
Alma 28 — A Tremendous Battle, and Then a Tremendous Silence — The Great War, the Mourning of a Nation, and the Inequality of Man Because of Sin

Alma 28: c. 77 BC, the fifteenth year of the reign of the judges. No sooner are the people of Ammon settled safely in Jershon than the Lamanite armies that pursued them out of the wilderness fall upon the Nephites who now stand between them and their former prey. The result is the most terrible battle yet recorded in Nephite history — tens of thousands of Lamanites slain, a tremendous slaughter among the Nephites too. The Lamanites are driven back, the people of Nephi return home, and the land falls into a great mourning. Mormon, the old soldier abridging from a thousand years' distance, lays down his narrator's pen and reflects: the same death that consigns some to endless woe raises others to the right hand of God, and the difference between the two is sin. The chapter is the quiet, sober epilogue to the whole Anti-Nephi-Lehi arc — the cost of the rescue counted in graves, and the meaning of the graves weighed in the balance of Christ.

Alma 28 is a short chapter, and most of it is a battle, but the battle is not the point. The point is what Mormon does after the battle — he stops narrating and starts mourning, and then he turns the mourning into doctrine. This is the editorial epilogue to the long Sons-of-Mosiah arc that began back in Alma 17. The people of Ammon have just been rescued and settled in Jershon (Alma 27); the price of that rescue comes due immediately in Alma 28, because the Lamanite armies that chased them out of the wilderness now crash against the Nephites who agreed to defend them. The chapter counts the cost of mercy in bodies, and then it asks what the bodies mean.

Hebrew Word Studies

***mispar* / *sheol* / *yeshuah* (מִסְפָּר / שְׁאוֹל / יְשׁוּעָה) — number, count, reckoning / the grave, the realm of the dead / salvation, deliverance, victory vv. 2, 11, 12.** Three Hebrew words sit beneath Mormon's reckoning of the dead. *Mispar* — number — is the noun behind the Hebrew theology of counting the slain and counting the saved. The same root names the book of *Bemidbar* (Numbers), with its censuses of the living and tallies of the fallen. Mormon's "tens of thousands... slain" and "many thousands... laid low" (vv. 2, 11) is the grim *mispar* of war; but the Hebrew mind also held that the Lord keeps a different *mispar* — "he telleth the number of the stars" (Ps. 147:4), and he numbers his people for salvation (Alma 26:37, "he numbereth his people"). The chapter sets the two reckonings side by side: the body count of the battlefield and the saved-count at the right hand of God. *Sheol* — the grave, the shadowed realm of the dead — is the Hebrew word for the destination Mormon fears for the unrepentant dead, the "state of endless wo" of verse 11. In the Hebrew Bible *Sheol* is the pit all the dead descend to; but the later prophetic hope, voiced in passages like Psalm 16:10 and Hosea 13:14, is that God will redeem the faithful *from* the power of *Sheol*. Verse 12's "raised to dwell at the right hand of God" is exactly that redemption — the faithful dead not held by *Sheol* but raised out of it. *Yeshuah* — salvation, and also victory and deliverance — is the root of the name Joshua and of the name Jesus (*Yeshua*), and its double meaning is the chapter's quiet hinge. In Hebrew the same word means "salvation" and "military victory," and Alma 28 holds both senses at once: the Nephites win a *yeshuah* on the battlefield (v. 3, the Lamanites "driven and scattered"), but the only *yeshuah* Mormon finally cares about is the one in verse 14, "the light of Christ unto life" — the salvation that the battlefield victory cannot give and the grave cannot take.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Gen. 23:1–4 (Abraham mourning and weeping for Sarah, then burying his dead — the dignity of grief behind vv. 4–5); Num. 1:2; 26:2 (the census, the mispar of the people — substrate for the counting of v. 2); 2 Sam. 1:17–27 (David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, how are the mighty fallen — the war-lament tradition behind vv. 4–5); Job 19:25–26 (I know that my redeemer liveth... in my flesh shall I see God — the resurrection knowledge of v. 12); Ps. 16:9–11 (thou wilt not leave my soul in hell... at thy right hand are pleasures for evermore — direct parallel to v. 12's right hand of God); Ps. 23:4 (though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil — the deathless peace behind v. 12); Ps. 90:3–10 (Moses on the brevity of life and the thousand years of the Lord — the mortality-reckoning mood of vv. 10–11); Ps. 147:4 (he telleth the number of the stars — the divine mispar set against the war-count, v. 2); Eccl. 3:1–4 (a time to weep, and a time to laugh... a time to mourn — the sorrow-and-joy doubleness of v. 14); Isa. 25:8 (he will swallow up death in victory; and... wipe away tears from off all faces — the consolation behind vv. 12, 14); Hos. 13:14 (I will ransom them from the power of the grave — the redemption-from-Sheol of v. 12); Matt. 9:37–38 (the harvest... is plenteous, but the labourers are few... pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest — the call of diligence to labor in the vineyards of v. 14); Matt. 25:46 (these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal — the two destinies of vv. 11–12); Lk. 16:22–26 (Lazarus and the rich man, the great fixed gulf between the two dead — the inequality of v. 13); Jn. 5:28–29 (the resurrection of life and the resurrection of damnation — the doctrinal frame of vv. 11–12); 1 Cor. 15:54–57 (death is swallowed up in victory — the resurrection triumph of v. 12); Rev. 14:13 (blessed are the dead which die in the Lord... they rest from their labours — the right-hand rest of v. 12); 2 Ne. 9:10–16 (the two-fold resurrection and the destinies of the righteous and the wicked dead — the doctrinal source behind vv. 11–13); Mosiah 16:11 (the resurrection to endless life and happiness or endless damnation — direct parallel to vv. 11–12); Alma 4:15 (the earlier inequality of pride — the word Mormon redeploys at a deeper level in v. 13); Alma 6:6 (the church's fasting and mighty prayer — the practice the whole nation adopts at v. 6); Alma 24:19–30; 25:9–17 (Mormon's prior editorial reflections — the abridger's stepping-forward that v. 8–14 continues); Alma 26 (the incomprehensible joy of v. 8); Alma 27:23, 28 (the Nephite defense pledge whose cost is paid here, and the people of Ammon's deathless resurrection hope echoed at v. 12); Alma 40–42 (Alma's coming discourses on the state of the dead, resurrection, and justice — the full doctrine vv. 11–13 anticipate); D&C 42:45–46 (thou shalt weep for the loss of them that die... they that die in me shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet — the sorrow-and-joy of v. 14); D&C 76:50–112 (the degrees of glory — the later unfolding of the inequality of destiny named in v. 13); D&C 138:12–19 (the righteous dead in joy awaiting the resurrection — the right-hand state of v. 12). ``