

Alma 53 — Sons Without an Oath — The Two Thousand Enlist Under Helaman

Alma 53: c. 64 BC, closing the twenty-eighth year of the reign of the judges. With Mulek retaken and the eastern front stabilized, Moroni sets the Lamanite prisoners to work building the walls of Bountiful — and turns the city they raise with their own hands into the stronghold that will hold them. But Mormon interrupts the war narrative to deliver a hard editorial: while Moroni was occupied, the armies on the west sea south gained ground over the Nephites, not by superior force but because of intrigue and dissensions among the Nephites themselves — iniquity from within doing what the enemy could not. Then the chapter turns to its real subject. The people of Ammon — the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, converted Lamanites who had buried their weapons and sworn never to shed blood again — are moved with compassion by the afflictions the Nephites bear on their behalf and are about to take up arms in their defense. Helaman restrains them, fearing they will lose their souls by breaking the oath. But their sons, who took no such oath, assemble: two thousand young men who covenant to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, call themselves Nephites, and ask Helaman to be their leader. They had never fought, yet they did not fear death; they were true at all times, taught to keep the commandments and to walk uprightly, and taught by their mothers that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them. Helaman marches at the head of his two thousand stripling soldiers to the embattled southwest, and the twenty-eighth year ends.

Alma 52 ended in victory — Mulek retaken, the surrounded enemy offered mercy, the prisoners outnumbering the slain. Alma 53 opens in the aftermath, with a small, telling image: the Lamanite prisoners are set to work burying the dead of both armies, then marched to Bountiful and made to dig a ditch and raise *a strong wall of timbers and earth, to an exceeding height* (v. 4) — and the city they build with their own hands becomes the prison that holds them. Mormon lingers on the detail because it is a kind of parable. The labor of the defeated becomes the defense of the victors; the wall the enemy raises encloses the enemy. There is no cruelty in it — Moroni sets them to work because *it was easy to guard them while at their labor* (v. 5) and because he needed every soldier free for the fight — but the picture has a quiet justice to it. The energy poured into a war of seizing is bent, in the end, toward building and keeping.

Hebrew Word Studies

ba^{ur} (בָּאוּר) — a young man in the fullness of his strength — the choice, chosen youth in his prime; from the root ba^{ar}, "to choose," so the word itself means both "young man" and "chosen one" v. 18 (the two thousand of those young men); v. 22 (his two thousand stripling soldiers). The English calls them "stripling soldiers" — a stripling being a youth not yet at full growth — and the word has become so dear to Latter-day Saints that it is easy to forget the Hebrew idea standing behind it. The ordinary biblical word for such a young man is ba^{ar}, and it carries a meaning the English loses entirely: it comes from the verb ba^{ar}, "to choose." A ba^{ur} is at once a "young man" and, by the very shape of the word, a "chosen one" — the youth singled out, the choice of the crop, the one in the prime of his vigor. (The same root gives ba^{ir}, "the chosen," used of the Lord's elect servant in Isaiah 42:1.) So the Hebrew imagination did not separate the two ideas the way English does: the young man in his strength is the chosen one, the pick of his generation. This is exactly the double sense Mormon's portrait carries. These two thousand are *young men* — ba^{urim} — in the literal sense: very young, untried, *they never had fought* (56:47). But they are also *choice* in the deeper sense — chosen, set apart, the elect of the rising generation, *true at all times*. Scripture knows the word can cut both ways. *Rejoice, O young man (ba^{ur}), in thy youth*, says Ecclesiastes (11:9), naming the season of strength that can be squandered. *Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth (be^{urotekha})*, it answers (Eccl. 12:1) — the same strength consecrated. The two thousand are ba^{urim} of the second kind: young men whose chosen strength is given, in the days of their youth, to their Creator and their country. And the word's link to *choosing* sharpens the chapter's deepest point. No one chose these young men for war — they *chose*, assembling themselves freely and covenanting of their own will. The chosen ones are the ones who chose. Their election is not imposed from above; it is the freely taken consecration of youth at its strongest, given to the cause of liberty before it could be wasted on anything less.

ne^{eman} / ^{emunah} (נֶאֱמָן / אֱמוּנָה) — faithful, trustworthy, reliable; firm, steadfast, able to be leaned upon — from the root ^{aman}, "to be firm, to support, to be sure" (the root of amen); ^{emunah} is faithfulness as steadiness, the quality of one who does not give way vv. 20–21 (true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted... men of truth and

soberness). When Mormon says the stripling young men were *true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted*, and *men of truth*, he is reaching for the central Hebrew idea of **■emunah** and its adjective **ne■eman** — and the idea is richer than the English "true" suggests. The root **■aman** means, at bottom, "to be firm, solid, steady" — the same root that gives us *amen*, the word that means "it is firm, it is sure, let it stand." A **ne■eman** person is not merely honest; he is *dependable* — firm under weight, sure to hold, the kind of man you can build on. It is the word used of Moses, of whom God says *he is faithful (ne■eman) in all mine house* (Num. 12:7), and of the *sure (ne■eman) house* God promises to build for the faithful (1 Sam. 2:35; 25:28), and of the *sure mercies* of David (Isa. 55:3). The image underneath all these is structural: something that bears load without failing. This is precisely the virtue Mormon singles out as the one that matters most — *but behold, this was not all* — above even the young men's courage and strength. Anyone can be brave in a good hour; the **ne■eman** man is *true at all times*, firm in *whatsoever thing* is laid upon him. And the phrase *in whatsoever thing they were entrusted* is the heart of it: faithfulness, in the Hebrew sense, is proven precisely in what is *entrusted* — the thing handed to you to keep, the charge you could betray and don't. The stripling sons are the load-bearing generation, the ones who hold. It is no accident that this same quality — *they did obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness* (57:21) — is what makes them, three chapters later, the soldiers no enemy can break and whom *not one soul* of death can claim. *Emunah* on the battlefield is the same *emunah* in the home where it was taught: the steadiness of those who do not give way, because they were built on something firm.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Alma 24:6–24 (*the original covenant of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies — the buried weapons and the oath never to shed blood again, kept even unto death; the oath the fathers cannot break in vv. 11–15 and the faith the sons inherit*); Alma 27:21–30 (*the people of Ammon received and protected by the Nephites in the land of Jershon — the shelter that the sons now covenant to repay, v. 17*); Num. 12:7 (*Moses faithful — ne■eman — in all mine house — the load-bearing faithfulness Mormon names in the sons, v. 20*); 1 Sam. 2:35 (*the sure — ne■eman — house God builds for the faithful priest — the same root of dependability*); Isa. 42:1 (*mine elect — ba■ir — in whom my soul delighteth — the chosen one from the same root as the ba■urim, the choice young men, v. 18*); Eccl. 12:1 (*remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth — be■urotekha — the consecration of youthful strength the stripling sons embody, vv. 20–21*); Deut. 6:6–7 (*these words... thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children — the home teaching behind they had been taught to keep the commandments, v. 21*); Prov. 22:6 (*train up a child in the way he should go — the formation that produces sons true at all times*); Ps. 127:3–5 (*children are an heritage of the Lord... as arrows in the hand of a mighty man; happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them — the literal arrows of a faithful generation set against the enemy*); Judg. 5:8 (*was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand? — Israel disarmed by internal apostasy, the inverse of the sons taking up arms in faith*); Matt. 20:28 (*the name taken on by choice — the sons who called themselves Nephites, binding themselves to the people who sheltered them, v. 16*); Alma 56:43–48 (*the sons in battle — they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them — the flowering of the seed planted in v. 21*); Alma 57:21, 25–26 (*they did obey... with exactness... not one soul of them who did perish — the trustworthiness of v. 20 proven and rewarded*); Alma 60:1–9; 61:1–8 (*Moroni's epistle and Pahoran's reply — the intrigue and dissensions amongst themselves of v. 9 traced to its source, the king-man rebellion that nearly destroyed the army from within*). ``