

---

# ALMA 17-20

---

Book of Mormon, Adult Institute Class, Monday, 14 December 2009

---

*David A. LeFevre*

---

## INTRODUCTION

---

Journeying down the road to Manti at the south end of the Nephite lands, Alma encountered some old friends. These chapters are part of the story of those friends, the sons of Mosiah and their companions, who had left in the first year of the reign of the judges for a mission to the Lamanites. Their record (which continues through Alma 28) is dropped in as a long flashback, as it were, jumping back fourteen years and only capturing a few activities of those years. These first four chapters focus on Ammon, who was the leader of the brave group of missionaries.

---

## ALMA 17 AMMON AND THE KING'S FLOCKS

---

- 1-5 Alma encounters the sons of Mosiah returning from their fourteen-year mission.
- 6-17 Going back fourteen years, the story begins with them journeying to Lamanite lands.
- 18-25 Ammon encounters Lamoni and becomes his servant.
- 26-39 Ammon protects the king's flocks.

**1 southward, away to the land of Manti.** Manti appears to be at the southern end of the Nephite lands. It is "by the head of the river Sidon" (Alma 22:27), which shows it was fairly high in altitude. It plays a prominent role in the later chapters of the book of Alma during the battles with the Lamanites (Alma 43, 56-59).

**He met with the sons of Mosiah.** The "with" in this phrase was inserted by the typesetter in the 1830 Book of Mormon and has remained since, but was not in the manuscripts (Skousen, 3:1948). It was an encounter, not a meeting, so dropping "with" makes more sense.

Later (Alma 27), we will learn that the sons of Mosiah had traveled back with their Lamanite converts and were heading to Zarahemla to try and determine what to do with them.

**2 they were still his brethren in the Lord.** By this time, it had been about thirty years since Alma and the sons of Mosiah had encountered the angel which started their conversion process, and they hadn't had any communication for the last fourteen years. Hearing about their missionary labors and successes, and seeing how they had grown was surely a cause of rejoicing for Alma.

**they had searched the scriptures diligently.** How many of the Nephites had daily access to scriptures is not known, though there are many references inviting people to search the scriptures, showing they were likely broadly available. This verse demonstrates that Ammon and the others took copies of the scriptures with them on their mission to the Lamanites.

**3 *much prayer, and fasting.*** Fasting and prayer can serve many purposes. In this verse, the sons of Mosiah fasted and prayed and received the spirit of revelation and prophecy, giving them the ability to teach “with power and authority of God.” See also verse 9 below.

**3 *power and authority.*** A typesetting error in the 1837 edition eliminated a phrase in this verse, probably because of the redundancy: “...and then they taught, they taught with power and authority, even as with the power and authority of God.”

**4 *the space of fourteen years.*** The mission to the Lamanites began in about 91 BC, the first year of the reign of the judges. This means that when the sons of Mosiah left, their father, Mosiah, was still alive, but died that same year at the age of sixty-three. When they returned fourteen years later, he would have been seventy-seven, so perhaps they were expecting he was still there. Alma was likely the first one to break the news of their father’s death so many years before.

**8 *with their numbers which they had selected.*** Other people were invited to join the sons of Mosiah on their mission. We do not know the size of the group or their names (except two: Muloki and Ammah [Alma 20:2]), but the language here suggests a fairly large group.

**9 *fasted much and prayed much.*** The purposes of their fasting and prayer included: 1) that the Lord’s Spirit would be with them; 2) that they might be “an instrument in the hands of God” to bring people into a knowledge of the truth of God; 3) That they might educate the Lamanites about their true history and the incorrect traditions of their fathers. See *Student Manual*, 199.

**10-12 *The Lord said unto them.*** The Lord spoke to them at least twice during their trip south. The first was a command to “Be comforted.” The second was a longer statement that promised them success in their missionary efforts, but only after they were “patient in long-suffering and afflictions” and were “good examples unto them.” These communications gave them courage to continue on and begin their missions.

**13 *they separated themselves.*** The record of this mission is very incomplete. Essentially, we have the records of Ammon and Aaron, and even though only a small portion of their labors. It would be fascinating to know what Omner and Himni did for fourteen years, as well as the others who journeyed the Lamanites with them.

**14-15 *the curse of God had fallen upon them.*** Mormon characterizes the Lamanites of that time as “wild,” “hardened,” and “ferocious,” people who murdered and robbed and plundered Nephites for the sole purpose of getting riches, and this because they were lazy and didn’t want to earn it by their own work. For all these reasons, God’s curse was upon them. Mormon’s main point is that these men were going to labor among people who would just as soon rob and kill them as anything.

**18 *Ammon being the chief among them.*** Ammon’s name is always listed first with the four brothers, so it is probable that he was the oldest (though when asked, the people wanted Aaron to be their king; see Mosiah 29:2). Regardless, Ammon was the leader of this missionary force, but Mormon gently adds that he was the leader because “he did administer unto them,” which meant that he “imparted the word of God unto them.” In essence, Ammon was their teacher and leader.

**19 *the land of Ishmael.*** This is the first time this land is mentioned. It became the focal point of Ammon’s labors and of the converts who later were large in number. The name Ishmael in Hebrew means ‘God will hear.’



21 ***Lamoni...a descendent of Ishmael.*** Lamoni was a king over a region, the land of Ishmael, named after the ancient sons of Ishmael. He was also a descendent of Ishmael, who with his family joined Lehi and company as they fled Jerusalem for a promised land. Lamoni played a key role in the success of the missionary effort to the Lamanites.

23 ***perhaps until the day I die.*** Ammon and the others were very committed missionaries. They didn't leave Zarahemla for a few months or even years—it was open-ended.

24 ***take one of his daughters to wife.*** In the ancient world, treaties and pacts were often sealed with marriages. Ammon was the son of the great Nephite king, Mosiah. Lamoni likely saw an opportunity to make an alliance that would benefit him and his people, who were living close to the Nephite borders.

25 ***Nay, but I will be thy servant.*** Ammon could have rationalized that this marriage was an opportunity to further his mission or get in good with the king. But he stayed focused on his task, and instead offered to be the king's personal slave. The offer must have been quite shocking to Lamoni at first, to have this prince of the Nephites lowering himself to slave status, but Lamoni accepted it, and Ammon went out to water the king's flocks.

26 ***water of Sebus.*** The better reading is "waters of Sebus" (plural), to match all other references to this in Alma 17-19. The waters of Sebus are only mentioned in relation to this story, so all we know

is that they were by the land of Ishmael, close enough to journey from the city of Ishmael to the waters and back in the same day.

27 **they fled many ways.** The thieves were very successful in scattering the flocks in every direction from the waters of Sebus. The concern that a previous group had been slain for just such another incident, plus the flocks being scattered seemingly beyond their reach, let the servants to despair and murmur.

29 **to believe in my words.** As the other servants were crying and bemoaning their fate, Ammon saw the whole event as an opportunity to do something that would advance the missionary work—turning their problems into a blessing. How often do we see our challenges and trials as opportunities and blessings?

31 **we will gather them.** It apparently didn't occur to any of them just to go get the scattered animals. Sometimes all it takes is a leader who will stand up and say, 'This is what we should do,' and people follow.

34 **they were in number not a few.** We don't know the number of the scatterers, but Ammon killed six of them with his sling, one of them with the sword, and cut off even more arms (verse 38), so it's not hard to imagine a group of 20-30—against 1. Sure, Ammon was a well-trained Nephite prince, clearly good with weapons, but the odds were huge against him, yet he showed no fear, only faith in the promise that the Lord would keep them from the hands of the Lamanites.

35 **they delighted in the destruction of their brethren.** This appears to be the main motivating force behind the attacks—they knew the king would kill them if they lost his flocks, and that somehow brought them delight. Mormon gives us this insight so there is no doubt about who is right and wrong in this encounter, and so we may know that Ammon's defensive actions are fully justified. In the next chapter (18:7) we learn that they also did it for personal gain.

36 **began to cast stones.** Both sides had slings and began to throw stones. In spite of the clear advantage, none of them could hit Ammon, but he killed six of them with stones.

37 **every man that lifted his club.** The Lamanite thieves did not have swords, so Ammon had a small advantage, but the numbers were still not in his favor. But amazingly, he (you knew it was coming) disarmed them with great strength and skill, such that they fled the scene.

38 **their leader.** Ammon killed only one man with the sword, the leader of the scatterers. But losing an arm in that day could also be a fatal wound, so it could be that others died later.

39 **a testimony of the things which they had done.** It doesn't say whose idea it was to gather up the severed arms and take them to the king, but it must have been a gruesome task and sight. My guess is that they didn't have a convenient large blanket or something to carry them in, as is sometime portrayed in art, but rather each took two and carried them along back to the palace.

## ALMA 18 AMMON TEACHES LAMONI

---

- 1-11 Lamoni learns of Ammon's deeds and thinks he is the Great Spirit.
- 12-23 Ammon begins to teach the king and his servants.
- 24-39 Ammon teaches of the gospel to Lamoni.



- 40-43 Lamoni falls to earth as if dead for two days and nights.

**2 *the Great Spirit who doth send such great punishments.*** Lamoni is predisposed to believe in a god of some sort by his traditions (verse 5). The “Great Spirit” is only mentioned by Lamoni and his father in the Book of Mormon, so we have no other knowledge of how it fit into any Lamanite religion, except that this was apparently not a god of judgment (verse 5 again). But seeing Ammon actions, Lamoni changes his opinion rapidly on that topic.

**3 *he is a friend to the king.*** The servants declined to offer an opinion on whether Ammon was the Great Spirit or not, but their conclusion was powerful nonetheless—he was the king’s friend and someone to be trusted.

**4 *I know that it is the Great Spirit.*** The king, however, is certain at this point—Ammon is ‘god among us.’

**9 *he is feeding they horses.*** This incident shows Ammon’s faithfulness and attention to detail, of course. But the mention of horses was criticized for many years by those who believed that horses were not found on the American continent until after the Spaniards. However, work by archaeologists and paleontologists in the last few decades has clearly uncovered horse remains that pre-date the Spaniards and are concurrent with humans. Further work needs to be done, but what can be said today is that the presence of horses in ancient pre-Columbian America is certain. See *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Volume - 10, Issue - 1, Pages: 76-77.

***a great feast.*** This feast comes back into the story in chapter 20.

**13 *Rabbanah.*** The meaning of the name is given in their language: “powerful or great king.” It could be related to the Hebrew word *rbb* that means ‘great or many’ (see <http://mi.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=51&chapid=397>, which is from the *Encyclopedia to Mormonism*), which shows up in the New Testament as “Rabboni” (John 20:16) or “Rabbi” (John 1:38).

**14 *an hour, according to their time.*** Mormon might be saying that a Lamanite hour was somehow different from a Nephite hour, but since we don’t really know what either was, we can just conclude it was a long time.

**16 *Ammon...perceived the thoughts of the king.*** Not to be irreverent or take anything away from Ammon, but he walks in, the servants who were with him are there, arms are laying all over the floor, and the king is sitting there in amazement. It’s good the Spirit helped him but it doesn’t seem like too hard of a guess!

**17 *I am a man.*** Ammon made no pretensions and doesn’t want any confusion. He was human and a slave of the king.

***Whatsoever thou desirest which is right, that will I do.*** Ammon may be a slave, but he maintained a moral standard nonetheless. If the king commanded him to do something contrary to God’s will, he would not do it.

**20 *Thou mayest speak boldly.*** The king was granting Ammon the ability to speak any words in his presence. See *Student Manual*, 201-202 for how we can likewise speak with boldness to our neighbors.

22-23 **Ammon being wise, yet harmless.** Ammon took full advantage of the situation and his position of power here, as he later did with Lamoni's father. But Mormon is clear that though he is opportunistic (catching the king "with guile"), he is "harmless," meaning that his motives are pure.

25 **I do not know what that meaneth.** How fascinating that Lamoni didn't know the word "God." Whatever word Ammon used in the Nephite language that is translated as "God" here, it was a new one to Lamoni. Perhaps he used the Old Testament name for God, Yahweh, or perhaps something like Elohim?

28 **This is God.** Taking what Lamoni knew, Ammon established some basic vocabulary (God, heavens, etc.), then quickly moved to his main points. But he had to come to common ground on the words first, or what he taught might have been totally misunderstood.

36 **the creation...the fall...the holy scriptures.** The 'first discussion' for Ammon was the plan of salvation, starting with the creation and the Fall, which explain the need for a Redeemer. Unless a person first understands that who God is and that they are separated from God by the Fall, they will often not feel a need for God in their lives.

37-38 **the rebellions of Laman and Lemuel.** The Nephite version of history was quite different from the Lamanite version, as we have seen in previous chapters. Part of Ammon's desire was to set the record straight, because until they agreed on their history, the animosities they were experiencing would be difficult to overcome.

39 **the plan of redemption...the coming of Christ.** Now Ammon got to the heart of his message, the atonement of Christ.

42 **he fell unto the earth.** The several examples of this in these chapters are unusual but contributed both to the conversion of those experiencing it and acted as a sign to those who witnessed it. Had Lamoni simply believed Ammon and started teaching it to his people, perhaps many would have perceived it as more of a political move (because it's not the first time Nephites had come among them and made alliances—the priests of Noah, for example). But the stories of dramatic 'near-death' experiences and being raised up added to the drama and potency of the change of direction.

43 **two days and two nights.** It will be three days before Lamoni awakes, a number that is obviously symbolic in many scriptural accounts. In the immediate term, it was the same number of days that Ammon had been a servant (17:26).

---

## ALMA 19 THE FIRST LAMANITE CONVERTS

---

- 1-11 The queen calls for Ammon who tells her Lamoni will soon awake.
- 12-13 Lamoni awakes and testifies; he and the queen fall to the earth.
- 14-16a Ammon and the servants all fall to the earth.
- 16b-21 Abish gathers the people who think Ammon has killed them all.
- 22-28 There is great contention about Ammon among the crowd.
- 29-33 They all arise and teach the people the truth.
- 34-36 Many are baptized and the Church begins to grow among the Lamanites.

2 **the queen.** We sadly never learn her name, but she is a marvelous character in this story who exhibits great faith. Had she not acted here, Lamoni could have been buried alive and Ammon's mission failed.

4 **a prophet of a holy God.** The servants had given her much of Ammon's information, so she was at least familiar with the vocabulary.

5 **he doth not stink.** Lamoni's sleep or coma must have been deep indeed because many believe him to be dead. It must have been impossible to see breathing or hear a heartbeat or anything. All she had to go by to believe that he was still alive was that decay had not yet set in—he didn't stink.

6 **this was what Ammon desired.** This was not a new experience for Ammon—he had seen Alma go through the same thing. So he knew Lamoni was going through a marvelous conversion and change and that they just needed to be patient. Interesting that he had wanted to speak to the queen and see the king but had to wait to be summoned.

8 **on the morrow he shall rise again.** Surely Ammon spoke by inspiration here, but Alma also was out for three days, so perhaps Ammon was drawing on that experience as well.

9-10 **Blessed art thou because of thy exceeding faith.** The queen believed Ammon based solely on what the servants told her and their brief encounter.

11 **she watched over the bed of her husband.** She again demonstrated her faith and love of her husband by staying with him all through the night and the next day.

13 **I have seen my Redeemer.** Lamoni's language shows how much he had been taught in those three days. Yet he was only awake for a short time, and then "sunk again with joy." Seeing it all, his wife joined him.

14 **Ammon seeing the Spirit of the Lord poured out.** Ammon either spent the night there with the queen waiting or returned the next day at the appointed time. Either way, he witnessed the event, which is how we have a record of it. He prayed with thanksgiving and joy for what was happening, then he, too, "sunk to the earth."

15-16 **they had all fallen to the earth.** The entire room is overcome by the Spirit and fall to the ground—except one servant woman.

16 **Abish.** One of three Book of Mormon women who have a name, Abish plays a significant role in the next events, both in terms of gathering a large group to witness it and in turning it around when it went bad. She also appears to be the source for this information, since Ammon was on the floor.

**converted unto the Lord...a remarkable vision of her father.** Another story we wish we had. Here in the middle of the Lamanite kingdom, in the very palace of the king, is a woman whose father had learned of God through a vision of some kind, and who believed the words of her father. How many other Lamanites had a secret knowledge of God? This shows how the Lord prepares the way for his work.

17 **ran forth from house to house.** All her life she had kept her belief in God a secret. But seizing this opportunity, Abish ran throughout the city, calling out and gathering people to the palace. Her emotions must have been a powerful mix of fear and excitement. Perhaps her father's vision had even foreseen such an event, and she realized that the time had come?

19 ***the people began to murmur***. Abish was still running around spreading the message but meanwhile the crowd was engaged in a debate—what was the cause of all these people laying on the earth as if dead? To Abish, the cause had been obvious, but not to these people.

22 ***lifted the sword to smite him***. The scatterers showed up as well—interesting that they were residents of the city and not just robbers out in the hills or something—and realized the man on the floor was he who had slain many of them. One of them made to kill Ammon, but in the process was struck dead himself.

23 ***Now we see that Ammon could not be slain***. One of Mormon’s key editorial phrases, “Now we see...” is found at key times. Here he inserts himself to remind us why the Lamanite could not kill the sleeping Ammon.

28 ***she saw the contention...sorrowful, even unto tears***. Abish wept as she realized that her actions had not resulted in the group simply viewing the scene and recognizing the hand of God. Instead, there was confusion and arguments.

29 ***took the queen by the hand***. In a hope that she could stop the arguing, Abish grabbed the queen’s hand—the only person she was surely allowed to touch—with a great prayer in her heart, and it worked! The queen stood up and began to speak.

30 ***being filled with joy***. A demonstration that women are faster learners than men <smile>—she had only been out a short time, yet she seemed to have shared in Lamoni’s conversion experience. But she also said things no one understood, but she grabbed Lamoni’s hand and he stood up, too.

32 ***many among them who would not hear his words***. Seeing them arise did not still all the contention. Probably the scatterers but others as well simply walked away.

33 ***their hearts had been changed***. The desire of every missionary is to see hearts changed, so see people change their desires and perspective. So we all need to experience a changed heart like Lamoni, his wife, and their servants.

34 ***they had seen angels***. When the Lord determines to work with people, he works in force. In this case, angels were also sent to testify to the truth of what was happening, enforcing a growing movement.

35 ***as many as did believe were baptized***. Baptism was and is the gate into the kingdom, and Ammon was busy administering this ordinance to all who came forward with faith.

36 ***and we see that his arm is extended***. Mormon’s voice again summarized why he shared this story with us—God is merciful to all who repent and believe, even Lamanites who have rejected the truth for hundreds of years.

---

## ALMA 20 AMMON AND LAMONI’S FATHER

---

- 1-7 The Lord commands Ammon to rescue his brother and friends from prison.
- 8-12 Ammon and Lamoni encounter Lamoni’s father.
- 13-21 Ammon overcomes Lamoni’s father.
- 22-27 Ammon spares the king’s life in exchange for support for Lamoni and his brethren.



- 28-30 Ammon and Lamoni free Aaron, Muloki, and Ammah from prison.

1 ***the land of Nephi...unto his father.*** Lamoni's father was the head king and lived in Nephi, the former home of the Nephite colonists who came there under Zeniff and stayed until another Ammon led them north to Zarahemla.

2 ***go to the land of Middoni.*** But the Lord had other plans for Ammon—he needed to go to Middoni and rescue his brother Aaron from prison, as well as two other companions, Muloki and Ammah.

4 ***the king...whose name is Antiomno.*** The king of Middoni was a friend of Lamoni's, not a brother or even a relative, showing that kingship was granted for a variety of reasons. We know nothing else about this man.

8 ***they met the father of Lamoni.*** Listening the Spirit has amazing benefits. Here Lamoni and Ammon are able to both accomplish their desires in the same journey. Had Lamoni gone to Nephi, he would have missed his father altogether. We never learned Lamoni's father's name, but it is fairly likely it was Laman, as the recent tradition of the Lamanites seems to be to call their kings Laman (Mosiah 7:21 and especially 24:3).

10 ***one of the children of a liar.*** Lamoni's father quickly showed his attitude toward Nephites, which must have been very common for the time.

14 ***commanded him that he should slay Ammon.*** Even after Lamoni's patient explanation of their purpose and why he had missed the important feast—or perhaps because of that explanation—the father commanded the son to kill Ammon.

15 ***I will not slay Ammon...I go to the land of Middoni.*** Though he feared his father (verse 11), Lamoni became very bold here and stood up to the evil request his father had made, harkening back to Ammon's words to him that he would do what the king desired which was right.

17 ***thou shalt not slay thy son.*** A dramatic moment that is a classic confrontation—Ammon steps in between the two kings, stopping the sword in mid-blow from killing the son (at least, that's how I see it).

20 ***smote his arm.*** Ammon went easy on the old king and did not cut off his arm, but he did put an end to the battle. Where were the king's servants? Why did no one jump to his defense? Was he traveling alone? No one else is mentioned and Ammon has complete control of the situation, so perhaps that was the case.

22 ***I will smite thee.*** Sounds like a bluff, but Ammon had taken other lives when they opposed him, so perhaps he was serious. Still, killing flock-scatterers and the head king of all the land are very different things. Fortunately, Ammon was not forced to make that hard choice.

24 ***my brethren may be cast out of prison...Lamoni may retain his kingdom.*** Ammon asked for nothing for himself, and certainly not half the kingdom as the father had offered him (again, tempting to be sure—as king over half the land, Ammon could have had great influence—but Ammon doesn't even appear to consider it).

26 ***I will grant unto you.*** The king recognized the goodness of Ammon's requests and went further, giving Lamoni complete independence.

27 ***I shall greatly desire to see thee.*** What an odd sight! The king is holding his bleeding arm but is so amazed by Ammon that he invites him to have a personal audience. Ammon never does take him up on the offer but instead sent his brother Aaron (next lesson).

29 ***they were naked, and their skins were worn.*** Aaron, Muloki, and Ammah had suffered much. We get their full story in the next lesson, but they had been very persecuted and completely unsuccessful so far in their efforts, showing just how miraculous Ammon's experience was. But the key was that "they were patient in all their sufferings." Though it had to be a trial, they continued to believe in the same promise that had protected Ammon and them from death, though they had certainly experienced deliverance only after a great trial.

## WORKS CONSULTED

---

Largey, Dennis L., ed., *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*.

LDS Church, *Book of Mormon Student Manual, Religion 121-122*.

McConkie, Joseph Fielding and Millet, Robert L., *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*.

Skousen, Royal, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*.

Sorenson, John L., *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*.