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## Moses, Captain Moroni, and the Amalekites

by Matthew Roper



Joseph Brickey, © IRI

After Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage and crossing of the Red Sea, another enemy, the Amalekites, attacked the camp on its pilgrimage to worship God at Sinai.<sup>1</sup> Moses, in response to this cowardly act, directed Joshua to fight them. For his part, Moses would stand atop a nearby hill holding the rod of God. “And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed: and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.” Moses, however, was tired and could not always keep his hands up, so “Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands *were steady* until the going down of the sun” (Exodus 17:8-12, emphasis added), allowing Joshua and the men of Israel to prevail in the battle.

In the Book of Mormon, the narrative in Alma 43-44 evokes the biblical story of the Amalekites. The shared elements, likely more

than mere coincidence, make for an interesting comparison.

Deuteronomy records that the Amalekite offensive was particularly heinous because the attackers “smote the hindmost of [Israel], even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and [the Amalekites] feared not God” (Deuteronomy 25:18). Like their biblical counterparts, the Amalekites in Alma’s narrative led massacres of unsuspecting people. In these attacks, the Amalekites and their supporters killed thousands of converted Lamanites in the land of Nephi. Because they refused to take up arms against their attackers (Alma 24:20-23; 27:2-3), the surviving converts migrated to the land of Jershon for safety, where Lamanites, led by Amalekites and Zoramites, unsuccessfully tried to repeat the earlier atrocities. Thwarted by Nephite armies, they went over to the land of Manti, “that they might commence an attack upon the weaker part of the people” (Alma 43:19-24).

In both Exodus and the book of Alma, when the battle’s outcome was in doubt, the Lord, through his representative, encouraged his people and inspired them to victory. Whereas Aaron and Hur held up Moses’s arms so Israel could prevail over Amalek’s army (Exodus 17:11-12), when the Nephites were frightened by the ferocity of their enemies, “Moroni, perceiving their intent, sent forth and inspired their hearts . . . and they cried with one voice unto the Lord their God, for their liberty and their freedom from bondage. And they began to stand against the Lamanites with power” (Alma 43:48-50). In an apparent allusion to the steadying of Moses’s arms, Captain Moroni credits “God, who has *strengthened our arms*” (44:5).

(Moses to page 8)

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(Moses from page 1)

Additional elements in the Alma narrative may also evoke words and phrases from the Exodus account. The Israelites were attacked while camped at *Rephidim*, a word whose root (*rpd*) can mean “support, help, carry.”<sup>2</sup> In his speech to the enemy commander Zarahemnah, Moroni emphasized that his people’s victory over their enemies was evidence of the Lord’s help: “Ye see that God will *support*” the Nephites (Alma 44:4). He also speaks of “the sacred *support* which we owe to our wives and our children” (v. 5). In Exodus, Amalek’s attack occurred after Israel had murmured for water, chided the Lord and Moses, and asked, “*Is the Lord among us, or not?*” (Exodus 17:7). In the Book of Mormon, Moroni pointedly observes to his cornered enemies, “But now, ye behold that *the Lord is with us*” (Alma 44:3), a phrase that evokes Israel’s deliverance from Amalek. Moreover, like the biblical Amalekites, the Amalekite- and Zoramite-led army in the Book of Mormon did not “fear God,” but attributed all the success of Moroni’s forces to their superior armor and cunning (Deuteronomy 25:18; Alma 44:9).

The word *steady* in Exodus 17:12 (“his hands *were steady*”) is rendered from the Hebrew *’ēmûnâ*, a word that most often refers to the moral quality of “faithfulness.”<sup>3</sup> As if to hammer home to his apostate enemies that it was the Lord and not the Nephites’ own wisdom and weaponry that had delivered them, Moroni observes, “Ye see that God will *support*, and keep, and preserve us, so long as we are *faithful* unto him, and unto our *faith*, and our religion; and never will the Lord suffer that we shall be destroyed except we should fall into transgression and deny our *faith*” (Alma 44:4).

When Israel prevailed in battle under Joshua, the Lord told them to remember what the Amalekites had done and also that “the Lord [would] have war with Amalek from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:14, 16). Israel was eventually commanded to “blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven” (Deuteronomy 25:19). Similarly, Moroni threatened his Amalekite-led enemies with extinction if they did not surrender their murderous purpose (Alma 44:7). By evoking the biblical story of the Amalekite attack,

to be remembered “from generation to generation,” Captain Moroni and Mormon, his admiring narrator, emphasized how the Lord did “great things” for their fathers (Book of Mormon title page).<sup>4</sup> God supported and delivered them as long as they remained faithful, just as he had delivered the Israelites under Moses from their Amalekite enemies.

#### Notes

1. Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1999), 489–90. Attacking worshippers on a pilgrimage was a particularly heinous crime in ancient Near Eastern culture.

2. William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 604.

3. Nahum Sarna notes that this is the only passage in the Hebrew Bible in which *’ēmûnâ* is used in a physical sense. Usually it refers to moral quality, such as faithfulness. Nahum Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 96.

4. Mormon likely named his own son after Captain Moroni.

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## INSIGHTS

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