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KnowWhy #155 - Why Did Mormon See Captain Moroni as a Hero?

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Abstract: Mormon, the warrior-historian-prophet who wrote the majority of the narrative contained in the book of Alma, had much to say about Moroni, the young chief captain over the Nephite armies. Captain Moroni represented the golden days of the Nephite civilization, a time when the people still repented of their sins and qualified for the blessings of God and the strength that comes from having the Spirit present. Mormon did his best to emulate Chief-Captain Moroni and even named his own son after that great man. He sincerely hoped that all of his future readers would understand what a powerful disciple of Christ Moroni was.



Painting of Captain Moroni by Walter Rane

“YEA, VERILY, VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU, IF ALL MEN HAD BEEN, AND WERE, AND EVER WOULD BE, LIKE UNTO MORONI, BEHOLD, THE VERY POWERS OF HELL WOULD HAVE BEEN SHAKEN FOREVER; YEA, THE DEVIL WOULD NEVER HAVE POWER OVER THE HEARTS OF THE CHILDREN OF MEN.” ALMA 48:17

THE KNOW

Mormon, the warrior-historian-prophet who wrote the majority of the narrative contained in the book of Alma, had much to say about Moroni, the young chief captain over the Nephite armies. Mormon was writing nearly four centuries after the events of the so-called “war chapters” in the second half of the book of Alma. It seemed that Mormon had many records from which to draw his history. However, he decided to make the figure of Chief-Captain Moroni one of his main focuses. The heroic acts of Chief-Captain Moroni are discussed in nearly twenty chapters of the book of Alma.

In Alma chapters 46–48, especially, readers can perceive that Mormon holds this Moroni in very high regard and considers him an example that “all men” should emulate (Alma 48:17). Starting in Alma 46, Mormon clearly attempts to contrast Moroni and his archenemy Amalickiah, presenting each figure as the antithesis of the other. The following are some of the specific points of comparison that Mormon included in his narrative:

MORONI	AMALICKIAH
“a strong and a mighty man” (Alma 48:11)	“a large and strong man” (Alma 46:3)
appointed by “the voice of the people” and by judges (Alma 46:34)	desired to be king through flattery, dissension, fraud and deceit (Alma 46:3–10; 47:1–35; 48:7)
unified his people for the cause of righteousness and to keep their covenants (Alma 46:12–21; 48:7)	caused dissension among people by blinding their minds and stirring them up unto anger (Alma 48:1–3)
rejoiced in the liberty and freedom of his country and people (Alma 48:11)	“sought to destroy the foundation of liberty” (Alma 46:10)
recognized the Lord’s hand, prayed for his people and “was firm in the faith of Christ” (Alma 46:12–13; 48:12–13)	fought against the preaching of Helaman, led dissensions from the church and sought to destroy the church of God (Alma 46:3–10)
“did not delight in bloodshed,” was willing to have his own blood spilled for his people, led his armies into battle and did not attack offensively (Alma 48:11–16)	“did care not for the blood of his people,” “did not come down himself to battle,” attacked the Nephites, hoping to bring them into bondage, “or slay and massacre them” (Alma 49:7, 10–11)
“had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion,” led the people in making a covenant to fight for their freedom, rights, families and religion (Alma 46:19–28)	his chief captains “took an oath that they would destroy the people” of the city of Noah; Amalickiah himself “did curse God, and also Moroni, swearing with an oath that he would drink his blood” (Alma 48:13, 17; 49:27)

Many more points of contrast could be observed between these two figures. Mormon wanted to show what great damage “one very wicked man” (Alma 46:9) could cause, but also, in contrast, how one very righteous man, like Moroni, if emulated by many, had the power to overcome all evil in the world (Alma 48:17).

In addition, it is also worth mentioning that Mormon apparently tried to imitate Moroni’s war strategies in his own time, including the fortification of cities (compare, e.g., Mormon 2:4; Alma 48:9) and trying to rally his people to “fight for their wives, and their children, and their houses, and their homes” (Mormon 2:23; Alma 46:12; 58:12).¹

Although not mentioned overtly, Mormon clearly had so much respect and admiration for Chief-Captain Moroni and what he had accomplished that he named his son after his hero.

THE WHY

President Thomas S. Monson, in the July 2016 *Ensign*, gave a First Presidency Message entitled: “True to the Faith of Our Forefathers.” The suggested applications of this message include exploring the qualities of people that we admire, whether they be ancestors, family,

friends, Church leaders, or figures from the scriptures. The article provides an example of a hero from the scriptures: “Perhaps you love Captain Moroni’s courage.”² Clearly, Captain Moroni is a figure that Mormon considered to be a righteous role model.

Mormon, like Chief-Captain Moroni, was called to be a military leader at a young age (Mormon 1:15; 2:1–2), at a time in which his people were similarly engaged in near constant wars. His exposure to the records containing the history of Moroni showed him a time when the Nephites still had faith in God, were strengthened by the Spirit, and were led to victory because of their righteous desires. At the time when Mormon was abridging this part of the Nephite records, he could see that Chief-Captain Moroni’s example was desperately needed among his people, and he longed to lead his people as Moroni did.

Mormon also longed for the time when his people, like the people of Nephi in Moroni’s day, would recognize the error of their ways, turn their hearts back to the Lord, and be blessed. In Alma 50, Mormon briefly emphasized how good things were for the Nephites in the days when they still kept the commandments of God, likely contrasting that period with his own. He declared:

And they did prosper exceedingly, and they became exceedingly rich; yea, and they did multiply and wax strong in the land.

And thus we see how merciful and just are all the dealings of the Lord, to the fulfilling of all his words unto the children of men;

...

And those who were faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord were delivered at all times, whilst thousands of their wicked brethren have been consigned to bondage, or to perish by the sword, or to dwindle in unbelief, and mingle with the Lamanites.

But behold there never was a happier time among the people of Nephi, since the days of Nephi, than in the days of Moroni, yea, even at this time, in the twenty and first year of the reign of the judges. (Alma 50:18–19, 22–23)

Mormon likely had in mind Moroni's time when, in Mormon 2:8–13, he tells of how he had hope that his own people would turn from their wicked ways and qualify for the blessings of the Lord once more. Because of their losses and because of the curse that was upon the land, the Nephites of Mormon's time apparently "began to repent of their iniquity, and began to cry" unto the Lord. He recounted:

And it came to pass that when I, Mormon, saw their lamentation and their mourning and their sorrow before the Lord, my heart did begin to rejoice within me, knowing the mercies and the long-suffering of the Lord, therefore supposing that he would be merciful unto them that they would again become a righteous people. (Mormon 2:12)

However, as a prophet of God, he soon understood the lamentable reality of his people's situation—that their response was not like the Nephites of yesteryear. Mormon exclaimed in disconsolation:

But behold this my joy was vain, for their sorrowing was not unto repentance, because of the goodness of God; but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin. (Mormon 2:13)

For many reasons and in many ways, Chief-Captain Moroni was a great hero to Mormon. He represented the golden days of the Nephite civilization, a time when the people still repented of their sins and qualified for the blessings of God and the strength that comes from having the Spirit present. Mormon did his best to emulate Chief-Captain Moroni and even named his own son after that great man.

Today, attentive readers can appreciate the numerous subtle signals that Mormon sent in his abridging of the war chapters of the book of Alma that are in the end purposefully echoed 150 pages later in Mormon's account of the painful conclusion of the Nephite demise. Mormon sincerely hoped that all of his future readers would understand what a powerful disciple of Christ Moroni was. Indeed, he declared that "if all men had been, and were, and ever would be, like unto Moroni, behold, the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever" and the world would be a better place, concordant with the will of God.

FURTHER READING

Thomas R. Valleta, "The Captain and the Covenant," in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, The Testimony of the Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr., (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 223–248.

Richard McClendon, "Captain Moroni's Wartime Strategies: An Application for the Spiritual Battles of Our Day," *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 3, no. 3 (2002): 99–114.

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NOTES

1. See Book of Mormon Central, "Why was Moroni's Young Age an Advantage? (Alma 43:17)," *KnoWhy* 151 (July 26, 2016).

2. Thomas S. Monson, "True to the Faith of Our Forefathers," *Ensign*, July 2016, 6.