
Alma 44 — A Covenant of Peace — Moroni, Zerahemnah, and Mercy in Victory

Alma 44: c. 74 BC, by the river Sidon, the close of the first great battle of the war that opened in Alma 43. Moroni's armored Nephites have surrounded Zerahemnah's exhausted Lamanite army; the victory is in hand and the slaughter could be total. Instead Moroni halts the killing and offers terms — lay down your weapons, swear a covenant of peace, and go free. The chapter is the Book of Mormon's master text on how a righteous people wages and ends a war: force is used only to compel peace, never to destroy; mercy is offered even to a beaten enemy; and the whole point of the fighting is a covenant, not a conquest. It turns on the strange, vivid confrontation between Moroni and Zerahemnah — the dissenter who will surrender his sword but refuses to swear an oath he knows he will break, the scalp struck to the earth as a sign, and the final covenant of peace that lets the survivors depart. It is also one of scripture's clearest statements that God preserves a people only so long as they are faithful, and never spares them in transgression.

Alma 44 finishes the battle that Alma 43 began, and it does so in a way no ordinary war record would. The Lamanite army under Zerahemnah is surrounded, weakened, and terrified; Moroni holds the power of life and death over thousands of men. What he does with that power is the whole subject of the chapter. He stops the killing. He offers terms. And the terms reveal the entire Nephite philosophy of war: the goal was never to destroy the Lamanites but to make them stop — to secure *a covenant of peace* and send the survivors home. Mormon, the old soldier, is showing his readers what victory looks like in righteous hands. The chapter pivots on a tense exchange between two men who had both once stood inside the covenant: Moroni, who kept it, and Zerahemnah, the dissenter, who did not. Zerahemnah's refusal to swear a false oath, the violent sign of the severed scalp, and the eventual covenant that ends the bloodshed together compose one of the most morally textured battle scenes in scripture — a scene about mercy, about the weight of an oath, and about the conditions on which God preserves a people at all.

Hebrew Word Studies

***berith* / *shevuah* (בְּרִית / שְׁוּעָה) — covenant, a binding agreement ratified by oath / oath, sworn promise, the invoking of God as witness and guarantor vv. 6, 11, 14–15, 19–20 / vv. 8, 11.** The chapter turns on two related Hebrew words. *Berith* is *covenant* — the central word of the Hebrew Bible, a binding agreement between parties, usually ratified by oath and often sealed with blood or a sign. A *berith* is more than a contract; it creates a bond, a relationship with obligations on both sides, and to break one is not merely to default but to betray. When Moroni demands *a covenant of peace* (v. 6) he is asking the Lamanites to enter a *berith* — to be bound, before God, to keep the peace. This is why the covenant, not the slaughter, is the goal: a defeated enemy can regroup, but a *berith*-bound enemy is held by something stronger than fear. The second word is *shevuah*, oath — the sworn element that ratifies a *berith*. To take a *shevuah* was to invoke God as witness and to call down His judgment on oneself if the promise were broken; in Israel an oath was inviolable precisely because God was its guarantor (Num. 30:2; Eccl. 5:4–5). This is the key to Zerahemnah's strange refusal: he will not take a *shevuah* he knows he will break (v. 8), because even he understands that a broken oath is a sin against God Himself, not merely against Moroni. His scruple is real — but it exposes his unbelief, for the same man denies that God had any part in the battle (v. 9). He fears the mechanism of the oath while denying the God who stands behind it. The tragedy of the dissenter is exactly here: he retains enough of the covenant culture to dread breaking an oath, but has lost enough faith to see no God in his own deliverance — and so he will neither swear peace nor trust the One who offered it.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Num. 30:2 (if a man vow a vow... or swear an oath... he shall not break his word — the binding shevuah of v. 8); Deut. 20:10–11 (the law to proclaim peace to a city before besieging it — Moroni's offer of terms, v. 6); Josh. 9:3–20 (the oath to the Gibeonites kept even when obtained by deceit — the inviolability of a sworn covenant, v. 8); 1 Sam. 17:45–47 (David: the Lord saveth not with sword and spear... the battle is the Lord's — against Zerahemnah's cunning and breastplates, v. 9); 2 Chr. 15:2 (the Lord is with you, while ye be with him... if ye forsake him, he will forsake you — the conditional preservation of vv. 3–4); Ps. 20:7 (some trust in chariots... but we will remember the name of the Lord — vv. 4, 9); Prov. 16:7 (when a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him — the covenant of peace, v. 20); Prov. 25:21–22 (mercy to a defeated enemy — Moroni sparing Zerahemnah, v. 20); Eccl. 5:4–6 (when thou vowest a vow... defer not to pay it — the weight of the oath, v. 8); Matt. 5:33–37 (Christ's teaching on oaths — let your communication be, Yea, yea — the seriousness Zerahemnah half-grasps, v. 8); Matt. 5:43–48 (love your enemies — the mercy Moroni shows, vv. 1, 20); Rom. 12:19–21 (avenge not yourselves... if thine enemy hunger, feed him — Moroni's refusal of vengeance, v. 20); Alma 43:45–47 (the cause and the first offense ethic that this chapter carries into victory); Alma 46:11–22 (Moroni's covenant of the title of liberty — the berith theme continued among his own people); Alma 48:11–13 (Moroni did not delight in bloodshed, a man firm in the faith of Christ — the portrait this chapter illustrates); Alma 55:18–19 (Moroni later refusing to use a captured advantage to slaughter — the same restraint as v. 20); Mosiah 23:13 (trust no one to be your teacher... except he be a man of God — the dissenter pattern of Zerahemnah); Hel. 4:24–26 (when the Nephites had dwindled in unbelief... the Lord did cease to preserve them — the warning half of vv. 3–4 fulfilled); D&C 98:33–38 (the Lord's law of war: offer peace, and only after repeated offenses is battle justified — the ethic of vv. 1–6). ``