions. Thus, prospering was more about caring for others than accumulating personal costly apparel.

Mormon often uses the term “continual peace” as a description of times of the absence of conflict and presence of prosperity. The definition of “continual” is perhaps ironic as there are times where it lasts hardly a year, and rarely as many as three or more years. As with other descriptions of peace and prosperity, Mormon mentions this prosperous time to prepare his readers for its dissolution, which begins in the next chapter.

In the 1830 edition, there was no chapter ending at this point. Our current chapters 1 through 3 were all part of the original chapter I. Thus, right after the statement that there was much peace is the declaration of its duration: “until the fifth year of the reign of the judges. That year and its story begin in the next chapter, and the separation gave Orson Pratt the subject change on which to make a new chapter division.

