

Alma 21 — Aaron in the City of Jerusalem — The Amalekites and Amulonites, the Synagogue Disputation, and the Prison of Middoni

Alma 21: Mormon rewinds. While Ammon was at Ishmael, what was happening with Aaron and his brethren? They had separated from Ammon at the beginning of the fourteen-year mission. Aaron's first stop was a Lamanite city named Jerusalem — built by Lamanites and Amalekites and Amulonites together. The Amalekites are apostate Nephites who left the Nephite church; the Amulonites are descendants of the wicked priests of Noah, who had taken Lamanite wives and become a sub-people of their own. Both groups had built synagogues after the order of the Nehors. Aaron preaches in the Amalekite synagogue; he is mocked and rejected. He moves on to Ani-Anti, then to Middoni, where he and Muloki and Ammah are imprisoned. The chapter ends as Ammon and Lamoni arrive to free them, picking up the thread from Alma 20:28.

Alma 21 is Mormon's flashback to the harder field. While Ammon was building his ministry in Ishmael through household conversion and royal favor, Aaron — the brother who should have been king — was getting cast out of synagogues, driven from city to city, and finally thrown into prison. The chapter is a careful editorial counterweight to the Lamoni narrative. Mormon does not want the reader to remember the Sons-of-Mosiah mission only by Ammon's success. The same mission, in the same year, was also the mission of Aaron — and Aaron's experience was Pauline in its hardship.

Hebrew Word Studies

beit-kneset / patach / qasheh-oref / dam-kapparah (בֵּית כְּנֶסֶת / פָּתַח / קָשֶׁה-וֹרֵף / דַּם כַּפָּרָה) — **house of assembly, synagogue / to open, unstop / hard of neck, stiffnecked / blood of atonement vv. 4, 9, 11, 14.** Four Hebrew constructions sit beneath Aaron's preaching tour. *Beit kneset* — house of assembly, synagogue — is the Mishnaic and rabbinic name for the Jewish synagogue building, and the Hebrew underneath the New Testament *synagōgē*. The chapter's note that the Amalekites had built synagogues *after the order of the Nehors* attests, in Lamanite territory, a recognizable *beit kneset* structure — an assembly house in the Jewish form, even though the doctrine inside it had become Nehorite. The Book of Mormon insists that the synagogue form is older than the post-exilic scholarship usually allows, and Alma 21 places it in Lamanite Jerusalem in the first century BC. *Patach* — to open, unstop — is the verb behind Aaron's *opening of the scriptures*. The Lord uses the same verb in Isaiah 35:5 (*then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, ve-nifqachu ainei ivrim*) and in Luke 24:32 (the disciples' confession on the Emmaus road that Christ had *opened the scriptures* to them). When the chapter says Aaron began *to open the scriptures*, the Hebrew underneath is *patach et-ha-katuvim* — the same verb Christ will use on the Emmaus road. *Qasheh-oref* — hard of neck, stiffnecked — is the standard Hebrew construction for the rebellious, the un-bowing, the one whose neck will not turn to the yoke (Ex. 32:9, 33:3, 34:9; Deut. 9:6). The chapter's repeated use of *stiffnecked* of the Amalekites and Amulonites uses precisely this construction. They are the Lamanite version of the wilderness Israel — the people whose necks the Lord could not turn. *Dam kapparah* — blood of atonement — is the construct of *dam* (blood) and *kapparah* (covering, expiation, atonement). It is the formula behind Leviticus 17:11 (*for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul*) and the entire Day of Atonement liturgy. When Aaron preaches *the atonement of his blood*, the Hebrew underneath is *dam kapparah* — the covering blood of the great sacrifice. Aaron is preaching the Day-of-Atonement doctrine of the Sin-Bearer to a Lamanite synagogue, and they will not have it.

From the Chapter's Architecture

Finally, the chapter is the textual hinge between Ammon's narrative and Aaron's. Alma 22 will pick up Aaron's thread: he will go to the great king's palace, preach the gospel from creation to Christ in much the same shape Ammon used at Ishmael, and the king will fall as if dead. The conversion of the great king is the chapter Mormon has been driving toward across Alma 17–21. Aaron — the brother whose months in prison the reader has just learned about — will be the one to deliver it.