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## Alma 33 — Then Cast About Your Eyes — Zenos, Zenock, and the Brazen Serpent, or How to Plant the Seed

*Alma 33: c. 74 BC, the same day on the hill Onidah among the cast-out poor of the Zoramites, continuing directly from chapter 32. Having heard Alma compare the word to a seed, the poor send back a practical question: in whom should they believe, and how do they actually plant this seed and begin to exercise faith? Alma answers from the brass plates, calling three witnesses out of Israel's deep memory — the prophet Zenos on prayer that God hears in every place and at every time, the martyred prophet Zenock on God's anger at a people who will not understand his mercies, and Moses lifting the brazen serpent in the wilderness so that whoever would look might live. The chapter teaches that worship is not confined to a building, that the scriptures themselves witness of the Son, and that believing in Christ can be as simple, and as hard, as turning the eyes to look. It is the hinge between the seed of chapter 32 and Amulek's great atonement sermon in chapter 34.*

Alma 33 is the answer to a follow-up question, and the follow-up question is what makes the chapter so practical. In chapter 32 Alma had given the poor a beautiful image — the word as a seed, faith as an experiment, the tree of life as the harvest. But an image is not yet an instruction, and the poor were honest enough to say so. They *sent forth unto him desiring to know* three things (v. 1): in whom should they believe — *one God* — to obtain the fruit; *how* should they plant the seed; and in *what manner* should they begin to exercise faith. They had heard the metaphor; now they wanted the method. Alma 33 is the method. And the striking thing about his answer is where he goes for it: not to new revelation but to the scriptures they already had on the brass plates. The way to plant the seed, it turns out, is to remember what the prophets of old already taught — and the chapter becomes a short anthology of lost prophets, Zenos and Zenock, brought forward to witness that the Son of God was known and prayed to and prophesied centuries before the Zoramites decided there would be no Christ.

### Hebrew Word Studies

*nachash / nasa / shama* (נָחָשׁ / נָסָא / שָׁמָא) — **serpent (and, by wordplay, bronze and divination) / to lift up, to raise, to bear / to hear, to listen, to heed and answer vv. 19, 19, 4–11.** Two of the chapter's images turn on Hebrew that English flattens. The brazen serpent of vv. 19–20 is, in Numbers 21:9, a *nechash nechoshet* — a serpent (*nachash*) of bronze (*nechoshet*) — a deliberate Hebrew pun, the two words sharing the same consonants so that the phrase almost hisses. The same root *nachash* also carries the sense of enchantment or omen, which is part of why later Israel had to destroy the bronze serpent when it became an idol (2 Kgs. 18:4, where Hezekiah breaks the *Nehushtan*). The object that healed by being looked at in faith became, when the looking turned to worship-of-the-thing, the very idolatry it once cured — a caution folded into Alma's type: the serpent saves only as a sign pointing past itself to the Son, never as a thing in itself. The verb behind *raised up* (v. 19) is *nasa*, to lift, to bear, to carry — the same verb used when the serpent is *set upon a pole* (Num. 21:9) and, crucially, the verb in Isaiah 53:4 where the Servant *hath borne (nasa) our griefs*. The lifting up of the serpent and the bearing of our sorrows by the Servant are the same Hebrew act, which is why the type fits Christ so exactly: the One lifted up (John 3:14, *as Moses lifted up the serpent*) is the One who bears what was killing us. And under the whole Zenos prayer (vv. 4–11) lies *shama* — to hear — the refrain *thou didst hear me* repeated through every place of prayer. In Hebrew *shama* is never merely auditory; to *hear* is to heed and to answer, which is why the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4, *Hear, O Israel*) is a call not just to listen but to obey. Zenos's testimony that God *heard* him in wilderness and field and closet is the claim that God *shama* — attended and responded — wherever the sincere heart cried, with no building required. The God who is *Shema*-ed by Israel is the God who *shamas* Israel back, in every place, because of the Son.

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## From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Num. 21:6–9 (Moses lifts the brazen serpent; whosoever... looketh upon it, shall live — the type of vv. 19–22); Deut. 6:4 (the Shema, Hear, O Israel — the hearing-God theology behind vv. 4–11); Deut. 19:15 (a matter established in the mouth of two or three witnesses — the witness-quorum structure of Zenos, Zenock, Moses); 2 Kgs. 18:4 (Hezekiah destroys the bronze serpent become idol — the caution folded into the nachash type, v. 19); 1 Kgs. 8:27–30 (Solomon's prayer that God hear from heaven wherever his people pray — the everywhere-heard prayer of vv. 4–10); Ps. 34:6, 17 (this poor man cried, and the Lord heard him... the Lord heareth the righteous — the hearing of the afflicted, vv. 8, 11); Ps. 65:2 (O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come — the God who hears, vv. 4–11); Ps. 102:1, 17 (hear my prayer... he will regard the prayer of the destitute — the cast-out heard, v. 10); Isa. 53:4 (he hath borne (nasa) our griefs — the lifting-and-bearing of v. 19); Isa. 55:6–7 (seek ye the Lord while he may be found... he will have mercy — the searchable, merciful God of vv. 2, 11); Matt. 5:44 (pray for them which... persecute you — Zenos praying for his enemies and God turning them to him, v. 4); Matt. 6:6 (pray to thy Father which is in secret — the closet of v. 7); Matt. 21:35; 23:37 (the prophets stoned and killed — Zenock's death, v. 17); Lk. 18:13–14 (the publican's prayer of the lowly heard, against the Pharisee — the cast-out poor vs. the Rameumptom); Jn. 3:14–15 (as Moses lifted up the serpent... even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should... have eternal life — the Lord's own reading of vv. 19–22); Jn. 9:1–7 (the man born blind told to wash and see — healing by a simple act of obedient looking); Acts 7:52, 58–59 (Stephen stoned for testifying of the Just One — the martyred witness, v. 17); Heb. 11:32–38 (the prophets who were stoned and slain for faith — Zenock among them, v. 17); 1 Ne. 19:10–17 (Nephi quotes Zenos, Zenock, and Neum on the coming Messiah — the brass-plates prophets behind vv. 3–17); Jacob 5 (the allegory of the olive tree, the words of the prophet Zenos — the major surviving Zenos text); Mosiah 24:14–15 (burdens made light in bondage — the lightened burden of v. 23); Alma 32:27–28, 41 (the seed and the experiment this chapter tells how to begin, vv. 22–23); Alma 34:8–16 (Amulek's expansion of the Son who shall suffer and die to atone of v. 22); Alma 37:38–45 (the Liahona type — Alma's other look and live figure, if we will look we may live); 3 Ne. 11:14–17 (the risen Christ shown and looked upon — the fulfillment of the type of looking); Hel. 8:13–15 (Nephi cites the brazen serpent and Moses again — as many as should look upon that serpent... even so... look upon the Son of God with faith). ```