

# Ammonihah: Measuring Mormon's Purposes

*S. Kent Brown*

**M**Y COLLEAGUE JOHN SORENSON coined the phrase “Mormon’s imperative,” meaning that Mormon’s editing carries within it an imperative to repent and come to Christ. The dire consequence of not following this imperative is implicit in the Book of Mormon’s reports of destruction beginning with Jerusalem and continuing to Cumorah, highlighting the shattering events at Ramah and Ammonihah along the way to secure Mormon’s point. Indeed, for Mormon—and for his source, Alma the Younger—Ammonihah would have served as a vivid example of what happens when people wholly turn from the Lord. Mormon had watched as his own people dug a deeper and deeper spiritual pit for themselves. It would have been natural for him to see the threatening fate hanging over his own generation mirrored in the fate of the citizens of Ammonihah.

*S. Kent Brown is a professor of ancient scripture  
at Brigham Young University.*

So what do these observations about Mormon's interests say about the character of his reporting? I suggest that, in the case of Ammonihah, Mormon's reporting partially obscures the nature of the crisis that was going on among the city's citizens because he chose to highlight the spiritual hazards of the affair and paid scant attention to political and other issues. To be sure, the experiences of Alma and Amulek at Ammonihah allowed Mormon to uncover the wobbly legal and economic situation in the city. But his chief focus, as always, rested on the spiritual.<sup>1</sup> Here I seek to set out the dimensions of Ammonihah's condition that Mormon leaves partially in the shadows.

Before we go forward, we might ask whether Alma the Younger was chiefly responsible not only for the account, which reports his own experiences, but also for its shape. After all, he spent much of his political and ecclesiastical life combating the religious and social ideals of the followers of Nehor, who had carved deep inroads among Ammonihah's citizens. But even if Alma's imprint could be demonstrated by a close examination of the text, the evident omissions point to Mormon's hand as the final molding influence in how the account tells the story.

### **The Plot**

This said, while a person could make several important observations based on the account of events in Ammonihah (see Alma 8–16)—such as God's ability and willingness to intervene in history—there is virtue in trying to discover why God urgently sent Alma back to the city to try to recover those who would repent. This attempt at recovery follows the pattern underscored elsewhere in Mormon's record. For example, God sent Abinadi and then inspired Alma's father, who was touched by Abinadi's

words, to reach out to souls within the recalcitrant Zeniff-Noah colony before debilitating events swept over them.

In rereading Alma 8–16, it seems apparent to me that certain people in Ammonihah had entered into a conspiracy to overthrow the central government in Zarahemla. There are three key passages:

An angel says, “They [the citizens of Ammonihah] do study at this time that they may destroy the liberty of thy [Alma’s] people” (Alma 8:17).

Alma says, “He [God] will not suffer you [the citizens of Ammonihah] that ye shall live in your iniquities, to destroy his people. He would rather suffer that the Lamanites might destroy all his people who are called the people of Nephi, if it were possible that they could fall into sins and transgressions” (Alma 9:19).

Amulek says, “The foundation of the destruction of this people is beginning to be laid by the unrighteousness of your lawyers and your judges” (Alma 10:27).

On the basis of what the record preserves, this situation is not unique since others had sought to overthrow the Nephite governmental system. We recall Amlici’s attempt to reestablish the monarchy in Alma 2. What is completely unexpected is the *divine* response—that the Lord would “utterly destroy” the city and its citizens (more on this later). Plainly, the plot was real and had a very high chance of succeeding. Moreover, I conclude that one is justified in viewing Alma 8–16 through lenses which reveal that Alma and Amulek are trying to unstring a nation-threatening plot. If we read these chapters with this in mind, some passages become all the more interesting and clear.

Several matters spring to mind. First, the Lord used Alma and Amulek to try to influence the course of history. A surface reading would suggest that neither He nor they succeeded. However, history was changed in the

end because the conspiracy was defeated. We recall that Alma converted some people, that many in the leadership perished in the collapse of the Ammonihah prison, and that the remaining unrepentant populace was wiped out. Second, in light of the angel's declaration in Alma 8:17—"They do study at this time that they may destroy the liberty"—the city was not simply an isolated community whose citizens wanted to be away from the central powers of the Nephite hegemony in order to seek their fortunes in ways that they chose, including at the expense of other local citizens. It was also a seedbed for a national revolution. I ask, What sort of revolution? And who was seeking to take over the central government? According to Alma 10:27 ("the unrighteousness of your lawyers and your judges"), it seems to have been at least a matter of local rulers and other prominent persons developing an appetite for greater powers and more influence. Yet it remains unclear whether they sought power within the existing governmental system or outside it. There is a third matter: how could the elite of Ammonihah possibly believe that they might garner enough support to take over Zarahemla? On the surface, it appears to be a plan brimming with madness. But we have to trust the Lord's words in 8:17 and the broad, nationwide implications that Alma draws from them in 9:19 ("the Lamanites might destroy *all* his people . . . if it were possible they could fall into sins and transgressions"; emphasis added). Thus it seems that the plotters were filled with proverbial hubris—what the Book of Mormon calls "pride."

Other questions present themselves. First, are there hints that passion for a monarchy motivated the conspirators? Or was it a matter of seceding from the larger society? Or neither? I do not detect any hints that plotters in the city were aiming at a monarchy. As noted, such an

effort under a man named Amlici had failed five years before (see Alma 2). It is possible that some of his supporters in that civil strife, who had not died nor gone over to the Lamanites, had simply relocated to the frontier, bringing their ideas for a monarchy to Ammonihah. Further, the conspiracy does not seem to have been aimed at secession because Alma's words in 9:19 about the possibility of the entire population falling "into sins" imply a broadly conceived revolt.

Second, in light of strong Nehorite influences among the populace of Ammonihah, what in Nehorite theology might have encouraged adherents to rebel? We don't know much about this theology,<sup>2</sup> except (a) that there was no sin or redemption (see Alma 1:4; 15:15; and the theology implicit in the questions and answers of Zeezrom and others in 11:26–38; 12:8, 20–21) and (b) that payment to preachers must have encouraged—or at least permitted—some kind of class system (see Alma 1:3, 16). Moreover, the fact that Nehor took up a sword in his confrontation with Gideon shows that he, and certainly his followers, were not pacifists but were willing to pursue their ends through force (see Alma 1:9). In this connection, the Nehorite former Nephites whom the sons of Mosiah met in Lamanite lands—there called Amlicites<sup>3</sup> and Amulonites—were seen as a hardening influence in Lamanite society (see Alma 21:2–4; 23:14; compare the characterization of the Amalekite/Amlicite military leaders of the Lamanite forces in Alma 43:6–7, 44). Significantly, they led out in fomenting civil war against the Lamanite royal house after its members were converted by Mosiah's sons (see Alma 24:1–2, 28–30), and then they slaked their anger by attacking the citizens of Ammonihah (see Alma 25:1–4).

There is irony in these last events. As we just noted, the Amlicites and the Amulonites (the descendants

of the former priests of Noah), who had settled among the Lamanite people, in their rage led a Lamanite army through the west wilderness and attacked Ammonihah, annihilating the entire population and fulfilling Alma's dire prophecies about the city's utter destruction (see Alma 16:1–3; 24:28–30; 25:1–2). Thus, Nehorites killed Nehorites. Incidentally, the Nehorites in the Lamanite army were involved in a mutiny soon after the attack on the city, revealing their nonpacifistic character, and most of these people were thereafter hunted down and executed (see Alma 25:4–9).<sup>4</sup>

### **The Response**

There is another theological point to be tied to Alma's ministry among people of the city. As noted above, he carried the terrifying message that if the citizens did not repent, God would "utterly destroy" them (Alma 9:12; see vv. 18, 24; 10:18, 22). It is as if God had declared His intent to undertake warlike action against them. (Such language does not appear in the chapters immediately preceding or following Alma 8–16, rising here and then receding.) Such a threat, it seems to me, indicates the seriousness of the peril that the conspirators in the city posed to the entire Nephite nation. Other expressions also convey God's harsh warning—"fierce anger" (see Alma 9:12; 10:23) and "wrath" (see Alma 12:36, 37). From God's viewpoint, the only way to eradicate the looming crisis—save through repentance—was for Him to wipe out the population, an act which the deaths of the judges and other officials in the prison foreshadowed.

In this connection, a quick reading of Alma 11:1 ("[judges] should receive wages according to the time which they labored") and Alma 11:20 ("it was for the sole purpose to get gain") would lead one to conclude that

most of the social chaos in the city was merely local and was orchestrated by a few clever judges and lawyers who enriched themselves thereby. To a point, that was true. But evidently far more was going on, for the Lord's warning to Alma puts a more malevolent spin on the macro-view of what was happening. Serious efforts were under way to undermine the central governmental structure in Zarahemla (see Alma 8:17).

Perhaps significantly, like Mormon, Alma sees his task chiefly in a religious, not political, light. Even though Alma has learned that there is serious political mischief afoot and that it will create severe consequences for the entire Nephite society, he turns to religious principles to try to blunt the threatening storm (as did Mormon in his time; see Mormon 3:2–3). But one must still see Alma's religious words against the backdrop of an ominous conspiracy. For instance, his words about Melchizedek's amazing spiritual success among a very wicked people are a vivid case in point because, against high odds, Melchizedek succeeded (see Alma 13:17–18). One is also justified in seeing Alma's restraint as exemplary, since he does not call for the military might of the Nephite nation to be brought against the people of the city to solve the looming problem. There are two further supporting points. First, Alma's success as a missionary apparently took some of the steam out of the movement because it did not mature within the few months before the city fell (one grasps the movement of time in Alma 10:6; 14:23; 16:1—seven months total). Second, there is an instructive parallel in Helaman 5, wherein the Lord uses a former head of state (Nephi) and his brother (Lehi) to undo a thorny political and military situation (the Lamanite capture of much of Nephite territory) by spiritual means (the conversion of all the personnel at the central Lamanite prison in the city of

Nephi, which led to the conversion of enough Lamanites to undercut the Lamanite national policy of conquering Nephite lands).

An unforeseen event connects to the success of Alma's missionary effort in Ammonihah: the deaths of many of the city's leading political and legal personalities in the collapse of the prison (see Alma 14:27). This event seems to have removed the main leadership of the conspiracy, for Amulek identifies these people as the main problem in Alma 10:27. The deaths of these men must have brought an end to the movement, at least partly. But the destruction of the city went forward nonetheless. Why? Because either there was a widespread plot that involved most or all of the remaining citizens and carried enough intensity to continue to be a menace or enough leadership remained to keep the conspiracy alive and defiant. Others may think of better reasons. At the very least, there were good people in the city when Alma arrived (see Alma 10:22–23), but as soon as they had fled the city or had been executed, the city became an open target for the Lord's justice, as did Sodom and Gomorrah.

One of the elements of Ammonihah's character as a frontier city has to do with its justice system. Similarities and differences between the city's justice system and that of the Nephite mother-culture raise four points, and perhaps a fifth. First, the justice system in Ammonihah seems to be religiously based, as the nature of the testimonies and charges against Alma and Amulek demonstrate (see "testified that there was but one God" in Alma 14:5; also vv. 14–15, 20–21, 24). Such a religious base underlay the legal system that Mosiah set in place before his death about ten years before (see Alma 1:1; 11:1, 4; also Mosiah 29:11, 28, 39).<sup>5</sup> But the legal system in Ammonihah differed in spirit and in application because a person could face charges



based on personal belief, as is evident in the cases of Alma and Amulek. We read, for example, the grounds for their imprisonment in Alma 14:20: “Will ye . . . judge this people, and condemn our law?” (see also 9:32; 14:5). The reason for executing citizens sympathetic to the cause of Alma and Amulek was that “they were of [Alma’s] faith” (14:15; see also 14:8; compare another Nephite law on this point in Alma 1:17).

Second, bribes were evidently an acceptable part of doing legal business, as the proffered bribe of Zeezrom demonstrates. Whether one had to be discrete in offering a bribe is not clear, because Zeezrom offers his in the presence of a crowd. One could suggest that Zeezrom was grandstanding and therefore was not following the normal custom of offering a bribe on the sly (see Alma 11:22). But the fact that the crowd was not surprised by Zeezrom’s act points to a corrupted legal culture in the city that people quietly accepted (Amulek’s withering response in Alma 11:23 may reflect his own standard, but not that of others in the city).

Third, the record is clear that judges and lawyers found ways to agitate situations until they became severe enough that people had to go before a judge for some sort of adjudication. The fact that Ammonihah’s ethical standards in legal matters did not control this type of activity says a lot about the climate of justice in the city.

Fourth, the fact that municipal law allowed the execution of believers—particularly the vulnerable (women, children)—also underscores the corrupt character of justice as it was doled out to citizens of the city (see Alma 14:8). In a different vein, these horrific executions also reveal the double-fisted fury that leaders of the conspiracy were willing to visit on any who stood against them in any way.

Fifth, I am not sure what to make of the continual comings and goings of legal and political officials to and from

the prison where Alma and Amulek were held (see Alma 14:18, 20, 23). They may have been acts that grew out of a grudging respect for Alma and his former status as head of state, acts that disclose an underlying (perhaps unconscious) feeling of guilt in the presence of such a person. Or they may have been simply acts of intimidation, or both. Whatever the case, such actions allow a glimpse into the permissible intimidation within the city's justice system, an intimidation that was evidently not governed by rules of ethical behavior in judicial cases. In contrast, there are none of these elements in the few legal cases that we read about in Zarahemla, even during the protracted war wherein Captain Moroni became prominent and played a part in the execution of traitors twice (see Alma 51:13–20; 62:3–11; the matter of justice for intruders was different as we see both within the Nephite colony of Limhi and among Lamanites; see Mosiah 7:7–11; 21:23; Alma 17:20). One can also compare the generally respectful climate of the trials of Nehor and Korihor (see Alma 1; 30). Even the Nephite system of justice in the colony of Zeniff, which his son Noah inherited, allowed people to defend themselves, as Abinadi did, even though the physical layout of the justice hall (apparently within the temple grounds, thus endowing legal proceedings with a sacrosanct sense), with elevated seats for the king and his judge-priests, was apparently designed to intimidate defendants (see Mosiah 11:10–11). But the intimidation in Noah's court was made to appear civil, though its effects were intended to cow defendants, as were the intimidation tactics manifested at Ammonihah.

While this brief review points to an evident conspiracy that is traceable in details from the report of events at Ammonihah, what remains central is Mormon's interest in preserving the story of the city's fate: it mirrors that of

Jerusalem, Ramah, and—eventually—Cumorah. Of equal interest in this case, it seems to me, is a dimension that Mormon chooses not to emphasize—a nation-threatening conspiracy that has caught God's eye. On the other hand, by recounting these events with his characteristic emphasis, Mormon pushes into view God's program for dealing with serious human matters. God first sends His representatives to plead for repentance. He then withdraws some of the righteous from the situation, allowing others to suffer. Finally, He executes His judgment.

## Notes

1. For a brief analysis of the aims that governed Mormon's historical work, see Grant R. Hardy, "Mormon as Editor," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. Melvin J. Thorne and John L. Sorenson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 15–28.

2. A good study on this theology is that by John L. Clark, "Painting Out the Messiah: The Theologies of Dissidents," in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11 (2002): 16–27.

3. The current reading of this name in the published text is Amalekites. But see the evidence marshaled by Chris Conkling from the original and printer's manuscripts of the Book of Mormon in his "Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites," in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 108–17.

4. Consult my notes in S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 105–6.

5. The earlier Nephite code, which must have included the Ten Commandments, is noted in Mosiah 29:15, 25 (see John W. Welch, ed., "The Law of Mosiah," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992], 158–61).

