
ALMA 36-42

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INTRODUCTION

Mormon pauses in the middle of the account of the start of the great Nephite wars to record Alma's fatherly counsel to his three sons, Helaman, Shibon, and Corianton. The proportion given to each is interesting: 6-1/2 pages to Helaman (36-37), 1 page to Shibon (38), and 8 pages to Corianton (39-42). All three sons receive thoughtful direction—and the retelling of Alma's conversion to both his older sons is priceless—but Corianton's sins trigger some great doctrinal discussion, which is certainly why Mormon included these chapters on the plates.

ALMA 36 TO HELAMAN: ALMA'S CONVERSION

The *Student Manual* (232) includes an instructive diagram of this entire chapter in chiasmic format. We have discussed chiasm before, but Alma 36 is a prime example of how that poetic form is used in the Book of Mormon. Every chiasmus has a central theme, which is at the heart of the parallel structure. In the case of Alma 36, the central theme is Jesus Christ, in verses 17-18. Before that the focus is on Alma's sin and pain; after that the focus is on his repentance and joy.

Helaman, Alma's oldest son, became the high priest and a military leader during this time of great war. It is he who led the sons of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (the people of Ammon) into battle. He preached with power and effectiveness. He was the keeper of the records after Alma's death.

1 *I swear unto you.* This specific phrase is used many times in the scriptures, especially the Old Testament, and the act of swearing is described even more often. Swearing in the scriptures generally has to do with making an oath. In fact, in Hebrew, 'swear' and 'oath' have the same root word. It was common to invoke the Lord's name when swearing to make the oath even more binding. In Jesus' day, the people had developed an elaborate system of swearing by different things (your head, the temple, etc.) to show how serious your oath was, which practice he condemned (Matt 5 and 23).

2 *remembering the captivity of our fathers.* 'Remember' is a key phrase in the Book of Mormon, but especially here in Alma's advice to Helaman. To Alma, to remember is an active verb, one which leads to action, to humility, and to obedience. Here he counsels Helaman to remember "the captivity of our fathers," which is sufficiently vague to be referring to the children of Israel in Egypt, to Alma's father during their time in Helam when they were captive to Amulon and the Lamanites, or to other events.

3 *thou art in thy youth.* Relative to Alma, that was probably true, but Helaman was not a young man. We don't know his age, but assuming this counsel was given in about the chronological order

Mormon includes it (year 18 of the judges), Helaman died just 17 years later (and apparently of old age, since his younger brother Shiblon died four years later). Helaman's son, also named Helaman, died 18 years later and already had a grown son, Nephi, so when Alma said this to Helaman, Helaman was already a father and perhaps even a grandfather.

5 *by the mouth of his holy angel.* Alma again related how an angel was the source of his knowledge of doctrine. From the context, this takes us to what Alma learned during the three days he was unconscious and being born again.

10 *three days and three nights.* As the *Student Manual* (233) notes and as we pointed out back in Mosiah, some have argued that the reference to this in Mosiah 27 that speaks of two days and two nights is a contradiction. But the Mosiah account clearly speaks of fasting for the shorter time, whereas Alma is here speaking of how long he was unconscious. It took a day to get everyone together and start the fast.

11 *heard by my brethren, but I did not hear them.* That means the account in Mosiah 27 is just Alma's, because it says, "these were the last words which the angel spake unto Alma" (Mosiah 27:17). True enough, but clearly the angel said more to the sons of Mosiah that Alma never heard. Also, as Alma recounted (verse 5), the angel told him more later.

12 *racked with eternal torment.* The term "racked" is not found in the Bible or in the Doctrine & Covenants. It has several meanings, but the relevant one here seems to relate to being tortured.

12 *my soul was harrowed up.* "Harrowed" is a farming term, meaning to plow a field. But speaking of a person, to be harrowed has the related meaning of being disturbed, distressed, and broken up.

14 *I had murdered many.* Alma clarifies this phrase next: he had "led them away unto destruction." It is not that Alma literally murdered anyone, but he equated teaching them evil things with murder.

17 *I remembered also...one Jesus Christ.* The turning point of Alma chiasm was the moment his remembered his father teaching about Christ and his atonement. As he thought on that, he cried out for mercy (verse 18), and was amazed to discover that he "could remember my pains no more" (verse 19).

20 *joy...light.* The reverse of the many words in verses 12-17 that describe his pain and suffering are joy and light. This is the result of being born again for Alma.

29 *retained in remembrance their captivity.* The point of remembering the many times God has delivered people from captivity is that it is a type of our own deliverance from the prison and slavery we allow ourselves to fall into by our sins and disobedience. Our Redeemer, Christ, is the one that frees us from this captivity—the only one who can, because of his personal sacrifice on our behalf.

ALMA 37 TO HELAMAN: HANDOFF OF THE SACRED RELICS

In this chapter, Alma is offering instruction to his oldest son, Helaman, about the sacred relics that have been handed down from the time of Nephi. The most important of these are the brass plates (verses 3-5), then keeping them in mind but adding "all the plates" of the Nephite people (5-20), he

teaches about the purpose and blessings of scriptures. Next he discussed the 24 plates of the Jaredites (21-32) and the lessons learned from that record. Some fatherly advice is shared in verses 33-37, then Alma turns his attention to the Liahona (38-46), drawing lessons from that ancient director as well.

1 *I command you.* This isn't just good advice, it is a commandment from father to son. Helaman is being charged with a serious responsibility.

2 *keep a record.* Alma commanded Helaman also to keep the record of the people on the plates of Nephi, as he had done. This assignment is short and without comment, compared to the long explanations and lessons drawn from the other things he assigned to Helaman, but he still emphasized that these are done "for a wise purpose."

3 *these plates of brass.* It had been about 500 years since Lehi and his family arrived in the New World when Alma brought out the brass plates to give to Helaman. These were sacred records and the core scriptures of the Nephites.

4 *until they should go forth.* Alma quoted Lehi from 1 Nephi 5:18.

5 *retain their brightness.* Brass plates after 500 years would normally have begun to turn greenish in color and lose their brightness. But with cleaning and good care, they could have looked as good as new. Alma's point is perhaps that the plates retain their brightness because they are "kept," or preserved and cared for.

5 *all the plates.* His comments are relevant not just to the brass plates but to all the Nephite records kept on plates.

6 *by small and simple things.* Alma quoted Nephi in 1 Nephi 16:29. Nephi, of course, is speaking of the "round ball of curious workmanship" that Lehi had found outside of his tent as they were about to leave the Valley of Lemuel. Alma will discuss that in a few verses, but in the meantime uses that reference and applies it to the records of the Nephites written on plates. See Elder Ballard's comments on *Student Manual*, 235.

8 *they have enlarged the memory of this people.* The scriptures serve to remind us of many things—God's love, his covenant with Israel, the great plan of happiness, and much more. Citing the scriptures certainly can enlarge the memory of an entire people.

9 *convinced so many thousands of the Lamanites.* We have talked earlier about the power of the scriptures as used by the sons of Mosiah during their missionary efforts among the Lamanites (e.g., Alma 18:36). Now Alma taught that not only were the scriptures used by the missionaries, but without them, they would not have experienced the same success.

11 *therefore I shall forbear.* A favorite scripture of a good friend of mine, quoted whenever he doesn't know an answer to a question.

13 *remember, remember.* The repetition of the phrase serves to emphasize the command. The word "remember" is also used in verse 14, 32, and 35 in this chapter. In, it (and its various forms) is used more times in the Book of Mormon than any other book of scripture, including the much longer Old Testament. And in the Book of Mormon, it's used in Alma more than anywhere else by nearly 2-to-1.

21 **those twenty-four plates.** The twenty-four plates are those found by the men sent by Limhi to try and find Zarahemla (Mosiah 8). We know they are the records of the Jaredites. Alma feared them greatly because they mentioned “works of darkness” where those people had made “secret murders and abominations” (verse 22) which led to their destruction. Fearing the same destruction for his own people, he counseled Helaman not to teach them.

these interpreters. This refers to the Urim and Thummim kept among the Nephites and used by Mosiah to translate the plates.

23 **Gazelem.** Bruce McConkie (*Mormon Doctrine*) determined that Gazelem was Joseph Smith, because he used a stone to translate ancient records, as this verse says will happen. Others think the name applies to the stone (meaning the punctuation should be “unto my servant, Gazelem a stone...”). Skousen (4:2361) believes the evidence is in favor of it being a person.

33-34 **Preach unto them.** Having counseled Helaman not to teach the things on the 24 plates, Alma summarized what he should preach: repentance, faith, humility, resist temptation, and do good works. To emphasize meekness, he said it twice.

36-37 This is a quote or paraphrase from Amulek, who was quoting/paraphrasing Zenos (Alma 34:18-27).

38 **our fathers called it Liahona.** This is the only place we get the name of the ball, director, or compass. Alma said it was the name given to it by “our fathers,” which presumably means Lehi and Nephi. Jonathan Curci explains in great detail the Hebrew meaning of this term, which is basically “the direction of the Lord.”

		Hebrew is read from right to left
ôna	iaho	l
“whither” or direction	theophoric indicator of YHWH	to
<p>Liahona means “the direction (director) of the Lord,” or literally “to the YHWH is the whither.”</p> <p>The term <i>Liahona</i> is composed of three words: the first part of the name <i>li</i> לְ indicates the possession of something; <i>iaho</i> יְהוָה exhibits the fingerprints of the tetragrammaton YHWH, i.e., the Lord; and <i>ona</i> אָנָּה is an adverb that means direction or motion to a certain place.</p>		

43 **these things are not without a shadow.** See comments from several in *Student Manual*, 236-237, especially Elder Bednar.

46 **the way.** Like the early Christians, there are many instances where Book of Mormon leaders mention “the way” referring directly to Christ.

ALMA 38 TO SHIBLON: TEACH THE WORD

Shiblon's counsel from his father is nearly identical to that given to Helaman, but in a condensed format. Perhaps Shiblon heard the other counsel and so Alma felt no need to fully repeat himself, and certainly Shiblon wasn't given the charge of the sacred relics (though he will receive that responsibility for a short time when Helaman dies—Alma 63:1).

4 *in bonds...wast stoned.* Alma's comment here about Shiblon helps us understand why the brethren got out of town so quickly after Alma and Amulek's discourses in Alma 32-34. Perhaps that's when they discovered that Shiblon had been stoned and imprisoned, and were somehow able to secure his release, but then left to avoid any further persecution?

7 *sent his angel.* This is the third and final telling of Alma's encounter with the angel.

ALMA 39 TO CORIANTON:

As mentioned above, Alma spent the most time with his son Corianton, who had rebelled in the middle of a mission. Sometimes parents are saddened today when missionaries come home early because of mistakes and bad choices, but imagine being in essence your son's missionary companion when that happened? Alma shows great patience and love, and in the end helps redeem his son, who returns to preaching (Alma 49:30).

3 *the land of Siron.* This is the only mention of this land. It was near "the borders of the Lamanites," but that was true of the mission to the Zoramites, so it appears to be somewhere south of Jershon but north of the Lamanite lands near there.

the harlot Isabel. It is perhaps ironic that of the three women mentioned by name in the Book of Mormon (who are Book of Mormon characters), one would be a harlot. She was quite well-known, apparently, and "did steal away the hearts of many" (verse 4). Shiblon fell prey to her attractions.

5 *most abominable above all sins.* Sexual sins are the most serious things a person can do in the Lord's eye, except for murder and denying the Holy Ghost. Our society today only understands the seriousness of murder—the other two get a pass. But that is not God's way.

9 *go no more after the lusts of your eyes.* It is a common pattern that sexual sin starts with the eyes. Pornography and other activities nearly always precede adultery, fornication, and other such acts.

11 *they would not believe in my words.* While Shiblon's stoning and imprisonment may have motivated the timing to leave the Zoramites, Corianton's actions contributed to the reason for leaving—Alma's effectiveness was stifled by his son's bad example.

14 *See not after riches.* Evidently, Isabel's attractiveness was more than physical. She probably led a wealthy lifestyle that appealed to Corianton, who, because of his father's selfless service to the Church, was probably not raised in wealth.

17 *you marvel why these things should be known so long beforehand.* Corianton had fallen into the Nehorite trap—you cannot know the future. But Alma points to God's eternal fairness and the ease of sending other divine beings to declare the future. Why shouldn't everyone know of Christ?

ALMA 40 THE RESURRECTION

1 ***thy mind is worried concerning the resurrection of the dead.*** At first mention, this seems like an odd topic for someone who has spent time with harlots and chasing after wealth to worry about. But the chapter makes it clear that it wasn't just the doctrinal question of when and how the resurrection takes place that trouble Corianton, but what follows—judgment.

3 ***I have inquired diligently of God.*** Alma wanted to know this as well, and it was “a mystery” that he had labored over, so now he shared with his son—and us—what he had learned from his labors.

4 ***when this time cometh no one knows.*** We know more about some of details of the resurrection today because of other Book of Mormon prophets and because of modern revelation, such as D&C 76.

9 ***this is the thing of which I do know.*** After going through his uncertain knowledge of the timing of the resurrection, he gets down to something of which he is sure—what happens to us after death. His source is “an angel”—perhaps the same one he had seen at least twice before.

12 ***a state of happiness, which is called paradise.*** The spirit world where we all go after this life is not a single place. Part of it is a place of joy, and is thus called paradise, where the righteous rest and have peace.

13 ***outer darkness.*** Alma does not use the term as we do, as shown by the context. He is not talking about the ultimate destination of the sons of perdition, but is contrasting the joy of paradise with the location of the wicked, which is characterized by darkness and misery. This is where each remain “until the time of their resurrection” (verse 14).

15 ***a first resurrection.*** Alma called upon the words of Abinadi, recorded by his father (Mosiah 15) to clarify the doctrine in this section.

18 ***reuniting of the soul with the body.*** Though taught by Christ's example in the New Testament and clear to us because of the teachings of modern prophets, much of the Christian world is very confused about the nature of the resurrection. They simply need to read and believe this one verse to solve a debate that has been going on for centuries.

20 ***I give it as my opinion.*** Alma delineates between what the angel taught him and about which he is sure with his personal opinion, which is still founded on thoughtful study and pondering.

21 ***there is a space.*** Alma's main point is that there is a time between death and the final judgment.

ALMA 41

1 ***some have wrested the scriptures.*** Alma had dealt with his share of people who had “wrested the scriptures” during his lifetime, including the Nehor, the Amlicites, Korihor, and the Zoramites.

2 ***the plan of restoration.*** “Restoration” in the Book of Mormon generally is an equivalent to “resurrection,” and certainly here in Alma's teachings.

5 **according to his desires.** We are judged by both our works (verses 3-4) and our desires, receiving the reward that we most desire.

9 **do not risk one more offense.** Alma knows how hard it is to repent and counsels his son to cease sinning. A person cannot repent who is continuing to sin, but must abandon that sin completely before the healing process can truly begin.

11 **without God in the world.** To be in a state of wickedness that excludes God from your life is, to Alma, “contrary to the nature of happiness.”

14 **mercy...justice...righteous judgment restored.** Alma takes the word “restored” and applies it to judgment in a brilliant example of logic and reason. If the resurrection is a “restoration,” how can it be different than the life the person already lived? How can a wicked person be “restored” to a goodness never experienced?

ALMA 42

1 **it is injustice.** Corianton continued to exhibit the influence of Nephite apostate teachings. In this case, Alma said that he (Corianton) thinks it is unjust for God to punish a person for sins.

4 **a probationary time.** Alma explained that the fall actually created the probationary state that we enjoy, so that we are not immediately punished for sin. We know what is right and wrong, since Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of knowledge, but our ability to partake of the tree of life and live forever is delayed. This allows us “a time to repent and serve God.”

7 **cut off both temporally and spiritually.** Alma means that Adam and Eve became subject to both death (temporal) and a separation from God (spiritual).

15 **God himself atoneth for the sins of the world.** Because of God’s perfection, without the atonement, he could only extend justice to us sinners. But because of the sacrifice of a God, Jesus Christ, he can extend both justice and mercy to us.

23 **mercy...atonement...resurrection...judged.** In a single verse, Alma summarizes the marvelous logic of the plan. Our role is to be “the penitent,” pleading with God for forgiveness and striving to live according to the law. The rest is brought about by the atonement of Christ, giving us mercy in judgment to overcome the spiritual death, and resurrection of body and soul, overcoming our temporal death.

29 **only let your sins trouble you.** Repentance is a core doctrine of the gospel because it is what we have to focus on. That is what is within our power to do. The rest is grace, given to us by the mercy of God because of Jesus’ sacrifice.

31 **ye are called of God.** This story has a very happy ending. Corianton did repent and did resume his ministry—see Alma 49:30.

WORKS CONSULTED

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