
Alma 56 — We Do Not Doubt Our Mothers Knew It — Helaman's Epistle and the Faith of the Rising Generation

Alma 56: c. 63 BC, the commencement of the thirtieth year of the reign of the judges, when Moroni receives the letter — but the letter itself looks back over four years, recounting events from the twenty-sixth year forward. Mormon now hands the pen to Helaman, and the abridgment opens out into a long first-person epistle from one beloved commander to another. Helaman tells the story of the two thousand sons of the people of Ammon: how their fathers, bound by the oath never to shed blood, were about to break it in the Nephites' defense until Helaman restrained them; how the two thousand young sons, bound by no such oath, took up arms and asked him to lead them; how he marched them to the embattled southwest to assist Antipus at Judea, where the Lamanites held Manti, Zeezrom, Cumeni, and Antiparah. He recounts the great decoy: his little band marching past Antiparah as if carrying provisions, baiting the strongest Lamanite army into a pursuit that drew them away from the city and into a trap between Helaman's force and Antipus's. At the decisive moment Helaman puts the question to his young men — will you go against them in battle? — and records their answer, the most famous words in the war: their God is with them, they do not fear death, they think more on the liberty of their fathers than on their lives, for they had been taught by their mothers that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them — and 'we do not doubt our mothers knew it.' They turn and fall on the Lamanite rear, rescue the failing army of Antipus, and surround and subdue the enemy. And when the battle is over and Helaman, dreading the count, numbers his two thousand, not one soul of them has fallen. This is the spiritual summit of the war record.

Something changes at the top of Alma 56, and it is the first thing to notice, because it governs how the whole chapter should be read. For fifty-some chapters Mormon has been our narrator, abridging, condensing, telling the war from above. Now he steps aside. *Moroni received an epistle from Helaman... and these are the words which he wrote, saying: My dearly beloved brother, Moroni* (vv. 1–2) — and from here through the end of Alma 58 we are not reading Mormon's summary but Helaman's own letter, copied in whole. The voice shifts from the historian's measured third person to the field commander's intimate first person, from *Helaman did to I, Helaman*. And the tone shifts with it. This is not a dispatch; it is a letter between two men who love each other, written *as well in the Lord as in the tribulations of our warfare*, and it carries a warmth no summary could. Mormon, who could have paraphrased the whole campaign in a paragraph, instead gives us Helaman's own words at length — because some things can only be told from inside, by the man who was there, who called these young soldiers *my sons* and dreaded counting their dead.

Hebrew Word Studies

torat ■em (תּוֹרַת אִמּוֹ) — "the teaching of a mother" — torah meaning instruction, direction, teaching (not narrowly "law" but the whole formative guidance handed down); ■em, mother. The phrase from Proverbs for the formative religious instruction given by a mother to her child vv. 47–48 (they had been taught by their mothers... we do not doubt our mothers knew it). When Helaman says the sons *had been taught by their mothers*, and the sons say *we do not doubt our mothers knew it*, the Hebrew phrase standing behind the idea is **torat ■em** — "the teaching of a mother" — and it comes from the heart of Israel's wisdom tradition. Twice the book of Proverbs sets a mother's teaching beside a father's as the twin pillars of a child's formation: *My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother (torat ■immekha)* (Prov. 1:8), and again, *keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother (torat ■immekha)* (Prov. 6:20). The word *torah* here does not mean "law" in the narrow legal sense; it comes from a root meaning "to point, to direct, to throw" (as one throws an arrow toward a mark), and it means *instruction, teaching, the showing of the way*. A mother's *torah* is the direction she points her child — the way of life she teaches him to walk. And the wisdom tradition insists this maternal teaching is not lesser than the father's; it is named in the same breath, given the same weight, called by the same exalted word used for the *Torah* of God himself. The mother is a *teacher of torah*, and what she transmits is nothing less than the way of the Lord. This is exactly what Alma 56 shows in action. The stripling sons walk into battle steadied by their mothers' *torah* — the instruction *that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them*. It was not a sentiment or a comfort; it was *teaching*, doctrine handed down, a true thing about God their mothers *knew* and taught them to know. And note what the sons trust: not first their own experience of God (they had none — *they never had fought*), but their mothers' *knowing*. *We do not doubt our mothers knew it*. The chain is the chain of **torat ■em**: the mother knows, the mother teaches, the child receives the teaching on the strength of the mother's knowing, and the teaching proves true when it is tested. The whole Hebrew theology of generational faith is here — that the covenant is carried forward not chiefly by armies or kings or even priests but by mothers teaching their children the *torah* of trust at home, so that a generation rises which *did not doubt* because its mothers *knew*. The Book of Mormon's most celebrated tribute to mothers is, at its Hebrew root, a tribute to mothers as teachers of *torah* — and a witness that the instruction of a faithful mother is strong enough to deliver an army.

ba■a■ (בְּאִמּוֹ) — to trust, to lean one's full weight upon, to feel secure and unafraid because of confidence in another; the opposite not merely of doubt but of anxiety — trust as the settled security of one who relies wholly on God v. 47 (if they did not doubt, God would deliver them); v. 48 (we do not doubt). The sons' creed — *if they did not doubt, God would deliver them* — is, in Hebrew terms, the doctrine of **ba■a■**, trust; for the opposite of doubt in the Hebrew Bible is not certainty about a proposition but **ba■a■**, the act of leaning one's whole weight on God without fear. **Ba■a■** is a physical word at root: to lean upon, to rest one's security on something, the way a man leans on a staff that he is sure will hold. To **ba■a■** in God is to put your whole weight on him and not be anxious, because you are sure he will not give way. The Psalms are saturated with it — *in thee, O Lord, do I put my trust (ba■a■ti)* (Ps. 31:1); *some trust in chariots... but we will remember the name of the Lord our God* (Ps. 20:7). And one passage stands so close to the sons' creed that it could be its source. *Our fathers trusted (ba■e■u) in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. They cried unto thee, and were delivered: they trusted (ba■e■u) in thee, and were not confounded* (Ps. 22:4–5). Set that beside Alma 56: the fathers' faith, the trust, the deliverance, the not being put to shame — *they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them*. The structure is identical: trust met by deliverance, the trusting never confounded. **Ba■a■** also illuminates why the sons' confidence took the form it did. To **ba■a■** is to be *unafraid* — *I will trust (e■a■), and not be afraid* (Isa. 12:2). This is exactly the chapter's portrait: *they did not fear death* (v. 47), because **ba■a■** drives out fear; the one who leans his full weight on God has nothing left to be anxious about. And the deepest note is that **ba■a■** is always *relational* — you do not trust in the abstract; you trust in *someone*. The sons trusted God; but the chapter shows the trust mediated, *we do not doubt our mothers knew it* — they leaned on God because they leaned on their mothers' word about God. Scripture promises that *blessed is the man that trusteth (yi■a■) in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is* (Jer. 17:7), and warns *cursed be the man that trusteth in man* (Jer. 17:5) — yet here the trust in the mothers is not the forbidden trust in man, because the mothers pointed past themselves to God; to trust their *torah* was to trust the Lord they taught. The two thousand are the living proof of Psalm 22: they trusted, and were delivered; they trusted, and were not confounded.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Alma 53:16–21 (the sons enlist and are true at all times... for they had been taught — the seed whose answer this chapter delivers: the teachers were the mothers); Alma 24:6–24 (the fathers' oath of buried weapons — the covenant the sons inherited without taking, the faith their mothers carried into the home); Prov. 1:8; 6:20 (forsake not the law of thy mother — torat ■immekha — the maternal torah the sons received and trusted, vv. 47–48); Deut. 6:6–7 (these words... thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children — the home instruction behind they had been taught); Ps. 22:4–5 (our fathers trusted in thee... they trusted, and were not confounded — the structure of trust-and-deliverance the sons' creed reproduces, vv. 47, 56); Ps. 20:7 (some trust in chariots... but we will remember the name of the Lord — ba■a■ in God rather than in numbers, v. 47); Isa. 12:2 (I will trust, and not be afraid — trust driving out fear, they did not fear death, v. 47); Jer. 17:7–8 (blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord — the blessedness of ba■a■, the tree by the waters that does not fail in drought); 2 Tim. 1:5 (the unfeigned faith... which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice — the New Testament's own tribute to faith handed down through mothers, the same pattern as the stripling sons); 1 Sam. 14:6 (there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few — deliverance of the few who trust, v. 56); 2 Chr. 20:15–17 (the battle is not yours, but God's... ye shall not need to fight... stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord — victory by faith, the army delivered); Wisd. 3:1 (the righteous dead in the hand of God — Helaman's they are happy, v. 11); Alma 57:21, 25–26 (they did obey... with exactness... not one soul of them who did perish... we do justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God — the sign of this chapter repeated and deepened); Alma 58:39–40 (the sons kept from falling by the sword... they stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has made them free — the campaign's faithful close); Eph. 6:10–13 (the whole armour of God and standing in the strength of his might — the spiritual frame of those who fight as if with the strength of God, v. 56). ```