
Alma 52 — Decoyed Out of Their Strongholds — Ammoron's War and the Retaking of Mulek

Alma 52: c. 66–64 BC, spanning the twenty-sixth through the twenty-eighth years of the reign of the judges. Amalickiah is dead, but the war is not over — for the ambition that drove him simply passes to his brother. On the first morning of the new year the Lamanites wake to find their king slain in his tent and Teancum ready to give battle; affrighted, they abandon the drive into the land northward and fall back into the city of Mulek behind their fortifications. Ammoron, Amalickiah's brother, is made king in his stead and commands his armies to hold the cities they have taken by the shedding of blood. Teancum, judging the Lamanite forts too strong to storm with his numbers, holds the line through the winter, fortifying and waiting, until Moroni sends reinforcements and orders: retain the Lamanite prisoners as a ransom for the Nephites they hold, secure the narrow pass into the land northward, and seek by stratagem to retake the lost cities. When an embassy fails to draw the Lamanite commander Jacob — a Zoramite of unconquerable spirit — out of Mulek onto fair ground, Moroni resolves on a decoy: Teancum marches a small force down the seashore to bait the Lamanite army into a pursuit, drawing them out of the city; Moroni, who has marched by night through the wilderness, takes the emptied city; and the pursuing Lamanites, met by fresh troops under Lehi and caught between Lehi's men and Moroni's, are surrounded. Jacob falls and Moroni is wounded in a furious clash; the rest surrender, the prisoners outnumbering the slain. The chapter shows the war's ambition outliving the man who began it, and sets Moroni's lawful, life-sparing war-craft — winning cities by wit and sparing lives by ransom — against the Lamanites' bloody holding of what blood had taken.

Alma 51 ended with a javelin and a sentence: *thus endeth the days of Amalickiah*. A reader might expect the war to end with the man who started it. Alma 52 opens by quietly refusing that hope. The Lamanites wake on the first morning of the new year to find their king dead in his tent, and they are *affrighted* — but the war does not die with Amalickiah, because the ambition that animated him was never really his alone. It passes, within a few verses, to his brother. *The brother of Amalickiah was appointed king... and his name was Ammoron* (v. 3). Mormon's economy here is itself a teaching. The usurper is replaced by his own brother almost as quickly as a head is replaced on a hydra, and the new king's first act is to command his people to *maintain those cities which they had taken by the shedding of blood* (v. 4). The lesson is sobering and very much Mormon's: the spirit of unrighteous ambition does not end when one ambitious man dies. It is a posture of the heart that finds a new bearer. Killing Amalickiah was necessary; it was not sufficient. The war goes on under a new name that means the same thing.

Hebrew Word Studies

ma■arav / koper (מֶרְצֵחַ / כּוֹפֵר) — **an ambush, a lying-in-wait, a hidden force set to spring — the lawful military stratagem / a ransom, the price paid to redeem a life or release a captive; a covering, an atonement-price vv. 21–24 (the decoy, the hidden march by night, the empty city taken) / v. 8 (the prisoners retained as a ransom).** Two Hebrew words name the two faces of Moroni's war-craft in this chapter, and both turn out to have a long scriptural shadow. The first is **ma■arav**, the *ambush* or *lying-in-wait* — the hidden force set to spring on an enemy drawn out of position. Its great biblical instance is the very stratagem Moroni uses here: the taking of Ai in Joshua 8, where the Lord himself directs Joshua to *lay an ambush (ma■arav) for the city behind it* (Josh. 8:2), to feign a retreat that draws the defenders out, and then to send the hidden men to *take the city while it stands empty* (Josh. 8:4–19). Alma 52 is almost a retelling of Joshua 8 — the feigned flight (Teancum down the seashore), the eager pursuit, the hidden force (Moroni by night through the wilderness) taking the emptied city of Mulek. The point worth making is that the **ma■arav** at Ai was not condemned as deceit; it was *commanded by God* as legitimate war against an enemy who would not be taken otherwise. Scripture distinguishes sharply between the **ma■arav**, the honest stratagem of war, and **■ormah** or *mirmah*, the treacherous cunning that betrays trust — the very words used of Amalickiah back in Alma 47. Amalickiah's craft betrayed those who trusted him; Moroni's **ma■arav** outmaneuvers an enemy who has refused fair battle. The form is similar; the moral world is opposite. And there is a deeper note: the **ma■arav** often figures God's own hidden working — the deliverance prepared in secret, sprung at the appointed hour (2 Chr. 20:22, where the Lord *set ambushments* for Israel's enemies). The second word is **koper**, *ransom* — the price paid to redeem a life. It is the half-shekel each Israelite paid as *a ransom (koper) for his soul* (Ex. 30:12), the price that *covers* (the root *kpr* is the root of *kippur*, atonement, the *covering* of sin). When Moroni orders the prisoners held as *a ransom* (v. 8), he is treating enemy lives as a **koper** — a price by which captive Nephites can be redeemed and brought home. The logic is the logic of redemption itself: captives are freed not by more killing but by a price held and paid, a life for a life. This is why the verse carries a weight beyond its military sense. The whole gospel runs on **koper** — *the Son of man came... to give his life a ransom (lutron, the Greek for koper) for many* (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45) — and Moroni's policy of redeeming captives by ransom rather than spending them in slaughter quietly traces the same shape. Together the two words frame the chapter's deepest claim: that the righteous warrior wins by the **ma■arav** of wisdom rather than the slaughter of a siege, and recovers his people by the **koper** of ransom rather than the spending of blood — war-craft bent, as far as war allows, toward the preserving of life.

From the Chapter's Architecture

“cross-references Josh. 8:1–22 (the taking of Ai by a God-commanded ambush / **ma■arav** and feigned retreat that drew the defenders out so a hidden force could seize the empty city — the direct biblical template for Moroni's decoy at Mulek, vv. 21–24); 2 Chr. 20:22 (the Lord set ambushments against Israel's enemies — the **ma■arav** as an instrument of divine deliverance); Judg. 20:29–48 (Israel takes Gibeah by a liers in wait and a feigned flight — the same stratagem in the period of the judges); Ex. 30:12 (every man a ransom / koper for his soul — the redemption-price behind Moroni's holding prisoners as ransom, v. 8); Lev. 16 (the kippur, the covering/atonement from the same root as koper — the deeper resonance of ransom as covering); Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45 (the Son of man came to give his life a ransom for many — the gospel pattern of deliverance by ransom rather than slaughter that Moroni's policy traces, v. 8); 1 Tim. 2:6 (Christ gave himself a ransom for all — the same); Prov. 21:22 (a wise man scaleth the city of the mighty, and casteth down the strength of the confidence thereof — victory by wisdom over fortification, vv. 19–24); Prov. 24:6 (by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war — the council of war, v. 19); Eccl. 9:14–18 (wisdom is better than strength... wisdom is better than weapons of war — the poor wise man who delivers a besieged city, the chapter's thesis); Alma 43:29–54 (Moroni's earlier use of terrain and stratagem, and the ethic of stopping the killing the moment the enemy yields — the precedent for vv. 37–40); Alma 47:1–18 (Amalickiah's treacherous ■ormah — the dark twin of Moroni's lawful **ma■arav**, the bookend this chapter closes); Alma 48:11, 23 (Moroni did not delight in bloodshed — the character behind the ransom and the offer of mercy, vv. 8, 37); Alma 55:1–24 (Moroni's later stratagem to free the Nephite prisoners at Gid without bloodshed — the ransom-and-wisdom ethic of this chapter carried further); Alma 53:10–22; 56–58 (Helaman and the stripling warriors — the next stage of the war this chapter sets up, as the eastern front gives way to the southwestern); 3 Ne. 3:20–21 (Gidgiddoni refuses to march into the robbers' lands but defends from prepared ground — the later application of the wisdom Moroni models here).

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