

Alma 23 — They Never Did Fall Away — Seven Cities Converted, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies Named, and the Exceptions

Alma 23: the great king's proclamation has gone out. Aaron and his brethren are given free passage to preach in every Lamanite city. The chapter is the report of what happened. Thousands of Lamanites were converted. Seven specific cities are named — the lands of Ishmael, Middoni, Nephi, Shilom, Shemlon, Lemuel, and Shimnilom. The chapter contains the Book of Mormon's most striking statement about Lamanite conversion: as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away. The chapter also names the exceptions: the Amalekites and the Amulonites did not convert, save it were one. The converted Lamanites, under the new king's guidance, take a new name to distinguish themselves from their unconverted brethren — Anti-Nephi-Lehies. The conversion is so complete that prosperity, peace, and the love of the brethren mark the entire territory.

Alma 23 is one of the Book of Mormon's most quietly extraordinary chapters. The great king's proclamation in Alma 22 has done what the proclamation said it would do. The missionaries have gone from city to city; the message has been preached; thousands have believed. The chapter is the after-action report. Seven specific cities are named, and one statement, more than any other in the chapter, sets it apart in the canon: *as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away.*

Hebrew Word Studies

shev / shem-chadash / sheva-arim / qelalah (שָׁבַע / שֵׁשׁ עָרִים / שֵׁשׁ עָרִים / הִלָּלָה) — **to return, repent / new name / seven cities / curse vv. 6, 9–12, 17, 18.** Four Hebrew constructions sit beneath the chapter's report of permanent conversion. *Shev* — to return, to turn back — is the verb behind *teshuvah*, the standard Jewish word for repentance. The verb runs through Joel 2:13 (*turn unto the Lord your God*), Isaiah 30:15 (*in returning and rest shall ye be saved*), and Hosea 14:1 (*O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God*). The chapter's *never did fall away* clause names the practical opposite of the cyclic Israelite *shuv-and-revert* pattern: these Lamanite converts returned and did not revert. The Book of Mormon's clearest text on the *teshuvah* that holds is in this chapter. *Shem chadash* — new name — is the construct of *shem* (name) and *chadash* (new). It appears in Isaiah 62:2 (*thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name*) and Revelation 2:17 (*and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it*). When the Anti-Nephi-Lehies receive their new name, the chapter is enacting the Isaian *shem chadash* doctrine — the corporate version of the white stone of Revelation 2:17. *Sheva arim* — seven cities — is the construct of *sheva* (seven) and *arim* (cities). The list of seven specific cities in vv. 9–12 — Ishmael, Middoni, Nephi, Shilom, Shemlon, Lemuel, Shimnilom — is precisely seven, the scriptural number of completeness. The chapter is not numerologically casual; the count of seven echoes the seven churches of Revelation, the seven nations of Canaan, the seven feasts of Israel. *Qelalah* — curse — is the noun in Genesis 27:13 (*upon me be thy curse, my son*) and Deuteronomy 28's covenant curses. The chapter's *the curse of God did no more follow them* uses the *qelalah* concept from 2 Nephi 5:21 and Alma 3 — the curse that fell on the rebellious Lamanite founders. The verse declares it lifted. The Book of Mormon's clearest text on the doctrine that the *qelalah* of apostasy is conditional and removable by genuine *teshuvah* is in verse 18.

From the Chapter's Architecture

The chapter is the textual hinge into Alma 24. The Amalekites and Amulonites, named in verse 14 as the exception to the conversion, will be the engine of the Lamanite assault that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies will face. The peace of Alma 23 will be tested in Alma 24. The weapons that have been laid down will not be picked up again — and 1,005 of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies will die for the discipline they have just covenanted to keep. The chapter that ended in peace is setting up the chapter that ends in martyrdom. Both chapters are the same story.