

Alma 16 — The Desolation of Nehors — Ammonihah Destroyed in a Day, the Zoram Rescue at Sidon, and the Many Things That Looked Forth for the Coming of Christ

Alma 16: the eleventh year of the reign of the judges (c. 81 BC), the fifth day of the second month. After the quiet aftermath at Sidom, a Lamanite army sweeps up suddenly upon the borders, destroys Ammonihah in a single day, and carries away captives from the surrounding country. Zoram — chief captain of the Nephite armies, not the servant of Laban from 1 Nephi 4 — goes up to inquire of Alma. By revelation Alma sends him across the river Sidon to intercept the Lamanite army; the captives are recovered, not one soul was lost. The bodies at Ammonihah are cast into pits; the land is renamed the Desolation of Nehors, and the scent of the unburied dead keeps it uninhabited for many years. The chapter closes with Alma and Amulek and many others preaching throughout the Nephite lands — in their temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues which were built after the manner of the Jews — and with the editorial observation that many things did look forth for the coming of Christ.

Alma 16 is one of the Book of Mormon's most disquieting chapters. A great city, warned at length by Alma and Amulek, refused the warning — and in a single day, every soul in it is dead. The chapter does not flinch from naming what happened: the Lamanites came in upon the wilderness side, slew the people, destroyed the city, took captives from the borders of Noah, and were gone before the Nephite armies could be raised against them. By the time Zoram leads the Nephite force across the Sidon to retrieve the captives, the city of Ammonihah is already a heap of unburied dead.

Hebrew Word Studies

shemamah / nehor / kabad / ruach (שְׁמָמָה / נְהוֹר / קָבָד / רוּחַ) (Aram. אֲרוּחָא / נְהוֹרָא / קָבָד) — **desolation, devastation, wasteland / light, brightness (Aramaic) / to be heavy, weighty, glorious / spirit, breath, wind vv. 9–11, 16.** Four Hebrew and Aramaic words shape the chapter. *Shemamah* — desolation, devastation, wasteland — comes from *shamem* (to be desolate, appalled). It is the word of Leviticus 26:33–35 (*your land shall be desolate*) and Ezekiel 6:14 (*I will make the land desolate*) — the precise curse for breaking the Mosaic covenant. When the chapter says *their lands remained desolate*, the Hebrew underneath is *shemamah*. The Desolation of Nehors is, in name, the Levitical covenant-curse fulfilled. *Nehor* — light, brightness — is the Aramaic for light (the Hebrew is *or*). It appears in Daniel 2:22 (*the light dwelleth with him*) and Daniel 5:11 (*light and understanding and wisdom found in this Daniel*). The name Nehor, the founder of the priestcraft Alma killed in Alma 1, is literally *light* — the Lucifer pattern of the light-bearer who turns into the darkness. The chapter's bitterest irony is that the city of the *light* tradition becomes the *desolation*. *Kabad* — to be heavy, weighty, glorious — is the root behind *kavod*, glory. The Ammonihahites called their city heavy / great / glorious; the Lord proved that no city's *kabad* is large enough to keep him out. Isaiah 23:9 puts it this way: *the Lord of hosts hath purposed it, to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all the honourable of the earth*. *Ruach* — spirit, breath, wind — is the word of Genesis 1:2 (*the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters*) and Joel 2:28 (*I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh*). When the chapter says *the Lord did pour out his Spirit on all the face of the land*, it is using the Joel formula word-for-word — *shafach et ruchi*. The juxtaposition is the chapter's whole point: the false light of Nehor's order is extinguished, and the true Spirit of the Lord is poured out on the rest of the land in the same season.

From the Chapter's Architecture

Finally, the chapter is the textual hinge between the Ammonihah arc and the Sons of Mosiah arc. The narrative has just closed the story of Alma and Amulek's mission to the Nehorite cities. Alma 17 will open with Mormon's flashback to the Sons of Mosiah, who have been preaching to the Lamanites for fourteen years at the same time. The two stories belong together — judgment on the Nehorite city and mercy on the Lamanite house — and Mormon is structuring his history so that the reader sees them side by side.