

Alma 55 — A City Taken Without a Death — The Wine, the Silence, and the Mercy at Gid

Alma 55: c. 63 BC, closing the twenty-ninth year of the reign of the judges. Moroni reads Ammoron's reply and grows angrier still — not at the insult, but because he sees that Ammoron knows his cause is fraudulent and wages the war anyway. He refuses the exchange on any terms but his own and resolves instead to free the Nephite prisoners held in the city of Gid by stratagem. He searches his army for a descendant of Laman and finds one, a man named Laman, formerly a servant of the Lamanite king Amalickiah murdered. By night Laman and a small band approach the guards at Gid posing as escaped Lamanites bearing stolen Nephite wine; the guards, urged on by Laman's feigned reluctance, drink the strong wine freely until they are all drunk and asleep. Moroni's men, in profound silence, pass weapons over the wall to the imprisoned Nephites — even the women and the children able to bear a weapon — until all are armed within. They could have fallen on the sleeping, drunken Lamanites and slain them all; but Moroni did not delight in murder or bloodshed, and he would not. Instead he surrounds them, and in the morning the Lamanites wake to find themselves encircled without and their prisoners armed within. They cast their weapons at the Nephites' feet, pleading for mercy. The city is taken without the shedding of blood; the Nephite prisoners are freed and join Moroni; the war's recoveries continue, and the year ends with preparations to retake fortified Morianton.

Alma 54 ended with Ammoron's defiant letter, and Alma 55 opens inside Moroni's reaction to it — but the reaction is not what a reader might expect. Ammoron has insulted him, mocked his God, threatened eternal war; and Moroni was *more angry*. But Mormon is careful to tell us exactly what the anger is *about*, and it is not wounded pride: *he was more angry, because he knew that Ammoron had a perfect knowledge of his fraud; yea, he knew that Ammoron knew that it was not a just cause that had caused him to wage a war against the people of Nephi* (v. 1). What enrages Moroni is not that Ammoron disagrees with him but that Ammoron *knows better and persists anyway*. The grievance about the stolen government, the claim of avenging a wronged brother — Ammoron knows these are pretexts. He is not deceived; he is a deceiver who knows he is deceiving. And that, to Moroni, is the unforgivable thing: not error, but the deliberate waging of a war one knows to be unjust. The chapter begins, then, by locating evil precisely where Mormon always locates it — not in ignorance but in knowing, willed wrongdoing.

Hebrew Word Studies

■afets (נָפֵט) — to delight in, take pleasure in, desire, be inclined toward — the inward turning of the heart toward a thing; what a person wants, not merely what he does v. 19 (he did not delight in murder or bloodshed, but he delighted in the saving of his people). When Mormon writes that Moroni *did not delight in murder or bloodshed, but he delighted in the saving of his people*, he is reaching for the Hebrew idea of ■afets — and the word is exactly right, because ■afets names not what a man does but what his heart is *inclined toward*, what he takes pleasure in, what he wants. It is a word about the direction of desire. And its most famous use is the one that stands directly behind Moroni's portrait: the Lord's twice-spoken declaration through Ezekiel, *Have I any pleasure (he■afots e■pots) at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?* (Ezek. 18:23), and again, *As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure (lo e■pots) in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live* (Ezek. 33:11). God does not *delight* in the death even of the wicked; his desire turns toward their repentance and life. This is precisely the disposition Mormon ascribes to Moroni, in nearly the same words. Standing over an entire garrison of sleeping, drunken enemies he could kill without cost, Moroni *does not delight* in their death — his ■efets, his heart's inclination, is not toward bloodshed but toward *the saving of his people*. He fights God's war with God's own reluctance. The word also illuminates the contrast the chapter is built on. The Lamanite guards are governed by a different ■efets — they *delight* in the wine, their desire turns toward the appetite that destroys them (*this saying only made them more desirous*, v. 10). Two armies, two directions of desire: the one whose heart turns toward indulgence and is undone, the other whose commander's heart turns toward saving and so will not even kill the helpless. Scripture says of the blessed man that *his delight (■eftso) is in the law of the Lord* (Ps. 1:2), and of the Servant that God *delighteth* in him (Isa. 42:1) — ■afets is the word for where the deepest current of a soul runs. Mormon's single sentence locates the current of Moroni's soul exactly where God's runs: away from death, toward deliverance.

moqesh (מִקְשָׁה) — a snare, a trap, a lure — originally the bait-stick of a fowler's trap; that which entices to destruction; by extension, a thing or person that becomes the occasion of another's ruin v. 31 (they could not be taken in their snares).

The word for *snare*, *moqesh*, comes from the world of the fowler and the trapper — it is the baited stick or lure that springs the trap when the bird touches it, the hidden mechanism that turns an appetite into a death. And it carries through scripture a steady moral lesson that Alma 55 enacts twice over. First, the *moqesh* is almost always something *attractive* — a snare works by desire; the bird is caught because it *wants* the bait. That is exactly how the Lamanite guards are taken: the wine is the *moqesh*, and their own craving for it springs the trap (vv. 10–14). The fowler here is Laman, and the bait is the very thing the guards desire. But the deeper biblical teaching about the *moqesh* is that it recoils — *the wicked is snared (yaqosh) by the transgression of his own lips* (Prov. 12:13); *they are taken in their own naughtiness* (Prov. 11:6); *whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein* (Prov. 26:27). The trap-setter is caught in his own trap. And this is precisely the irony of the chapter's close. The Lamanites, having lost Gid to a wine-snare, try to spring the same snare on the Nephites — wine, *that they might destroy them with poison or with drunkenness* (v. 30). But the Nephites *could not be taken in their snares* (v. 31), because they were *not slow to remember the Lord their God*. Here the Hebrew lesson turns on its hinge: the *moqesh* catches only those governed by appetite, never those governed by remembrance. The snare needs a desire to spring it; the man who *remembers God* and tests his wine before he drinks it has no ungoverned desire for the bait to catch. Scripture warns that even good things — and false gods, and the friendship of the wicked — become a *moqesh* to those whose hearts are unguarded (Ex. 23:33; 34:12; Judg. 2:3; Ps. 106:36). The protection is never cleverness; it is the disciplined remembrance that leaves the trapper nothing to bait. The Lamanites set the snare and watched it spring on themselves; the Nephites walked past every snare untouched, because the only thing that springs a *moqesh* is a desire the remembering heart has already mastered.

From the Chapter's Architecture

“cross-references Ezek. 18:23; 33:11 (*I have no pleasure — lo e^ם pots — in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live — the divine ^םafets Moroni mirrors in he did not delight in bloodshed but delighted in the saving of his people, v. 19); Ps. 1:2 (his delight — ^םefto — is in the law of the Lord — the direction of a righteous heart's desire); Prov. 26:27 (whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein... he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him — the *moqesh* recoiling, vv. 30–31); Prov. 11:6 (the transgressors shall be taken in their own naughtiness — the snarers caught in their snare); Prov. 12:13; 29:6 (the wicked is snared — *yaqosh* — by the transgression of his lips... an evil man is snared by his sin); Ex. 23:33; 34:12; Judg. 2:3 (the things and friendships that become a *moqesh* — snare — to the unguarded heart); Prov. 20:1 (wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging; whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise — the appetite that takes the Gid guards, vv. 10–14); Prov. 23:29–35 (the woe and wounds of those who tarry long at the wine — the helplessness that delivers a garrison without a blow); Hab. 2:15 (woe to him that giveth his neighbour drink... and maketh him drunken — the moral weight of the stratagem, held in check by the refusal to then slay them); Deut. 8:11–18 (beware that thou forget not the Lord thy God — the remembrance that keeps the Nephites from the snare, v. 31); Alma 48:11, 16 (Moroni did not delight in bloodshed — the character Mormon establishes, enacted here over the sleeping enemy); Alma 52:8, 37 (the ransom policy and the we will forbear shedding your blood — the same life-sparing ethic, the city taken whole); Alma 43:54 (Moroni's earlier stopping of the slaughter the moment the enemy yields — the precedent for sparing the surrendered at Gid); Matt. 5:7 (blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy — the mercy Moroni shows the defenseless, answered by the enemy pleading for mercy, v. 23); D&C 98:23–32 (the Lord's law of war — bearing, forbearing, and the blessing on those who spare — the revealed frame for Moroni's restraint).”*