

General Comments on Alma 36-42

These chapters form Alma's closing remarks to his sons shortly before his departure from the land of Zarahemla, probably a few months later (cf. 45:18). It is plain from his own comments he is less than happy with the condition of the Nephites (cf. 29:1-8, 31:26-35), and Mormon portrays Alma as unhappy (cf. 35:15). Alma has spent a great deal of time trying to keep the Nephites on the right track, and has had mixed results. He apparently has had enough of the Nephites, and he just leaves. But, before doing so he gives his sons Helaman (ch. 36-37), Shiblon (ch. 38), and Corianton (ch. 39-42) with his final blessings. We might speculate that in the remaining time before he leaves, Alma is traveling around to the other churches in and around Zarahemla to put them in order as well.

From these chapters it is safe to assume Alma only had three sons. As far as daughters, there is no mention of any. Given the nature of the text focusing on Alma's ministry, and not his personal life, it is possible he had younger sons and daughters, but they didn't play an active role in Alma's ministry, so they didn't end up in the text. He obviously had a wife at some point, but there is no mention of her either. As his departure in 45:18 presents it as a solitary event it is safe to assume he is a widower at that point. It seems unlikely Alma would abandon non-adult children, so he probably had no younger children than the three sons mentioned. If there were daughters, they were likely peers to the three sons, and presumably married by this point.

The complex and deliberate structure of these chapters, and lack of conversation between Alma and his sons, point plainly to the text originally being three letters written to each of his sons and given to them prior to his departure from the land of Zarahemla. The letter would have then been scribed into the record, presumably by Shiblon as he inherited the plates from Alma. Or, perhaps Alma himself inscribed them prior to leaving. Now, this is not to say Alma didn't deliver the content of the letters to his sons verbally, but the text of these chapters is clearly a deliberately crafted work, and not the recounting of an extemporaneous dialogue.

Comments on Alma 36

This chapter is a more verbose and stylized account of the events detailed in Mosiah 27.

The text of this chapter is highly structured, there are microstructures within macrostructures. The format is clearly deliberate on Alma's part as the account is a verbatim quotation of Alma from his own record (cf. 35:16), and not a stylized arrangement after the fact by Mormon. Given its complexity it is safe to assume this work took a considerable amount of time to compose and Alma invested a great deal of effort to do so.

This is probably the best-known chapter in the Book of Mormon when it comes to the subject of textual structure and Semitic poetical devices. It has been featured in numerous articles, including the [Ensign \(October, 1989, Donald W. Parry, Hebrew Literary Patterns in the Book of Mormon\)](#).

The primary subject of the chapter is Alma's conversion to the gospel. But, there are a number of sub-themes as well. One of the more obvious sub-themes is that of corporate versus individual salvation and how they interact. In v. 1-2 and 28-30 Alma emphasizes the importance of remembering Israel's history and all the Lord has done for his fathers. This is in accordance with the angel's admonition in Mos. 27:16 (also cp. 5:2-5 where Alma tells the Nephites at Zarahemla to do the same).

His statements concerning remembering Israel's history bracket his recounting of his own conversion story (v. 3-28). What is the connection? As the Nephites are natural Israel (the descendants of Lehi through Manasseh, and the descendants of Mulek through Judah) the various covenants which apply to Israel apply to them as well. The various covenant blessings and curses in the Law (cf. Lev. 26, Deut. 28) all apply to them as well. And, as the nation of Israel is composed of many individuals, the Lord is bound to deal with individuals as well as nations.

In this particular case, the Lord was very merciful to Alma in not destroying him outright, but rebuking him and giving him an opportunity to repent (v. 6-10). The result was Alma repented (v. 11-22) and became zealous for the Lord (v. 23-27).

And this follows the typical covenant curse pattern where the Lord chastens Israel until they repent. So, the large-scale corporate dealings of the Lord filter their way down to individuals.

Also note the way Alma personalizes the typically corporate formula for being cut off or prospered in the land in v. 30. This admonition is most often used in a corporate sense (cf. 9:13, 1 Ne. 2:3-4, 2 Ne. 1:9, Jarom 1:9), but King Benjamin also personalizes it (cf. Mos. 1:7).

For a similar discourse on applying the general covenants with Israel as a whole to a relatively small group, compare Limhi's comments in Mos. 7:17-33.

Another sub-theme through this chapter is the Lord as Deliverer. The Lord delivered their fathers (v. 2, 28), he delivered the church from Alma's subversions (v. 6-9), he delivered Alma from death and hell (v. 15-19), and then delivered Alma from trials and tribulations (v. 27). The role of "Deliverer" here is defined as both physical and spiritual, as well as both corporate and individual. And, clearly, it necessarily implies the Lord is very active at both the corporate and individual levels.

1 MY son, give ear to my words; for I swear unto you, that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land.

v1 A standard covenant blessing. Those who keep the commandments of the Lord are blessed by Him. Note the counter in v. 30 contains both blessing and curse.

2 I would that ye should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he surely did deliver them in their afflictions.

v2 Alma brings to mind their Israelite lineage, necessarily implying they inherit all of the covenants that go with it.

3 And now, O my son Helaman, behold, thou art in thy youth, and therefore, I beseech of thee that thou wilt hear my words and learn of me; for I do know that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day.

v3 Alma applies broad covenant theology to the individual. As members of covenant Israel, the individual Israelites participate in this covenant.

"thou art in thy youth", Helaman is the oldest son, and since Corianton is at least post-puberty and Shiblon was born in between it is safe to assume Helaman is at least in his early 20's. He might be as young as 18, but that seems unlikely as Alma makes him high priest less than a year later, cf. 45:2. v14 "I had murdered", speaking of causing spiritual death and not physical death, as is made plain when he says "or rather led them unto destruction".

4 And I would not that ye think that I know of myself--not of the temporal but of the spiritual, not of the carnal mind but of God. 5 Now, behold, I say unto you, if I had not been born of God I should not have known these things; but God has, by the mouth of his holy angel, made these things known unto me, not of any worthiness of myself; 6 For I went about with the sons of Mosiah, seeking to destroy the church of God; but behold, God sent his holy angel to stop us by the way. 7 And behold, he spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet; and we all fell to the earth, for the fear of the Lord came upon us. 8 But behold, the voice said unto me: Arise. And I arose and stood up, and beheld the angel. 9 And he said unto me: If thou wilt of thyself be destroyed, seek no more to destroy the church of God.

v4-8 Alma recounts his early history as a his testimony of what happened to precipitate the confrontation with an angel.

10 And it came to pass that I fell to the earth; and it was for the space of three days and three nights that I could not open my mouth, neither had I the use of my limbs. 11 And the angel spake more things unto me, which were heard by my brethren, but I did not hear them; for when I heard the words--If thou wilt be destroyed of thyself, seek no more to destroy the church of God--I was struck with such great fear and amazement lest perhaps I should be destroyed, that I fell to the earth and I did hear no more. 12 But I was racked with eternal torment, for my soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree and racked with all my sins. 13 Yea, I did remember all my sins and iniquities, for which I was tormented with the pains of hell; yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments. 14 Yea, and I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction; yea, and in fine so great had been my iniquities, that the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror. 15 Oh, thought I, that I could be banished and become extinct both soul and body, that I might not be brought to stand in the presence of my God, to be judged of my deeds. 16 And now, for three days and for three nights was I racked, even with the pains of a damned soul. 17 And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins,

v10-17 The confrontation makes Alma realize that everything he was fighting against was in fact true, and his efforts to

overthrow the church caused him realize he had jeopardized himself and others as well.

behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world. 18 Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death. 19 And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. 20 And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! 21 Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy. 22 Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there.

v17-22 Alma recalls his father's teachings concerning the Messiah, and he appeals to Him, and has his guilt swept away. He has a vision of God surrounded by angels, and wishes to be with them.

v22 The comments in this verse are similar to those in 19:33-34 where the people who had collapsed and then revived says they had seen and conversed with angels, apparently during this time he had physically collapsed. Here, Alma informs us he had physically collapsed as well, and after repenting he apparently sees into heaven. Taking these together it would appear when these people had collapsed their spirits had fled their bodies and gone into the presence of God and/or angels.

23 But behold, my limbs did receive their strength again, and I stood upon my feet, and did manifest unto the people that I had been born of God. 24 Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. 25 Yea, and now behold, O my son, the Lord doth give me exceedingly great joy in the fruit of my labors; 26 For because of the word which he has imparted unto me, behold, many have been born of God, and have tasted as I have tasted, and have seen eye to eye as I have seen; therefore they do know of these things of which I have spoken, as I do know; and the knowledge which I have is of God.

v22 But, Alma doesn't die and go praise God at his throne, instead he returns to himself, revives and commits to preaching repentance so others might experience the joy he has.

27 And I have been supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and in all manner of afflictions; yea, God has delivered me from prison, and from bonds, and from death;

yea, and I do put my trust in him, and he will still deliver me. 28 And I know that he will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory; yea, and I will praise him forever,

v27-28 Alma has been supported in many ways and delivered from many mortal threats, and knows he will be delivered from death and hell.

v27 "supported under trials and troubles", such as those in ch. 9-14 as well as any other personal struggles.

v28 "I know that he will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory", while this might be Alma hinting he has had his calling and election made sure, it could also simply be an expression of confidence in the Lord. Given the context, it seems likely it is the latter, as this is a poetical accounting of faith and experiences, as opposed to a doctrinal statement of fact.

for he has brought our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by his power into the promised land; yea, and he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time. 29 Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time even down to the present day; and I have always retained in remembrance their captivity; yea, and ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity.

v28-29 The Lord delivered Israel anciently, and brought them, the Lehighites to this promised land, and continues to deliver the Nephites from the Lamanites. Alma tells Helaman he needs to remember these things.

30 But behold, my son, this is not all; for ye ought to know as I do know, that inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land; and ye ought to know also, that inasmuch as ye will not keep the commandments of God ye shall be cut off from his presence. Now this is according to his word.

v30 Alma reiterates the covenant blessing, but warns that failure to keep the commandments results in covenant curses.

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