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THE MARTYRDOMS AT AMMONIHAH AND THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD

G. St. John Stott

According to the apocryphal Acts of Peter, the apostle, knowing that powerful men in Rome sought his life, discussed his situation with others and decided to leave the city. However, ‘as he went out of the gate he saw the Lord come into Rome. And when he saw him he said, “Lord, where are you going?” And the Lord said unto him, “I go to Rome to be crucified”.’ As we might expect, Peter took the hint and himself returned to Rome, rejoicing that he had seen his Saviour and ready to accept his own crucifixion.¹ The story is well-known through fiction and film even to those who have not read the Acts, and so I use it here to highlight what is of interest in a similar, and yet disquietingly different story in the Book of Mormon. Alma II—‘reviled ... and spit upon ... [and] cast out’—quits the city of Ammonihah, only to be stopped on the way by an angel and told to return ‘and preach again unto the people of the city’.² Most of the differences between this story of Alma and that of Peter are unimportant, and need not concern us here.³ One, however, highlights what I find problematic in the former: although both narratives tell how a leader of the church prudently quits

¹ ‘Acts of Peter’ 35, in J.K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), a revision of the texts in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. M. R. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

² Al 6:20 [8:16]. References to Smith’s work are in the first place to the Book of Mormon (Independence, MO: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1908; current printings are in the name of ‘Community of Christ’), followed by references to editions published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, given in square brackets.

³ Alma does not leave Ammonihah voluntarily, he interprets the subject of his vision as an angel rather than the Lord, and whereas Peter adduces from his vision that he should return to Rome, Alma is specifically directed to return to Ammonihah.

a hostile city only to return there after a vision, Peter returns to Rome to be crucified; Alma returns Ammonihah to watch others burn.⁴

I.

We know little about the identity of the martyrs of Ammonihah except that they were of '[Alma's] faith',⁵ and a minority in a city that had adopted the teachings of Nehor (that is, believed that 'the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and in the end, all men should have eternal life').⁶ Some of those who died would have been new converts (those who had heard the preaching of Alma and Amulek and believed their message); others, we might assume, were those who had held to Alma's faith for many years, but had been stirred up and renewed by the revival.⁷ The distinction was not one the city fathers cared about, however. When their patience with the representatives of the Zarahemla church⁸ expired, all the men who had believed what Alma and Amulek had taught were driven out of the city, their wives and children arrested, and their homes searched for incriminating literature. Then, after a cursory legal process,⁹ a fire was built, and those

⁴ The story is told in Al 10:44–57 [14:7–15].

⁵ Al 10:57 [14:15].

⁶ Al 10:59 [14:16]; 1:5–7 [1:3–4]. By the time Alma came to Ammonihah, it was also assumed by the order of Nehors that the soul slept after death—i.e. that there was no continued existence of the soul between death and resurrection (Al 9:34–36 [12:20–21]). Nehor's beliefs would have been recognized by many latter-day readers of the Book of Mormon as problematic not just because of their universalism because they appealed to the idea of God's benevolence 'in itself; and acting from itself' rather than acting through Christ: the phrasing is from Adam Clarke, *Salvation By Faith*, *Discourses on Various Subjects, Relative to the Being and Attributes of God, and his Works in Creation, Providence, and Grace*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (New York: M'Elrath & Bangs, 1831), vol. 3, 201.

⁷ For Alma's revival ministry in general, see Al 2:26 [4:19].

⁸ As Nehor organized churches, referring to 'the' church would be ambiguous; as Alma was high priest in Zarahemla (Al 2:1, 5 [4:1, 4]), I use the geographical reference to identify the church he belonged to.

⁹ Only 'whosoever believed or had been taught to believe in the word of God' were condemned (Al 10:45 [14:8]), which suggests that it was possible to deny

still in custody were cast into the flames. This differentiation of sentence (men exiled, women and children burned) was possibly intended to be a parody of Leviticus 16, with the men driven into the wilderness as scapegoats, and the women and children serving as a grotesque sin offering,¹⁰ but I do not pursue that possibility here. What concerns me instead is that while this is happening Alma stands by, making no attempt to intervene.

That Alma might hesitate before intervening, we can understand. Those who followed Nehor denied the reality of the fires of hell and the need for deliverance from them, and whatever else was a political and theological driver for their action, they seem to have choreographed the martyrdoms as a challenge to Alma: if your God saves from fire, show us! In such circumstances we might well expect him to hesitate—to wonder if he should reduce his testimony to wonder-working. But we would not expect him to hesitate for long: after all, lives are at risk here, and it would seem inconceivable that he can think it right to let people burn to death—to see children thrown into the flames—because of scruples about the right use of miracles. Perhaps he does not; after all, he never uses this argument in self-justification. But he lets people die just the same. Even when his companion Amulek urges him to do something ('How can we witness this awful scene?' he asks; 'let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God which is in us, and save them from the flames'), Alma refuses to act, uttering what I find to be the most chilling words in the Book of Mormon: 'The Spirit constraineth me that I must not'.¹¹

belief in (or knowledge of) the Zarahemla church's message. Of course, the authorities in Ammonihah would not have described the writings they searched for as 'the word of God', or even thought that they offered a theological threat to the status quo; however, they would have seen them as politically dangerous, as they could inspire a resistance to the arbitrary use of political power: see fn. 66, below.

¹⁰ Adding to the blasphemy would be the disregard of Lev 22:28.

¹¹ Al 10:50 [14:11].

For Noah Webster in 1828, to constrain meant ‘to exert force, physical or moral, either in urging to action or in restraining it’,¹² so presumably we are supposed to conclude that it took effort for Alma not to intervene. Doing so offers little consolation, however, for what is important in the present context is not what he wanted to do but what he did. In some situations we might understand inaction because of impotence in the face of evil. In an interesting parallel to the Alma story, James Adair reports of traders to the Cherokee that when their protests at the plans of their hosts to torture Mohawk prisoners by fire were ignored, and they realized that it was out of their power to alter the prisoners’ fate, ‘they ... retired as soon as the Indians began their diabolical tragedy.’ There was nothing more that they could do without risking their own lives.¹³ But Alma did have the power to act and intervene. To be sure, his options were limited (he and Amulek were themselves prisoners at the time); but all that he needed to do was stretch out his hand and ‘exercise the power of God’—and he refused.

It is hard not to be troubled by that refusal. By most ethical standards, I suggest, Alma would be judged to be wrong in standing back in this way. He was passive in the face of suffering. (In some martyrologies, those who die in the Lord do not suffer but enjoy anaesthesia¹⁴—but that is not the case here.¹⁵ Alma was standing by

¹² *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828; Chesapeake, VA: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1968), ad loc. The word is also used for the Spirit’s direction when Nephi struggles against the idea of killing Laban (1 Ne 1:110 [4:10]).

¹³ *The History of the American Indians, Particularly Those Nations Adjoining to the Mississippi East and West Florida, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and Virginia* (London: E. and C. Dilly, 1775), 384.

¹⁴ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 438.

¹⁵ Amulek talks of the ‘pains’ of the martyrs: Al 10:48 [14:10]; cf. the account of Abinadi’s martyrdom in Mos 9:21 [17:14]. For Webster pain could reference ‘any degree’ of suffering ‘from slight uneasiness to extreme distress or torture’ (*American Dictionary*, ad loc). We should not draw any conclusions from the way no cries were reported; note how an article on the ‘Immolation of Eight Widows’ in the *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion’s Herald*, 10

while people died in agony.) And, no less troubling, he was passive in the face of evil. Anthony Flew, addressing the inadequacy of free-will theodicies some fifty years ago, noted that ‘We cannot say that [God] would like to help but cannot: God is omnipotent. We cannot say that he would help if he only knew: God is omniscient. We cannot say that he is not responsible for the wickedness of others: God creates those others.’ Indeed, Flew continued, God must be considered ‘an accessory before and during the fact to every human misdeed’.¹⁶ These were not new complaints when Flew framed them, and the theme has been revisited by many others since, but his words are worth pondering nonetheless for his phrasing brings into focus the problem we face. Whatever degree of responsibility for what happened at Ammonihah we attribute to God, all of Flew’s charges are applicable to Alma: he knew what was happening, he had the power to prevent people dying, he was even an accessory before the fact (after all, it is his preaching that creates the storm of violence)—and he does nothing to forestall the tragedy he witnesses.

Alma would no doubt meet these charges with the affirmation that he was only doing God’s will (he had, after all, been constrained by the Spirit not to act on his own initiative), and that if that was all the justification he needed, it should be all that was necessary for us. If, as Job had it, with God ‘is wisdom and strength, ... counsel and understanding’,¹⁷ that is surely all we need to know. Yet even if that is the case, it is hard to imagine the faithful not wondering how Alma’s action could be understood to be God’s will, and (to borrow the phrase of Irving Greenberg) what statement about God could retain credibility ‘in

April 1829, described the suttee of the wives of an Indian prince: ‘In a moment [the funeral pile] was one complete flame, and the heat so intense that everyone ran to a distance.—There was no noise, not even a shriek.’

¹⁶ ‘Theology and Falsification’, in Anthony Flew and Alasdair Macintyre, eds. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM, 1955), 107.

¹⁷ Job 12:13.

the presence of burning children’;¹⁸ indeed perhaps, thinking of these children, even wondering whether their high priest had not made a tragic mistake.

Although this last suggestion needs to be taken seriously,¹⁹ it is not an idea I pursue here. What interests me in this article is how Alma understood the events of that day in Ammonihah—and he seems to have been completely unaware of the possibility that he had been in error. His explanations for his conduct are cursory. He has no qualms about using the power of God to secure the deliverance of Amulek and himself when they are subsequently imprisoned (there is not a hint of a rationalization that the cases were different).²⁰ And he shows no embarrassment when they, escaping to the land of Sidom, are met by those ‘who had been cast out and stoned, because they believed in [his] words’. Reunited with the Ammonihah saints Alma and Amulek do not

¹⁸ ‘Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust’, in Eva Fleischer, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 23.

¹⁹ As we know, we can be mistaken in our discernment of the Spirit, and relying on what we take to be the Spirit’s impress without stopping for a theological reality-check can lead to horrible crimes. We might remember the ‘Kirtland killings’ of 1989 (Sandra B. McPherson, ‘Death Penalty Mitigation and Cult Membership: The Case of the Kirtland Killings’, *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, vol. 10, no. 1 [2006], 65–74)—or the tragedy five years earlier in American Fork. ‘And I kind of said to myself [Dan Lafferty remembered], “What am I supposed to do, Lord?” Then I felt impressed that I was supposed to use a knife. That I was supposed to cut their throats’ (Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* [London: Macmillan, 2004], 186). LDS Church President Wilford Woodruff famously observed that ‘the Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as president of the Church to lead you astray. It is not in the program. It is not in the mind of God’ (G. Homer Durham, ed., *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff* [Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1946], 212–13), but I am not so confident as my LDS friends that prophets are infallible, and it could be that Alma is my proof.

²⁰ Again, there are similarities and differences with Peter: the latter, imprisoned in Jerusalem by Herod Agrippa I (a grandson of Herod the Great), is delivered by an angel without the need any action on his own part (Acts 12:6–11); Alma and Amulek use the power of the Lord to break the cords that bound them and rend the walls of the prison.

hesitate to relate ‘all that had happened unto their wives and children, and also concerning themselves, and of their power of deliverance’²¹—and the casualness with which they effect this transition, and segue from the deaths of others to their own preservation, suggests a freedom from any sense of guilt. Whether or not we think that Alma could have had any right to an easy conscience, he acts as if he had one, and given the revulsion the thought of mass killings arouses in modern readers, it seems legitimate to ask how this could be so.

II.

Alma offers two explanations for his non-intervention, and the first is an appeal to God’s mercy. ‘[B]ehold’, he tells Amulek, ‘the Lord receiveth them [the martyrs] up unto himself, in glory’,²² and that (he implies) is reason enough for him not to intervene. Although Alma does not explain further, for those who read the Book of Mormon in 1830 the idea would have appeared persuasive—at least as an explanation for the martyrs’ willingness to die. Almost certainly they would have known the promise in Romans that those who died in Christ would live in him,²³ and if they had come to the Nephite record familiar with Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments*²⁴ they would also have been able to apply to the events of Ammonihah the words of Thomas Bilney, one of the most celebrated of the Marian martyrs: there would be ‘a pain for the time’ in the dying, but then there would be ‘joy unspeakable’.²⁵

²¹ Al 10:88 [15:2].

²² Al 10:50 [14:11].

²³ Rom 6:8.

²⁴ Foxe’s work (commonly known as the Book of Martyrs) was a staple of popular reading in eighteenth-century America, alongside Bunyan’s *Pilgrims Progress* (Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1986], 4), and can be presumed to be still influencing religious households in the New Nation.

²⁵ John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable*, Variorum Edition (Sheffield: hriOnline, 2004), 1570 text, 1151 (spelling modernized)—available online at <http://www.hrionline.shef.ac.uk/foxe/> (accessed August 16, 2008). For martyrdom in early modern Europe, see Brad S.

To note this is not to argue for a nineteenth-century origin for the Book of Mormon. Even if we believe that there really was a history of the Nephites written on plates with the appearance of gold, and that Joseph Smith, Jr. had the gift of translation; even then, I suggest, we need to recognize that the Book of Mormon came to us as a text that could speak to a nineteenth-century audience. Whatever language we might suppose that the Nephite prophets spoke—Hebrew, Yucatec, some unknown and presumably extinct creole (or none at all, if we see them as apocryphal characters)—their witness was shared with us in English, and that language must be accepted as the means by which they are meant to speak to us in the latter days.²⁶ Further, it was not English-in-general that was used (if there is such a thing), but a particular religious discourse, a language already rich in meanings.²⁷ Martien E. Brinkman, Professor of Ecumenical / Intercultural Theology at the Free University Amsterdam, has noted (and the proposition strikes me as unarguable) that ‘No religion reveals itself except robed in a culture’,²⁸ and I would suggest that the religion of the Book of Mormon comes to

Gregory’s amazing *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); for the early church, see Michael Gaddis, *There is No Crime for Those who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), as well as Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

²⁶ Any translation that could only be understood by reference to the language of its original would be a poor one. As one notable translator has put it (J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘On Translating Beowulf’ [1940], in Christopher Tolkien, ed., *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays* [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983], 55), a translation ‘must need no gloss’. This does mean that we should not look back to an original to understand the translator’s choices; just that the translation should be understandable in its own right.

²⁷ An established discourse, as Mikhail M. Bakhtin pointed out, is constituted by ‘thousands of . . . dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness’ (M. Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist [Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981], 277).

²⁸ ‘Where is Jesus “At Home”? Hermeneutical Reflections on the Contextual Jesus’, *Journal of Reformed Theology*, vol. 1 (2007), 109.

us robed in the culture of the translation's target audience—the evangelicalism of the burned-over district.²⁹

We see this enrobement most clearly in the way in which Smith's translation draws upon Biblical vocabulary and imagery. Whatever we might suppose to have been the case with the Nephite original, time and again in the English text Book of Mormon authors quote, paraphrase, or allude to Old and New Testament texts, and as a result we cannot help but find the work's 'primary context of meaning' in the dialogue between its words and those of the Bible, whereby we have a restatement of Biblical doctrine in the details of the Nephite record.³⁰ To be more precise: since we cannot read the Bible outside an interpretative tradition, the dialogue is with the words of the Bible as they would have been read (and those doctrines as they would have been understood) by the first readers of the Book of Mormon; or in other words, the words of the Bible as they would be construed by early-nineteenth-century evangelicals.³¹ Apologists might disagree, arguing

²⁹ Nathan O. Hatch suggested a more complicated scenario, a 'blurring of words' in which 'high and popular culture, rationalism and supernaturalism, mystical experience and Biblical literalism were combined in the crucible of popular theology' (*The Democratization of American Christianity* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 34–35), but even if that is allowed I would still suggest that in the Book of Mormon everything builds from an evangelical base. I use the term deliberately to indicate the broad consensus that held between Protestants at the time of its publication (for Webster, *American Dictionary*, ad loc, the word simply meant 'consonant to the doctrines and precepts of the gospel, published by Christ and his apostles'), without trying to tie either Smith or the Book of Mormon to a particular tradition.

³⁰ I am borrowing here from Raymond C. Van Leeuwen's thoughts on New Testament interpretation: 'On Bible Translation and Hermeneutics', in Craig Bartholomew et al., eds., *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 306–307. For restatement as repetition with 'new details', see Adena Rosmarin, *The Power of Genre* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 24; for the Book of Mormon as a midrashic restatement of Biblical themes, see Anthony Chvala-Smith, "The Spirit, the Book, and the City: Retrieving the Distinctive Voice of the Restoration," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, vol. 19 (1999), 25.

³¹ Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-Day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) notes the use of

that the language of the Book of Mormon only looks evangelical—that in fact the work offers quite other insights, but the translation did not do them justice. So Brigham Young believed,³² and given his conviction that the gospel was the same in all ages (and therefore that preached in Ammonihah was the same as that taught in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake), one can understand why he might do so. Indeed, the idea has an undeniable attraction: insights change when defined in ‘an already constituted discourse’,³³ and new wine sits poorly in old bottles; it could well be, therefore, that there were understandings and experiences lying behind the language of the Book of Mormon that were not fully captured by it. However, to argue thus—to assume that we need to read the Book of Mormon using corrective lenses—would be to slight the gift we have been given.³⁴ If we see inspiration in the work, it surely lies in the text we have, in the words it uses; and such a text cannot be understood without an awareness of the way its words echo those of the Bible.

Biblical language in the Book of Mormon without exploring the dialogic implications of the usage; the impossibility of reading *sola scriptura* is concisely argued by Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 6–7. Given the existence of passages in the Book of Mormon where nineteenth-century interpretations of the Bible are explicitly challenged—as in Alma’s discussion of the first resurrection (Al 19:48–49 [40:15])—I presume that passages where there is no challenge can be read in the light of these interpretations. That is not to say the Bible is only susceptible to a single reading, or that evangelical texts do not themselves need interpretation—as Michael McCann notes, ‘the whole process of seeking out lexicons and codes as prolegomena to interpretation necessarily commits the investigator to interpretation as a prior step in his investigation’ (‘The Authentic Discourse of the Renaissance’, *Diacritics*, vol. 10 [1980], 79–80); nevertheless, I believe that the discourse of Evangelical Protestantism can provide a context that can illuminate our reading of the Book of Mormon.

³² ‘The Kingdom of God’, Sermon of 13 July 1862, *Journal of Discourses* (1854–86), vol. 9 (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1862), 311.

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 171.

³⁴ If we see the language of the Book of Mormon as ‘given’ by God (as in propositional revelation), it would also involve him in a bait and switch operation which I would find distasteful.

With this in mind let us return to Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*. Bilney, it will be remembered, had looked forward to knowing 'joy unspeakable' after his death, and it is tempting for Latter Day Saints of all traditions to interpret his words in terms of rewards earned and kingdoms promised. But Bilney did not think of joy in these terms, and as it happens neither did Alma. Upon death, he will explain to his son Corianton, our souls 'are taken home to that God who gave them life', and at that time 'the spirits of those who are righteous ... are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise; a state of rest; a state of peace'.³⁵ Or as the Presbyterian Eli Meeker explained in 1827, in a formula that Alma would have appreciated for its challenge to the beliefs of the 'order of the Nehors', following death the souls of the penitent would 'witness [Christ's] presence, in a state of consciousness and happiness'.³⁶

³⁵ Al 19:46 [40:13]; Mos 1:83–85 [2:38]. A similar expectation was expressed a few years later by Moroni, the chief commander of the Nephite armies, when he notes in his letter to Pahoran that at death the righteous 'enter into the rest of the Lord their God' (Al 27:29 [60:13]). The parallel is interesting, but when Moroni uses the same argument as Alma when reflecting on deaths in wartime—'the Lord suffereth the righteous to be slain that his justice and judgment may come upon the wicked' (Al 27:29 [60:13])—we cannot take him seriously. It makes no sense to assume that God allowed these righteous to die in order to punish the wicked as (a) the wicked in question were the civil administration in Zarahemla, and for God to allow there to be Nephite deaths in order to punish Nephite leaders for not preventing those same deaths seems inconceivable; and (b) Moroni is in any case mistaken in condemning Pahoran as he does. We can presume that Moroni is echoing Alma without thinking through what he is saying, and without evidence that his understanding of the situation is correct.

³⁶ *Sermons: Philosophical, Evangelical, Practical Subjects, Designed for the Use of Various Denominations of Christians* (Ithaca, NY: Mack & Andrus, 1827), 310; cf. Samuel Hopkins, *The System of Doctrines Contained in Divine Revelation Explained and Defended*, 2 vols. (Boston: Lincoln & Edmunds, 1811), vol. 2, 192. Smith would have known the language of Presbyterianism—his mother, two of his brothers, and possibly at least one sister were members of the Western Presbyterian Church in Palmyra (Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984], 53)—and though he was personally inclined

There is, as it happens, some ambiguity in Alma's use of the term 'glory', for he believed that what he described to Corianton as being 'taken home' was but a foretaste of our final destiny. It is only at judgement, he argued, when body and soul are reunited, that the righteous know a fullness of joy and 'shine forth in the kingdom of God'³⁷—and as it happens, when Alma applies to himself the promise made to the martyrs, he associates it with the resurrection. 'I know', he tells Helaman (another of his sons), 'that [God] will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory'.³⁸ However, if that was what he had in mind in Ammonihah, he would have needed to have made this clear. When the Book of Mormon came from the press most Christians would not have doubted that the martyrs immediately entered into paradise or 'Abraham's bosom'.³⁹ 'I will not attempt the defence of a sentiment that the happiness of the blessed, before the resurrection and the judgment is as perfect, and exalted, as it will be subsequent to those events', Marcus Smith wrote in 1829. Nevertheless, he continued, 'a state of glory immediately succeeds death', and 'those who die in the Lord, enter without interval or delay, into blessedness and glorification'.⁴⁰

Likewise, latter-day readers would not have hesitated before equating Alma's 'righteous' and Meeker's 'penitent'. Not only would the equation have seemed a natural one to form, following a study of the gospels;⁴¹ it also followed naturally from the logic of Alma's story, where the former term is used to describe those who die and enter into

towards Methodism he would have had little quarrel with most of what they reported of reformed belief. For a typical Methodist account of what happens after death, see 'The Good Steward' in Albert C. Outler and Richard Heitzenrater, eds., *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 425–26.

³⁷ Al 19:59 [40:25]; cf. Hopkins, *System of Doctrines*, vol. 2, 195.

³⁸ Al 17:26 [36:28].

³⁹ Lk 16:22; for the equation with paradise, see Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (1981), trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 43.

⁴⁰ *An Epitome of Systematic Theology* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt, 1829), 250–51.

⁴¹ Hopkins, *System of Doctrines*, vol. 2, 21.

glory in Ammonihah. In this context, it cannot mean anything but the penitent, for some of the martyrs had only come to believe Alma's words days before their death, and they had had no time to do anything but discover that they did believe. Rather than talking to Corianton of those who have lived righteous lives (i.e. lives full of 'good works'), Alma can only be using the term to describe those who—truly penitent—have been declared righteous, or justified, through God's grace. 'The justification of a sinner', Samuel Hopkins wrote, offering a definition that few of Smith's contemporaries would have challenged, '... consists in forgiving his sins, or acquitting him from the curse and condemnation of the law; and receiving him to favour, and a title to all the blessings contained in eternal life; which is treating him as well, at least, as if he had never sinned, and had always been perfectly obedient.' Or as a correspondent to the Methodist *Zion's Herald* noted in 1827, '(1) It brings the soul into the favour of God. (2) It gives a title to the kingdom of heaven. (3) It adds strength to our faith for a meetness to enter heaven.'⁴²

This reference to justification might be questioned, of course, as the word is not found in the Book of Mormon.⁴³ However, the

⁴² Hopkins, *System of Doctrines*, vol. 2, 50; Alpha [pseud.], 'The Doctrine of Justification', *Zion's Herald*, 5 December 1827; Wesley, 'The Scripture Way of Salvation', *Sermons*, 372. This insistence on the importance of justification might be thought to contradict Nephi's aphorism that we are saved 'after all we can do' (2 Ne 11:44 [25:23]), but much depends on whether we take after as a temporal conjunction ('following') or as a concessive ('despite'). Book of Mormon usage is divided, but taking the former option would align Nephi with Charles Grandison Finney, and the alignment seems unlikely. For Finney it is 'perseverance in obedience to the end of life' that guarantees justification (*Systematic Theology* [1878; Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1976], 326–327); for the Nephite prophets it is knowing Christ that gives one a place at God's right hand (Mos 11:132 [26:24]), and reliance on his merits that is crucial (2 Ne 1:73–75, 13:28–30 [2:8, 21:23]; Al 14:32 [24:10]; cf. Mi 6:4–5 [6:4]).

⁴³ This is a point that needs a detailed consideration that I cannot give it here; however, I would argue that reading entails a recognition of what is presupposed as well as what is asserted by a text, and that being the case 'justification' could be counted as the old information (what is 'given' in the discourse

promise Amulek made to the Zoramites, in Antionum (the next site of revival) could not refer to anything else and be comprehensible to the work's first readers. '[I]f ye ... repent and harden not your hearts', he tells them, 'immediately shall the great plan of redemption be brought about unto you.'⁴⁴ Something, we are told (something glossed in our text as the bringing about of 'the great plan of redemption' unto believers), occurs when ('immediately') people exercise faith in Christ, and for any reader in 1830 this could only have been justification.⁴⁵ 'Men are brought into a justified state by the first act of saving faith', Hopkins had explained. 'The promise of salvation is made to him that believeth. ...' The change the transformation from sinner to saint 'is instantaneous', Marcus Smith noted. 'The fruits of it may be gradual, and in all cases are so ... There is a difference in the evidences of a change and the change itself.'⁴⁶ What is more, regardless of the terminology used, the experience described in Book of Mormon conversion narratives is that of justification.⁴⁷ Just as in Paul's account, where the justified rejoice because they have felt 'the love of God ... shed abroad in [their] hearts', so in the Book of Mormon converts find hope in the knowledge that they are 'encircled about eternally in the arms of [God's] love'.⁴⁸ For a

joined by the Book of Mormon) to be distinguished from the new information found in Alma's text.

⁴⁴ Al 16:227 [34:31].

⁴⁵ Significantly, Amulek echoes Paul's affirmation in Rom 3:24 that we are 'justified freely by ... grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'. Note that his going on to insist that 'now is the time and the day of your salvation' he could be indicating when God will act, as well as warning against procrastination (Al 16:227 [34:31]).

⁴⁶ Hopkins, *System of Doctrines*, vol. 2, 71-72; Marcus Smith, *Epitome*, 209 (Smith is talking here of regeneration, for he links the sanctifying and forensic aspects of justification, but his point is relevant).

⁴⁷ Whether or not Paul viewed justification as an experience is controversial. (See, for example, N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005], 121-22.) However, if I am interpreting Amulek correctly, it is viewed as such within the Book of Mormon.

⁴⁸ Rom 5:5 (1-11); 2 Ne 1:29 [1:15]; cf. Jac 3:4, 17 [4:4, 11]; and Wesley's challenge to the University of Oxford: 'Are you happy in God? Is he your

nineteenth-century reader, the two experiences would have been one and the same.

III.

This argument might be thought too Protestant by some Latter Day Saints, and not Protestant enough by some Evangelicals (after all, we have skirted the issue of grace, and whether there is a place for works-righteousness in the Book of Mormon), but it is surely uncontroversial to suggest that a martyr could embrace her fate because she was sure that after death she would see God. 'It has been common for martyrs, to go to the stake, or to other most cruel deaths, in the joyful assurance, that they were going to heaven', Samuel Hopkins reported⁴⁹—and so we should assume for those in Ammonihah.

However, although Alma's first explanation explains the courage of those who died,⁵⁰ it seems to offer no explanation as to why they had to die. This is, as we shall see, a premature conclusion, and in at the end of this article I will need to return to the martyrs' hope of paradise; but before I do so I need to consider his second explanation for standing back. In this, he focuses on God's justice rather than his mercy, and argues that the Lord allows the people of the city to commit this atrocity 'according to the hardness of their hearts'—allows them, that is to say, to throw their prisoners into the flames—'that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath, may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day.'⁵¹

At first glance this hardly helps, particularly if Alma is thought to be referring to the Last Day. It makes no sense to argue that God's eschatological justice gains credibility from his actions corresponding to an external standard. As if it could—'what superior justice have we to set

glory, your delight, your crown of rejoicing?' ('The Almost Christian', *Sermons*, 67).

⁴⁹ *System of Doctrines*, vol. 2, 131; cf. Mos 9:21 [17:15].

⁵⁰ And the consolation of the bereaved.

⁵¹ Al 10:50–51 [14:11].

against His justice?’ Karl Barth pointedly asks in his commentary on Romans: God is just.⁵² Besides, we can hardly suppose that if the executions had not continued, those responsible for them would not have come under judgement. Of course, in the account we have, Antionah and the other notables of Ammonihah (the ‘chief rulers’ of the city) were acting as they did because of ‘the hardness of their hearts’. They had clearly gone beyond the possibility of repentance, or even prudential second thoughts. As in the later case of Mormon’s people, their hearts were ‘grossly hardened’, and ‘the Spirit of the Lord ... [had ceased] to strive with [them]’. Latter-day readers would have recognized the finality of that state, and ‘the certainty of self-destruction without the Holy Ghost.’⁵³ But even if we suppose that in an alternate universe where Alma does intervene, Antionah really had been on the point of cancelling the executions when the high priest stretched forth his hand, we might still believe that the initial motivation of those who organised, conducted and enjoyed the preparations for a mass execution would have been sufficient for their condemnation.⁵⁴ Besides, even if those

⁵² *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 76. I am not convinced (as is Blake T. Ostler, ‘The Mormon Concept of God’, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 17, no. 2 [1984], 87) there is a moral law independent of God—which would be a possible, but not the most probable, interpretation of Alma’s argument that if God were to violate ‘the law’, ‘the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God’ (Al 19:104 [42:22]).

⁵³ Al 7:46 [9:30]; Mn 1:16–19 [1:41–43]; Lyman Beecher, *The Gospel According to Paul: A Sermon Delivered Sept. 17, 1828, At the Installation of the Rev. Bennet Tyler, D.D., as Pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Portland, Maine* (Boston: T. R. Marvin, 1829), 19; cf. Asahel Nettleton, ‘The Destruction of Hardened Sinners’, in *Asahel Nettleton: Sermons From the Second Great Awakening* (Ames: International Outreach, Inc., 1995), 30–9; Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes; or, A View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals and Institutions of Christianity (1825–29)*, ed. J. M’Clintock, 2 vols. (New York: Carlton & Parker, 1850), vol. 2, 87 and vol. 1, 221.

⁵⁴ Of course, this scenario would be complicated by genuine repentance—but the problem we face is not that Alma delays intervention expecting repentance, but that he does so to legitimate condemnation. For God’s knowledge of the ‘intents of the heart’, see Al 9:23–25, 12:110 [12:14, 18:32]; cf. Rom 2:16; Wesley, ‘The Great Assize’, *Sermons*, 316.

points are questioned, the idea of God allowing an atrocity to take place so that he can punish the perpetrators makes no sense on moral grounds. ‘What would you think’, asks Raymond M. Smullyan, ‘of a parent who stands by watching one of his children brutally mistreating another, and making not the slightest attempt to prevent it, but then later brutally punishing the guilty one?’ What, indeed. And yet this scenario would have to be the one underlying Alma’s argument, if we took him to be solely contemplating our eternal destiny.⁵⁵

We should not, however, take it for granted that Alma was just thinking of the Last Day when he talked of the judgements to be executed upon the people of Ammonihah. To be sure, he was concerned to make it clear that the blood of the martyrs will cry out against the guilty then,⁵⁶ but that is secondary in his argument, and to think that his words only referenced resurrection and judgement would be a mistake. Alma was also anticipating the city’s immanent destruction at the hands of the Lamanites,⁵⁷ and here we are on firmer interpretative ground, even if it leaves a bad taste. Today we tend to question the morality of collective punishment,⁵⁸ but such reservations are anachronistic; the fate prophe-

⁵⁵ *Who Knows: A Study of Religious Consciousness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 49. The traditional response to such criticisms involves the appeal to God’s need to allow for human freedom, but in the present case we are not expressing surprise that God did not intervene, but that his servant (who wanted to intervene, as a free agent) is prevented from doing so. I return this problem in Part IV, below.

⁵⁶ Al 10:52 [14:11]; cf. Mos 9:16 [17:10], Rev 6:9-10. The resurrection has long been thought to answer the question of theodicy, in that it would offer a public demonstration of God’s justice: Krister Stendahl, ‘Immortality Is Too Much and Too Little’, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 197.

⁵⁷ Al 14:60 [25:2].

⁵⁸ In modern jurisprudence, the logic of collective punishment lies in the presumption that there has been a conspiracy to commit the crime that is being punished, and that a person who joins a conspiracy is liable for ‘all the crimes that may be within the scope of the organization’ (Neal Kumar Katyal, ‘Conspiracy Theory’, *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 112 [2003], 1372). Given its political nature, all of Ammonihah could be thought complicit in the sin that aroused God’s ire (see fn. 66, below); however, the questions merits a fuller treatment.

sied for Ammonihah was the same as that of Babylon, which became ‘a wilderness, a dry land, and a desert’, with the walls of the city ‘thrown down’, and all of the destruction ‘the vengeance of the Lord’,⁵⁹ and in 1830 few would have questioned the rightness of this. There would have been no reason for the first readers of the Book of Mormon to doubt that that God was glorified in executing judgement, whether it be in the Old World or the New, or that he wanted his ‘violent grace’ to be seen to be at work in the world.⁶⁰ ‘Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance?’ they would have read in Romans—and the answer would have been clear. God’s righteousness is known in his anger.⁶¹ ‘God is of purer eyes than to behold sin with the least complacency’, Joseph Smith’s contemporary Nathanael Emmons affirmed; and the way he continued would have been uncontroversial at the time: ‘Though he knows that he can overrule all sin to his own glory, and cause it to promote his own interest, yet he hates it perfectly, and is as much disposed to punish it as to hate it.’⁶²

IV

Of course, even if it is granted that Alma was primarily thinking of the revelation of God’s wrath within history, we are still faced with the problem of a witness to an atrocity being constrained not to intervene. God’s non-intervention would not be problematic—or at least not so problematic—since it is presumed to be a prerequisite for our agency

⁵⁹ Jer 50:12–15; cf. Rev 18:6–8 for the destruction of the eschatological Babylon.

⁶⁰ The phrase is from Hugh Lloyd Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (London: University College Press, 1971), 161; cf. Ezek 28:22

⁶¹ Rom 3:5; cf. the reading in *Holy Scriptures, Containing the Old and New Testaments: An Inspired Revision of the Authorized Version*, New Corrected Edition (Independence, MO: Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1944): ‘[H]ow dare we say, God is unrighteous who taketh vengeance?’

⁶² ‘The Vindictive Anger of God’, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4 of Jacob Ide, ed., *The Works of Nathanael Emmons* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1842), 237.

that our moral actions have consequences, just as our physical ones do. 'Does not the ability to obey include, necessarily, the ability to transgress?' Lyman Beecher asked in 1828. 'Is it possible to form free agents, and set up a moral government, without bestowing on creatures the terrific capacity of transgression and desert of punishment?'⁶³ In a world in which men and women are free to act for good or evil we do not expect God to reach down from heaven to prevent an auto-da-fe. However, human non-intervention when faced with suffering is a problem. Anyone who doubts this should consider the way in which the philosopher David Lewis imagines a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag praying for deliverance, and God responding that he cannot help. After all, God explains in Lewis' scenario, were he to intervene 'Stalin's freedom to choose between good and evil would [be] less significant'.⁶⁴ We might defend the rightness of God's acting (and arguing) thus, and challenge Lewis' contention that God's doing so is morally unacceptable; but I doubt that we would even think to defend a human agent who had the power to secure the prisoner's deliverance, but used the same argument to justify inaction. Almost certainly, such passivity would be unhesitatingly condemned.

We should not rush to judgement in the present case, however. Although Alma seems to justify our condemnation, it is important to note that he did not stand back in order to preserve Antionah's freedom of choice, and hence provide grounds for the destruction of Ammonihah. The destruction of the city had been on God's agenda before Alma's return there, and therefore before the martyrdoms—before Antionah's decision. 'Yea, say unto them [the people of Ammonihah]', the angel had explained when sending Alma back to the city he had left, 'except they repent, the Lord God will destroy them. For behold, they do study at this time that they may destroy the liberty of

⁶³ *The Gospel According to Paul*, 17. According to Webster, terrific would have meant 'Dreadful; causing terror; adapted to excite great fear or dread' (*American Dictionary*, ad loc).

⁶⁴ 'Evil for Freedom's Sake', *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 108.

thy people [the church].⁶⁵ This conspiracy was not inspired by theological differences, of course. Nehor's universalism was far better calculated to secure a following than Alma's call to repentance, and prior to his revival campaign the doctrines he proclaimed would have been thought unlikely to threaten religious stability in Ammonihah. However, the Zarahemla church rejected the idea of monarchy—and it was this political dimension to its witness that made its members dangerous in a society that tolerated the arbitrary use of power, and possibly even wanted to bring back the rule of kings.⁶⁶ If the martyrdoms showed the Ammonihah authorities acting with Machiavellian thoroughness to prevent there being any resistance to ambition, but, judging from the angel's message, it was the plan to deny liberty in Christ that provoked God's wrath, not the particularities of its implementation.⁶⁷ Ironically the real significance of the martyrs lies in their lives, not their deaths. Prior to their exile and arrest, they had been holding back God's wrath

⁶⁵ Al 6:21–22 [8:16–17]; cf. Al 8:40 [10:27], and, for a similar statement from Moroni, Al 25:6–8 [54:7–8]. The people of Ammonihah are also guilty of more generally not keeping 'the commandments' (i.e. being in violation of the covenant with Lehi: Al 7:15 [9:13]), but the fundamental issue is one of political oppression.

⁶⁶ I infer the desire for a monarchy from the connotations of 'liberty' in the Book of Mormon—for from the days of Alma I, liberty 'in Christ' is a social contract 'to stand fast in [the] liberty wherewith [they had] been made free, and . . . trust no man to be a king' (Mos 11:14 [23:13]; Al 28:12–13 [61:9]; cf. Al 20:9–10 [43:9]; 3 Ne 1:49–50 [2:12]), an interpretation of Gal 5:1 that would have seemed natural in 1830—at least to those who remembered the rhetoric of the revolutionary generation. See Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 299; cf. David Ross Williams, *Wilderness Lost: The Religious Origins of the American Mind* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1987); Thomas Gustafson, *Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language, 1776–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Note that Rom 1:18 links God's wrath with the suppression of truth: Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Designed for Students of the English Bible* (Philadelphia: Grigg & Elliot, 1835), 47–48.

⁶⁷ Though persecution could provoke vengeance (see Jac 2:49 [3:1], and note the irony of 1 Ne 7:35–36 [22:16–17] where the righteous are to be preserved and the wicked destroyed by fire), it does not do so in the present case.

through intercessory prayer⁶⁸—‘[I]t is by the prayers of the righteous that ye are spared’, Amulek had warned the city; ‘... if ye will cast out the righteous from among you, then ... the Lord [will not] stay his hand, but in his fierce anger he will come out against you’⁶⁹—and their deaths are not important as a *causis belli* for God but as a sign that his obligation to show forbearance to the city had ended.⁷⁰

Stated thus, this last point might be thought to bring us back to our beginning. ‘If one is in a position to prevent some evil’, Peter van Inwagen notes, ‘one should not allow that evil to occur—not unless allowing it to occur would result in some good that would outweigh it or preventing it would result in some other evil at least as bad’,⁷¹ and in Alma’s case neither condition can be appealed to. The first (the possibility that the evil could ‘result in some good that would outweigh it’) is clearly irrelevant. Although entry into paradise is no doubt a good that would outweigh the evil of earthly suffering (that was Bilney’s point, after all), the Book of Mormon makes it clear that it is not necessary to die a martyr to be with Christ. One could perhaps argue that once martyrdom had been offered, the gift was one that it was impossible to refuse;⁷² or that, since it is those who ‘look unto [Christ], and endure to the end’ that have eternal life, a martyr’s death offered a kind of guar-

⁶⁸ Al 8:31 [10:22]; for intercession, see Ezek 22:30; Joel 2:17.

⁶⁹ Al 8:33 [10:23].

⁷⁰ To be precise, to show that he had shown forbearance. Evangelical Christians put great emphasis on the transparency of God’s judgement, and his desire ‘to make known to creatures, upon what ground he proceeds in giving rewards, and inflicting punishment’ (Hopkins, *System of Doctrines*, vol. 2, 198).

⁷¹ *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 100.

⁷² Note Christ’s warning that he would deny before his Father ‘whosoever shall deny me before men’ (Mat 10:32), and the traditional teaching that the refusal of martyrdom is denial (thus Tertullian, *De fuga in persecutione*, 12:5, in *Tertulliani Opera 2: Opera Monastica, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* [Turnholt: Brepols, 1954]). Of course, the relevance of this warning to the situation in Ammonihah could be challenged: Alma’s intervention, if not sought by the martyrs themselves, would not be the equivalent of a refusal or recantation on their part.

antee of glory that it would be foolish to reject;⁷³ but to do so seems unduly legalistic. As for the second condition: one can hardly claim that Alma's preventing the deaths of the martyrs would have led to a greater evil or (what might be thought the same) frustrated God's plans. On the one hand, the deaths marked the end of religious liberty and political freedom in Ammonihah; they did not prevent it. On the other, God did not really need to silence the intercessors to be able to ignore their prayers. (One might remember Calvin's commentary on Ezekiel 14:17-18: 'when [the Lord] has determined to destroy a land, there is no hope of pardon, since even the most holy will not persuade him to desist from his wrath and vengeance.')⁷⁴ Nor, as we have seen, did he need the blood of the martyrs to condemn Ammonihah. The wickedness of its people had, like that of the Amorites, reached 'its full measure' (and therefore merited condemnation) before the first fires were lit. All that was necessary for God's wrath to be revealed was that the prayers of intercession ceased.⁷⁵

However, to stop at this point, ready to accuse Alma of allowing—even doing—gratuitous evil, would be to ignore his testimony of divine foreknowledge. When Amulek, understandably worried by what is happening to his co-religionists, wonders if he and Alma might not be burned alive also, Alma rejects the idea on the grounds that they have

⁷³ 3 Ne 7:10 [15:9]; cf. 'To Pious Brothers and Sisters', *Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald*, 29 May 1829. The guarantee was to be welcomed as it always possible to fall from grace. '[I]f ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love', Alma would challenge his hearers, 'I would ask, Can ye feel so now?' (Al 3:46 [5:26]). Are you 'happy in [God]?' Wesley asked. 'Then see that you "hold fast" "whereunto you have attained"!' ('Spiritual Worship', *Sermons*, 440, probably drawing on Heb 10:23 and 1 Tim 4:6). For the experience as one known to Smith, see Scott H. Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1987), 5.

⁷⁴ *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Meyers, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), ad loc.

⁷⁵ For the Amorites, see Gen 15:16; Dt 2:34, 3:6. Note that for the intercession to cease, all that would have been necessary would have been either (a) a prophetic word to that effect, or (b) that all the saints (not just the men) be driven out of the city.

not yet fulfilled their calling⁷⁶—and in doing so he implicitly contrasts their preservation with the deaths of the others. If he and Amulek will not die because they have not completed their mission, the martyrs, in dying, are evidencing that they have completed theirs.⁷⁷

Alma's belief in God's foreknowledge—not only shown here, but also affirmed in earlier testimony that priesthood callings were 'prepared from the foundation of the world, according to the foreknowledge of God',⁷⁸ and that indeed God had 'foreknowledge of all things'⁷⁹—is probably not viewed sympathetically by most readers today. The doctrine conflicts with what we want to believe about our free agency and what quantum physics suggests that we should say about the world.⁸⁰ Alma is clearly out of step with modern belief. However, as noted earlier, my concern in this article is not to turn him into a theologian for our day but to understand him in his own, and whatever we might suppose that Alma would have made of quantum physics, he certainly found it possible to reconcile God's foreknowledge and our moral agency. Most of those who read the first edition of the Book of

⁷⁶ Al 10:54 [14:13]; cf. the testimony of Nephi (concerning himself, 1 Ne 1:102 [4:3]) and Mormon (concerning Samuel, He 5:112–13 [16:12]).

⁷⁷ Although Alma does not elaborate on this idea, elaboration would not have been necessary for latter-day readers to appreciate that it was time for the martyrs to die. The idea that when there was no deliverance from martyrdom, the ensuing death was God's will was commonly held. See e.g. Robert South, *Sermons Preached Upon Several Occasions*, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1823), vol. 1, 74: 'Martyrdom is stamped such only by God's command. . . His gospel does not dictate imprudence; no evangelical precept jostles out that of a lawful self-preservation. He therefore that thus throws himself upon the sword, runs to heaven before he is sent for. . . .'

⁷⁸ Al 9:65 [13:3]. Current LDS readings take this verse as a reference to the pre-existence, but that interpretation had not occurred to readers even a decade after the publication of the Book of Mormon: see Brigham Young and Willard Richards, 'Election and Reprobation', *Millennial Star*, vol. 1, no. 9 (January 1841), 218. For the Biblical context, see Eph 1:4 and Rom 8:29, and cf. Joseph Bellamy, *True Religion Delineated and Distinguished from All Counterfeits* (1750; Ames: International Outreach, 1997), 26.

⁷⁹ Al 9:71 [13:7].

⁸⁰ George L. Murphy, 'Providence in a Scientific World', *Quarterly Review*, vol. 23 (2003), 251–62.

Mormon would have expected no less. Starting from (as it then seemed) the incontrovertible biblical evidence for predictive prophecy, they would have thought it impossible to deny that God had foreknowledge of some events (of the incarnation, for example)—or, if that were granted, to think that there were limits to his knowledge. ‘[I]f God foreknew any events’, Emmons would argue, ‘he must have foreknown all events, from eternity’.⁸¹ But they would have found it equally unthinkable to deny moral agency. Its reality was self-evident. As Asahel Nettleton summarized the case, ‘That [every man] chooses and refuses is as certain as it is that he exists.’⁸² No-one reading the Book of Mormon in 1830 would have been surprised to find Alma both presuming that choice was free, and that what happened in this world was an unfolding of the will of God.⁸³

⁸¹ ‘Foreknowledge of God’, *Systematic Theology*, 265. Robert Frost would revisit this theme with telling effect in his poem ‘Design’.

⁸² ‘The Counsel and Agency of God in the Government of All Things’, *Sermons*, 186.

⁸³ That said, we should note that Alma does not address the question that divided Smith’s contemporaries: whether what God foreknew was what he had already decreed. The idea that it was appeared logical to Calvinists, who, remembering the scriptural affirmation that God works in us ‘to will and to do’ (Phil 2:13), had no trouble supposing that a ‘particular providence’ shapes ‘all the affairs of men’ (Paschal N. Strong, *The Pestilence: A Punishment for Public Sins* [New York: H. Sage, 1822], 21); Arminians resisted the idea, however, even though they were then forced to fall back on vaguer ideas of providence (as in Watson, *Theological Institutes*, vol. 1, 331), since such thinking seemed to open the door to predestination. As noted, Alma does not get involved in this debate, though he seems to lean towards what would be a Calvinist position. Early in the revival he testified with reference to what he had learned by the ‘spirit of prophecy’, that ‘whatsoever . . . [he said] concerning that which is to come, is true’: Al 3:82 [5:47–48], and arguably that could only be the case if the future were known to God and therefore something that could be revealed to his servants. Note Nettleton’s reflection (‘Counsel and Agency’, *Sermons*, 182), ‘If God has not decreed the existence of future events’, ‘neither the existence, nor time, nor manner of such events could possibly be foreknown’; and the significance, in this context, of Abinadi’s prophetic foreknowledge of the martyrs’ deaths (Mos 9:21 [17:15]).

Again, of course (as with the idea of justification), I am reading between the lines. Alma does not explore the relevance of God's foreknowledge to the deaths he witnesses. Nevertheless, this idea that the number of our days is known beforehand to God—taken for granted within the narrative—merits attention, for it resolves the puzzle of his conduct. Since their intercession could no longer hold back God's wrath, there was no need for the saints to remain in Ammonihah; and since it was time for them to return to God, there was no reason for Alma to try to prevent their death. He could let Antionah and the others work out their damnation without hindrance.⁸⁴ To be sure there would be pain, even agony, in the death chosen for the martyrs, but as we have seen no earthly suffering has any weight when set against the post-mortal joy to be enjoyed by the righteous⁸⁵—and there was no point in trying to intervene when it was time for them to die.

⁸⁴ Thus Hodge would note how God punishes sinners by withdrawing 'the restraints of his providence and Spirit' thereby giving them up 'to the dominion of their own wicked passions' (*Commentary*, 53–54).

⁸⁵ I do not suggest that Alma thought God unmoved by these sufferings (Christ's knowledge of and compassion for our pain is part of his Christology: Graham St. John Stott 'Does God Understand Our Fears?' *Sunstone* [June 2007], 52–57); but it should be recognized that there is a general indifference to death and suffering in the Book of Mormon, perhaps because, from a Nephite perspective, nothing was more important than eternal life. Notice in this connection, God's willingness to destroy a city rather than see it threaten the salvation of others: Al 7:26–27 [9:19]. Although the logic is that of 1 Ne 1:115 [4:13] ('It is better that one man should perish, than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief'), in Ammonihah far more than 'one man' will perish—and although readers today cannot help but be troubled with the idea God that can intend mass death (see the discussion in Tod Linafelt, "Strange Fires, Ancient and Modern," in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust* [New York: New York University, 2000], 15–18), this was something that many Christians in earlier generations could take in their stride. What should trouble us here, even we accept that God could act in this way, is the vicious circle created by Alma's judgment: I will not intervene, because they are marked for death; they are marked for death, because no one intervenes. Presumably his certainty came from the constraint of the Spirit—but, as noted above (at fn. 19), this is something that it is easy to mistake for quite other impulses. I offer an introduction to Smith's understanding of the impulses of

Whether we find this appeal to God's foreknowledge convincing will of course depend on the theology we bring to our reading of the text, not the logic of the Book of Mormon account, but, whether or not we are convinced, it should be granted that Alma had his reasons for acting as he did in Ammonihah that day. If the city fathers thought that they would be able to rid themselves of a political threat (and at the same time deal a blow to the prestige of the Zarahemla church), and the martyrs, relying on the merits of Christ, trusted that they would enter paradise, Alma believed that he was both doing good in facilitating the martyrs' entering glory, in being (as it were) the Dr Kevorkian of Ammonihah,⁸⁶ and doing the will of God in letting sinners seal their fate.⁸⁷ Yet even if so much is granted, and all necessary allowances made for a world that is different from our own, it is still hard for me to imagine myself standing there in Ammonihah and watching the saints die. If understanding Alma entails an imaginative response to his situation as well as an intellectual one, I have to admit to failure. To imagine myself (as Alma) watching children being thrown into the flames and making no objection, is horrific no matter how the action is interpreted;⁸⁸ and so is the thought of my watching the townspeople destroy themselves, without trying to warn them a final time. That they were beyond repentance can

the Spirit in G. St. John Stott, 'The Seer Stone Controversy: Writing the Book of Mormon', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1986), 36–53, but more work needs to be done on this subject.

⁸⁶ The martyrs' desire to go home is perhaps the best answer to those who would agree with Father Paneloux that suffering in this world cannot be justified by talk of an eternity of joy (Albert Camus, *La peste* [Paris: Gallimard, 1947], 203), for their suffering was chosen. However, we have only begun to trace the implications of such an answer—and we have not even glanced at some of its aspects, such as the capacity of children (Paneloux's particular concern) to make the decisions martyrdom entails.

⁸⁷ Hodge, *Commentary*, 53–54; cf. Erberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith—A Theological Study with Ecumenical Purpose*, trans. J. F. Cayzer (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2006), 66.

⁸⁸ Even if that were not the case, Jer 7:30–31 is an uncomfortable parallel.

be granted; but still it seems impossible—as I try to imagine the situation—that I would be expected to turn away.

Perhaps few will share my desire to understand imaginatively. Many, I recognize, would dismiss my concerns on the grounds that I am being too tender-hearted in my reading of the text; and possibly I am. But I would find it odd not to apply my imagination to the reading of a narrative, and rightly or wrongly the fact remains: no matter how much faith I bring to the task I find it hard to imagine, with any degree of comfort, being in a square in Ammonihah watching people burn. Others might approve of my approach and even share my reactions, but go on to argue that problematic passages in scripture (such as the verses describing the Ammonihah martyrdoms) should not form part of my spiritual education.⁸⁹ But here too I have to disagree. Although I cannot elaborate in the present context, I believe that we should see scripture as a whole—and that to excise is to distort.⁹⁰ And besides, as I hope that I have shown, there is much to be learned from (or to be gained from

⁸⁹ See e.g. William D. Russell, 'Let's Put Warning Labels on the Standard Works', *Sunstone* (July 2004), 26–30; C. Robert Mesle, 'For the Welfare of Children: The Place of Scripture in the Life of the Church', *Distinguished Authors Series*, vol. 2, 1989–90 (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1990), 7–22, for the argument that scripture should be sanitized.

⁹⁰ In narrative, Roland Barthes noted, 'in differing degrees, everything ... signifies. This is not a matter of art (on the part of the narrator), but of structure; in the realm of discourse, what is noted is by definition notable. Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nevertheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness: everything has a meaning or nothing has' ('Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives' [1977], in Susan Sontag, ed., *A Barthes Reader* [New York: Vintage, 2000], 261). And 'even if a detail were to appear irretrievably wrong', I would add. There are no doubt mistakes in the Book of Mormon (as the title page suggests), but that does not mean that we should reach for a red pencil. True revelation, as the Catholic theologian Niels Christian Hvidt reminds us, is where 'both the divine and the human synergetically and symbiotically coincide' (*Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 133). Applying this idea to the Book of Mormon, we can not only say that what is weak made strong (as Lehi affirms: 2 Ne 2:24 [3:13]); we can also say, following Hvidt, that what is weak is strong.

reflecting on) what happens in Ammonihah,⁹¹ and from a theological perspective it would therefore be a mistake to ignore these verses. But if that is the case, our study of them has only begun—and the struggle to understand continues.

⁹¹ 2 Tim 3:16–17 is relevant here, I believe, and Julian Rivers, ‘The Moral Authority of Scripture’, *Cambridge Papers*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2004), available online at <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/document.php?id=44&topicID=0> (accessed August 16, 2008) is helpful—although I disagree with some of what he says about the closure of the canon.