



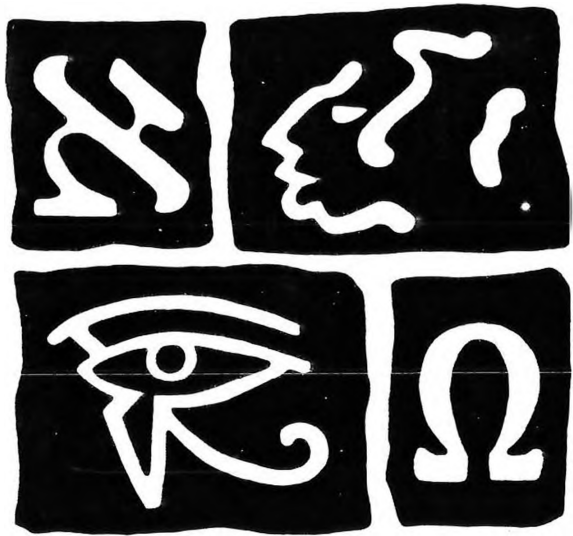
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I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee: Survivor Witnesses in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: A striking new study has been initiated comparing a subtle, recurring pattern in the Book of Mormon with a particular type of human behavior recently identified in the writings of the “survivors” of Hitler’s and Stalin’s death camps. A link between these testimonies might at first seem unlikely, but upon reflection, however, it is clear that Mormon and Moroni, Lehi and Nephi, Alma and Amulek, Ether and Coriantumr, and others in the Book of Mormon were also witnesses of atrocious deaths and genocide. Did these ancient annihilations and modern holocausts generate similar human reactions from their final survivors?



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I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee:
Survivor-Witnesses in the Book of Mormon

by Lisa Bolin Hawkins and Gordon C. Thomasson

In his article, "Survivors and the Will to Bear Witness," which appeared in 1973 in the journal Social Research, sociologist Terrence Des Pres describes experiences typical of those who have survived horrors, extremity, and evil created by their fellow humans. Des Pres' observations are based on the reports of survivors of Nazi and Soviet concentration camps, and he concludes that survival of these man-made hells is a specific kind of human experience, one manifestation of which is the will of the survivor "to survive as witness."¹ The survivor-witnesses studied by Des Pres have written a body of literature communicating their paramount desire to remember and record their experiences and those of others who did not survive. Des Pres suggests that this "literature of survival" is a specific genre, reflecting the specific survival experience, that could not have been predicted until its emergence in the years since World War II.² The purpose of this article is to point to parallels

1. Des Pres, "Survivors and the Will to Bear Witness," Soc. Res. 40:668-69 (1973). When Des Pres describes this experience as "typical," he means that there are enough examples to identify "witnessing" as a kind or type of survivor behavior, and not that all survivors find it essential to bear witness. Ibid., 673, n.9. For a more complete account of Des Pres' study of survivors of the death camps, see T. Des Pres, The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

2. Ibid., 668-69.

between Des Pres' observations about survivors of the death camps and certain experiences of prophets and others in the Book of Mormon who can also be considered survivor-witnesses.

Des Pres' identifies several features of this particular phenomenon and specific human experience, which can be summarized generally as follows: (1) The will to remember and record anchors the survivor in the moral purpose of bearing witness, thus maintaining his own integrity in conscious contradiction of the savagry around him.³ (2) Witnessing of his experience is viewed as a duty, even a sacred task.⁴ (3) It is instinctively felt, an involuntary outburst of feeling, born out of the horror that no one will be left.⁵ (4) The task is carried out despite great risks; often in secret or by depositing the record in a secret archive.⁶ (5) Survivors do not witness to inflict guilt or to rationalize their own survival. Their mission transcends guilt and their irrepressible urge to witness arises before any thought of guilt surfaces and at their initial stage of adjustment to extremity.⁷ (6) They speak simply to tell, to describe, out of a common care for life and the future, realizing that we all live in a realm of mutual sacrifice.⁸ (7) Survival in this sense is a collective act; the survivor has pledged to see that the story is told. Des Pres describes:

3. Ibid., 685.

4. Ibid., 670.

5. Ibid., 672, 674.

6. Ibid., 670.

7. Ibid., 679-80, 684.

8. Ibid., 683.

[I]n extremity men and women make a special promise among themselves, always implicit and often openly declared. Whoever comes through will take with him the burden of speaking for the others. Someone will survive and death will not be absolute. This small pledge is enormously important to people facing extinction. In the survivor's own case, furthermore, it becomes a way to transcend the helplessness which withers hope and self-respect in the presence of so much affliction. Surrounded by suffering which he cannot comfort or prevent, this much at least he can do: the deaths, the sorrow, the infinite dragging pain shall not be lost completely.⁹

(8) The survivors speak to the whole world, as a firsthand eye-witness, one whose words cannot be ignored.¹⁰ (9) They view themselves as a necessary connection between the past and the future.¹¹ (10) They perceive that "out of horror . . . the truth will emerge and be made secure." That "good and evil are only clear in retrospect," for wisdom only comes at a terrible price. Thus, their mission is to display the "objective conditions of evil."¹²

This phenomenon of the survivor-witness, which has been first described by 20th century social scientists, can be recognized in several Book of Mormon settings, as will now be shown and examined, beginning with some simple examples and ending with the most fully documented case of Mormon and Moroni as survivor-witnesses.

One example of the survivor-witness is Alma the Elder, a priest in the court of the wicked King Noah. Alma was a judge at

9. Ibid., 678.

10. Ibid., 671, 689.

11. Ibid., 674.

12. Ibid., 674, 687, 689.

the trial of the prophet Abinadi, and came to believe what Abinadi taught. After Alma began to defend Abinadi and to ask the king to release the prophet, Alma was expelled from the court. (Mos. 17:1-3.) The king sent his servants to kill Alma, but Alma hid and spent his time writing down all that Abinadi had said (17:3-4). Then Alma began to preach Abinadi's message, going about "privately among the people," and gathering the believers together at the waters of Mormon, where Alma would hide in the daytime from King Noah's searchers (18:1-6). Des Pres quotes survivor Elie Weisel, who could have been describing Alma:

Rejected by mankind, the condemned do not go so far as to reject it in turn. Their faith in history remains unshaken, and one may well wonder why. They do not despair. The proof: they persist in surviving--not only to survive,¹³ but to testify. The victims elect to become witnesses.

After King Noah discovered the activities of Alma and his followers, he sent his army to destroy them, but the 450 believers "took their tents and their families and departed into the wilderness" (18:33-35). These people settled in the land of Helam (23:1-5,19), but were then enslaved by an army of Lamanites led by Amulon, one of King Noah's wicked priests (24:25-29; 25:8-10). When the people of Alma began to cry to God because of their afflictions, Amulon put guards over them to kill anyone who was found praying. The people continued to pray in their hearts, and the Lord replied:

. . . I will ease the burdens that are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do

13. Ibid., 668.

that ye may stand as witnessess for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions. (Mosiah 24:14.)

This passage illustrates an important theme in the Book of Mormon that Des Pres does not describe in the records of survivor-witnesses of the death camps. The death camp survivors' purpose was to inform and then remind and warn the world of what happened, so that the dead would never be forgotten and the atrocity would never happen again. In the Book of Mormon, these purposes are seen in combination with God's purposes, and the survivors are also witnesses of God's love in helping them to endure or in delivering them from their agony.

Even those who are not delivered are witnesses for God's purposes. One such case involves Alma the Younger, who, after serving as high priest and chief judge of the Nephites for eight years, relinquished the judgment-seat in order to devote full time to the ministry (Alma 4:16-20). Together with his newly converted companion, Amulek, Alma preached to the city of Ammonihah and commanded the people to repent or be destroyed (8:29-30). The two prophets taught the basic principles of the gospel, relating them to history, and told of the coming of Christ (9-13).

After Alma and Amulek had spoken to the people, some believed their words, but the majority sought to kill Alma and Amulek and took them bound before the chief judge of Ammonihah. Other men who believed in the teachings of Alma and Amulek were cast out, and people were sent to throw stones at them, perhaps to execute them (14:7). Then, the wives and children of the

believers were brought together, and those who believed or had been taught to believe were burned to death (14:8).¹⁴

Alma and Amulek were forced to watch the painful deaths of these women and children. One can hardly bear to imagine the sights, smells, and sounds that must have accompanied the scene.

And when Amulek saw the pains of the women and children who were consuming in the fire, he also was pained; and he said unto Alma, How can we witness this awful scene? (Alma 14:10.)

The answer to this desperate question could be found by Alma and Amulek as survivors of this atrocity only in the prospect that the incident would not be forgotten:

But Alma said unto him: . . . the Lord . . . doth suffer that . . . the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he may exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea and cry mightily against them at the last day. (Alma 14:11.)

Amulek is wrenched by the suffering he sees and by the need to stand helpless in the face of such affliction. But Alma comforts him with the knowledge that God is receiving the martyrs and that the evil will someday be known: the blood of the innocent women and children will witness the evil of their murderers. In this regard, Alma is confident that survivor-witnesses will also remain. Amulek says to Alma, ". . . perhaps they will burn us also." Alma disagrees: "our work is not finished." (14:12,13.) Alma and Amulek did escape from

14. Eradication of a heretic's family may have been part of the punishment of the evil doer or it may have been viewed as removing some defilement from the community. See Josh. 7:24-25.

Ammonihah and lived to preach, prophesy, and bear witness of the evils they had seen, but the wicked people of Ammonihah were soon destroyed and the land remained desolate for over seven years (Alma 16:9-11).

Along with the women and children who were burned in Ammonihah were burned "their records which contained the holy scriptures" (14:8). This was indeed an attempt to utterly destroy the believers. Des Pres points out that survivors of the Warsaw ghetto, like survivors of Nazi and Soviet camps, risked their lives to preserve records of what took place. Chaim A. Kaplan wrote, "My utmost concern is for hiding my diary so that it will be preserved for future generations." Des Pres continues:

The thrust of urgent purpose is everywhere felt; he [Kaplan] describes it, at one point, as "a flame imprisoned in my bones, burning within me, screaming: Record!" . . . Precisely why his task is felt so strongly, and the function it serves, are issues which Kaplan does not go into. What is clear is the passionate will to preserve the memory of the horror he has witnessed. And this desire was not his alone. The need to remember becomes a general response whenever the extremity men endure is man-created.¹⁵

By destroying the records of the Christians of Ammonihah, the wicked murderers were doing far more than burning books. As Des Pres wrote, the survivors of the death camps knew it:

Death is compounded by oblivion, and the foundation of humanness--faith in human continuity--is itself endangered. The final horror is that no one will be left. A survivor of Dachau told me this: "The SS guards took pleasure in telling us that we had no chance of

15. Des Pres, op. cit., 669-760.

coming out alive, a point they emphasized with particular relish by insisting that after the war the rest of the world would not believe what happened; there would be rumors, speculations, but no clear evidence, and people would conclude that evil on such a scale was just not possible." Without the past men have nothing to stand on, no context from which to organize the energies of moral vision. Against such possibilities survivors do what they can. Facing man-made horror, their need becomes strong to remember and record--to insure, through one's own survival or the survival of one's word, that out of horror's very midst (from where else can it come?) the truth will emerge and be made secure.¹⁶

By destroying a people and their records, one eradicates them from history; thus the desire of the evil to destroy not only a people but also their records, especially any record of the evil (see Enos 14-16). This may account for the profound desire of prophets anticipating and people surviving genocidal horrors to record their and others' experiences, and also, perhaps, for the preoccupation with record-keeping and leaving a witness that we find throughout the Book of Mormon.

We have already seen that Alma the Elder considered his first task, while hiding from King Noah, to be the creation of a record of Abinadi's message (Mosiah 17:4). The importance of records is also emphasized in the efforts of Nephi and his brothers to obtain the genealogical and scriptural records kept by Laban in Jerusalem, even at the risk of their lives (1 Ne. 3-4). Lehi's entire family can be considered survivor-witnesses of a sort, fleeing from the Jerusalem to save Lehi's life (1 Ne. 7:14) and to avoid the coming conquest and captivity in Babylon (2 Ne. 25:9,10). The sober task of recording their experiences

16. Ibid., 674.

and struggle for survival was passed from Nephi to his brother Jacob who, despite the hardships he had known, hoped that his witness would reach many:

And it came to pass that I, Jacob, began to be old; and the record of this people being kept on the other plates of Nephi, wherefore, I conclude this record, declaring that I have written according to the best of my knowledge, by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore we did mourn out our days. And I, Jacob, saw that I must soon go down to my grave . . . and to the reader I bid farewell, hoping that many of my brethren may read my words. (Jacob 7:26-27.)

Jacob briefly refers to the persecutions and hardships he and his people had known in wandering in the wilderness and building homes in a new land, and in their disputes among themselves, which eventually led to war. His stark prose is typical of survival literature.¹⁷ Despite the mournful nature of these experiences, Jacob knew that his record and the witness of what had happened would be of value to those who read it in the future, and represented his responsibility to all that had happened in the past.

The prophet Mormon recognized a similar responsibility when he was told by the Lord to step down from his duties as a general and leader of the Nephites in their final battles against the Lamanites. The Nephites had become as wicked and bloodthirsty as the Lamanites, and Mormon wrote:

17. Ibid., 675.

. . . I utterly refused to go up against mine enemies; and I did even as the Lord commanded me, and I did stand as an idle witness to manifest unto the world the things which I saw and heard, according to the manifestations of the Spirit which had testified of things to come. (Mormon 3:16.)

Mormon's response to the evil that he saw was typical:

Bearing witness is a typical response to extremity. Confronting radical evil, men instinctively feel the desire to call, to warn, to resist. Terror dissolves itself in silence, but terror's aftermath, the spectacle of human mutilation, gives rise to a different reaction. In the presence of horror men are seized by an involuntary outburst of feeling that in its abruptness is like a scream--often, in fact, literally a scream. And in this crude cry the will to bear witness is born.¹⁸

That Mormon then saw his chief responsibility as that of a record-keeper and witness is emphasized by his next words, which are a call and a warning to the Gentiles, the house of Israel, and all the ends of the earth to repent and prepare to stand before the judgment-seat of Christ (3:17-22).

Perhaps the best example of the survivor-witness in the Book of Mormon is Mormon's son, Moroni. Virtually each of the ten characteristics of the survivor-witness typology listed at the beginning of this paper is present in the words and deeds of Mormon and Moroni. After witnessing the horrible deaths of hundreds of thousands -- the entire Nephite nation --including all his kindred (Mor. 2:15; 4:11, 15, 21; Moro. 9:8), Moroni sees his major responsibility as the completion and preservation of the records of his people:

Behold I, Moroni, do finish the record of my father, Mormon. . . . I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people. . . . Therefore I will write and hide up the records in the earth, and whither I go it mattereth not. (Mor. 8:1-4. See also 4:23.)

18. Ibid., 673.

Moroni knew that the records would someday be revealed:

[B]ehold, I say unto you that those saints who have gone before me, who have possessed this land, shall cry, yea, even from the dust will they cry unto the Lord; and as the Lord liveth he will remember the covenant which he hath made with them. . . . And behold, their prayers were also in behalf of him that the Lord should suffer to bring these things forth. And no one need say that they shall not come, for they surely shall, for the Lord hath spoken it; for out of the earth shall they come, by the hand of the Lord, and none can stay it . . . and it shall come even as if one should speak from the dead. And it shall come in a day when the blood of saints shall cry unto the Lord, because of secret combinations and works of darkness. (Mor. 8:23-27.)

Moreover, the stark loneliness (Mor. 8:5) and obliviousness to risks (8:3) accompany the survivor's transcendent sorrow ("O ye fair ones!" 6:17-22; 2:19; 5:8). The care for the future and the survivor's sense of providing a necessary and last link between the past and the future (5:9-10; 7:1-10; 8:26, 35; 9:30) is clear as Mormon and Moroni write to "all the ends of the earth." (3:16-18; 5:8). As Des Pres points out, those who serve as survivor-witnesses, individually or through records, allow the dead to speak through their voices, just as Moroni states.

Survivors are not individuals in the bourgeois sense. They are living remnants of the general struggle, and certainly they know it. . . . Survival is a collective act, and so is bearing witness. Both are rooted in compassion and care, and both expose the illusion of separateness. It is not an exaggeration, nor merely a metaphor, to say that the survivor's identity includes the dead.¹⁹

Thus Moroni's lonely existence as the last surviving Nephite incorporates the lives of all those who had gone before. His writing and preservation of the records of others creates the collective record of the Book of Mormon peoples, and the voice

19. Ibid., 677.

speaking from the dust--from the dead--is the collective voice speaking the sobering truth, which is unmistakably visible in retrospect, as it objectively views the conditions of good and evil arising out of the ultimate terror of the deaths of all the saints whose record has been so preserved (Hel. 12:3; Mor. 8:36-41).

Similar representatives of destroyed peoples are Ether, who hid the records of the Jaredites "in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them" (Ether 15:33; see Mos. 8:7-9), and Coriantumr, the lone survivor of the Jaredites (Ether 15:29-32), who was found by the people of Zarahemla (Omni 1:19-22).

Because the Book of Mormon is an abridgment of a longer and presumably more detailed record (see W. of M. 1), we do not have access to as much information about the experiences of Book of Mormon peoples as we have about the suffering of the prisoners of the Nazi and Soviet concentration camps. And yet, there is enough said about the horrible experiences of some of the prophets and others that we can discern that they suffered in a manner analogous to those who have suffered in the man-made hells of the Twentieth Century. That the response of the Book of Mormon peoples to that type of atrocity and widespread death is so accurately similar to a typical human phenomenon observed and analyzed in remarkably parallel detail under comparable circumstances by a Twentieth Century sociologist -- especially where genocides and calamities of the magnitude studied by Des Pres and depicted in the Book of Mormon were unprecedented in the world of Joseph Smith -- is worthy of note. This coincidence

makes Terrence Des Pres' "Survivors and the Will to Bear Witness" an article of special interest to the student of the Book of Mormon. The true-to-life urgent witness of the survivors who left us the testimonies contained in the Book of Mormon convey to us an unexpectedly powerful case of the sociological and anthropological "will to bear witness."