
Alma 60 — Righteous, and Wrong — Moroni's Epistle of Condemnation

Alma 60: Moroni, on the eastern front and not knowing that Zarahemla has fallen to an armed rebellion, writes a second epistle — this one to Pahoran and 'all those who have been chosen by this people to govern' — by way of condemnation. He recounts the sufferings of the armies: hunger, thirst, fatigue, thousands fallen by the sword 'while it might have otherwise been if ye had rendered unto our armies sufficient strength.' He demands to know the cause of the government's 'thoughtless stupor,' warns that the blood of the slain will come upon their heads, and lays out the hard doctrine that God lets the righteous be slain so his justice may fall on the wicked who could have saved them. He traces the whole catastrophe to 'the wickedness which first commenced at our head' — the king-men — and presses the charge to its edge: 'we know not but what ye yourselves are seeking for authority... traitors to your country.' He invokes the saying that 'the inward vessel shall be cleansed first,' threatens to leave his front, march on Zarahemla, and 'stir up insurrections' against any who would usurp power, and closes with the lines that have defined him ever since: 'I seek not for power, but to pull it down. I seek not for honor of the world, but for the glory of my God, and the freedom and welfare of my country.' Every word burns with a real and righteous fire over real and dying men — and almost every accusation is aimed at a man who has been overthrown and is innocent. This is the chapter where Moroni is most magnificent and most mistaken at once, and Mormon preserves it whole.

This is the famous letter. If you know one thing Captain Moroni ever wrote, it is probably a line from this chapter — *I seek not for power, but to pull it down, or can you think to sit upon your thrones in a state of thoughtless stupor, while your enemies are spreading the work of death around you?* It is the most quoted, most preached, most admired piece of writing in the war record. And it is, at the same time, a letter built almost entirely on a mistake. That is the thing we have to hold onto the whole way through, because it is what makes the chapter great rather than merely loud.

Hebrew Word Studies

keli (כֵּל) — "vessel" — a container, implement, or instrument; from a root meaning to hold or contain. A keli is anything made to hold something else — a cup, a jar, a tool, and by extension the body or the self as the container of a life. To speak of an "inward vessel" and an "outward vessel" is to picture the person, or the people, as a container with a hidden inside and a visible outside v. 23 (the inward vessel shall be cleansed first, and then shall the outer vessel be cleansed also). Moroni's image of the inward and outward vessel runs on a single Hebrew word, *keli*, "vessel" — and the image is precise. A *keli* in the Law is something that can be clean or unclean, and the purity codes are emphatic that a vessel must be cleansed *inside*, not just wiped on the surface (Lev. 11:32–33 even orders certain earthen vessels broken because the inside cannot be purified). The whole logic of ritual cleanness assumed what Moroni states: that the *inside* of the vessel is what actually determines whether it is clean, and that surface cleansing of a foul interior is worthless. This is exactly the figure Jesus would later turn on the Pharisees — *thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also* (Matt. 23:26); *ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess* (Matt. 23:25). The striking thing is that Moroni reaches this teaching *centuries before* Christ speaks it, and attributes it to God — *God has said that the inward vessel shall be cleansed first*. Either he is drawing on a prophetic saying preserved in the brass plates and now lost to us, or he has arrived independently at the same divine principle Jesus will later make famous; either way the Book of Mormon is quietly witnessing that this is *God's* settled order, not one teacher's clever line. And the principle is total. It governs nations — Moroni's point is that you cannot clean up the war at the borders (the outer vessel) while corruption festers at the head of the government (the inner vessel); the inside must be dealt with first or the outside cleansing won't hold. It governs souls just as exactly — no amount of outward religion, outward reform, outward good behavior will make a person clean if the inside is full of *extortion and excess*. Real change is always inside-out. You cannot scrub the cup's rim and call it clean while the inside rots. And there is a cost to Moroni in his own image that the chapter lets us feel without stating: the man demanding that the inner vessel be cleansed first is carrying, in this very letter, an inner thing — a rash and false judgment of his brother — that wants cleansing. He preaches the right order. In the next chapter, Pahoran's grace will help him keep it.

menuchah (מְנוּחָה) — "rest, resting-place" — from *nuach*, to rest, settle, come to repose. *Menuchah* is not merely the cessation of labor but a settled, secure dwelling — the rest of having arrived, of being safely home, of conflict ended and the soul at peace v. 13 (they do enter into the rest of the Lord their God). When Moroni says the slain righteous *enter*

into the rest of the Lord their God, the word standing behind "rest" carries a freight the English barely hints at. *Menuchah* (and its root *nuach*) is one of the great destination-words of the Hebrew Bible. It is the rest God gives Israel when the wars are finally over and they dwell secure: *the Lord your God hath given you rest, and hath given you this land* (Josh. 1:13). It is the resting-place the ark seeks — *Return, O Lord, unto the... rest* (Num. 10:36). It is the soul's home in the most beloved of the Psalms: *he leadeth me beside the still waters* — literally *waters of rest, menuchot* — *he restoreth my soul* (Ps. 23:2). And it is the settled security the soul speaks to itself in grief: *Return unto thy rest (menuchayki), O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee* (Ps. 116:7). To enter the Lord's *menuchah* is not to fall asleep or to vanish; it is to *arrive* — to come home from the war, to be done with conflict, to dwell safe. So watch what Moroni does for the men dying on his front. They fall by the sword in a war that should never have starved them, and the world's verdict on such a death is *waste* — lives spent for nothing, cut off in the middle of the fight. Moroni overturns that verdict with a single word. The slain do not stop at the grave; they *enter into the menuchah of the Lord their God*. The soldier who dies on the field of an unfinished war has, in fact, finished his war — he has come into the rest, the home, the still waters that the living are still marching toward. This is the same hope the New Testament will gather up: *there remaineth therefore a rest (sabbatismos) to the people of God* (Heb. 4:9); *blessed are the dead which die in the Lord... that they may rest from their labours* (Rev. 14:13). Moroni already knows it. He can hold his grief and his hope together because he believes both that these men died wrongly and that they arrived rightly — out of the war, into the rest, home in the God who let them be slain and then received them. The vessel poured out on the battlefield is gathered into the *menuchah* of God.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Matt. 23:25–26 (*cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also* — the inside-out principle Jesus speaks and Moroni reaches centuries early, v. 23); Lev. 11:32–33 (*the unclean keli that must be cleansed within or broken* — the purity logic behind the inward vessel); Ps. 23:2 (*he leadeth me beside the still waters* — waters of *menuchah*, the rest the slain enter, v. 13); Josh. 1:13; Num. 10:36 (*the rest God gives when the wars are over* — the *menuchah* the fallen soldiers enter ahead of the living); Heb. 4:9 (*there remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God* — the rest of the Lord their God, v. 13); Rev. 14:13 (*blessed are the dead which die in the Lord... that they may rest from their labours* — the New Testament seal on Moroni's doctrine of the slain righteous); Gen. 4:10 (*the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground* — the innocent blood that shall come upon your heads for vengeance, v. 10); Prov. 16:32; James 1:19–20 (*slow to anger, the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God* — the standard against which the misaimed accusation of v. 18 is measured); Alma 48:11–17 (*the portrait of Moroni who did not delight in bloodshed and whose greatness would shake hell* — the praise made safe by I seek not for power, v. 36); Alma 51:5–21 (*the king-men's first refusal to defend the country, put down by the sword* — the wickedness which first commenced at our head, vv. 15–16); Alma 59:13 (*the anger that wrote this letter* — Moroni was angry with the government, because of their indifference); Alma 61:9 (*Pahoran's reply revealing the accusation was aimed wrong* — ye have censured me, but it mattereth not; I am not angry); D&C 121:39 (*it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority... to exercise unrighteous dominion* — the lust for power Moroni names, and the danger his signature renounces). ``