
Mormon 3 — Vengeance Is Mine — The Nephites' Boast, Mormon's Refusal, and the Idle Witness Who Writes to Us

Mormon 3: c. AD 360–362. After two victories, the Nephites cross the line that seals their doom: instead of giving God the glory, they boast in their own strength and swear by the throne of God to go up in offensive war and avenge themselves on their enemies. The Lord had given Mormon one last errand — cry repentance, and the people shall be spared — and they hardened their hearts against it. Now, when they swear the oath of vengeance the Lord forbade, Mormon does something extraordinary: he utterly refuses to lead them any longer, and becomes an idle witness, standing aside to observe and record. From that refusal the chapter turns outward and forward — Mormon lays down his pen as a general and lifts it as a prophet to us, writing directly to the Gentiles, the house of Israel, and all the ends of the earth, that every soul must stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. It is the chapter where the war narrator becomes, openly, the messenger to the latter days.

Mormon 3 is the chapter where two things break: the Nephites break the last commandment that could have saved them, and Mormon breaks with the Nephites. After the spiritual collapse of chapter 1 and the false repentance of chapter 2, this chapter records the final moral inversion that makes destruction certain — and the prophet's response to it. The Lord gives the people one more chance: through Mormon he calls them to *repent... and be ye baptized, and build up again my church, and ye shall be spared* (v. 2). They refuse. Then, after God grants them two military victories, they commit the sin that seals their fate — they *boast in their own strength* and swear by the throne of God that they will wage offensive war to *avenge themselves* on their enemies (vv. 9–10). This is the crossing of a line. Their wars to this point had been defensive, fought for homes and families and freedom — the only kind of war the Book of Mormon ever sanctions (Alma 43:46–47). Now they swear an oath of aggressive vengeance, claiming for themselves the prerogative God reserves to himself. And Mormon, who has led them since he was sixteen, refuses to go one step further.

Hebrew Word Studies

naqam / shava / shaphat (נָקַם / שָׁוָה / שָׁפַט) — **vengeance, retribution / to swear, to take an oath (lit. "to seven oneself") / to judge, to govern, to vindicate** vv. 9–10, 15; vv. 10, 14; v. 20. Three Hebrew words carry the chapter's moral architecture. *Naqam* — vengeance — is the prerogative the Nephites usurped and the Lord reclaimed. *Vengeance is mine, and I will repay* (v. 15) is a direct echo of *li naqam ve-shillem*, "to me belongeth vengeance and recompence" (Deut. 32:35), the song of Moses. In Hebrew thought *naqam* is dangerous in human hands precisely because it belongs to God's role as judge; when humans seize *naqam* they pretend to a perfect justice they do not possess. The Nephites' oath to *avenge themselves* is the theft of *naqam*. *Shava* — to swear — is the verb behind their oath, and it carries a built-in irony: *shava* is denominative from *sheva*, seven, the number of completion and of covenant, so that to swear is literally to "seven oneself," to bind oneself by the sacred number. The Nephites *shava* by the throne of God — they invoke the most binding, sacred form of oath — to commit the very sin God forbids, perverting the holiest covenant-language to sanctify aggression. To *shava* by God's throne to do evil is to turn the machinery of covenant against the covenant-giver. *Shaphat* — to judge — names the seat to which Mormon redirects everything: the *judgment-seat of Christ* (v. 20). The *shophet* (judge) in Israel was both ruler and vindicator; to *shaphat* is to set right, to render to each his due. The chapter's whole logic is that *naqam* (vengeance) belongs only at the seat of the true *shophet* (judge) — that humans must not seize the vengeance which the Judge alone can render rightly, and that all of us, having left vengeance to him, must ourselves come before his *mishpat* to be judged.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Deut. 32:35 (to me belongeth vengeance, and recompence — the direct source of v. 15); Gen. 4:23–24 (Lamech's boast of self-avenging — the seizing of naqam the Nephites repeat, vv. 9–10); Lev. 19:18 (thou shalt not avenge... but... love thy neighbour — the law broken in vv. 9–10); 1 Sam. 24:12; 26:10–11 (David refuses to avenge himself on Saul, the Lord judge between me and thee... but mine hand shall not be upon thee — the righteous refusal of self-vengeance, vv. 11, 15); Ps. 94:1 (O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongeth — v. 15); Prov. 20:22 (say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the Lord — vv. 9–15); Eccl. 12:14 (God shall bring every work into judgment — the judgment-seat of v. 20); Isa. 1:18–20 (come now, and let us reason together... if ye be willing... but if ye refuse — the last offer of v. 2); Matt. 5:38–44 (ye have heard... an eye for an eye... but I say unto you... love your enemies — the vengeance forbidden in vv. 9–10); Matt. 26:52 (all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword — the oath of aggressive war, vv. 9–10); Rom. 2:4–6 (the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance... who will render to every man according to his deeds — repented not after deliverance, v. 15, and the judgment of v. 20); Rom. 12:19 (avenge not yourselves... vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord — the New Testament citation of v. 15); 2 Cor. 5:10 (we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ — verbatim doctrine of v. 20); Heb. 10:30 (vengeance belongeth unto me... the Lord shall judge his people — v. 15); Alma 43:46–47 (the law that the Nephites may fight only defensively, ye shall not... give the second offense — the ethic the oath of vv. 9–10 violates); Alma 48:14–16 (Nephites never to give offense, never to raise the sword except against an enemy and to preserve their lives — the standard broken here); Hel. 1:1–13 (an earlier seizure of power and vengeance among the Nephites — the recurring sin); 3 Ne. 27:14–16 (all drawn to the judgment-seat to be judged of works — v. 20); Morm. 8:20 (Moroni: judgment is mine, saith the Lord, and vengeance is mine — the doctrine carried forward, v. 15); D&C 82:23 (leave judgment alone with me, for it is mine, and I will repay — v. 15); D&C 64:10–11 (I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men... leave the judging to me — vv. 9–15). ```