
Mormon 4 — By the Wicked Are the Wicked Punished — The Aggression That Doomed Them, and a Carnage Beyond Description

Mormon 4: c. AD 363–375. The chapter that proves Mormon's warning. The Nephites, having sworn their oath of vengeance, go up on the offensive against the Lamanites — and the moment they cross from defense to aggression, they begin to be smitten. Mormon states the law plainly: it was because they went up against their enemies that they began to fall, for had they stayed on the defensive the Lamanites could have had no power over them. The chapter then descends into a horror without precedent — both sides delighting in bloodshed, women and children offered as human sacrifices to idol gods, every heart hardened — until Mormon declares there had never been so great wickedness in all the house of Israel. The Nephites begin to be swept off as a dew before the sun, and Mormon, seeing the end approaching, goes to the hill Shim and takes up all the records Ammaron had hidden. It is the chapter of the great divine principle that the wicked are the instrument of God's judgment upon the wicked.

Mormon 4 is the chapter where the warning of chapter 3 comes true with terrible exactness. The Nephites had sworn an oath of aggressive vengeance, and Mormon had refused to lead them and pronounced their doom. Now the chapter shows the doom unfolding, and it traces the unraveling to a single, precise cause: the moment the Nephites went over to the offensive, they began to lose. This is the doctrinal core of the chapter and one of its great contributions — the Book of Mormon's clearest statement that righteous war is defensive war, and that the very act of aggression is what stripped the Nephites of divine protection. From there the chapter descends into a darkness deeper than anything the record has shown: not merely battle but mutual delight in bloodshed, and the offering of captive women and children as human sacrifices to idols, on both sides. Mormon, the *idle witness* of chapter 3, watches it all and renders the verdict that there had *never... been so great wickedness among all the children of Lehi, nor even among all the house of Israel* (v. 12). And as the Nephites begin to be *swept off... as a dew before the sun*, he goes to recover the buried records, knowing the end is near.

Hebrew Word Studies

shaphat / qatseph / tal (שָׁפַט / קָטֵף / טַל) — **to judge, to execute judgment / wrath, fury, the overflowing of divine anger / dew vv. 5, 5, 18.** Three Hebrew ideas frame the chapter. *Shaphat* — to judge, to execute judgment — stands behind *the judgments of God will overtake the wicked* (v. 5). In Hebrew, God's *mishpat* (judgment) is not only a verdict but an enacted setting-right; and the chapter's startling claim is about the *means* of that enacting — *it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished*. The same theology runs through Isaiah, where Assyria is *the rod of mine anger* (Isa. 10:5), a wicked nation made the unwitting instrument of God's *mishpat* on a wicked people. God's judgment, in this mode, requires no thunderbolt; it works through the ordinary, self-consuming violence of the wicked themselves. *Qatseph* — wrath, the overflowing of divine anger — is the OT word for the fury that *overtakes* the wicked; it is the wrath that *went out from the Lord* in plague (Num. 16:46) and the wrath stored against the day of reckoning. The chapter's *judgments of God will overtake the wicked* (v. 5) is the *qatseph* arriving — but arriving, characteristically, not from the sky but through the hand of the enemy, the wicked Lamanites as the carriers of a wrath the Nephites earned. *Tal* — dew — is the chapter's most poignant image (v. 18). In the Hebrew Bible *tal* is almost always a blessing: the dew of heaven that makes the land fruitful (Gen. 27:28), the dew of Hermon, the dew on Gideon's fleece, the dew of resurrection (Isa. 26:19, *thy dew is as the dew of herbs*). Mormon inverts the blessing into a figure of doom: the Nephites are *swept off... as a dew before the sun* — not the dew that waters and revives, but the dew that vanishes the instant the sun rises, here one moment and utterly gone the next. A people who might have been the *tal* of blessing upon the land have become the *tal* that evaporates without trace.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Gen. 27:28 (the dew of heaven as blessing — the blessing Mormon inverts at v. 18); Num. 16:46 (wrath gone out from the Lord — the qatseph that overtakes the wicked, v. 5); Deut. 32:35 (vengeance and recompence belong to God — the principle behind the wicked-punishing-wicked judgment, v. 5); Lev. 18:21; 20:1–5 (the abomination of passing children through the fire to idols — the human sacrifice of vv. 14, 21); Judg. 7:22 (the Lord sets every man's sword against his fellow in the Midianite camp — the wicked destroying the wicked, v. 5); 2 Kgs. 17:7–18 (Israel destroyed by Assyria for its wickedness, especially child sacrifice — the pattern of vv. 5, 12, 14); Ps. 7:14–16 (his mischief shall return upon his own head... he is fallen into the ditch which he made — sin punishing itself, v. 5); Prov. 5:22 (his own iniquities shall take the wicked himself — v. 5); Isa. 10:5–7 (Assyria the rod of mine anger, a wicked nation made the instrument of judgment — the master parallel to v. 5); Isa. 26:19 (thy dew is as the dew of herbs — the dew of resurrection Mormon inverts at v. 18); Isa. 33:1 (woe to thee that spoilest... when thou shalt cease to spoil, thou shalt be spoiled — the aggressor brought down, v. 4); Hos. 6:4; 13:3 (Israel's goodness as the early dew... that passeth away... as the chaff... as the smoke — the evaporating people of v. 18); Hos. 8:7 (they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind — the self-consuming harvest of v. 5); Matt. 26:52 (all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword — the aggressors smitten, v. 4); Rom. 1:24–32 (God gave them up to their own hearts' lusts — the withdrawal that lets the wicked destroy themselves, vv. 5, 11); Alma 43:46–47 (the law that the Nephites fight only to defend, never to give offense — the law broken at v. 4); Alma 48:14–16 (never to raise the sword except... against an enemy, except it were to preserve their lives — the defensive ethic violated, v. 4); Mosiah 11:19 (an earlier Nephite people who did boast in their own strength and were brought low — the recurring sin, v. 8); Hel. 4:11–13 (an earlier defeat because of their wickedness... they were left to their own strength — the forfeited protection of v. 4); Morm. 2:26 (the Spirit not abiding, the people left to themselves and weak — the cause behind v. 18); Morm. 3:9–15 (the oath of aggressive vengeance whose consequence this chapter shows); D&C 63:33 (I have sworn... wars... the wicked shall slay the wicked — verbatim doctrine of v. 5); D&C 98:33–48 (the Lord's law of war: defensive only, offense forbidden unless commanded — the principle of v. 4). ``