

Alma 57 — Two Hundred Who Fainted, Not One Who Fell — Exactness, Faith, and the Keeping of the Sons

Alma 57: Helaman's epistle continues, recounting events of the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth years of the reign of the judges (the letter itself was received by Moroni in the thirtieth — Helaman is still looking back). Ammoron offers to surrender Antiparah in exchange for the prisoners; Helaman refuses any but an even exchange, and the people of Antiparah abandon the city, which falls into Nephite hands. Reinforced by six thousand men and sixty more sons of the Ammonites — so that the two thousand are now two thousand and sixty — Helaman's army surrounds and takes the city of Cumeni by intercepting its provisions, then holds it against a fierce Lamanite counterattack. The prisoners grow so numerous and so violent that, when they rebel and rush the guards, the Nephites are forced to slay many. In the climactic battle for Cumeni, Helaman's young men fight 'most desperately,' firm and undaunted, obeying every word of command 'with exactness,' and 'according to their faith it was done unto them.' When it is over, two hundred of the two thousand and sixty have fainted from loss of blood, and every one of them has been wounded many times — yet not one soul of them has perished, a preservation Helaman and his whole army 'justly ascribe... to the miraculous power of God.' This is the war record's deepest meditation on the kind of deliverance faith brings: not exemption from wounds, but preservation through them.

Alma 57 continues Helaman's letter without a break, and it raises the stakes of the miracle that closed Alma 56. There, two thousand untried sons fought the strongest Lamanite army and not one of them died — and a reader might, just possibly, file it under extraordinary good fortune. Alma 57 makes that filing impossible. Because this time the sons are not spared the fighting's cost. This time *every one of them is wounded*, two hundred of them faint from loss of blood, the battle is so desperate that the rest of the army is *about to give way* — and *still* not one of them perishes. The chapter is constructed to move the miracle from the category of luck into the category of God, by showing a preservation that survives the most punishing possible test. In Alma 56 the sons came through untouched; one could imagine a natural explanation. In Alma 57 they come through *shredded* — bleeding, fainting, wounded many times over — and the survival of every single one of them through *that* is something no natural account can carry. Helaman names it for what it is: *we do justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God* (v. 26).

Hebrew Word Studies

shamar (שָׁמַר) — to keep, guard, watch over, observe carefully, preserve — used both of a person keeping a command (observing it with care) and of God keeping a person (guarding and preserving them); the same verb names the obedience of the watchful and the protection of the Watcher v. 21 (they did obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness); vv. 25–26 (not one soul of them who did perish... preserved by his marvelous power). The chapter's two great themes — the sons' exact *keeping* of every command, and God's *keeping* of every son — are, in Hebrew, the same verb: *shamar*. This is not a coincidence of translation but a profound theological pattern the Hebrew Bible draws again and again, and Alma 57 enacts it perfectly. *Shamar* means "to keep, guard, watch, observe with care." It is the word for *keeping* the commandments — *keep (shamar) my statutes* (Lev. 19:19), *observe (shamar) to do all these commandments* (Deut. 11:22) — the careful, watchful, exact observance Helaman describes when he says the sons *did obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness*. To *shamar* a command is precisely to perform it *with exactness*: to guard it, to watch over it, to let nothing of it fall to the ground. But *shamar* is also the word for *God's keeping of his people* — and the same Bible that commands Israel to *keep* the law promises that God will *keep* those who do. The supreme text is Psalm 121, built entirely on the verb: *he that keepeth thee (shomerekha) will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel (shomer Yisraēl) shall neither slumber nor sleep... the Lord is thy keeper (shomerekha)... the Lord shall preserve thee (yishmorkha) from all evil; he shall preserve thy soul (yishmor et-nafshekha). The Lord shall preserve (yishmor) thy going out and thy coming in* (Ps. 121:3–8). Six times in a few verses the Keeper *keeps*. And this is exactly the structure of Alma 57: the sons *keep (shamar)* every command with exactness, and the Lord *keeps (shamar)* every one of them through the battle — *not one soul... did perish... preserved by his marvelous power*. The keepers are kept. Those who *guarded* the commandment are *guarded* by God; those who let no word of command fall to the ground are the ones of whom not one soul falls to the earth. The Hebrew makes visible what the English only implies: that the preservation answers the obedience, that to *keep* the Lord's word is to be *kept* by the Lord, and that the same watchful care the sons gave to every command, God gave to every son. The deepest promise of the chapter is folded into the double life of a single verb — *shamar* the law, and be *shamar*-ed by its Giver.

nefesh / dam (נֶפֶשׁ / דָּם) — **nefesh, soul, life, the living self — the breath-borne life of a creature; dam, blood. Scripture binds the two: the life (nefesh) of the flesh is in the blood (dam) — so that to lose blood is to lose the seat of life itself v. 25 (two hundred... who had fainted because of the loss of blood... not one soul of them who did perish).** There is a quiet wordplay buried in verse 25 that the Hebrew brings to the surface, and it is one of the most beautiful things in the war record. Helaman says two hundred of the sons *fainted because of the loss of blood*, and yet *not one soul of them who did perish*. In Hebrew, "soul" is *nefesh* and "blood" is *dam*, and these two words are bound together by one of the most important verses in the Law: *the life (nefesh) of the flesh is in the blood (dam)... for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul (nefesh)* (Lev. 17:11; cf. 17:14, *the life of all flesh is the blood thereof*). Scripture locates the *nefesh* — the living soul, the life — *in the dam*, the blood. The blood is the vessel of the life; to pour out the blood is to pour out the *nefesh*. This is why the spilling of blood is so grave a thing in the Law: blood is not merely fluid but the very seat of the God-given life. Now hear verse 25 again with that in mind. The two hundred sons lost their *blood* — the very thing that, in Hebrew thought, *carries the soul* — until they fainted, drained of the *dam* in which the *nefesh* dwells. By every reckoning of the Law, men emptied of their blood should be emptied of their life; the *nefesh* should follow the *dam* out of the body. And yet — *not one nefesh of them did perish*. The blood drained, but the soul was kept. The vessel of life was poured out nearly to the dregs, and still the life remained. The Hebrew makes the miracle almost unbearably precise: these are men whose *nefesh*-bearing *dam* ran out of them, who fainted at the very threshold where soul departs from body — and the God who declares that *the life is in the blood* held their lives in his own hand when their blood could no longer hold them. There is a deeper resonance still, for the same verse that binds *nefesh* to *dam* says it is *the blood that maketh atonement for the soul* — and the war record has shown us, since Alma 52's *koper*, that the blood poured out to redeem is the gospel's own pattern. The sons poured out their blood in the cause of liberty and were kept alive; the One whose pattern they trace poured out his blood and laid down his *nefesh* that ours might be kept. *Not one soul of them did perish* — though their blood ran out — because the life was held by the One in whose hand all souls are, the One whose own poured-out blood is the atonement for every *nefesh*.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Matt. 9:29 (according to your faith be it unto you — the principle Helaman states independently, according to their faith it was done unto them, v. 21); Matt. 8:13 (as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee — the same measure-for-measure of faith); Ps. 121:1–8 (the Keeper who shall preserve thy soul... shall neither slumber nor sleep — the shamar theology of God keeping those who keep his word, vv. 25–26); Lev. 19:19; Deut. 11:22 (keep — shamar — my statutes... observe to do all these commandments — the careful keeping that is obedience with exactness, v. 21); Lev. 17:11, 14 (the life — *nefesh* — of the flesh is in the blood — *dam*... it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul — the bond of soul and blood behind fainted because of the loss of blood... not one soul did perish, v. 25); Deut. 12:23 (the blood is the life — the seat of life poured out yet the life kept); John 14:15 (if ye love me, keep my commandments — love expressed as exact obedience, the faith-as-keeping of the sons); James 2:17–22 (faith made perfect by works — the welding of trust and obedience Helaman shows on the field); Ps. 91:1–11 (he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways — preservation of the trusting through danger, though not exemption from it); 2 Tim. 4:7 (I have fought a good fight... I have kept the faith — keeping the faith as the soldier's exactness); Alma 56:44–56 (the first battle and the first count, not one soul... had fallen to the earth — the miracle this chapter deepens at far higher cost); Alma 58:39–40 (the sons kept from falling by the sword... strict to remember the Lord their God from day to day — the continual trust of v. 27 sustained to the campaign's end); Alma 52:8 (the *koper*/ransom — the poured-out blood that redeems, the pattern the wounded sons trace); D&C 84:88 (I will be on your right hand and on your left... mine angels round about you, to bear you up — the keeping of the faithful servant); Mosiah 2:41 (they that keep the commandments... are blessed in all things — the blessedness of the keepers who are kept). ``