
Alma 37 — By Small and Simple Things — The Sacred Records, the Liahona, and the Charge to Helaman

Alma 37: c. 73 BC, in Zarahemla, the continuation of Alma's charge to Helaman from chapter 36. Having given his son the story of his conversion, Alma now entrusts him with the sacred records — the plates of Nephi, the brass plates, the twenty-four Jaredite plates, and the interpreters — and commands him to keep them, preserve them, and pass them on. From the records Alma draws his great theme: that God works by small and simple means to bring about his great purposes, that the records have already saved thousands of Lamanite souls and will save many more, and that the keeping of sacred things is bound by covenant. He warns Helaman to guard the dark Jaredite secrets without spreading them, teaches him to refer every decision about the records to the Lord, and closes with the type of the Liahona — the small compass that guided the fathers by their faith, an emblem of how easily the word of Christ will guide us if we will only give heed. It is the most sustained Book of Mormon meditation on why records are kept and how God uses the small to confound the great.

Alma 37 is the second movement of Alma's charge to Helaman, and where chapter 36 was about the father's soul, this chapter is about the father's trust — the sacred records he is now placing in his son's hands. Helaman is the eldest son, the one who will carry the Nephite record forward after Alma, and so this charge is, in a sense, the formal transfer of the historian's office. But Alma does not treat it as mere archival succession. He treats the records as living instruments of salvation, and he builds the whole chapter around a single astonishing claim: that God accomplishes his greatest works through the smallest means. The plates look like metal and engraving; in Alma's reading they are the means by which thousands of Lamanites were brought to Christ, the means by which thousands more — Lamanite and Nephite — will yet be saved, and the means by which God will *show forth his power unto future generations*. The chapter is the Book of Mormon explaining, from the inside, why it exists and why it must be preserved.

Hebrew Word Studies

zakar / qaton / nachash-nasa (זָכַר / קָטוֹן / נָחַשׁ-נָסָא) — **to remember, to bring actively to mind / small, little, least, insignificant /** (cf. Alma 33) **the lifted look that heals vv. 13, 35; vv. 6–7; vv. 44–46.** The chapter's pulse is again *zakar* — to remember — doubled at its two emotional peaks: *O remember, remember, my son Helaman* (v. 13) and *O, remember, my son* (v. 35). As in Alma 36, *zakar* in Hebrew is active and present; to remember is to keep before the mind and act upon. The whole purpose of the records Alma entrusts is corporate *zakar* — they *enlarged the memory of this people* (v. 8), preserving across generations what a people would otherwise forget. The records are memory made permanent, the antidote to the *incorrect tradition* (v. 9) that takes hold when a people forgets the true account. Under the master theme lies the Hebrew valuing of the *qaton* — the small, the least. Israel's whole self-understanding was that God chose the *qaton*: *the Lord did not... choose you because ye were more in number... for ye were the fewest (qaton) of all people* (Deut. 7:7); Gideon protests *my family is poor... and I am the least (qaton)* before God makes him a deliverer (Judg. 6:15); David is the *qaton*, the youngest, left with the sheep, when Samuel anoints him (1 Sam. 16:11). Alma's *by small and simple things are great things brought to pass* (v. 6) is this deep biblical pattern stated as doctrine: God's habitual instrument is the *qaton*, and *small means... doth confound the wise* precisely because the wise despise the small. Finally, the Liahona type (vv. 44–46) reaches back to the *nachash-on-a-pole* of Alma 33: both are *look-and-live* figures, the lifted serpent and the guiding compass, and both turn on the same paradox — salvation made so *easy* (a look, a glance at the spindles) that the slothful heart will not stoop to it. The Hebrew sensibility that God saves by the small, the simple, and the easily-despised runs from Gideon's three hundred to the *qaton* shepherd-king to a few engraved plates in a young man's hands.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Deut. 7:7 (Israel chosen though the fewest of all people — the qaton theology of vv. 6–7); Judg. 6:15–16 (Gideon the least made a deliverer — God's small means, v. 7); Judg. 7:2–7 (the three hundred, that the victory be God's not man's — small means... confound, vv. 6–7); 1 Sam. 16:7, 11 (the Lord chooses the youngest, the qaton shepherd David, looking on the heart — vv. 6–7); 1 Sam. 17:45–47 (David's the battle is the Lord's, victory not by sword or spear — the small means of vv. 6–7); 1 Kgs. 19:11–12 (the Lord not in the wind or earthquake but in the still small voice — God working through the small, v. 6); Prov. 3:5–6 (trust in the Lord... in all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths — verbatim sense of v. 37); Prov. 8:17 (those that seek me early shall find me — learn wisdom in thy youth, v. 35); Eccl. 12:1 (remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth — v. 35); Isa. 28:10 (line upon line... here a little, and there a little — the small-and-simple method, v. 6); Zech. 4:6, 10 (not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit... who hath despised the day of small things? — the master parallel to vv. 6–7); Matt. 13:31–33 (the mustard seed and the leaven, the smallest becoming the greatest — vv. 6–7); Matt. 7:13–14 (the narrow way, easy to miss — the easiness and the neglect of vv. 43–46); Lk. 16:10 (he that is faithful in that which is least — the stewardship of small sacred things, vv. 6, 14); 1 Cor. 1:27–29 (God hath chosen the foolish... the weak... the base things... to confound the wise — verbatim theology of vv. 6–7); 2 Cor. 4:7 (this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God — the small means, vv. 6–7); 1 Ne. 16:10, 16, 28–29 (the Liahona, the ball that worked by faith and small means showing marvelous works — the type of vv. 38–45); 1 Ne. 16:18–32 (the family's slothfulness and the ceasing of the compass's guidance — vv. 41–42); Mosiah 1:3–7 (Benjamin on the records that preserved the language and the covenants, were it not for these... we must have suffered in ignorance — vv. 8–9); Mosiah 8:9–19 (the twenty-four Jaredite plates and the seer with interpreters — vv. 21–24); Mosiah 28:11–20 (the interpreters used to translate the Jaredite record — vv. 21–24); Alma 33:19–22 (the brazen serpent, look and live — the twin type of vv. 44–47); Ether 8:18–26 (the secret combinations of the Jaredites that destroyed them — the oaths Alma seals in vv. 21–32); Hel. 3:13–16 (the keeping and multiplying of the many records — the stewardship transmitted here); D&C 3:1; 10:1–5, 43 (the works and designs of God cannot be frustrated; do not run faster than... strength — the appeal-unto-the-Lord stewardship of v. 16); D&C 64:33 (be not weary in well-doing... out of small things proceedeth that which is great — verbatim echo of vv. 6–7). ``