

Alma 32 — The Experiment Upon the Word — Faith as a Seed, and the Blessedness of the Poor Who Were Cast Out

Alma 32: c. 74 BC, the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges, among the Zoramites in Antionum. The mission Alma launched in chapter 31 has labored without visible result among the proud — until it finds the people the proud threw away. The poor, cast out of the synagogues they built with their own hands because their clothing was too coarse, come to Alma on the hill Onidah and ask the question the whole chapter answers: we have no place to worship our God; what shall we do? Alma turns to them with joy, because their poverty has made them ready, and delivers the Book of Mormon's master discourse on faith — not as certainty but as a desire that consents to an experiment, the word planted in the heart like a seed and known to be good by its swelling and its growth. The chapter is the constructive answer to the Rameumptom of chapter 31 and to Korihor's ye cannot know of chapter 30: a way of knowing the unseen that begins with no more than a willingness to try.

Alma 32 is one of the most beloved and most carefully reasoned chapters in all of scripture, and it arrives exactly where it is needed. The mission to the Zoramites began in chapter 31 against the Rameumptom — the high stand from which the proud recited their scripted thanks for being elect and for there being no Christ. The preaching made no headway among those people. But it found another people entirely: the poor, the ones the Zoramites had cast out of the very synagogues the poor had built with their own hands, because their clothing was too coarse for the holy stand. These are the people who come to Alma on the hill Onidah, and their question is the most honest question in the Book of Mormon — *we have no place to worship our God; what shall we do?* The chapter is Alma's answer, and the answer turns out to be a complete theology of how faith begins, grows, and ripens. It is also the deliberate cure for the two diseases the preceding chapters diagnosed. Against Korihor's claim that nothing unseen can be known (Alma 30:15), and against the Zoramites' counterfeit certainty on the stand (Alma 31:16), Alma offers a third way: knowledge of the unseen that begins not with proof and not with pretense, but with a willingness to experiment.

Hebrew Word Studies

emunah / *zera* / *anavah* (אֱמוּנָה / זֶרַע / אָנָוָה) — **faith, faithfulness, firmness, steadiness / seed, offspring, that which is sown / humility, lowliness, being bowed down vv. 21, 28, 16.** The chapter's three key ideas each rest on a Hebrew word richer than its English. *Emunah* — usually translated "faith" — comes from the root *aman*, to be firm, to be reliable, the root behind *amen* (so be it, it is firm). In Hebrew, *emunah* is far less about mental certainty than about steadiness and trustworthiness; it is the word for Moses' hands held *steady* until sundown (Ex. 17:12, *his hands were emunah*), and for God's own *faithfulness* that reaches to the clouds (Ps. 36:5). When Alma says *faith is not to have a perfect knowledge* (v. 21), he is recovering exactly this Hebrew sense: *emunah* is not knowing-for-certain but holding-steady toward what is true and unseen. The famous *the just shall live by his faith* (Hab. 2:4) is *the just shall live by his emunah* — by his faithfulness, his steady trust — which is precisely the faith-that-must-be-nourished of vv. 37–43. *Zera* — seed — is the second word, and it is loaded with covenant history: it is the *seed* of Abraham (Gen. 22:17), the *seed* of the woman that bruises the serpent (Gen. 3:15), the *seed* that is the word of God in the Lord's own parable (Lk. 8:11, *the seed is the word of God*). Alma's *we will compare the word unto a seed* (v. 28) joins his discourse to the whole biblical theology of the planted word — and to Isaiah's promise that the word goes forth and *shall not return unto me void*, giving *seed (zera)* to the sower (Isa. 55:10–11). *Anavah* — humility — is the third, from *anah*, to be bowed down, afflicted, brought low. The same root yields both *ani* (the poor, the afflicted) and *anav* (the humble) — which is why the Hebrew mind heard, in a single root, the link Alma's whole opening turns on: the *poor* (compelled-*anah*) and the *humble* (chosen-*anavah*) are the same word bent two ways. Moses was the *anav* above all men (Num. 12:3); the poor of Alma 32 are the *ani* made ready to become the *anav*. The chapter is, at root, the story of how *anah* — being bowed down by affliction — can become *anavah*, the willing lowliness in which the *zera* of the word takes root and *emunah* holds steady until the fruit comes.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Gen. 3:15 (the seed of the woman — the zera theology behind v. 28); Gen. 22:17–18 (the seed of Abraham as promise — the covenant weight of the seed image); Num. 12:3 (Moses the anav, meek above all men — the chosen humility of v. 16); Deut. 8:2–3 (the Lord humbled Israel in the wilderness to prove what was in their heart — compelled humility turned to instruction, vv. 12–13); Ps. 34:18 (the Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit — the blessedness of the poor in heart, v. 3); Ps. 51:17 (a broken and a contrite heart — the lowliness God receives, v. 16); Hab. 2:4 (the just shall live by his faith / emunah — the steady-trust faith of v. 21); Isa. 55:10–11 (the rain and the seed to the sower; the word that shall not return... void — the seed-word of vv. 28, 41); Isa. 57:15 (God dwells with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit — vv. 6, 16); Isa. 61:1 (good tidings unto the meek / the poor — the cast-out poor of vv. 2–5); Matt. 5:3–6 (blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are they that hunger... for they shall be filled — the Beatitude pattern of vv. 3–16, 42); Matt. 13:3–9, 18–23 (the parable of the sower — the seed, the soil, the root, the scorching sun, the fruit — the direct Gospel parallel to vv. 28–43); Matt. 17:20 (faith as a grain of mustard seed — the particle of faith of v. 27); Mk. 4:26–32 (the seed growing secretly, the smallest seed becoming the greatest tree — vv. 30, 37–41); Lk. 8:11 (the seed is the word of God — the explicit identification behind v. 28); Lk. 17:5–6 (Lord, increase our faith... if ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed — vv. 27, 29); Jn. 4:14 (a well of water springing up into everlasting life — verbatim behind v. 41); Jn. 6:35 (he that cometh to me shall never hunger... never thirst — the filling fruit of v. 42); Jn. 7:17 (if any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine — the experiment-yields-knowledge logic of v. 27); Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38 (Paul's repeated the just shall live by faith — the emunah of v. 21); Heb. 11:1 (faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen — the canonical twin of v. 21); 1 Nephi 8; 11:21–25 (Lehi's tree of life and its fruit, most sweet, above all; the fruit is the love of God — the destination of vv. 42–43); 1 Nephi 15:36 (the fruit of the tree most precious and most desirable above all other fruits — v. 42); 2 Ne. 31:20 (press forward... feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end — the nourishing and enduring of vv. 41–43); Jacob 5 (Zenos's allegory of the olive tree, nourishing and pruning across the ages — the extended treatment of the nourish-the-tree doctrine of vv. 37–41); Mosiah 4:5–11 (Benjamin on nothingness and the willing heart — the chosen humility of v. 16); Alma 30:15, 43–48 (Korihor's ye cannot know... show me a sign — the error vv. 17–21, 27–35 answer); Alma 31:13–23 (the Rameumptom and its counterfeit certainty — the disease this chapter cures); Alma 33–34 (Alma's and Amulek's continuation — how to plant the seed and the Christ in whom it grows); Ether 12:4, 6 (faith is things which are hoped for and not seen... ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith — the trial-then-fruit pattern of vv. 27, 42); D&C 50:24 (that which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light — the discernible light of v. 35). ``