
Alma 29 — O That I Were an Angel — A Psalm of Holy Desire and Holier Restraint

Alma 29: c. 76 BC, the sixteenth year of the reign of the judges, a season of continual peace in the land. Set in the same stretch of years as Ammon's hymn in Alma 26, this short chapter is Alma's own psalm — the companion song to Ammon's. Overwhelmed by the harvest he and the sons of Mosiah have seen, Alma cries out a wish so large it would shake the earth: that he might be an angel and preach repentance to every soul alive. Then he catches himself. The wish, he realizes, is a kind of sin — a quarrel with the wisdom of a God who grants to every nation its own teachers and to every soul its own desire. The chapter is the inward turn of a great missionary heart learning the difference between holy zeal and holy contentment, and finding its deepest joy not in its own reach but in the repentance of others.

Alma 29 is seventeen verses long, and it is almost entirely interior. There is no narrative here — no battle, no journey, no convert named. It is a man alone with a longing, watching that longing get too big, and bringing it back under the discipline of God's will. After the great public events of the preceding chapters — Korihor will come in the very next chapter, but in the book's order Alma has just been reflecting on the harvest of the sons of Mosiah's mission — the record stops and lets us hear Alma think. What we get is one of the two great psalms of the Book of Alma. Ammon sang his in chapter 26; this is Alma's, and the two belong side by side. Ammon's hymn is about joy that fears it has become boasting. Alma's is about desire that fears it has become rebellion. Both men are wrestling with the same problem from opposite sides: how does a soul on fire for God keep the fire holy?

Hebrew Word Studies

chelqi / ratson / mal'akh (חֶלְקִי / רַצּוֹן / מַלְאָךְ) — **my portion, my allotted share / will, desire, good pleasure, favor / messenger, angel, one who is sent vv. 1, 3, 4.** Three Hebrew words sit under the chapter's argument. *Chelqi* — "my portion" — is the language of the allotted inheritance, the lot that gave each Israelite tribe and family its measured share of the land (Josh. 18–19). But the word's most beautiful use is when the portion is not land but God himself: *the Lord is my portion (chelqi)*, saith my soul (Lam. 3:24), and *thou art my portion, O Lord* (Ps. 119:57), and the Levites, who received no land, were told *I am thy portion and thine inheritance* (Num. 18:20). When Alma says he ought to be *content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me* (v. 3), he is using exactly this theology: a faithful man's *chelqi* is assigned by God, and to despise its size — even out of zeal — is to want a portion other than the one the Lord himself has become for you. *Ratson* — will, desire, good pleasure — is the word behind the chapter's repeated *desire* and *will*. It is what God *granteth unto men according to* (v. 4); but in its highest use *ratson* is God's own good pleasure, the favor that *endureth a lifetime* (Ps. 30:5) and the *acceptable year of the Lord*, literally the *year of the Lord's ratson* (Isa. 61:2). The chapter turns on whether Alma's *ratson* will bend to God's: he wants to override the wills of all men, then surrenders his own will to the *ratson* of a just God who honors the wills of all. *Mal'akh* — messenger — is the word that means both "angel" and, in its plain sense, any human envoy sent with a message; a prophet is called the Lord's *mal'akh* (Hag. 1:13; Mal. 3:1, where the prophet's own name means "my messenger"). The irony of Alma's wish is built into the Hebrew: he longs to be a *mal'akh* — an angel — when he already is one, a man sent with God's message. He need not become a different kind of being. He is already what he wishes to be, only in the form a *just God* allotted him.

From the Chapter's Architecture

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