

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM



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little longer. In the fourth segment, the “grieved” owner, accompanied by the servant and other workers, carefully tries again in one last effort. Together they reverse the previous implantation (the “young and tender” plants are returned to the old tree) and splice other old tree limbs into the previously selected trees, appropriately pruning, cultivating, and nurturing each tree as required (verses 29–73). This particular operation of mixing and blending, mingling and merging all the trees together, meets with success in replicating the superior quality crop of “natural fruit” everywhere on his property. Elated, he promises his helpers a share (“joy”) in the harvest for as long as it lasts. But he also pledges destruction of all the trees if and when their capacity for a positive yield wanes again (verses 73–77).

In the subsequent chapter Jacob renders a brief interpretation (6:1–4). Conscious that his people, the Nephites, branched from the house of Israel, he is particularly anxious to redirect their increasingly errant behavior, and therefore reads into the allegory a sober caution of repentance for these impenitent New World Israelites: “How merciful is our God unto us, for he remembereth the house of Israel, both roots and branches; and he stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long; . . . but as many as will not harden their hearts shall be saved in the kingdom of God” (6:4).

Modern interpretations of the allegory have emphasized its universality. Accordingly, readers have explored its application to the house of Israel and the stretch of covenant time, that is, beginning with God’s pact with Abraham and finishing with the Millennium and the ending of the earth; its doctrinal connection to the ages of spiritual apostasy, the latter-day Restoration, Church membership, present global proselytizing, the return of the Jews, and the final judgment. Other studies have begun to explore its literary and textual correspondences with ancient documents (Hymns from Qumran) and with the Old (Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah) and New Testaments (Romans 11:16–24); and even its association with the known laws of botany. Some scholars have declared it one of the most demanding and engaging of all scriptural allegories, if not the most important one.

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L. GARY LAMBERT

ALMA₁

Alma₁ (c. 174–92 B.C.) was the first of two Almas in the Book of Mormon. He was a descendant of NEPHI₁, son of LEHI, and was the young priest in the court of king Noah who attempted a peaceful release of the prophet ABINADI. For that action, Alma incurred royal vengeance, banishment, and threats upon his life. He had been impressed by Abinadi’s accusations of immorality and abuses within the government and society and by his testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Mosiah 17:2). Subsequently forced underground, Alma wrote out Abinadi’s teachings, then shared them with others, attracting sufficient adherents—450—to organize a society of believers, or a church. The believers assembled in a remote, undeveloped area called Mormon. Participants in the church pledged to “bear one another’s burdens,” “mourn with those that mourn,” “comfort those that stand in need of comfort,” and “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things” (Mosiah 18:8–9). This pledge was then sealed by BAPTISM, which was considered “a testimony that ye have entered into a covenant to serve him [Almighty God] until you are dead as to the mortal body” (verse 13). Believers called themselves “the church of God, or the church of Christ, from that time forward” (verse 17).

Alma’s leadership included ordaining lay priests—one for every fifty members—whom he instructed to labor for their own support, and to limit their sermons to his teachings and the doctrine “spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets . . . nothing save it were repentance and faith on the Lord” (Mosiah 18:19–20). Alma also required that there be faithful observance of the SABBATH, daily expressions of gratitude to God, and no CONTENTION, “having their hearts knit together in unity and in love” (18:21–23). The priests assembled with and taught the people in a worship meet-

ing at least once weekly (18:25). Through generous donations, everyone cared for one another “according to that which he had” (18:27–28).

Eventually the believers were discovered and king Noah accused Alma of sedition, ordering his army to crush him and his followers. Forced into exile, Alma led the people deeper into the wilderness, where they thrived for twenty years in a region they named Helam (Mosiah 18:32–35; 23:1–5, 20). Alma ardently declined well-intended efforts to make him king, and successfully dissuaded his people from adopting a monarchical government, urging them to enjoy the new “liberty wherewith ye have been made free” and to “trust no man to be a king” (Mosiah 23:13). He did not oppose monarchies as such but, rather, acknowledged their fundamental limitation: “If it were possible that ye could always have just men to be your kings it would be well for you to have a king” (23:8).

Alma and his people afterward suffered oppression at the hands of Amulon, also an ex-priest and deserter from king Noah’s court, who, along with the remnant of a LAMANITE army, discovered Alma’s people in their wilderness refuge. During their suffering the voice of the Lord promised relief and deliverance because of their covenant with him: “I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions” (Mosiah 24:14). Once again, in Moses-like fashion, Alma guided his people out of bondage, and led them during a twelve-day journey to a new land—the Land of Zarahemla—where they joined with the people of Zarahemla and exiled NEPHITES to form a new and stronger Nephite nation (Mosiah 24:24–25).

The king of Zarahemla, Mosiah₂, also a descendant of transplanted God-fearing Nephites, sanctioned and even authorized expansion of Alma’s church in his kingdom; the church, however, operated separately and independently of the state. The king also assigned the reins of leadership to Alma (Mosiah 25:19; 26:8), who successfully directed the church during twenty years characterized largely by tribulations, with many confrontations between nonbelievers and church members resulting in ordeals for both him and the church (Mosiah 26:1–39). Eventually, widespread antagonism necessitated a royal injunction to lessen the tension (27:1–6). Even one of Alma’s sons was among the ranks of the enemies of the church, his agitation and criticism inviting yet worse persecution for church members (27:8–10).

During his lifetime Alma watched king Mosiah dismantle the monarchy and transform it into a system of judges elected by the people (Mosiah 29:2); he also saw his own son, Alma₂—the one who earlier had brought grief to him and the church—become the first chief judge (Mosiah 29:1–44). This political transformation proved pivotal in the history of the Land of Zarahemla. Directly and indirectly Alma had a hand in bringing it about; the record of his and his people’s pain under oppressive rulers was widely known throughout the kingdom (25:5–6) and remained distinct in king Mosiah’s mind (29:18). Alma’s influence, then, can be seen as transcending the immediate spiritual boundaries of his stewardship over the church. Indeed, because of this influence the entire Nephite nation came to know unprecedented changes in almost every dimension of daily living—political, social, and economic, as well as religious. These changes—and all their connected ramifications for the social order and the populace—prepared the backdrop against which the resurrected Christ’s visit to the Americas was staged. Loved by his followers for his devotion and faith, and held in esteem by his peers for his effective leadership, Alma will probably always be best known as the founder of the church in Zarahemla. His posterity became the leading Nephite family for over 400 years, down to Ammaron in A.D. 321 (4 Ne. 1:48). Alma died at age eighty-two, less than a hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

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ALMA₂

Few individuals have had greater influence upon a civilization than Alma₂, son of Alma₁. He was a key figure in the rise of the Nephite church and republic, serving as the first chief judge in Zarahemla, commander-in-chief of the Nephite army, and high priest (c. 90–73 B.C.). His efforts to protect his people from war, dissension, and wickedness were exceeded only by his single-minded dedication to the Savior, whom he came to know through revelation.

This crusader for righteousness first appears in the Book of Mormon as a rebellious young man. He and four of the sons of King Mosiah₂, described as “the very vilest of sinners” (Mosiah 28:4), rebelled against the teachings of their parents and