
Alma 39 — Cross Yourself in All These Things — Alma's Charge to Corianton

Alma 39: c. 73 BC, the third and longest of Alma's farewell charges, given to Corianton, the youngest son, who had forsaken his mission among the Zoramites and gone after the harlot Isabel. Where Helaman received the records and Shiblon received commendation, Corianton receives correction — a sustained, sorrowful, but finally hopeful charge that names the sin plainly, weighs it against the gravest sins, and then turns the boy's face back toward the Christ he had begun to doubt. Alma 39 is only the opening movement; the charge runs through chapter 42, and the chapters that follow (40 on resurrection, 41 on restoration, 42 on justice and mercy) are all Alma answering the questions Corianton's sin and unbelief had raised. This first chapter does the hard part: it confronts the sin, sets it in its true seriousness, calls for repentance, and then — crucially — refuses to leave the son in despair, opening the door to the gospel of Christ that the next three chapters will fling wide.

Alma 39 begins the last and longest of Alma's three farewell charges, and it is the hardest one to read because it is the hardest one a father ever had to give. Helaman, the eldest, received the records and the long testimony of conversion (Alma 36–37). Shiblon, the steady middle son, received commendation and gentle counsel (Alma 38). Now comes Corianton, the youngest, and the charge to Corianton is correction — for Corianton had gone on the Zoramite mission with his father and brothers and had failed there, abandoning the work and going after a harlot. Alma does not soften the facts, and he does not pretend the failure was small. But neither does he crush the boy. The whole charge is built to do two things at once: to make Corianton feel the real weight of what he has done, and to keep that weight from becoming despair by pointing relentlessly to Christ. This first chapter confronts the sin; the three that follow (40–42) answer the doctrinal doubts the sin had bred. Alma 39 is the surgeon's first cut — necessary, painful, and aimed entirely at healing.

Hebrew Word Studies

***to'ebah / zarah* (תֵּבָה / זָרָה) — abomination, a thing detestable, a violation of sacred order / to commit fornication, to go whoring, to be unfaithful v. 5, vv. 3–4, 9.** Two Hebrew words stand under Alma's charge. The first is *to'ebah*, abomination — the strongest word in the Hebrew Bible for a defiling violation of God's order. It is used for idolatry (Deut. 7:25), for cult prostitution (1 Kgs. 14:24), for dishonest weights (Prov. 11:1), for the sins that defile the land and cause it to vomit out its inhabitants (Lev. 18:24–30). A *to'ebah* is not merely a bad act; it is something that profanes the sacred and breaks the covenant order. When Alma calls Corianton's sin *an abomination... most abominable above all sins* save two, he is placing sexual sin in this gravest category — a defilement of the holy power of creation itself. The second word is *zarah*, the verb behind *harlot* (Isabel) and behind the whole biblical vocabulary of covenant-unfaithfulness. *Zarah* is literal harlotry, but the prophets use it for Israel's spiritual adultery against the Lord (Hos. 1–3; Ezek. 16; Jer. 3). The two senses are not separate: physical *zarah* is grave precisely because it images and enacts the deeper *zarah* of a heart turning from its covenants. Corianton's literal unfaithfulness with Isabel was bound up with the unfaithfulness of a missionary who *forsook the ministry* — the body's betrayal and the covenant's betrayal were one act. Alma is teaching his son that what he had treated as a private appetite was in truth a *to'ebah*, a defiling of the sacred, and a *zarah*, a breaking of faith — and that is why it weighed what it weighed.

From the Chapter's Architecture

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