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Source: *The Book of Mormon: Mosiah, Salvation Only Through Christ*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1991

Page(s): 91-111



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Abinadi: The Prophet and Martyr

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Robert J. Matthews

The Nephite prophet Abinadi holds a singular place in the Book of Mormon. He is the first Nephite of whom we have record to die as a martyr. His doctrinal teachings are some of the most valuable in the Book of Mormon, clarifying the purpose of the law of Moses, identifying who the Redeemer would be, and declaring some facts about the Resurrection not previously mentioned in the Book of Mormon. He was capable of exquisitely colorful language sparked with fiery metaphor, yet at times was plain-spoken to the point of bluntness.

Abinadi confronted the wicked establishment—in the person of king Noah and his priests—single-handedly. The record gives no hint of any other prophet being present with whom he could share the burden of his ministry. So far as we know, he converted but one man; yet that one man, Alma, became the progenitor of a posterity that kept the sacred records and served the Nephites as their ecclesiastical leaders (and sometimes their political leaders) for the remainder of their history, a period of well over 400 years. (This is seen in the lineage of Alma¹, Alma², Helaman², Shiblon, Helaman³, Nephi², Nephi³, Amos¹, Amos² and Ammoron. We do not know if Mormon was also a descendant of Alma, since the abridged record that we have does not give Mormon's lineage, other than to say he was a descendant of Lehi [3 Nephi 5:20] and of Nephi [Mormon

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1:5].) Abinadi's history and teachings were preserved in the writings of his one convert, Alma, and Alma's posterity kept the records down to the time of the prophet Mormon, thus making the remainder of the Book of Mormon possible. Abinadi's ministry influenced the entire second half of Nephite history. Because Abinadi's story is in the Book of Mormon, it has already influenced millions of readers in this dispensation and will yet influence billions more.

Several documentary sources have enabled me to prepare this paper. The basic source is the Book of Mormon itself, primarily Mosiah chapters 11 to 18. At least four LDS writers have produced valuable commentaries. These are, in sequence of publication, Elder George Reynolds' "Abinadi," in his *Dictionary of the Book of Mormon*, which is now out of print; Elder Mark E. Petersen's *Alma and Abinadi*; John W. Welch's "Judicial Process in the Trial of Abinadi"; and Rodney Turner's "Two Prophets: Abinadi and Alma" in *Studies in Scripture: 1 Nephi to Alma 29*. Each of these commentaries provides valuable and unique insights. With so many useful works already in print, one might wonder what was still left to be said. However, I found enough things in the text of the book of Mosiah that these commentators either had not noticed, treated only lightly, or chose not to mention, probably for want of space, that seemed to justify yet another paper about Abinadi.

In this paper I will deal with two general subjects. First, I will discuss the historical and circumstantial record of the man Abinadi—his life, ministry, and death. Second, I will discuss his doctrinal teachings. As we review these things, I invite you to think of the prophet Mormon, at the end of his nation's struggles in the fourth century AD, searching what must have been by that time a wagonload of the large plates of Nephi and selecting those things of greatest worth to include in his abridged and summarized record. Mormon was not a freelance writer, but was called of God to prepare a record of his people. He was divinely appointed to be the editor and compiler of a sacred record that would deliver a specific message. We can

be grateful that he was inspired to include the story and the teachings of the prophet Abinadi. The Book of Mormon would lack continuity, and a major part of its message would be missing, without the Abinadi portion.

The Man Abinadi

We first hear of Abinadi's teachings and martyrdom in Mosiah 7:26–28. His name is not mentioned, but the fact that he was a prophet and had been slain for his teachings is stated in these verses by king Limhi, son of king Noah. Limhi was a good man, and he was sorry for the wicked things his father Noah had done which had resulted in the death of this prophet. Said Limhi:

And a prophet of the Lord have they slain; yea, a chosen man of God, who told them of their wickedness and abominations, and prophesied of many things which are to come, yea, even the coming of Christ. And because he said unto them that Christ was the God, the Father of all things, and said that he should take upon him the image of man, and it should be the image after which man was created in the beginning; or in other words, he said that man was created after the image of God, and that God should come down among the children of men, and take upon him flesh and blood, and go forth upon the face of the earth—And now, because he said this, they did put him to death; and many more things did they do which brought down the wrath of God upon them. Therefore, who wondereth that they are in bondage, and that they are smitten with sore afflictions? (Mosiah 7:26–28)

We do not know of Abinadi's parentage or early life. The popular artist Arnold Friberg has given us an outstanding painting that depicts Abinadi as an old man, thin and weather-beaten. And it may very well be so. But I find nothing in the record to indicate whether he was old or young, large or small. Of his physical characteristics we know but little. However, the content of his teachings and his mannerisms when confronting the priests of Noah—baiting them, challenging their knowledge, and questioning their behavior—tells us quite a bit

about his courage, his agile mind, his knowledge of the gospel, and his strength of character.

Abinadi reminds me of the Old Testament prophet Amos who predated him by 600 years. The biblical record does not tell us of Amos' death, but commentators have concluded that anyone who issued such fiery and sharp condemnations as did Amos would probably be martyred by those who were stung by the cutting truth of his words. One writer, Rodney Turner, sees a parallel between Abinadi and the New Testament prophet John the Baptist: both were lone preachers of righteousness; both encountered wicked kings; both spoke of the sinful practices of the king and his people; both testified of the coming of Christ; and both were martyred as victims of priesthood (240).

Abinadi ministered to the people of Zeniff, a group of Nephites who left the land of Zarahemla and settled in the land of Lehi-Nephi and Shilom (Omni 1:27; Mosiah 7:1, 21) in about 200 BC. It appears that Zeniff reigned as king of his people in Lehi-Nephi (under the Lamanite king of the land) at the same time that Mosiah and king Benjamin reigned in Zarahemla. Zeniff was a good man, although he identifies himself as "over-zealous" (Mosiah 9:3). His son and successor was Noah, a very wicked man, as explained in Mosiah 11. Under Noah's reign both the government and the people moved rapidly into wickedness—idolatry, unchastity, materialism, secularism, pride, and extensive consumption of wine. These conditions were characterized by excessively elaborate buildings, love of riches, boasting in their own strength, and self-justification. Such a lifestyle is expensive, and, as is usually the case, it was supported by very high taxes. As a result of a military victory of Noah's army over the Lamanites, Noah's people were lifted up in the pride of their hearts, and delighted in the shedding of blood—all because of the wickedness of the king and his priests (Mosiah 11:19).

Several times in Mosiah 11 the point is made that the bad example of the leaders led the people into wrong-doing (vv 2,

6–7, 15, 19). Pointing out this cause-and-effect relationship is a major contribution of the story: people have a tendency to follow their leaders, and corrupt leaders corrupt the whole kingdom.

As defined in the record, the people's catalog of sins included the following (Mosiah 11:1–19):

1. having many wives and concubines
2. doing all manner of wickedness
3. levying heavy taxes, with which they supported their opulence and luxury
4. consecrating priests who were lifted up in pride
5. being lazy
6. worshiping idols
7. enjoying whoredoms
8. speaking lying and vain words
9. placing their hearts upon riches
10. spending their time in riotous living
11. becoming winebibbers
12. boasting of their own strength
13. delighting in the shedding of blood

As noted earlier, these were at first the sins of only Noah and his priests, but the iniquity spread until it became general among the people.

With this setting, Abinadi is introduced with these few words:

And it came to pass that there was a man among them whose name was Abinadi; and he went forth among them, and began to prophesy, saying: Behold, thus saith the Lord, and thus hath he commanded me, saying, Go forth, and say unto this people, thus saith the Lord—Wo be unto this people, for I have seen their abominations, and their wickedness, and their whoredoms; and except they repent I will visit them in mine anger. (Mosiah 11:20)

Abinadi's warning consisted of the following (see Mosiah 11:20–25): Unless you repent, thus saith the Lord, (1) I will bring the entire people into bondage; (2) they will be afflicted by their enemies; (3) they will cry unto me (the Lord) for help, and "I will be slow to hear"; (4) I will allow them to be smitten;

and (5) they will be in such difficulty that only I will be able to deliver them.

Please note that although Abinadi was careful to say he was speaking for the Lord, he spoke in the first person singular. The Lord had told him what to say. The people also noticed Abinadi's first-person language and didn't like it. They were angry with Abinadi and with the Lord and endeavored to slay Abinadi, but the Lord enabled him to escape from them out of the city of Lehi-Nephi. King Noah said, "Who is Abinadi, that I and my people should be judged of him, or who is the Lord, that shall bring upon my people such great affliction?" (Mosiah 11:27). But neither the people, nor the priests, nor king Noah repented of their evil doings.

After two years Abinadi came back to the city in disguise and again publicly preached repentance. Where he had been these two years the record does not say. His first-person message this time was even more pointed, direct, specific, and descriptive than before. A summation is as follows:

You have not repented or heeded the warning, therefore God has sent me to say that you shall be visited of the Lord in his fierce anger, that "this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage"; you "shall be smitten on the cheek, . . . and shall be driven by men, and shall be slain." The vultures, the dogs, and the wild beasts shall devour your flesh. "The life of king Noah shall be valued as a garment in a hot furnace. . . . He [Noah] shall know that I am the Lord." Noah shall be "as a dry stalk of the field, which is run over by beasts and trodden under foot." He [Noah] shall be as a fully ripe thistle, blown in the wind. "I [the Lord] will smite this my people with sore afflictions," and with famine and pestilence; they "will have burdens lashed upon their backs. . . . They shall be driven . . . like a dumb ass"; I will send hail to smite them; the east wind shall smite them; "insects shall pester their land also and devour their grain"; "they shall howl all the day long." "Except they repent I will utterly destroy them from off the face of the earth." (See Mosiah 12:1-12)

Abinadi's Colorful Language

As can be quickly perceived from the foregoing, Abinadi was an effective communicator. It would be difficult to mis-

understand him. His sentences (at least as they now appear in English) are full of high-intensity verbs, descriptive adjectives, and colorful nouns. His discourse has a poetic and lyric element to it.

Abinadi Confronts the Priests of Noah

Abinadi was taken by the people, bound, and brought before the king. After telling the king of Abinadi's prophecies against the people, his captors elaborated on his pronouncements against the king (*Mosiah 12:9*). Their self-justification reads something like this (*Mosiah 12:12–16*):

1. He [Abinadi] pretendeth the Lord hath spoken. . . .
2. And he saith all this shall come upon thee except thou repent. . . .
3. O king, what great evil hast thou done,
4. Or what great sins have thy people committed,
5. That we should be condemned of God
6. Or judged of this man?
7. We are guiltless,
8. And thou, O king, hast not sinned; . . .
9. This man has lied . . . and he has prophesied in vain. . . .
10. We are strong, we shall not . . . be taken captive. . . .
11. Thou hast prospered in the land, and thou shalt also [continue] to prosper.

Noah ordered Abinadi cast into prison and called the priests together as a council to decide what to do with him (*Mosiah 12:17*). The priests asked that Abinadi be brought before them, that they might question him and “cross him” and find a charge on which to formally accuse him (*Mosiah 12:18*). The record says they began to question him, “But he answered them boldly, and withstood all their questions, yea, to their astonishment; for he did withstand them in all their questions, and did confound them in all their words” (*Mosiah 12:19*). Abinadi’s “defense” before the priests was not defensive. He was aggressive, confident, forward, and marvelous.

When one of the priests asked Abinadi the meaning of the words of Isaiah that say, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, . . . that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! . . . And all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isa 52:7–10), Abinadi did not immediately explain the meaning of the scripture. Instead, he became the questioner. To the request for enlightenment on a scripture, he asked:

Are you priests, and pretend to teach . . . and to understand the spirit of prophesying, and yet desire . . . of me what these things mean?

Noting their perversion of the ways of the Lord, he asked:

What teach ye this people?

When they said they taught the law of Moses, he asked:

If ye teach the law of Moses, why do ye not keep it? Why do ye set your hearts upon riches? Why do ye commit whoredoms and spend your strength with harlots, . . . and cause this people to commit sin?

Then to test their knowledge of the purpose of the law of Moses, he asked:

What know ye concerning the law of Moses? Doth salvation come by the law of Moses? . . . What say ye? (Mosiah 12:25–31)

When they answered “that salvation did come by the law of Moses,” Abinadi refuted their answer explaining that salvation comes only through Christ, and that the law alone cannot save (Mosiah 12:32). He then quoted the first two of the Ten Commandments given to Moses: “Thou shalt have no other God before me,” and “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” He then asked the priests if they had obeyed these commandments or taught the people to obey them, and then answered for them that they had not (Mosiah 12:37).

When Noah heard Abinadi’s thunder-and-lightning words, he ordered him to be put to death, for “he is mad” (Mosiah 13:1). To proclaim Abinadi “mad” provided Noah and his priests with a legal excuse to kill him, since a madman was

a threat to the community. As the priests attempted to take him, Abinadi withheld them and said:

Touch me not, for God shall smite you if ye lay your hands upon me, for I have not delivered the message which the Lord sent me to deliver; neither have I told you that which ye requested that I should tell; therefore, God will not suffer that I shall be destroyed at this time.

But I must fulfil the commandments wherewith God has commanded me; and because I have told you the truth ye are angry with me. And again, because I have spoken the word of God ye have judged me that I am mad.

... And his face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses' did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord.

And he spake with power and authority from God; and he continued his words, saying:

Ye see that ye have not power to slay me, therefore I finish my message....

Yea, and my words fill you with wonder and amazement, and with anger.

But I finish my message; and then it matters not whether I go, if it so be that I am saved.

But this much I tell you, what you do with me, after this, shall be as a type and a shadow of things which are to come. (Mosiah 13:3-10)

Abinadi then read to them the remainder of the Ten Commandments. Very likely he could have quoted them from memory, but it appears that he had an object lesson in mind when he read from a written text. Here are his words: "And now I read unto you the remainder of the commandments of God, for I perceive that they are not written in your hearts; I perceive that ye have studied and taught iniquity the most part of your lives" (Mosiah 13:11).

Having read the Ten Commandments, he asked the priests again, "Have ye taught this people [to obey] these things?" (Mosiah 13:25). He answered his question himself by saying, "If ye had, the Lord would not have caused me to come forth and to prophesy evil concerning this people" (Mosiah 13:26).

Abinadi then delivered the remainder of his message, that which he said he must deliver, which consists of a prophecy and explanation of the coming of Christ to redeem humankind, and also his answer to the question the priests had asked him

about a passage from Isaiah (Mosiah 14–16). His teachings at this juncture constitute five and one-half pages of material in our present Book of Mormon. He cites Moses and Isaiah particularly, and all of the prophets generally, as having taught that God himself would come down from heaven and dwell in the form of a man on the earth and redeem humankind from the Fall. He speaks at length of Christ's mission and of his power to redeem humankind from sin and from the grave.

True Prophets Testify of Jesus Christ

There is a very significant point to be made here. Abinadi, with all the thunder and power characteristic of any Old Testament prophet, preached repentance and inveighed against the sins of king, priests, and populace alike. But he showed that forgiveness and redemption were not available to them merely by change and reformation, but also by repentance and faith in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. And he explained with great clarity and emphasis that it would be the God of Israel himself who would come down from heaven and be the Son of God in the flesh.

This point is often lacking in our present Old Testament text. As the Old Testament now reads, the prophets were great reformers, champions of social justice, and preachers of righteousness. They were spokesmen for God. But our present Old Testament frequently does not make it clear that the God they worshiped would become the Redeemer on earth, the future Jesus Christ. Nor does it make it clear that these prophets taught the gospel of Jesus Christ, with its ordinances and ceremonies, such as baptism and the laying on of hands. We know from latter-day revelation that the ancient Old Testament prophets knew of Christ, taught his gospel, and worshiped him, but their records have not come to us in plainness and clarity as have the Book of Mormon records, and therefore these important concepts are not clear from the Old Testament alone.

Abinadi says that all of the ancient prophets taught that the God of Israel would come to earth as the Redeemer:

And now, did they [the people] understand the law? I say unto you, Nay, they did not all understand the law; and this because of the hardness of their hearts; for they understood not that there could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God. For behold, did not Moses prophesy unto them concerning the coming of the Messiah, and that God should redeem his people? Yea, and even all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began—have they not spoken more or less concerning these things? Have they not said that God himself should come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth? Yea, and have they not said also that he should bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, and that he, himself, should be oppressed and afflicted? (Mosiah 13:32–35)

In summation, Abinadi said to the priests:

And now, ought ye not to tremble and repent of your sins, and remember that only in and through Christ ye can be saved? Therefore, if ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come—Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father. Amen. (Mosiah 16:13–15)

Trial and Conviction of Abinadi

After Abinadi had finished his “sayings,” king Noah sent him back to prison and counseled again with his priests (Mosiah 17:5). After three days Noah sent for Abinadi and informed him that they had found a charge against him, and he was “worthy of death” (Mosiah 17:7). The accusation was that Abinadi had said that “God himself should come down among the children of men” (Mosiah 17:8). This accusation was apparently a charge of blasphemy rather than a charge of a crime against the state.

King Noah offered to rescind the penalty of death if Abinadi would take back all that he had said against him and against the people. Abinadi refused and declared that he would suffer even to death to prove the truth of his words. He also warned the king that he would have to answer for his deeds at

the last day, and if the king caused Abinadi's death (Abinadi being an innocent man), the king would also have to answer for that at the last day.

Noah was about to release Abinadi, for he feared the judgments of God. But the priests, seeing that the king began to waver, knew how to appeal to the king's vanity and raised their voices to accuse Abinadi, saying, "He has reviled the king" (Mosiah 17:12). Reviling the king may have been a crime against the state, a type of sedition. At any rate, the king regained his selfish courage, was stirred to anger again, and delivered Abinadi to be slain.

Keeping Abinadi in hold for three days before formally accusing him may reflect the difficulty Noah and the priests had in finding a capital charge against him. Or it may have been a psychological maneuver to give him time to think about and to fear his punishment and thereby break his spirit. Whatever the cause of the delay, Abinadi was condemned to die.

The Death of Abinadi

We generally say that Abinadi was burned at the stake—and that may be true, although technically it might not be the whole story. The scripture does not say he was "burned at the stake"; it says he "suffered death by fire" (Mosiah 17:20). A statement in Mosiah 17:13 catches our attention: "And it came to pass that they took him and bound him, and scourged his skin with faggots, yea, even unto death." Three words in the foregoing sentence should be noted. The first is that they *bound* him. That seems self-explanatory. The second is that they *scourged* him. To scourge means to whip, flail, or beat. The third term is *faggots*: "He was scourged with faggots, yea, even unto death." A faggot is a bundle of sticks or twigs, used for fuel. This passage seems to say that Abinadi's tormentors took burning torches and poked him with these, burning his skin until he died. And then, says the record, "He fell, having

suffered death by fire; . . . having sealed the truth of his words by his death" (*Mosiah* 17:20).

If Abinadi was actually burned at the stake, the scene would have been somewhat different. I've never seen anyone burned at the stake, but my conception of it is that a person is tied to the stake, and wood or other combustible material is placed at the feet, and perhaps piled waist-high, and then lighted. The victim suffers from the flames and from smoke inhalation. It is a terrible way to die.

Several accounts in the Book of Mormon speak of death by fire, and at least one account in the Bible tells of an attempted execution by fire, but in no case does either record say anything about a stake. Two examples of death by fire from the Book of Mormon are, of course, Abinadi and king Noah (*Mosiah* 19:20). Others are the Lamanites who were killed by the descendants of the priests of Noah (*Alma* 25:5–11). Later, those same descendants of the priests of Noah were themselves hunted and burned (*Mosiah* 17:18; *Alma* 25:12). The converts of Alma and Amulek in Ammonihah also suffered death by fire, evidently by being thrown into a burning pit (*Alma* 14:8). In the Bible we read that the three friends of Daniel were cast into a fiery furnace, though they received no harm (*Dan* 3:20–27).

In my mind I see Abinadi bound, possibly supported by something, and his fiendish executioners (probably the priests) gathered about him with burning torches (faggots) in their hands, jabbing him and rubbing him with these until they caused him to die. They actively, eagerly, and physically caused his death; they were not merely passive, interested bystanders watching a bonfire. I can imagine them dancing and cavorting about Abinadi, and hear them shouting, exulting, and gloating over what they were doing. And during it all, Abinadi was pronouncing prophecies of God's vengeance upon them—prophecies that were literally fulfilled. The noise, the din, the stench would be awful! Wickedness and righteousness, life and death, are real, and Abinadi's martyrdom really did happen. It

was necessary that it happen so the righteous might be justified and the wicked might be condemned. Sadly, we read that “Abinadi was [only] the first [among the Nephites] that suffered death by fire because of his belief in God” (Alma 25:11).

Alma Writes the Words of Abinadi

A young man named Alma, one of Noah’s priests, had felt the truth of Abinadi’s words and had defended him before the king. For this act of bravery the king caused that Alma should be cast out of the palace and the kingdom, and then sent servants to slay him. Alma escaped and hid himself for many days, and “did write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:1–4). We can be very grateful to Alma for doing this and making Abinadi’s story and words available to us.

Although Alma wrote all of Abinadi’s words, that does not necessarily mean that Mormon included all of them in the abridged account given to us in the book of Mosiah. There are at least four clues that we do not have a complete transcript of Abinadi’s debates with the priests, nor a full account of his teachings. For example, in Mosiah 7:26–28 (which was cited earlier) Limhi speaks of Abinadi’s death and explains for what teachings he was slain. Limhi states that Abinadi said the following:

[1] Christ was the God, the Father of all things; [2] . . . that he should take upon him the image of man, and [3] it should be the image after which man was created in the beginning; or in other words, [4] he [Abinadi] said that man was created after the image of God, and [5] that God should come down among the children of men, and [6] take upon him flesh and blood, and [7] go forth upon the face of the earth. (Mosiah 7:27)

The teachings of Abinadi that are given us in the book of Mosiah chapters 11 through 17 cover each of these seven items except numbers three and four. Since Limhi makes a point of saying that these are the teachings for which Abinadi was slain, we naturally conclude that Abinadi had said something about

each one of them. Either Limhi overstated the situation or else he had a more complete transcript than we have. Of course he could have had access to the original, while we have only Mormon's abridgment.

A second clue that we may not have the entire conversation is found in Mosiah 12:8, which says, "And many things did Abinadi prophesy against this people." We can't tell from the record whether or not all of these "many things" are included in the present text.

A third clue is found in Mosiah 12:18–19:

And it came to pass that they [the priests] said unto the king: Bring him hither that we may question him; and the king commanded that he should be brought before them. And they began to question him, that they might cross him, that thereby they might have wherewith to accuse him; but he answered them boldly, and withstood all their questions, yea, to their astonishment; for he did withstand them in all their questions, and did confound them in all their words.

In our record, the one and only question that the priests ask and that Abinadi answers is a question about Isaiah 52:7–10, whereas the text above says that he answered "all their questions" and "did confound them in all their words." It appears that we have but a sampling of the great debate between Abinadi and the priests. How we wish we had it all!

A fourth clue is found in Mormon 1:19, where Mormon speaks of the "sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics" in the land, "even unto the fulfilling of all the words of Abinadi." Our record contains no such prophecy of Abinadi. Obviously Mormon had a more complete record of Abinadi's words than we have. No doubt future readers will be privileged to find the much fuller account on the large plates themselves, and not be limited to the shortened version in the Book of Mormon.

Abinadi's Doctrinal Teachings

In my opening statement I said that Abinadi's doctrinal teachings are some of the most valuable in the Book of Mor-

mon because they clarify the purpose of the law of Moses, identify who the Redeemer would be, and declare some facts about the Resurrection for the first time in the Book of Mormon. Elder George Reynolds rated Abinadi's words as "some of the most precious gospel teachings" and "important . . . doctrinal portions" of the Book of Mormon (10, 18). He identified the subject matter as "the principle of the atonement and other laws of God" (9). Elder Mark E. Petersen wrote that "Abinadi built on Nephi's foundation. [He] explained the Atonement in detail, stressed the resurrection of the dead, and made it clear that while all who die will be raised from their graves, salvation from sin will come only to those who accept and obey the gospel" (1). Elder Petersen further said that "Abinadi's . . . teachings concerning the Savior and the resurrection are an inspiration and great comfort to all" (20).

I will briefly review some major points of Abinadi's teachings, first about the law of Moses. Abinadi characterized the law of Moses as "a very strict law; . . . a law of performances and of ordinances, a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him" (*Mosiah* 13:29–30). He further said that the things of the law were "types of things to come" (*Mosiah* 13:31), and that the day would come when it would no longer be expedient to obey the law of Moses. He also said that the ancients did not all understand the law, and did not comprehend that the law was completely unable to save anyone without the "redemption" and the "atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people" (*Mosiah* 13:28, 32).

I have found that it is not only ancient Israel that has misunderstood the law. There is a great deal of misunderstanding today about what the law was and why it was given. This misunderstanding is found both among Christian and Jewish denominations, and even among teachers in the Church. It takes a great deal of time and effort to examine what is given us about the law of Moses in the Old and New Testaments, the

Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the writings of other latter-day prophets. Therefore I have found Abinadi's concise, summary-like statements about the purpose and place of the law very enlightening.

A second major point of Abinadi's teachings is that "God himself" will make the atonement that will redeem humankind. Abinadi leaves no doubt in his teaching that the God of Israel himself will be the Redeemer who will come to earth as the Son of God. He is not the first in the Book of Mormon to teach this doctrine, but he gives it more emphasis than those who precede him in the record. Nephi had said that the Messiah, who would come in 600 years, would be "the very God of Israel . . . the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (1 Nephi 19:7–10). Nephi also had shown that such identification of the Messiah as the God of Israel was likewise the teaching of the earlier prophets Zenock, Neum, and Zenos (1 Nephi 19:10). Jacob taught the same doctrine, saying that the "great Creator" would come to earth and would be called "Christ," and the people would "crucify him" (2 Nephi 9:5; 10:3). King Benjamin also taught that the "Lord Omnipotent," who reigns in the heavens for all eternity, would come to earth by being born of Mary, would "dwell in a tabernacle of clay," and would go among the people. He would be called Jesus Christ; he would be crucified and then rise from the dead (Mosiah 3:5–10). King Benjamin's discourse was given 20 or so years after Abinadi's death, but because of the structure of the Book of Mormon it is placed before the story of Abinadi, and thus the reader encounters it first.

Though Abinadi was not the first in the Book of Mormon to identify the Savior as the God of ancient Israel, he gives the topic such intensive and extensive coverage that if readers hadn't picked up on the concept earlier, they could scarcely miss it in the teachings of Abinadi. Abinadi mentions at least eleven times that "God himself" will be the Messiah. These are found in the following verses: Mosiah 13:28, 32, 33, 34–35;

15:1, 2–4, 5–7, 8, 23; 16:4, 15. A quick delineation of what Abinadi says in these verses is as follows:

1. “Were it not for the atonement, which God himself shall make, . . . they [all humankind] must unavoidably perish” (13:28).
2. “There could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God” (13:32).
3. Moses said that God should redeem his people. All the prophets ever since the world began have spoken concerning this same thing (13:33).
4. The prophets have said that “God himself should come down among men, and take upon him the form of man” and “bring to pass the resurrection” (13:34–35).
5. “I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among . . . men, and redeem his people” (15:1).
6. In Christ the attributes of mortal man and Eternal God are both in one person because he was conceived in the flesh by the power of God (15:2–4).
7. Although the Messiah has the attributes and will of the Father, he suffers temptation, but does not yield to the temptation. He is finally crucified and slain, “the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father” (15:5–7).
8. Thus God, being victorious over death, “breaketh the bands of death . . . for the children of men” (15:8).
9. The righteous will rise in the Resurrection “to dwell with God who has redeemed them” (15:23).
10. Because of the fall of our first parents, all humankind were “endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people” (16:4).
11. “Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father” (16:15).

Abinadi was evidently effective in making his point, for the formal charge brought against him by Noah and the priests was, “Thou art worthy of death. For thou hast said that God himself should come down among the children of men” (Mosiah 17:7–8).

A third major contribution of Abinadi’s teachings is his clarification about the resurrection of the dead. Others had mentioned the Resurrection, but Abinadi is the first in the Book

of Mormon to describe and use the phrase *first resurrection*. We would suppose that earlier prophets such as Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob knew the details of the first and subsequent resurrections, but in our present Book of Mormon record Abinadi is the first to speak of a first resurrection or to discuss the Resurrection in detail. His discourse on the subject begins in Mosiah 15:20 and extends through Mosiah 16:11, a total of two complete pages, or the equivalent of 22 column inches of material.

A quick summary of what Abinadi says about resurrection, especially the first resurrection, is as follows:

1. "The Son [of God] . . . hath power over the dead; therefore, he bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead" (Mosiah 15:20).
2. There is a first resurrection, consisting of those who have been, who are, and who shall be from the beginning down to the time of Christ. This means "all the prophets, and all those that have believed in their words, or all those that have kept the commandments"—they are the first resurrection (15:21–23).
3. Those who died in ignorance, before Christ came, to whom the plan of salvation was never declared, shall have part in the first resurrection (15:24).
4. "Little children [who die as little children] also have eternal life," which in the context of Abinadi's discourse means that they will be in the first resurrection (15:25).
5. If Christ had not broken the bands of death so that the grave could have no victory, there could have been no resurrection—but he did break the bands of death, and there is a resurrection, and "the grave hath no victory, and the sting of death is swallowed up in Christ" (16:6–8).
6. Resurrection means that "this mortal shall put on immortality," "that there can be no more death." The final judgment comes after the Resurrection (16:9–10).
7. The righteous shall be resurrected to a happy state; the wicked shall be resurrected to a state of damnation (16:11).

Abinadi's teachings are in harmony with the expanded knowledge we now have of the Resurrection through the revelations given to the Prophet Joseph Smith. However, Abinadi's

record does not tell it all. For example, Abinadi says that those who die in ignorance, “not having salvation declared unto them,” will have “a part in the first resurrection, or have eternal life” (Mosiah 15:24). Abinadi’s use of the phrase “eternal life” is not as precise as we have come to use it today; in the context of his discourse he was pointing out that those who die in ignorance, who never had a chance, are not overlooked or neglected by a merciful, all-wise, and powerful God. A more detailed discussion would point out that “all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God” (D&C 137:7). We have to conclude that Abinadi included this particular group of people when he spoke of the righteous. On the other hand, there would likely be some who would not have received the gospel with all their hearts, even if it had been offered. Among them would have been a number of good people who were not converted, and other people who were converted but not diligent. We learn from D&C 76:76–80 that many of these will inherit the terrestrial glory, which is also part of the first resurrection. Furthermore, we learn from D&C 45:54 that “the heathen nations” and “they that knew no law shall have part in the first resurrection.”

What Abinadi did not say, at least in the record we have of his teachings, is that those who die after the time of Christ, who are righteous, will also be in the first resurrection. The first resurrection that Abinadi spoke of consists of the righteous who lived from the time of Adam to the time of Christ. We who live after the time of Christ know of a “second session” of the first resurrection, one stretching from Jesus’ time to his second coming and then on through the Millennium. Abinadi spoke from his perspective; we speak from ours.

An interesting note is that in speaking of the righteous who have the gospel and obey it in mortal life, Abinadi says, “*They are* the first resurrection” (Mosiah 15:22; emphasis added). Whereas, in speaking of those who did not have the gospel and

who died in an ignorance not of their own making, he says, “They have *a part* in the first resurrection” (Mosiah 15:24; emphasis added). There is a distinction in the diction used here, but I am not certain what we can make of it.

There are other great things in Abinadi’s teachings, such as an identification of the “seed of Christ” and his marvelous use of Isaiah chapters 52 and 53, but these are dealt with by other participants in this symposium.

Ever present in Abinadi’s ministry is his awareness that he was a witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. First, he spoke in great plainness and with much energy and total commitment. Second, his words were fulfilled to the letter (Mosiah 20:21; Alma 25:9–12; Mormon 1:19). Third, Abinadi was fierce and strong, a terror to evil-doers. There is a significant lesson to be learned here. If he had not been so blunt and so obvious, the people might not have thought he meant what he said, nor would they have thought what he said was so important. His energy no doubt helped Alma to have the strength to repent. As in all good teaching, Abinadi communicated well, and was by his own person and his own words the greatest of object lessons. He needed no additional audio-visual aids. In Abinadi the Lord had just the right kind of person he needed for the situation.

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