

Alma 54 — Two Letters, Two Worlds — Moroni and Ammoron Exchange Epistles

Alma 54: c. 63 BC, the commencement of the twenty-ninth year of the reign of the judges. Ammoron, the Lamanite king, sends to Moroni proposing an exchange of prisoners. Moroni rejoices — not chiefly to recover his soldiers, though he wants them, but because the Lamanites hold many Nephite women and children, and he holds only warriors; so he resolves on a stratagem, demanding a whole family — a man, his wife, and his children — for each single Lamanite prisoner. He sends his terms in a blistering epistle that preaches the justice of God and the hell awaiting murderers, names Ammoron and his dead brother as such, and closes with a threat of total war: blood for blood, life for life. Ammoron answers in kind. He claims the war as vengeance for his murdered brother Amalickiah; he rehearses the ancient Lamanite grievance — that the Nephite fathers robbed the Lamanite fathers of their right to the government; he offers peace only on the terms of Nephite surrender to 'those to whom the government doth rightly belong'; he vows a war that shall be eternal, to subjection or extinction; and he denies God outright — 'we know not such a being; neither do ye.' He signs himself a descendant of Zoram and 'a bold Lamanite.' The chapter is a study in two letters: two men, two readings of the same history, two gods — or, in Ammoron's case, none.

For two chapters the war has been told in movement — marches, decoys, the wall of Bountiful rising, the stripling sons enlisting. Alma 54 stops the movement entirely and gives us two documents. Ammoron writes proposing a prisoner exchange; Moroni answers; Ammoron answers back. Nothing happens, in the sense of battle. And yet this may be the most revealing chapter in the whole war, because Mormon — who could have summarized the negotiation in a sentence — instead copies out both letters in full, so that we can hear the two men think. A battle shows you who is stronger. A letter shows you who a man *is*. Mormon wants us to see, in their own words, the two souls this war is being fought between, and the chapter is built so that the letters answer each other line for line, worldview against worldview.

Hebrew Word Studies

go^{el} ha-dam (גֹּאֵל הַדָּם) — the avenger of blood — the near kinsman whose duty was to require the life of one who had slain his relative; but go^{el} alone means "redeemer, kinsman who buys back" — the same word for the one who ransoms a relative from debt or slavery, and the title of God himself as Redeemer v. 16 (I am the brother of Amalickiah... I will avenge his blood upon you). When Ammoron writes *I will avenge his blood upon you*, he is claiming, in Hebrew terms, the office of the go^{el} ha-dam — the "avenger of blood," the near kinsman bound by ancient law to require the life of whoever killed his relative (Num. 35:19; Deut. 19:6, 12). And the claim deserves to be examined, because Ammoron is perverting a sacred institution, and the perversion is the point. The law of the go^{el} ha-dam existed to protect the innocent slain — to ensure that a murdered man's life was not simply forgotten, that there was a kinsman whose duty was to see justice done. But it was hedged with a crucial protection: the cities of refuge (Num. 35:9–28), which existed precisely so that the avenger could *not* shed the blood of one who had killed lawfully or accidentally. The avenger had no right against a man who slew in a just cause. And that is exactly Ammoron's problem. Amalickiah was not innocently slain; he was a murderer and a usurper killed in a defensive war — the kind of death the law explicitly placed *outside* the avenger's reach. Ammoron claims the role of go^{el} ha-dam for a brother to whom the protections of blood-vengeance never applied; he wears the robe of the righteous avenger to license what is, in fact, simply the continuation of his brother's aggression. But the word has a second face that exposes him further. Go^{el} does not only mean "avenger"; it is, far more often, the word for *redeemer* — the kinsman who *buys back* a relative fallen into debt or bondage (Lev. 25:25, 48), the role Boaz plays for Ruth, the word Job cries in his hope, *I know that my Redeemer (go^{eli}) liveth* (Job 19:25), the title God takes again and again — *thy Redeemer (go^{alekh})*, the *Holy One of Israel* (Isa. 41:14; 43:14; 44:6). The same Hebrew word names the avenger who takes a life and the Redeemer who buys one back. And the war chapters have shown us both: Moroni redeems captives by *ransom* and *exchange* (the work of the go^{el} as redeemer, 52:8; 54:11), bringing his people home by paying a price; Ammoron pursues *vengeance*, the go^{el} as blood-taker, spending life to avenge a death. One kinsman buys his people back; the other spends his people to avenge his brother. The deepest irony is that Ammoron, denying God in the very same letter (v. 21), claims a role whose ultimate bearer is God — the Go^{el}, the Redeemer of Israel. He reaches for the avenger's sword while rejecting the Redeemer whose word the avenger's office was always meant to serve. The man who knows *no such being* claims the being's own title.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Num. 35:9–28 (the avenger of blood — go<sup>■</sup>el ha-dam — and the cities of refuge that shield the one who killed lawfully, the institution Ammoron perverts in claiming to avenge a murderer's death, v. 16); Deut. 19:1–13 (the same law — the avenger may not slay one who killed without lying in wait); Lev. 25:25, 47–49 (the go<sup>■</sup>el as kinsman-redeemer who buys back a relative — the redemptive face of the same word, against Ammoron's vengeful one); Job 19:25 (I know that my Redeemer — go<sup>■</sup>eli — liveth — the title Ammoron's own word bears, claimed even as he denies God); Isa. 41:14; 44:6 (thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel — God as the Go<sup>■</sup>el whose office Ammoron usurps and whose being he rejects, v. 21); Ps. 14:1 (the fool hath said in his heart, There is no God — the practical atheism of we know not such a being, v. 21); Mosiah 10:12–17 (the Lamanite tradition of grievance — that the Nephite fathers wronged and robbed the Lamanite fathers of the government — the inherited myth Ammoron adopts though Zoram's descendant, v. 17); 2 Ne. 5:1–4 (the actual history — Nephi fled for his life from brothers who sought to kill him, the truth the grievance inverts); Alma 20:10–13 (the Lamanites taught from their fathers the same grievance of being wronged — its persistence as the engine of every Lamanite war); Alma 52:8 (Moroni holding prisoners as a ransom — the redeemer's work that frames the exchange of this chapter); Matt. 20:28 (the ransom for many — the redemptive logic Moroni's exchange traces and Ammoron's vengeance refuses); Ex. 20:13 (thou shalt not kill — the law of murder Moroni invokes and Ammoron's godless premise dissolves, v. 7); Alma 48:11, 14–16 (Moroni did not delight in bloodshed yet would defend his people to the last — the character behind both the severity and the mercy of his letter); D&C 64:9–11 (vengeance the Lord's, the disciple to forgive — the gospel resolution of the blood-vengeance Ammoron claims). ```