

Alma 49 — The Weakest Places Made Strongest — The Vindication of Moroni's Preparation

Alma 49: c. 72 BC, the eleventh month of the nineteenth year of the reign of the judges. The war Amalickiah manufactured in Alma 48 finally arrives, and it arrives exactly where the Lamanites remember the Nephites being soft. Their chief captains march on the city of Ammonihah — the city their fathers had leveled in a single day a dozen years before (Alma 16) — supposing it will be an easy prey again. Instead they find it ringed with a ridge of earth so high they cannot reach the defenders, and they break against it. Frustrated, they turn to the city of Noah, the weakest place in the land, and there discover the trap of Moroni's foresight: the weakest city has been made the strongest of all, commanded by the same Lehi the Lamanites most feared. They swear an oath to take it anyway and are slaughtered against the entrance — more than a thousand Lamanites dead, their chief captains all slain, and not a single Nephite soul lost. The chapter is the direct vindication of the preparation doctrine of Alma 48:9 (in their weakest fortifications he did place the greater number of men): the cities the enemy thought weakest were the cities Moroni had quietly made impregnable. Amalickiah, who would not come down to the battle himself though he cared nothing for his people's blood, receives the news and curses God and Moroni, swearing with an oath to drink Moroni's blood. The chapter sets the prepared and consecrated defender against the absent, raging usurper, and lets a wall of earth carry the doctrine.

Alma 48 was preparation; Alma 49 is the test of it. Mormon spent the previous chapter telling us what Moroni had been doing while Amalickiah schemed — fortifying the weakest cities, throwing up banks of earth, placing *the greater number of men* in the places that looked most exposed (48:8–9) — and then he paused to paint the portrait of the man who did such work. Now the work is tried in fire. The Lamanite armies Amalickiah inflamed at last come down, and they come down with a memory: they remember which Nephite cities used to be easy. They remember Ammonihah, which their fathers destroyed in a single day (Alma 16). They remember Noah as a soft place on the border. So they march on exactly the cities they expect to find weak — and find them made strongest. The whole chapter is the springing of a trap that Moroni set two chapters ago and that the reader has been let in on but the Lamanites have not.

Hebrew Word Studies

■**azaq** / **metsudah** (אַזַּק / מְצֻדָּה) — **to be strong, to strengthen, to make firm — also "to harden" (as Pharaoh's heart) / a mountain stronghold, fastness, fortress — and a favorite name for God as the believer's refuge vv. 5, 8, 14 (the weak city made strong, the Nephites prepared as never before) / vv. 2, 4, 13, 18 (the forts of security, the ridge and ditch and bank).** Two Hebrew words sit under the earthworks of this chapter, and together they turn a story about dirt into a story about God. The first is ■**azaq**, the great Hebrew verb for *strength* — to be strong, and in its causative form to *make* strong, to fortify, to harden. It is what Moroni does to the weak city of Noah: he makes it ■**azaq**, strong *even to exceed* the strong city (v. 14). But ■**azaq** carries a famous double edge in the Hebrew Bible, because it is also the word for what God did to Pharaoh's heart — *I will harden* (■**azaq**) *Pharaoh's heart* (Ex. 4:21; 7:13). The same root that *strengthens* the humble city *hardens* the proud heart, and Alma 49 holds both senses at once: while Moroni strengthens the weak place, the Lamanite captains harden themselves against all evidence — bound by a rash oath, they ■**azaq** their own resolve to attack a city they can see is unassailable, and the hardening kills them. Strength rightly used builds a refuge; strength turned to stubbornness digs a grave, and the ditch of Noah fills with the bodies of men who hardened their hearts against wisdom. The word that blesses Moroni's foresight is the word that dooms their pride. The second word is **metsudah**, the mountain *stronghold* or *fastness* — the high, defended place. Literally it is David's hideout in the wilderness (1 Sam. 22:4–5; 24:22), the fortress of Zion (2 Sam. 5:7), the rocky height a man flees to when the enemy is too strong. But the Psalter takes the military word and makes it a name for God himself: *the Lord is my rock, and my fortress (metsudah), and my deliverer* (Ps. 18:2; 31:3; 71:3; 144:2). The believer's true **metsudah** is not a wall of earth but the God who delivers — which is exactly the move the Nephites make at the chapter's end. They have built the finest **metsudah** of stone and timber and dug earth ever seen among the children of Lehi (v. 8), and when the battle is won they look past the wall to the One it pointed toward and thank *the Lord their God, because of his matchless power in delivering them* (v. 28). The fortification is real and it mattered; but it was always a figure of the deeper refuge. Moroni built a **metsudah** of earth precisely because he trusted the **metsudah** of heaven, and the chapter's quiet theology is that the two are not in competition: the man who digs the ditch and the man who thanks God for the deliverance are the same faithful man, doing one consecrated work in two motions.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Ps. 18:2 (the Lord is my rock, and my fortress / metsudah, and my deliverer — the divine refuge behind the earthworks of Noah, vv. 14, 28); Ps. 31:3; 71:3; 144:1–2 (God as fortress and the one who teacheth my hands to war — preparation and providence joined, as in Moroni); 1 Sam. 22:4–5; 24:22 (David in the hold / metsudah — the mountain stronghold as literal refuge); 2 Sam. 5:7 (the strong hold of Zion — the fortress that becomes a name for God's protection); Ex. 4:21; 7:13 (God hardens / ■azaq Pharaoh's heart — the same root that strengthens the weak city hardens the proud captains who attack it, vv. 14, 17); Deut. 31:6 (be strong / ■azaq... for the Lord thy God... will not fail thee — strength rooted in God's presence, the Nephite reading of their own walls); Prov. 18:10 (the name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe — the tower of Alma 50 read as figure); Prov. 21:31 (the horse is prepared against the day of battle: but safety is of the Lord — the exact theology of vv. 8 and 28: prepare fully, credit God); 2 Cor. 12:9–10 (my strength is made perfect in weakness... when I am weak, then am I strong — the gospel form of the weak-place-made-strongest of v. 14); Eph. 6:11–17 (the whole armor of God — the moral reading of the head-plates and breastplates of v. 24); Alma 16:1–11 (the earlier destruction of Ammonihah in one day — the memory the Lamanites march on, v. 3); Alma 43:38–53 (Lehi and the breastplate-and-shield armor that first broke the Lamanites by the Sidon — why they feared Lehi exceedingly, vv. 16–17); Alma 46:11–13 (Moroni's oath to defend his people even to the loss of his blood, the righteous inverse of Amalickiah's oath to drink blood, v. 27); Alma 48:7–9 (the preparation doctrine this chapter vindicates — in their weakest fortifications he did place the greater number of men); Alma 51:33–37 (Amalickiah's rash oath answered by Teancum's javelin — the blood he swore to drink, never tasted); Hel. 3:27–29 (the strict word of God a sure guide which will divide asunder all the cunning and the snares — the spiritual fortification behind the literal); 1 Ne. 17:3 (God doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means — the providence the Nephites thank in v. 28). ``