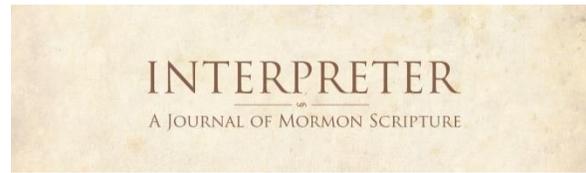




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Alma — Young Man, Hidden Prophet

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ALMA — YOUNG MAN, HIDDEN PROPHET

Matthew L. Bowen

*Abstract: The biographical introduction of Alma the Elder into the Book of Mormon narrative (Mosiah 17:2) also introduces the name Alma into the text for the first time, this in close juxtaposition with a description of Alma as a “young man.” The best explanation for the name Alma is that it derives from the Semitic term *glm* (Hebrew *‘elem*), “young man,” “youth,” “lad.” This suggests the strong probability of an intentional wordplay on the name Alma in the Book of Mormon’s underlying text: Alma became “[God’s] young man” or “servant.” Additional lexical connections between Mosiah 17:2 and Mosiah 14:1 (quoting Isaiah 53:1) suggest that Abinadi identified Alma as the one “to whom” or “upon whom” (*‘al-mî*) the Lord was “reveal[ing]” his arm as Abinadi’s prophetic successor. Alma began his prophetic succession when he “believed” Abinadi’s report and pled with King Noah for Abinadi’s life. Forced to flee, Alma began his prophetic ministry “hidden” and “concealed” while writing the words of Abinadi and teaching them “privately.” The narrative’s dramatic emphasis on this aspect of Alma’s life suggests an additional thread of wordplay that exploits the homonymy between Alma and the Hebrew root **‘lm*, forms of which mean “to hide,” “conceal,” “be hidden,” “be concealed.” The richness of the wordplay and allusion revolving around Alma’s name in Mosiah 17–18 accentuates his importance as a prophetic figure and founder of the later Nephite church. Moreover, it suggests that Alma’s name was appropriate given the details of his life and that he lived up to the positive connotations latent in his name.*

“And He Was a Young Man”

As I have noted in a previous study,¹ one of the most transparent examples of onomastic wordplay in the Book of Mormon text is found in Mosiah 17:2. This verse mentions the name Alma for the first time, and the name’s bearer, Alma the Elder, is introduced into Mormon’s Abinadi narrative:

¹ See Matthew L. Bowen, “‘And He Was a Young Man’: The Literary Preservation of Alma’s Autobiographical Wordplay,” *Insights* 30/4 (2010): 2-4.

But there was one among them whose name was **Alma** [*ʿlm*] he also being a descendant of Nephi. And he was a **young man** [cf. Heb. *ʿelem*] and he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken, for he knew concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them; therefore he began to plead with the king that he would not be angry with Abinadi, but suffer that he might depart in peace.

Hugh Nibley posited many years ago that the name Alma means “young man.”² Paul Hoskisson concurred with Nibley, analyzing “Alma” as cognate with *ʿelem* which had been **ǵlm* at an earlier stage of the Hebrew language) with the meaning “youth” or “lad”³ (cf. Ugaritic *ǵlm*;⁴ Old South Arabic *ǵlm*, “child, boy, youth”;⁵ and Arabic *ǵulām*, “boy, youth, lad; slave; servant, waiter”).⁶ Alma is an attested Semitic name⁷ but is not found in the biblical corpus, although it may be related⁸ to the personal⁹ and place name¹⁰ Alemeth [or Alameth] and the place name Almon.¹¹ The textual juxtaposition of the name Alma with “young man” — *its*

2 Hugh W. Nibley (*An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], 76) wrote that “Alma” can mean “a young man, a coat of mail, a mountain, or a sign.”

3 Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Alma as a Hebrew Name,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 72-73.

4 Cf. CAT 1.14 ii 40-41.

5 Joan Copeland Biella, *Dictionary of Old South Arabic: Sabaean Dialect* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 395-396.

6 Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed. (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 798.

7 Terrence L. Szink, “New Light: Further Evidence of a Semitic Alma,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 70. See further Terrence L. Szink, “The Personal Name ‘Alma’ at Ebla,” *Religious Educator* 1/1 (2000): 53-56. John A. Tvedtnes, John Gee, and Matthew Roper, “Book of Mormon Names Attested in Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 41-51.

8 Scott C. Layton (“The Semitic Root *ǵlm* and the Hebrew name *ʿĀlæmæt*,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102/1 [1990]: 80-94) connects the Hebrew personal/place name Alemeth [Alameth] and place name Almon with the Semitic root *ǵlm*.

9 1 Chronicles 7:8; 8:36; 9:42. In the latter two passages, Alemeth is the name of a descendant of Saul, a member of the displaced royal family.

10 1 Chronicles 6:60 [MT 6:45]; Alemeth occurs as a place name in the tribal area of Benjamin.

11 Joshua 21:18. *Almon* possibly denotes “way marker” (cf. Arabic *ʿalam* = “waymarker”) or “sign post” — i.e., “signifier.” See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 836. Hereafter cited as HALOT.

evident etymological meaning — strongly suggests intentional authorial wordplay on the name (or a play on the meaning of the name).

In this essay, I revisit the wordplay on Alma in Mosiah 17:2 in order to show that the wordplay goes well beyond the polyptoton¹² on Alma and ‘*elem*’ there. I will incorporate a previous observation by Aaron P. Schade and myself¹³ that the text of Mosiah 17:2 also alludes to Abinadi’s use of Isaiah 53:1 (in Mosiah 14:1), converting the phrase “to whom” (‘*al-mî*’) into a literary echo of Alma’s name in Mosiah 14:1. Moreover, I will show that the text of Mosiah 17–18 includes a much lengthier paronomasia that exploits the homonymy of the name Alma and the Hebrew verbal root *‘*lm*’, to “hide,” “conceal,” “be hidden,” “be concealed,” “hide oneself.”¹⁴

Alma, God’s Young Man and Descendant of Nephi

If the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon is any indication, we are fortunate to be able to detect the wordplay of Alma and “young man” (‘*elem*’) in Mosiah 17:2 at all.¹⁵ The words “he also being a descendant of Nephi & he was a young man” were almost omitted from the printer’s manuscript when Oliver Cowdery made this copy from the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon. He subsequently reinserted these phrases in supralinear fashion into the printer’s manuscript. Writes Royal Skousen:

There are no similar words or phrases here that could have led Oliver Cowdery to visually skip this part of the text. Instead, his eye seems to have skipped down past an entire line of [the original manuscript] as initially copied from [the original manuscript] into [the printer’s manuscript]. Later, probably while proofing [the printer’s manuscript] against [the original manuscript], he discovered his error and supplied the text that he had originally omitted (the supralinear insertion is in heavier ink). Clearly, the passage would have read perfectly fine without the added text;

12 Polyptoton = a wordplay on cognate terms — i.e., words derived from the same root.

13 Aaron P. Schade and Mathew L. Bowen, “To Whom Is the Arm of the Lord Revealed?” *Religious Educator* 16/2 (2015): 91-111.

14 See, e.g., HALOT, 834-835.

15 See Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Revelations and Translations Volume 3, Part 1: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 303-305.

thus there was no motivation to insert this line of text except that it was the reading of the original manuscript .¹⁶

Oliver Cowdery must have attached some importance to the nearly missed clauses in the text, hence his re-inscribing them into the printer’s manuscript “in heavier ink” as if for conscious or subconscious emphasis. However, Oliver probably did not appreciate that his restoration of the missed text preserved strong evidence of intertextuality between Alma the Elder’s narrative biographical introduction and Nephi’s autobiographical introduction (as well as Enos’s and Zeniff’s later autobiographical introductions in Enos 1:1 and Mosiah 9:1).

Indeed, the aforementioned wordplay on “Alma” as a “young man” becomes even more striking in view of earlier wordplay in the Book of Mormon. For example, when we compare the biographical introduction of Alma to his ancestor Nephi’s autobiographical introduction and a related biographical description of himself and why his faith diverged from his brothers, the textual dependence of Alma’s biography on Nephi’s autobiography is clear:

1 Nephi 1:1; 1 Nephi 2:16	Mosiah 17:2
<p>I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents , therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father [`ābī] and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days. (1 Nephi 1:1)</p>	<p>But there was one among them whose name was Alma , he also being a descendant of Nephi . And he was a young man , and he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken , for he knew concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them; therefore he began to plead with the king that he would not be angry with Abinadi, but suffer that he might depart in peace.</p>
<p>And it came to pass that I, Nephi , being exceedingly young , nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God , wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father [`ābī]; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers. (1 Nephi 2:16)</p>	

¹⁶ Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Three: Mosiah 17–20* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 255. Emphasis added.

On one hand, the onomastic wordplay on Alma and “young man” imitates the autobiographical wordplay of 1 Nephi 1:1 (on Nephi and *nfr*, “good[ly],” “goodness,” etc.).¹⁷ On the other hand, the wordplay cunningly incorporates Nephi’s subsequent autobiographical description of himself as “young.” Beyond this, the two texts from Nephi’s personal writings share numerous lexical connections that Mosiah 17:2 utilizes — e.g., Nephi, knowledge/know, my father, “taught in all the learning of my father”/“did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father” (see further below).

Against the backdrop of pre-Lehite biblical scripture, the narrator’s evoking of the term *‘elem* through wordplay recalls the David-Saul-Jonathan cycle wherein *‘elem* occurs twice. In the King James Version of the Bible, it is translated “young man” in one instance (“if I say thus unto the **young man** [*lā‘elem*]. . .,” 1 Samuel 20:22) and “stripling” in the other: “Enquire thou whose son the **stripling** [*šē‘al ‘attâ ben-mî zeh ha‘âlem*] is” (1 Samuel 17:56). Thus the juxtaposition Alma with “young man,” in addition to linking Alma with his ancestor Nephi, serves to associate Alma with the positive portrayal of the *‘elem* David in 1 Samuel 17.

The *‘elem* (“young man”) in 1 Samuel 20:22 was clearly a servant (i.e., a kind of *‘ebed*) and thus in this instance preserves the semantic nuance of *‘glm* as found in Arabic *‘gulām*, a “young man” being a “servant.” Here we might compare the epithets ascribed to Kirta (or Kirtu) in the Ugaritic Epic of Kirta, *‘glm il* (“young man of El,” KTU/CAT 1.14, col I, line 40-41; col II, line 8-9) and *‘bd il* (“servant of El,” KTU/CAT 1.14, col. II, lines, 49, 51).¹⁸ This sense of *‘elem* is perhaps conceptually important to the later narrative’s depiction of Alma as God’s servant (Mosiah 18:12; 26:20; 27:14; cf. 17:3) and the spiritual successor of Abinadi (Mosiah 26:15, 20). Nevertheless, there is still more to the narrator’s onomastic portrait of Alma.

17 See Matthew L. Bowen, “Internal Textual Evidence for the Egyptian Origin of Nephi’s Name,” *Insights* 22/11 (2002): 2. On “Nephi” as the Egyptian word *nfr* and its late pronunciation, see John Gee, “A Note on the Name Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 189–91; John Gee, “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name Nephi,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 1–5.

18 See, e.g., the parallel text in Edward L. Greenstein, trans., “Kirta,” in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon Parker (SBL Writings from the Ancient World Series; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 13-14, 18. KTU/CAT 1.14, col. III, line 49 juxtaposes the terms *‘glm* and *‘bd* suggesting a possible semantic relationship. Cf. Hoskisson, “Alma as a Hebrew Name,” 73.

Alma, the One “To Whom” and “Upon Whom” the Lord Revealed His Arm

Aaron P. Schade and I have elsewhere¹⁹ proposed that the narrator intended the phrase “And he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:2) as a direct allusion to Mosiah 14:1 where Abinadi begins his full-length citation of Isaiah 53 to king Noah and his priests, including Alma. Abinadi declares: “Yea, even doth not Isaiah say: Who **hath believed** our report, and **to whom** [*‘al-mî*, or “upon whom”] is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (quoting Isaiah 53:1). By identifying Alma as the one who “believed” Abinadi’s report in Mosiah 17:2 (cf. Mosiah 14:1), the narrator also identifies Alma as the one “to whom” (*‘al-mî*) — or “upon whom” — the “arm of the Lord” had been “revealed.”

Confirmatory evidence for Mosiah 17:2 as an allusion to Isaiah 53:1/Mosiah 14:1 surfaces during Abinadi’s martyrdom with his declaration that many others would be similarly martyred because they “believe in the salvation of the Lord their God” (Mosiah 17:15). Abinadi’s words also allude to Isaiah 52:10 (“The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall **see the salvation of our God**”), a text which one of Noah’s priests — perhaps Alma himself²⁰ — had quoted to Abinadi (see Mosiah 12:24) and that Abinadi himself requoted to the priests including Alma (see Mosiah 15:31 and 16:1. In the latter passage he calls it “the salvation of the Lord.” Abinadi’s phraseology (“believe in the salvation of the Lord”) thus subtly combines the language of Isaiah 52:10 with “believe” from Isaiah 53:1 (cf. Mosiah 14:1, “Who hath **believed** our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?”) In the immediate context of Abinadi’s discussion of Isaiah, the language of Mosiah 17:2 causes the language of Isaiah 52:10 and especially Isaiah 53:1 to revolve around Alma as the only one in Noah’s court to recognize that “the Lord [had] made bare his holy arm” and was thus the only one to “see the salvation of ... God.” Alma was the only one “to whom” (*‘al-mî*) “the arm of the Lord [was] revealed” (Mosiah 17:2).

Alma’s ancestor Nephi’s “goodness” (or, “goodliness”), as implied in the latter’s name, was at least partly attributable to “goodly parents” including a goodly father who had “taught [him] somewhat” in all his learning and prepared him to seek and acquire “a great knowledge of the goodness of and the mysteries of God” (1 Nephi 1:1). Nephi, though

¹⁹ Schade and Bowen, “To Whom is the Arm of the Lord Revealed?” 91-111.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92-94.

he was admittedly “young,” had “great desires to know of the mysteries of God.” Alma too, though a “young man” (i.e., an *‘elem*) and a priestly member of a corrupt royal court, nevertheless sincerely listened to Abinadi’s prophetic “report.”

On account of his desire, Nephi was “visit[ed]” by the Lord and the Lord “did soften [Nephi’s] heart that [he] did believe all the words which had been spoken by [his] father” (1 Nephi 2:16). Alma’s listening to Abinadi’s report was so sincere²¹ that he had the arm of the Lord revealed “to” him and (later) “upon” him (cf. <<*‘al-mî*>>) and “he believed the words which Abinadi had spoken.” Both Nephi and Alma his descendant experienced what Nephi described in these words: “For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and {{the mysteries of God shall }}be {{unfolded unto them}}, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round” (1 Nephi 10:19). Mormon seemingly alluded to both Nephi’s and Alma’s experiences when he wrote autobiographically: “And I, being **fifteen years of age** and being somewhat of a sober mind, therefore **I was visited of the Lord, and tasted and knew of the goodness**²² of Jesus ” (Mormon 1:15; cf. 2:1). Nephi, Alma, and Mormon all became prophets — witnesses “to whom” and “upon whom” the Lord had revealed his arm.

Alma’s “Hidden” Ministry

Mosiah 17:2 emphasized Alma’s being an *‘elem* — a “young man” who believed the words of Abinadi, his spiritual “father” (cf. Hebrew *‘ab/’ābî*), and implicitly the revelation which led him to believe Abinadi’s report — the revealed arm of the Lord. In Mosiah 17:3-4 the narrator shifts the emphasis to Alma’s “hid[ing] himself” and beginning his prophetic ministry “concealed” from King Noah and his priests, Alma’s former colleagues. The result is another thread of onomastic wordplay on Alma:

But the king was more wroth, and caused that **Alma** should be cast out from among them, and sent his servants after him that they might slay him. But he fled from before them and **hid himself** [cf. Heb. *hit‘allam*]²³ that they found him not. And **he**

21 Cf. the sincerity requirements given by Moroni later in Moroni 10:3-5.

22 On the literary significance of Mormon’s autobiographical use of a term rendered “goodness” here see Matthew L. Bowen, “Nephi’s Good Inclusio,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 181-195.

23 Cf. Deuteronomy 22:3-4.

being concealed [cf. *ne'lam*]²⁴ for many days did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken.

It is no small detail that Alma's prophetic ministry begins in hiding. Alma's name was not only appropriate given that he was a "young man" ... but also of because he successfully "hid himself," presumably with divine help. Had he been immediately discovered by the king, Alma's efforts would have been fruitless.

Here the narrator breaks off from his biographical introduction of Alma in order to tell the story of Abinadi's martyrdom (Mosiah 17:5-20). Following Abinadi's death, the narrator (Mormon), resumes the biography of Alma the Elder that he had briefly begun. He also resumes his emphasis on the "hiddenness" or secrecy of Alma's prophetic activities:

And now, it came to pass that **Alma**, who had fled from the servants of king Noah, repented of his sins and iniquities, and went about **privately** [i.e., in a "hidden" manner]²⁵ among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi — Yea, concerning that which was to come, and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven.

And as many as would hear his word he did teach. **And he taught them privately**, that it might not come to the knowledge of the king. **And many did believe his words.** (Mosiah 18:1-3)

The resumption of Alma's biography marks a progression in his nascent prophetic ministry: he had fully "repented of his sins and iniquities," yet he was not content merely to have written Abinadi's words while having "hid himself," but now also "went about privately among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi." Again, the narrative creates a paronomasia on the name Alma, based on the homonymy of Alma and the Semitic/Hebrew root **lm* — or at least the interpretive, paronomastic meaning created for Alma by the homonymic

24 Cf. 1 Kings 10:3; 2 Chronicles 9:2.

25 Cf. Latin *privatus* as "withdrawn from public life" (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/private). In Webster's 1828 dictionary, one meaning of "private" is "Sequestered from company or observation; secret; secluded; as a *private* cell; a private room or apartment; *private* prayer" (<http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/private>).

relationship of Alma (from **glm*) and **lm* (i.e., the play on the midrashic/paronomastic idea of Alma as “hidden one” could also be accomplished with Hebrew synonyms like **hb*’ and **str* or even other terms).²⁶

The narrator’s (Mormon’s) repetition of wordplay on Alma is not quite an example of *Wiederaufnahme* (i.e., a resumptive narrative repetition) since it is not simply a reiteration or restatement of what he has already narrated. However, the twofold use of a word/phrase translated “privately” dramatically recalls the “hidden”/“concealed” beginnings of Alma’s life as a prophet, this while emphasizing the difficult — and perhaps appropriate — nature of Alma’s current prophetic and evangelical labor.

As Mormon begins to describe the importance of the place that became his namesake, he provides a final yet emphatic wordplay on Alma and “hide” (cf. **lm*):

Now, there was in Mormon a fountain of pure water, and **Alma** resorted thither, there being near the water a thicket of small trees, where **he did hide himself** in the daytime from the searches of the king. And it came to pass that as many **as believed him went thither to hear his words**. (Mosiah 18:5-6)

Alma continues his “hidden” prophetic ministry by baptizing in the waters of Mormon, a “thicket of small trees” affording Alma all of the secrecy he required. The language of Mosiah 18:5-6 additionally recalls Mosiah 17:2: just as Alma “believed” Abinadi’s prophetic report (cf. Mosiah 14:1), now many others were “believ[ing]” his. The arm of the Lord was being revealed to some “four hundred and fifty souls.”²⁷

The “discovery” of Alma and his “hidden” ministry marks the end of his people’s sacred time at the waters of Mormon — a time that was remembered ever after among the Nephites.²⁸ Mormon records:

And these things were done in the borders of the land, that they they **might not come to the knowledge of the king**. But behold, it came to pass that the king, having **discovered** a movement among the people, sent his servants to watch them. Therefore on

26 Moshe Garsiel (*Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, trans. Phyllis Hackett [Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991], 98-126 and *passim*) cites numerous examples of paronomasia accomplished through synonyms and similar phenomena in the text of the Hebrew Bible.

27 Mosiah 18:35: “And they were in number about four hundred and fifty souls.”

28 See, e.g., Mosiah 18:30; 3 Nephi 5:12.

the day that they they were assembling themselves together to hear the word of the Lord they were **discovered** unto the king. (Mosiah 18:30-32)

Alma and his people's "hiddenness" came to an end at that time. However, once they were "discovered unto the king" and his servants, divine providence ensured that Noah and his henchmen did not crush the nascent church: "And it came to pass that the army of the king returned, having searched in vain for the people of the Lord" (Mosiah 19:1). Alma remained "hidden" long enough to establish a church and a movement that would eventually renovate Nephite religion, politics, and society. The importance of what Alma the Elder accomplished in secret at the waters of Mormon can scarcely be overestimated. The impact that his son Alma the Younger (upon whom he, of course, bestowed his own name) and his later descendants had upon Nephite politics and religion was similarly tremendous.

Conclusion

The evident wordplay in Mosiah 17:2 stands as yet another example of wordplay that is imitative of 1 Nephi 1:1, but also draws together and incorporates other elements of Nephi's biography (see also 1 Nephi 2:16). Moreover, the same language deliberately recalls Abinadi's utilization of Isaiah 53 to preach repentance to King Noah and his court and suggests that Alma himself was the answer to Abinadi's appropriation of Isaiah's question: "Who hath believed our report, and to whom [*'al-mî*] is the arm of the Lord revealed?" (Mosiah 14:1, quoting Isaiah 53:1).

Finally, Alma the Elder was truly the "hidden" prophet: he recorded Abinadi's exchange with Noah and his priests and the former's prophetic words while "hid[ing] himself" and "being concealed" from the latter (Mosiah 17:3-4); he "went about privately" (Mosiah 18:1) and "taught [his word, i.e., Abinadi's words] privately" (Mosiah 18:3); and "he did hide himself" while baptizing and establishing a church at the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18:5).

The three-dimensional wordplay on the name Alma in Mosiah 17-18 demonstrates yet again how sophisticated onomastic wordplay in the Book of Mormon can be. Recognizing and appreciating its use can help us better understand the messages intended by the book's ancient authors/editors.

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