
Alma 4 — Pride Enters the Church — Inequality at Zarahemla, Alma Yields the Judgment-Seat to Nephihah, and the Decision to Go Forth in Pure Testimony

Alma 4: in the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth years of the reign of the judges (c. 86–82 BC). The Church prospers in the wake of the Amlicite war; Alma baptizes thousands at the Sidon; the people begin to wax proud — costly apparel, fine pearls, ranks, contentions, persecution within the Church. The wickedness of the Church becomes a stumbling-block to the world. Alma, weary, decides he cannot reach the heart by the law. He delivers the judgment-seat to Nephihah, a wise man and a just man. Alma retains the office of high priest and goes forth among his people to bear down in pure testimony.

Alma 4 is the inflection point of the reign of the judges. The chapter records the moment when Alma the Younger, having served four years as both chief judge and high priest, recognizes that the judgment-seat cannot reach the disease that has begun to grow inside his people. Pride has entered the Church. The laws of Mosiah can deal with murderers and rebels, but they cannot pull down pride from the heart. Alma yields the civil office to Nephihah and confines himself wholly to the high priesthood — and the chapter becomes the founding text both for the Nephite separation of civil and religious leadership and for the missionary journey that will fill the next twelve chapters of the Book of Alma.

Hebrew Word Studies

gaon / mikshol / qodesh (גאון / מִכְשׁוֹל / קֹדֶשׁ) — **pride, exaltation / stumbling-block, offense / holiness, set-apart-ness vv.**

6–20. The chapter's theological triad in Hebrew. *Gaon* — *pride, exaltation* — is the noun behind Pr. 8:13's *pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way (gaon ve-gaavah)*, and it shares its root with the verb *to be high* or *to rise up*. Biblical pride is height set against the Lord, not merely self-regard. The chapter's *pride of eyes* is exactly the Old Testament's *gaon* — eyes lifted up where they should not be. *Mikshol* — *stumbling-block* — is the noun behind Lev. 19:14 (*thou shalt not put a stumblingblock before the blind*) and Isa. 8:14 (*the Lord himself shall be... a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence*). Alma 4 records the moment when the Church became the *mikshol* — the stumbling-block that stopped the world from coming to the Lord. *Qodesh* — *holiness, set-apart-ness* — is the noun behind *qodesh haqodashim*, the Holy of Holies. When the chapter ends with Alma confining himself wholly to the high priesthood, the language behind that confinement is *qodesh*. The chapter teaches that the *qodesh* is the instrument the Lord uses against the *gaon* when civil power cannot reach it.

From the Chapter's Architecture

Finally, the chapter is the prologue to the missionary journey that fills the next twelve chapters. Alma's resolve to bear down in pure testimony will take him to Zarahemla (Alma 5), Gideon (Alma 7), Melek (Alma 8:3), Ammonihah (Alma 8–14), and Sidom (Alma 15). The whole arc of Alma 5–16 begins as one man's decision to lay down the office that cannot heal his people and to pick up the one that can.