

Alma 30 — Korihor — The Anatomy of Unbelief, and the Sign That Was Not Mercy

Alma 30: c. 76–74 BC, the latter end of the seventeenth year of the reign of the judges, in a season the chapter opens by calling continual peace. Into that peace walks a man the record names simply Anti-Christ — Korihor, who preaches that there shall be no Christ, no atonement, no certainty of anything unseen, and that every man fares in this life according to his own strength and genius. He is the third and last of the Book of Mormon's anti-Christ, following Sherem (Jacob 7) and the order of Nehor (Alma 1), and his chapter is the fullest dissection of unbelief in all of scripture — its arguments laid out, answered by Alma, and finally exposed when Korihor confesses that a being he called an angel taught him the very doctrine he preached. He demands a sign; he is struck dumb; he confesses he always knew there was a God; he is cast out to beg, and is trodden to death among the Zoramites. The chapter is the Book of Mormon's clearest examination of the logic of disbelief and the wreckage at the end of it.

Alma 30 is the longest single confrontation in the Book of Alma, and it is one of the most carefully constructed chapters in all of scripture. It is built as a debate — a real one, with both sides given their best arguments — and then as the collapse of one of the debaters. The Book of Mormon has shown us false teachers before, but never at this length and never with this much of their actual case quoted. Korihor gets to make his argument in full. Mormon, abridging, does not censor him or reduce him to a caricature; he lets the anti-Christ speak, and the speech is disturbingly modern. Then he lets Alma answer, and finally he lets Korihor's own mouth, in the moment it can no longer speak, write the truth. The chapter is the third and last panel of a triptych the book has been building since Jacob 7: Sherem, who denied that Christ would come; the order of Nehor, who made religion a trade; and now Korihor, who denies that anything beyond the seen can be known at all. Each anti-Christ is more thoroughly secular than the last, and Korihor is the end of the line — pure unbelief, argued to its root.

Hebrew Word Studies

yatsar / *koach* / *'edut* (יָצַר / כֹּחַ / עֵדוּת) — **to form, to fashion, to shape (the potter's verb) / strength, power, might / testimony, witness, the solemn attested fact vv. 17, 44, 41.** Three Hebrew words frame the collision between Korihor's creed and Alma's answer. The first lies under Korihor's word *creature* in *the management of the creature* (v. 17). Behind the English *creature* stands the Hebrew theology of the *yetser* — the thing formed — from the verb *yatsar*, the potter shaping clay (Gen. 2:7, the Lord *formed* man; Isa. 64:8, *we are the clay, and thou our potter*). To speak of "the management of the creature" is to speak of the formed thing managing itself — the pot insisting it has no potter, the *yetser* denying the *yotser*. Korihor's whole doctrine is the clay's claim of self-origination, and the Hebrew makes the absurdity audible: a *yetser* that manages itself is a pot that threw itself on a wheel that does not exist. The second word is *koach* — strength — the exact term behind *every man conquered according to his strength* (v. 17). It is the same *koach* the faithful Nephites refused to trust in: Zeniff went to battle *in the strength of the Lord* (Mosiah 9:17, *be-koach Yahweh*), and Ammon boasted *in his strength I can do all things* (Alma 26:12). Korihor preaches a gospel of *koach* relocated entirely into the self — man's own strength as the measure of all conquest — and it is the precise inversion of the book's central confession that all real *koach* is borrowed. The third word is *'edut* — testimony, witness — the root that governs Alma's reply. Where Korihor says nothing unseen can be known, Alma answers with a courtroom full of witnesses: *all things denote there is a God... do witness that there is a Supreme Creator* (v. 44), and *I have all things as a testimony* (v. 41). *'Edut* is the word for the Ten Commandments themselves, kept in the *ark of the testimony* (Ex. 25:16); it is sworn, attested, covenantal knowledge. Alma's case is that the witness is not absent but overwhelming — the scriptures, the prophets, the earth, its motion, the planets in their regular form — and that Korihor has not lacked evidence but refused a flood of it. The debate is finally between a man who says there is no *'edut* and a man who says the whole creation is *'edut*.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Gen. 1:14–18 (the lights and the regular motion of the heavens — the testifying planets in their regular form of v. 44); Gen. 2:7 (the Lord formed man of the dust — the yatsar / creature irony behind v. 17); Ex. 25:16 (the ark of the testimony — the 'edut / attested-witness theme of vv. 41, 44); Deut. 4:19; Job 38–39 (the witness of sun, moon, stars, and the ordered cosmos against the fool — behind v. 44); Job 21:7–15 (the prosperity of the wicked who say what is the Almighty, that we should serve him? — Korihor's every man prospered according to his genius, v. 17); Ps. 14:1; 53:1 (the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God — the practical atheism of vv. 37–38, 48); Ps. 19:1–4 (the heavens declare the glory of God... there is no speech... where their voice is not heard — the master text behind Alma's all things denote there is a God, v. 44); Ps. 94:7–11 (they say, The Lord shall not see... he that planted the ear, shall he not hear? — the rebuttal of the unseen-is-unknowable claim, vv. 15, 44); Isa. 29:15 (woe to them that hide counsel from the Lord and say who seeth us? — the no act is a crime assumption of v. 17); Isa. 64:8 (we are the clay, and thou our potter — the yatsar answer to the management of the creature, v. 17); Matt. 12:38–39; 16:1–4 (an evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign — Korihor's sign-demand of vv. 43–48); Matt. 16:26 (what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul — against the strength-and-genius creed of v. 17); Lk. 16:31 (if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead — the futility of the sign Korihor demands, v. 44); Jn. 20:29 (blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed — the direct answer to ye cannot know of things which ye do not see, v. 15); Rom. 1:19–22 (the invisible things of God clearly seen... by the things that are made, so that they are without excuse — Paul's exact parallel to Alma's v. 44); 2 Cor. 4:18 (the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal — the inversion of Korihor's epistemology, v. 15); 2 Cor. 11:13–15 (Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light — the deceiver of v. 53); 2 Thess. 2:9–11 (the working of Satan with all deceivableness, God sending strong delusion, that they should believe a lie — Korihor verily believing his own falsehood, v. 53); 2 Pet. 2:1–3, 19 (false teachers who through covetousness... with feigned words make merchandise of you... promise them liberty while themselves servants of corruption — Korihor's commercial accusation inverted, and the false liberty of v. 17); Jacob 7:1–20 (Sherem, the first anti-Christ — the triptych Korihor completes); Alma 1:2–15 (Nehor, the second anti-Christ, and priestcraft — the order Korihor's accusations against the priests echo, v. 23); Alma 11:21–46 (Amulek and Zeezrom — the prior courtroom debate over God and resurrection that prepares this one); Alma 29:4–5 (God grants to men according to their desires — the agency that no law against belief protects, vv. 7–11); Alma 32 (faith as a seed, experiment upon the word — the constructive answer to Korihor's ye cannot know); Helaman 16:13–23 (later signs disbelieved and explained away — the Korihor pattern recurring); 3 Ne. 2:1–3 (people growing less and less astonished at signs and imagining up some vain thing — the same hardening); Moses 6:63 (all things are created and made to bear record of me — the doctrine of creation as witness, v. 44); D&C 88:42–47 (the planets in their orbits, any man who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen God moving in his majesty — the modern restatement of v. 44). ``