

A CAPACIOUS PRIESTHOOD AND A LIFE OF HOLINESS

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As an offering in speculative theology, this paper reconsiders the current normative understanding of a male-only priesthood as presented in the Book of Mormon, specifically in Alma 13:1–20, and proposes that Alma presents a more capacious model. While this text is generally accepted as supporting the establishment and practice of a male-only priesthood (and a model of the Melchizedek Priesthood), I argue that Alma’s message was meant to expand the role of priesthood in society and to provide a way for an entire community to enter into a life of holiness.¹ The exegesis that this paper presents is not simply an attempt to bring women into the conversation but to expand the conversation for the entire community—the community of all believers: men, women, and the rest of us.

The foundation for this speculative reading is the nature of scriptures themselves. A remarkable element of scripture that remains constant over the eons is that its messages disrupt the status quo and invite us to consider new ways of thinking and being. Limiting the reading of Alma 13:1–20 as priesthood for males only misses this important element. Although the text itself does not explicitly limit the office of priest to

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1. My reading of Alma does not include an analysis of the biblical basis of gendered hierarchies. For more on that topic, see Cory Crawford, “The Struggle for Female Authority in Biblical and Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 1–70.

males only, many readers assume that it does. A prime example is found in the short chapter summary, which claims that the text describes how “men are called as high priests” (Alma 13).² While this is only one possible interpretation, having it stated within the text of the summary may be a hindrance to our reading of the text, causing us to overlook some of its more remarkable elements. It is worth noting that in *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition*, in lieu of a summary, the chapter heading simply states “Alma Explains the Ordination of Priests” with no mention of the gender (and/or sex) of priesthood holders.³

While I grant that Alma’s intent may not have been to specifically include women in the priesthood, I am not convinced that his intent was to limit the priesthood to men only. I propose that Alma invites his listeners to consider an alternate *form* of priesthood. This new form is not based on tribal lineage as previous models had been, but is rather based on the divine lineage we all hold as children of God. Alma proclaims that when this new priesthood is extended to the entire human family, it enables the community of believers to exercise their faith, do good works, embrace a holy calling, become high priests obeying the commandments and teaching others, and finally entering into the rest of their God. As I offer my speculative reading of Alma, I will show that when a religious community thinks of itself as a near kinship group (an egalitarian human family) who has a common religiously centered goal that is facilitated and perpetuated by priests (an office that everyone in the community qualifies for), it is able to become a community of individuals living a life of holiness. Before I present my argument, I would like to briefly discuss my approach and the challenge of working with religious text.

2. Italics mine. These chapter summaries are found in all copies of the Book of Mormon as published and distributed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1981).

3. Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 288.

The Challenge of Working with Text

As a specialist in religion and society, I am most interested in how religious communities “do” religion and, in the process, construct meaning for themselves and their fellow believers. Most often I employ ethnographic methodology, which includes attending worship services with religious communities and interviewing individual congregants. Through participating in the summer seminar, I have been granted the rare opportunity to examine a religious community through its religious texts—perhaps becoming a *socio-theologian*. Just as I do with people, I approach text with a respect for the tradition that my exegesis sets out to critique. Although the source of my study is scripture rather than people, my goal of discovering how religion is done and how a community constructs meaning remains the same. That being said, working with text does present unique challenges.

Regardless of the perceived source of scripture, every text has a writer. Whether the writer is Paul and the text his letters, or Alma and the text his sermon to the people of Ammonihah, every text has a social context within which it was produced and a community it was meant to address. Although scripture is elastic enough to remain germane to the human condition across the wide expanse of space and time, reading it outside of that original social context can be challenging. Additionally, as the text is reproduced, there are many translators and editors, each bringing with them their own unique social location and cultural standpoint.

While we can assume that every effort is made to remain as objective as possible, we cannot assume that these individual socially-influenced positions do not find a way to creep into the text. A prime example of a social norm finding its way into the text is the gendered language of religious texts.⁴ While using male-centric language in formal writing

4. While some versions of the Bible strive for inclusive language, the King James Version, which is used in Mormonism (and other religious traditions), employs the use of male-gendered language.

may have once been the norm, in our current social context its use, as well as the overall absence of women in religious texts, is problematic. Feminist theologians such as Judith Plaskow note that Jewish women live in an uncomfortable liminal state—continually looking to Jewish texts and traditions for direction on how to live their best lives but finding themselves absent or excluded. Mormon women express similar concerns and say that such exclusion is why they often find the scriptures a source of spiritual pain rather than comfort.

Having scripture that is written largely (if not exclusively) using masculine forms of address can also cause confusion.⁵ In some cases it may be clear that the word “men” is referencing literally men only, but in other cases “men” may be pointing to all of humankind. An example of scripture meant for men only would be Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 5:31: “It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away *his* wife, let *him* give her a writing of divorcement” (emphasis added). We can allow that Jesus may have been talking directly and exclusively to men. Generally, however, we believe that it would be wrong to assume that the entire text of the Sermon on the Mount is meant only for male ears to hear, or that men are the only people to which the entire text of the sermon applies. Likewise, we do not assume when 2 Nephi 2:25 states “Adam fell that *men* might be; and *men* are, that they might have joy” (emphasis added) that the verse is literally referring to men only. In this case we commonly assume “men” to mean humankind in general.

5. There is quite a bit of debate about the male-centric language of scriptures. To read further on this topic, see works such as D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998); Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?: The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998); and Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2000). In the context of Mormon theology, a theology with a gendered god, the debate takes on a unique added layer that exploring fully is beyond the scope of this paper.

Another confusing case with the exclusive use of male pronouns is the word “brethren.” This word can be read in several ways. For instance, it can be read literally. When we see the word “brethren,” it can literally mean the archaic plural form of “brother” (i.e., multiple biological brothers). Another option is to read “brethren” as a reference to the male members of a specific religious group, a longstanding practice that is still in use today. Lastly, it is conceivable that we could expand the term to include the entire religious community (men, women, and children) much like the way we can accept the use of “man” or “men” as shorthand for humankind. As we consider this particular passage in Alma, it is important for us to further consider the way Alma uses the term “brethren” specifically.

Alma’s Community of Brethren

In the first verse of chapter 13, Alma addresses his listeners as “my brethren.” Within a current LDS context, this phrase is commonly used to address a gathering of LDS men. It can also be used in conjunction with “my sisters” to address a congregation, or even the general public. Given that this phrase is so familiar to Mormons, these words may be easily passed over without much thought. To avoid this mistake it is worth taking the time to unpack Alma’s address—“my brethren.”

To begin, the word “brethren” is important by itself. There is a certain warmth to the familial term that hints at the relationship’s being old and established rather than new and untried. It carries an intimate egalitarianism not found in more formal relationships or forms of address. For instance, the term “brethren” lacks a hierarchy of power that terms such as “followers” or “students” creates. Being placed in Alma 13:1 is important as it reduces the tensions of power between Alma and his listeners that created a shadowy undertone in the previous chapter. It also dissipates the tension between Alma and the interlocutor Antionah (Alma 12:20–21).

By calling the listeners “*my* brethren,” Alma is indicating possession and belonging. Through our own personal experience within our faith communities, we know that members of a religious order (or congregation) share a special bond and social link. This is especially noticeable in the LDS custom of addressing one other as “brother” and “sister.” By claiming his listeners as “*my* brethren,” Alma is pointing to such a link by indicating that he is a member of the group he is addressing.

While Alma’s listeners may have already thought of themselves as a certain type of group, Alma’s naming them as “*my* brethren” reclassifies them, and Alma then claims them as his own. We see how he constructs this new identity for them and himself in Alma 12:36–37 and 13:1. In 12:36, Alma is recounting God’s words to men and is using the same teaching style of address he has used in the previous verses—that is, using phrases such as “I say unto *you*, that if *ye* will harden *your* hearts,” etc. (emphasis added). In verse 37, he suddenly changes the address and says “and now, *my* brethren, seeing *we* know . . . let *us* repent” (emphasis added). This shift indicates that after having been taught certain principles, those Alma is addressing now know those principles as well as he does and he can use the words “we” and “us.”

The use of the term “we” is just as crucial as the label “*my* brethren,” for now Alma is counting himself among those he is addressing. He has inserted himself into their community. Also in chapter 13, verse 1, Alma reminds the people that they are God’s children. This is another signal that he is trying to establish an idea of an egalitarian community of which he is a member.

If he were not establishing an egalitarian community, Alma could have easily used other terms or forms of address such as “people of Ammonihah” or “friends.” As readers who know the ultimate fate of Ammonihah, it may not have surprised us if Alma were to have used other, less friendly forms of address such as “hard-hearted people,” or even “sinners.” Still, Alma chooses to use not just a friendly form of address but one of familial closeness and equality. This egalitarian ele-

ment is perhaps most apparent in verse 5, which can be read: to sum up, from the beginning everyone is on equal footing. Holy callings have always been available for those whose hearts are open to receive them. From this we can see that Alma's salutation has at once dissolved any hierarchy of power and acknowledged a shared bond. With the use of a familial term we get a sense that the shared bond is a special type of relationship, close enough to be kin or family.

A Capacious Priesthood

Throughout Alma's address his focus is on repentance and the plea not to harden one's heart. This indicates a choice—a choice between opening your heart and mind to a new possibility, or hardening your heart and remaining closed in old ways of being. Surely, if one has a hard heart, she will not be open to new ways of doing things and certainly not prone to repent. If one has a hard heart, she will not be open to the possibility of new realities both temporal and eternal, and without repentance neither can become a new reality. I assert that Alma was attempting to present these new realities through a new, capacious priesthood.

Various religious traditions believe that the priesthood is found (and/or grounded) in a specific group of individual priests and that there are as many different priesthoods as there are priests. For those traditions, the priesthood does not exist outside of the priests—they are interdependent. Mormons, on the other hand, approach the priesthood as a universal, where men are priests because they hold the priesthood.⁶ This means that for Mormons, the priesthood is not dependent on priests, but exists in and of itself.

6. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 17.

Alma's model of a Melchizedek Priesthood aligns with the universal model of priesthood that Joseph Smith presented in 1835.⁷ According to Smith, the priesthood should be open to extend beyond lineage and time, thus universal. Smith illustrated this point by naming Adam as the first priesthood holder. Adam's lineage is God's lineage; as children of God, that lineage is shared by the entire human family.

In his writings on the history of the Church, Joseph Smith stated that "the Priesthood is an everlasting principle, and existed with God from eternity, and will to eternity, without beginning of days or end of years."⁸ This is quite similar to Alma's words in 13:7, which reads, "This high priesthood being after the order of his Son, which order was from the foundation of the world; or in other words, being without beginning of days or end of years, being prepared from eternity to all eternity, according to his foreknowledge of all things."

A universal priesthood in which Adam, the "father of the human family,"⁹ is the first priest is important to Alma's presentation of the priesthood. Alma begins chapter 13 by reminding his listeners that God gave the commandments "unto his children" (Alma 13:1). Alma is reminding people of the source of the commandments, but more importantly he is reminding them that, as receivers of the commandments, they are children of God. In essence, Alma is reminding his listeners that they are all part of the human family. For Smith and Alma, being children of

7. Joseph Smith would apply this idea in 1835 to establish the LDS Melchizedek Priesthood, where one need not be a literal descendent of Aaron in order to hold the office of priest (D&C 107:16–17). Smith's construction of a Melchizedek Priesthood is still one of social and political power and is a hierarchical version of priesthood reserved for men only.

8. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 8. Smith originally spoke these words in July or early August 1839.

9. *Ibid.*, 9.

God is the only prerequisite needed to be eligible for the office of priest and priesthood in general.

I realize that some may argue that Mormons grant sex and gender as eternal and a preexisting condition and believe that we are foreordained to certain roles restricted by sex, such as priest or mother. I argue that such restriction is a social construct rather than a divine constraint and that if an argument is valid for a capacious priesthood in this temporal life, it is also valid for the pre- and afterlife. While there is more to be said on that matter, for now I would like to set aside ideas of all preexisting conditions (including the theodicy of holiness and sanctification) to be met prior to ordination into the priesthood (either in the premortal life or in the current temporal life) and consider two possible ways to approach the priesthood as presented in Alma 13. The first is the traditional Mormon scenario, which divides humanity into two groups: male priests and/or priesthood holders and female non-priests who do not hold the priesthood.¹⁰ The second is a more capacious model where the duties of priest are to teach the plan of redemption and every member of the human family is eligible for this office. Before we can consider this proposed model, it is necessary to review the form of priesthood Alma may have been trying to supplant.

The culture of the people Alma was addressing was one of priestcraft, where male priests held privileged paid positions and repentance was not a requirement for salvation. Evidence of the social, religious, and political power of the priests in that culture is reflected in the first chapter of Alma. There we read how Nehor introduced the people of Nephi to priestcraft. Nehor held that “every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people” (Alma 1:3). Alma, on the

10. Defining females as non-priests designates them as “other” and is problematic. While defining and discussing the issues this definition includes is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that such issues are at play here.

other hand, felt that “were priestcraft to be enforced among this people it would prove their entire destruction” (Alma 1:12).

While Alma’s concern over the possible destruction of a people may be the motive for his emphasis on repentance, his equal emphasis on the source of the high priesthood may also be an indicator that he is aiming to present a new, more capacious idea of priesthood. Naming “the foundation of the world” as its source, Alma is presenting the idea that it is the priesthood itself rather than the priests (including their physical and socially constructed attributes or sex, lineage, and gender) that is eternal in nature. While priests must prepare themselves through exceeding faith, good works, and being called, the priesthood need not be prepared, laid, or called, it just was, and continues to be. If only the priesthood itself is eternal, and not the privilege of gender and lineage as requirements of obtaining the priesthood, then we can consider the form or order of priest in a more open and inclusive way.

A more speculative piece of evidence that Alma is presenting a capacious form of priesthood over a limited and gendered model is the destruction of the city of Ammonihah. The chief judge of Ammonihah ordered the destruction of holy scriptures and the massacre of all women and children who believed in Alma’s words (Alma 14:8). Certainly, if Alma’s form of priesthood had been available to women, it would have disrupted the established priestcraft culture of that city. Perhaps to avoid such disruption and civil unrest, those who would have been eligible for priesthood under Alma’s model, along with supporting scripture, were destroyed. This massacre would have insured that the status quo of privileged male priests could be maintained.

The final evidence that Alma is presenting a new form of priesthood is his emphasis on the manner, or holy order, in which priests are to be ordained. If Alma were offering a new idea of priesthood, he would also have to present a new model that would supplant the lineage-based model of Aaronic priestly offices. It is referred to as the Aaronic Priesthood since only Aaron and his sons qualify to be consecrated to the

office of priest (Exodus 28). Alma presents the new capacious model in the form of a Melchizedek Priesthood.

Establishing a New Form of Priesthood

Alma presents the figure of Melchizedek as the model for a capacious priesthood. Given that the priestcraft Alma is supplanting is lineage-based, he must cite the authority of his new capacious priesthood. Alma accomplishes this by reminding the people that Melchizedek is a priest after the holy order of God and that he “preached repentance unto his people” (Alma 13:18).

Most often Melchizedek is referred to in conjunction with the role of a priest and the gathering of tithes. Given that redemption, not tithes, is Alma’s focus, I suggest Alma is using Melchizedek for other reasons. I propose that Alma is using this figure to accomplish three things. First, it is an attempt to tap into an existing collective memory of a form of previously established priesthood. He began his address in chapter 13 by asking the people to “cite your minds forward” (Alma 13:1), or to remember. Something remembered is not something new. Second, Alma uses an especially virtuous priest to emphasize the fact that the priesthood model he is suggesting is moral. This could be a counterpoint to his views that the priestcraft of Nehor is immoral. Third, by using the known figure of Melchizedek, Alma is showing them that the type of priest he is promoting is especially noble.

Overall, Alma also seems to be clarifying that the high priests he is referring to in his sermon are not the same as the high priests we know from Hebrews who are ordained for humankind in things pertaining to God. The use of Hebrews here can be a bit tricky; I feel that most often the crucial elements are too easily brushed over. Let me explain.

The mention of Melchizedek in Hebrews 5 specifically mentions *men* as priests. “For every high priest taken from among *men* is ordained for *men* in things pertaining to God, that *he* may offer both gifts and

sacrifices for sins” (emphasis added). While many religious traditions (including Mormonism) take this reference as justification for a male-only priesthood, the verse may actually be pointing to something more significant. To clarify, in Hebrews 5:1 we read of Melchizedek’s function as a high priest; that priests are men *for* men, and his function of offering gifts and sacrifices for sins. This point of “for men” is crucial. Commentators such as Warren Quanbeck see Hebrews 5:1–10 as describing the priestly qualifications of Christ, for Christ was chosen from among men to act on behalf of man. In this sense, the emphasis on men is not to disqualify women from priesthood but to qualify Christ as savior. With his emphasis on repentance and redemption, Alma’s use of Melchizedek may be pointing to the coming of a savior rather than bolstering a reason for an exclusively male priesthood.

Returning to the idea of a capacious priesthood, the use of Melchizedek offers one more important point. Alma clarifies that “the Lord God ordained priests . . . to teach these things unto the people” (Alma 13:1) and that Melchizedek was this type of high priest who “received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God” (Alma 13:18). This type of priesthood is not restricted to men as it is in Hebrews 5:1, for in Alma 13:1–12 we read how all members of the human family are God’s children and as such are on the same standing with their brethren. Hebrews 7:3 illustrates how lineage is not a prerequisite for priesthood, as Melchizedek was “[w]ithout father, without mother, without descent . . . but made like unto the Son of God.” So again we have the idea of a universal and capacious priesthood reinforced, but now with the added “according to the holy order of God,” the holy order being this radical new spiritual practice—a life of holiness.

A Life of Holiness

As I mentioned at the beginning, I argue that Alma’s message is meant in part to provide a way for an entire community to enter into a life

of holiness. By a life of holiness I mean a life that is lived for a sacred purpose (e.g., holding a sacred office) and a life of righteousness. It is also a life that has a special relationship with the holy (i.e., God). Alma is talking about this type of life when he refers to the plan of redemption, which includes faith, repentance, and doing good works. Alma warns his listeners against hardening their hearts and emphasizes the importance of living the commandments, and in chapter 13 he gives more direct instructions on how priests help a community do those things. In other words, Alma is presenting a holy order in which priests can help themselves and others live lives of holiness.

Alma is emphasizing a priesthood that is based on a holy order. The word “holy” is used thirteen times in these twenty verses, most often in relation to the calling, ordination into an order, and the ordinances performed by the power of God. When we think of the word “holy,” we usually reflect on a state or experience that is beyond our temporal existence. However, when we overlay Alma’s appeals to repentance, faith, and good works, we see that Alma is calling the people into a radical new life of spiritual practice, a life of holiness—a new manner or way of being.

This new life of holiness is egalitarian rather than hierarchical; but a priesthood by nature must be ordered, so a capacious holy order of priesthood would seem a contradiction. To solve this dilemma, Alma introduces Melchizedek as a model. Now that a model is in place, the last necessary element is a communal practice of ritual—a manner, or way, to enact the function of the priests. In this instance, the needed ritual is good works.

I believe that the good works Alma is pointing to involve keeping the commandments. The commandments provide a solid list of things people should and should not do; this doing with religious intent is the act of ritual. Therefore, teaching about the commandments and how to keep them enables a community to participate in holy works.

The inhabitants of the city of Enoch are an example of a community who achieved a life of holiness. In Moses we read of Enoch’s leadership

and how the community achieved a unity of heart and mind. “And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). They achieved not only a life of holiness and equity, but created a city of holiness—a Zion.

I find that religious communities create meaning for themselves in part by embracing important narratives. In any communal narrative there is a need for storytellers—people who establish the narrative and pass it along to others, allowing it to be perpetuated. In this way the best storytellers are also the best teachers. In this text, Alma establishes these storytellers as ordained priests. Alma gives us this detail in verse 1, where he states that priests are ordained in order to teach. Priests teach the people about the commandments, and in doing so they also teach the people about who they are and what they should do.

Alma is constructing a narrative about the people and God. God gives the people commandments that the priests help the people learn how to follow. The connection between God and the people becomes a bonded link. God is promising rest and redemption, and the people are pledging adherence with soft hearts. The people then become a covenant (promise-making and -keeping) people, and God claims them as his own. “Therefore, whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest” (Alma 12:34).

Conclusion

Throughout this offering of speculative theology, I have invited the reader to consider a new way of thinking about Alma’s sermon regarding the priesthood. Alma reminds his listeners that they are children of God who, by choosing good and exercising great faith, are given a holy calling of priesthood and a life of holiness. I suggest that Alma’s intent

is to extend this holy calling to everyone—men, women, and the rest of us—by our divine lineage as children of God.

By conferring divine lineage on the entire human family, Alma at once dismantles a patriarchal hierarchy and unites a community into a single tribe. No longer restrained by circumstances of birth such as sex/gender and tribe (Aaron), every member of the community is now eligible for office of priest in Alma's Melchizedek Priesthood.

Our seminar reading began with the verse “Now it came to pass that when Alma had made an end of speaking these words, the people began to be more astonished” (Alma 12:19). In this short essay, I have suggested that Alma's ideas give the people a new way to think of themselves in community with each other and with God. He invites his listeners to consider a new form of priesthood and a way to live a life of holiness. Alma's capacious priesthood may be presenting the people with a chance to reconstruct their reality—and that is truly astonishing.