

Alma 17 — They Had Searched the Scriptures Diligently — The Sons of Mosiah, the Fourteen-Year Lamanite Mission, and Ammon at the Waters of Sebus

Alma 17: Mormon opens his great flashback. The chapter rolls back fourteen years to the first year of the reign of the judges (c. 91 BC), when Alma met the four sons of Mosiah — Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni — in the borders of Zarahemla as they were returning from their Lamanite mission. Mormon then narrates the whole mission from its beginning: their refusal of the kingship (Mosiah 28), their fourteen-year preparation in fasting, prayer, and the searching of the scriptures, their entry into the land of Nephi, the Lord's promise that he would make them instruments in his hand, their separation to different cities, Ammon's choice to go to the land of Ishmael, his offering to be a servant before King Lamoni, the king's flocks at the waters of Sebus, the scattering ambush, Ammon's lone defense, the severed arms, and the bringing of those arms to the king.

Alma 17 is the chapter where Mormon stops the forward narrative and circles back. The previous chapters have been moving through the eleventh year of the judges — Ammonihah destroyed, the captives recovered, the church established at Sidom. Now Mormon turns and tells us what has been happening at the same time on the other side of the country. Fourteen years ago, the four sons of Mosiah refused the throne and went on mission to the Lamanites. The mission has been running for fourteen years. They are now coming home — but before Mormon shows us their return, he shows us the work.

Hebrew Word Studies

keli / darash / tzom-tefillah / yad (כֵּל / דָּרַשׁ / צוֹם / תְּפִלָּה / יָד) — **instrument, vessel, tool / to seek, search out, inquire / fast and prayer / hand, arm, power vv. 2, 3, 9, 11, 39.** Four Hebrew words underlie the chapter's vocabulary of preparation and instrument. *Keli* — instrument, vessel, tool — is the noun in Acts 9:15 when the Lord names Saul *a chosen vessel*, *skeuos eklogos* in Greek, *keli bachir* in Hebrew. When Alma 17:11 says *I will make an instrument of thee in my hands*, the underlying construction is *kelei yad*, vessels in the hand. The Sons of Mosiah are not volunteers; they are vessels, fashioned by fourteen years of preparation. *Darash* — to seek, search out, inquire — is the verb behind *midrash* (interpretation) and *darshan* (the one who expounds the Torah). Ezra 7:10 is the foundational text: *Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments*. When the chapter says the Sons of Mosiah had *searched the scriptures diligently*, the Hebrew underneath is the same root. They are doing what Ezra did. *Tzom-tefillah* — fasting and prayer — appears together in Ezra 8:23 (*we fasted and besought our God*), Nehemiah 1:4 (*I fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven*), and Daniel 9:3 (*to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting*). The Book of Mormon places the same paired discipline at the foundation of every Nephite missionary preparation. *Yad* — hand, arm, power — appears over 1,600 times in the Hebrew Bible. Exodus 13:9 captures its theological force: *with a strong hand hath the Lord brought thee out of Egypt*. Alma 17 plays the word two ways. The Sons of Mosiah are *kelei be-yad*, vessels in his hand. The Lamanite attackers at Sebus have their *yadot*, their arms, cut off. Whose arm is in whose hand is the chapter's underlying drama.

From the Chapter's Architecture

Finally, the chapter sets up everything that follows. The arms in verse 39 become the question in Alma 18:2 — is not this the Great Spirit? The Lord's promise in verse 11 — I will make an instrument of thee — becomes the conversion of King Lamoni in Alma 18, of his household and servants in Alma 19, of the land of Middoni in Alma 20, of the king's father in Alma 22, and of the seven cities in Alma 23. One of the great mission arcs of the canon begins in this chapter, and the chapter is careful to show that the arc began, fourteen years earlier, on the brass plates in four young men's hands.