

Alma 36 — I Could Remember My Pains No More — Alma's Conversion to Helaman, and the Chiasm That Turns on the Name of Christ

Alma 36: c. 73 BC, in Zarahemla, the first of the three charges Alma gives his sons after gathering them in Alma 35. This is Alma's word to Helaman, his eldest, the son who will inherit the sacred records — and it is the most artful single chapter in the Book of Mormon. Alma tells the story of his own conversion: the church-destroyer struck down by an angel, three days and nights racked with the pains of a damned soul under the memory of his sins, until the thought of Jesus Christ breaks upon him and he cries for mercy — and in that instant the pain is gone and the joy is as exquisite as the pain had been bitter. He tells it to teach Helaman a single promise: keep the commandments and prosper. But he tells it in the form of an elaborate chiasm — a mirror structure that builds inward, line by line, to a single hinge: the name of Jesus, the Son of God, cried out in the depths. The form is the message: at the center of a soul's deepest darkness, and at the center of the chapter, is Christ.

Alma 36 is, by wide agreement, the most carefully composed chapter in the Book of Mormon, and it is also one of the most moving. It is the first of Alma's three farewell charges to his sons (gathered in Alma 35:16), and it is addressed to Helaman, the eldest, the son who will carry the records forward. Its surface purpose is simple and is stated at both ends: *inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land* (vv. 1, 30). But to teach that promise, Alma does something extraordinary — he gives Helaman his own testimony, the full story of his conversion, the most detailed first-person account of being born of God in all of scripture. And he tells it in the form of a chiasm: an ancient Hebrew literary structure in which ideas are stated in one order and then repeated in reverse, building inward like a set of nested arches toward a single central point. The chapter is not a chiasm by accident or by the reader's clever imposition; it is built that way with a precision that runs through dozens of matched elements, and the matching is the meaning. Everything in the chapter folds toward one center, and the center is the name of Christ.

Hebrew Word Studies

zakar / *yissurim* / *chiasm* (זָכַר / יִסּוּרִים / —) — **to remember, to call to mind, to bring to active memory / torments, sufferings, chastenings / (Greek) a crossing, an X-shape — the inverted parallel structure vv. 17–19, 12–16, whole chapter.** The whole chapter turns on the Hebrew verb *zakar* — to remember. In Hebrew thought *zakar* is never passive recollection; to *remember* is to bring something into the present and act on it, which is why God's *remembering* his covenant means he acts to fulfill it (Gen. 8:1; Ex. 2:24). Alma 36 is built on two opposite acts of *zakar*. First, the destroying memory: *I did remember all my sins and iniquities* (v. 13) — the *zakar* that is hell, the active, present, total recall of sin before a holy God. Then, at the center, the saving memory: *I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy... concerning... Jesus Christ* (v. 17) — the *zakar* that rescues, the calling-to-mind of the word about Christ. And the instant that second *zakar* takes hold, the first is undone: *I could remember (zakar) my pains no more* (v. 19). The same faculty that was the soul's torment becomes, turned toward Christ, the soul's deliverance. This is why the chapter's frame keeps commanding memory — *remember the captivity* (v. 2), *retain in remembrance their captivity* (v. 29): Alma is teaching Helaman that salvation runs through what we choose to *zakar*. The torment itself the chapter calls being *racked* — the Hebrew sense gathered in *yissurim*, sufferings or chastenings, the afflictions that, in the wisdom tradition, can either crush or refine. Alma's *yissurim* refine: the *pains of a damned soul* (v. 16) carve out exactly the capacity that the *joy as exceeding* (v. 20) then fills. As for the chapter's form, the Greek term is *chiasm* — from the letter chi (X), a crossing — the inverted-parallel structure native to Hebrew poetry (Ps. 3; Isa. 6:10; Lev. 24:13–23). That Alma 36 is a sustained, deliberate *chiasm* folding to the name of Christ is itself an argument for the book's Hebraic authenticity; the form was not understood in the modern sense in 1830, yet here it is, executed with a precision that serves the meaning — the crossing-point of the X is the cross-confessing cry, *O Jesus, thou Son of God*.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Gen. 8:1; Ex. 2:24 (God remembered his covenant and acted — the saving zakar behind vv. 17–19); Ex. 12–14 (the Exodus from Egypt and the Red Sea — the captivity-and-deliverance frame of vv. 2, 28–29); Lev. 24:13–23 (a clear Mosaic chiasm — the native Hebrew form Alma employs); Deut. 8:2 (remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee — the commanded memory of vv. 2, 29); 1 Ne. 1:8 (Lehi saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels — verbatim source of v. 22); 1 Ne. 2:20 (inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land — the frame of vv. 1, 30); Ps. 3 (a short biblical chiasm — the structural kin of the chapter); Ps. 30:5 (weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning — the pain-to-joy proportion of vv. 20–21); Ps. 51:1, 12 (have mercy upon me, O God... restore unto me the joy of thy salvation — the cry and its answer, vv. 18–20); Ps. 103:12 (as far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions — the pains remembered no more, v. 19); Isa. 1:18 (though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow — the reversal of v. 19); Isa. 6:10 (a chiastic prophetic line — the form of the chapter); Isa. 12:1 (though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me — the turn of vv. 18–20); Jonah 2:1–9 (the prophet's descent to the belly of hell and cry for deliverance — the three-days descent-and-rescue pattern of vv. 10–20); Lk. 15:17–24 (the prodigal came to himself, returned, and was met with joy — the conversion arc of vv. 17–24); Lk. 18:13 (God be merciful to me a sinner — the cry of v. 18); Acts 9:1–22; 22:6–16; 26:9–18 (Saul the church-destroyer struck down by light, three days blind, then sent to preach — the closest biblical parallel to vv. 6–24); Rom. 7:24–25 (O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?... I thank God through Jesus Christ — the cry and the deliverance, vv. 18–19); 2 Cor. 5:17 (if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature — born of God, vv. 5, 23–26); Mosiah 5:2 (a mighty change in us... we have no more disposition to do evil — the born-of-God change Alma describes); Mosiah 27:8–31 (the third-person account of Alma's conversion that this chapter retells from the inside); Alma 5:7–13 (Alma's earlier preaching of the same conversion and the mighty change of heart); Alma 26:17–20 (Ammon, fellow church-destroyer, snatched from the gulf — the parallel testimony of a son of Mosiah); Alma 38:8 (Alma's same cry retold to Shiblon — I did cry unto him and I did find peace to my soul); Alma 42:29–31 (Alma urges Corianton to let his sins trouble him only unto repentance — the harrowing turned to its right use); Hel. 5:12 (Helaman, hearing this charge, builds his own sons on the Rock of Christ — the fruit of Alma 36 in the next generation); D&C 19:16–19 (Christ's own account of suffering for sin that the penitent might not suffer — the atonement Alma cried to, v. 18). ```