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Strategy for Survival

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Strategy for Survival

Beginning with a mobile defense, the Nephites soon adopted the classic system of fortified cities and strong places, their earth-and-wood defenses resembling those found all over the Old World. Settled areas with farms, towns, and a capital city were separated from each other by considerable stretches of uninhabited country. The greatest military operation described in the Book of Mormon is the long retreat in which the Nephites moved from one place to another in the attempt to make a stand against the overwhelmingly superior hereditary enemy. This great retreat is not a freak in history but has many parallels among the wars and migrations of nations. There is nothing improbable or even unusual in a movement that began in Central America and after many years may have ended as far away as New York.

Methods of Defense

At the beginning of their history the Nephites put up a mobile defense against their enemies, making skillful use of the wilderness to "fortify against them with their armies" (Jacob 7:25). This method was never given up, as we can see in the ordering of the evacuation of the land of Jershon which "gave place in the land . . . for the armies of the Nephites, that they might contend with the armies of the Lamanites" (Alma 35:13). But in the third generation the Nephites "began to fortify our cities, or whatsoever place of our inheritance," a project rendered necessary and possible by the great increase of population (Jarom 1:7-8). From this time on the strategy of fortified cities and "places of security" (Alma 50:4) becomes the rule, though the fighting is still mostly done in the wilderness. Of recent years students have come to realize that the earthen mounds, circles, walls, and hill-forts that are virtually the only surviving

remains of many an Old World civilization actually represent the normal and typical life of ancient people, and from them they have reconstructed manners of living and warfare that exactly correspond to those described in the Book of Mormon.¹

The System of Strong Points

The Nephites tended their flocks and tilled their fields within safe distance of some fortified place, either a walled town or a specially prepared place "of resort" (Alma 52:6) to which they could flee at a moment's notice in case of a raid by the fierce and predatory Lamanites. In time of general alarm we see all the people converging on the central city and principal national stronghold. "And they [the Lamanites] are upon our brethren in that land; and they are fleeing before them with their flocks, and their wives, and their children, towards our city" (Alma 2:25). In this particular case the amazing speed with which the people were able to round up their flocks and flee to the city shows that we are dealing with a standardized type of thing. Nephite cities were used both as defense places for armies to fall back on (Mosiah 21:12), and when necessary as regular castles of defense (Mosiah 21:19), while the enemy might "come into the land . . . by night, and carr[y] off their grain and many of their precious things" (Mosiah 21:21). There came a time when every Nephite city had the appearance of a fort, and then the casual visitor would have had a hard time telling whether he was in the Old World or the New, for the fortifications of the Nephites seem to have resembled those of Europe and the Near East in all particulars.² Moroni set his armies to

digging up heaps of earth round about all the cities. . . . And upon the top of these ridges of earth he caused that there should be timbers, yea, works of timbers built up to the height of a man, round about the cities. And . . . upon those works of timbers there should be a

frame of pickets built upon the timbers round about; . . . and he caused towers to be erected that overlooked those works of pickets, and he caused places of security to be built upon those towers (Alma 50:1-5).

Alma tells of other fortifications of earth and wood, dirt banks and ditches (Alma 52:6) lined by "a strong wall of timbers" (Alma 53:4). Only once is stone mentioned, and that is as an added reinforcement rather than the normal defense. Moroni erected "small forts, or places of resort; throwing up banks of earth round about to enclose his armies, and also building walls of stone to encircle them about, round about their cities and the borders of their lands; yea, all round about the land" (Alma 48:8). These, the only stone structures mentioned in the Book of Mormon, seem to have been emergency works of rubble, hastily thrown up for a particular operation; they were certainly not buildings of stone. Towers were built in the New World for the same purposes as in the Old World, but again, while we are told of wooden towers, nothing is said of stone.

In a good description of a typical Nephite fortification (Alma 49:17-20) we are told that elevation was an important element of defense, the enemy being forced to climb up to the fort, which was surrounded by a high bank and a deep ditch; an important feature was the "place of entrance" where assailants were let into a trap and there cut down by the swords and slings of the most expert fighters in the place (Alma 49:20). This is the typical arrangement of hundreds of old earthworks scattered all over the Old World, some of which, like the Roman camp on the Taunus, have recently been reconstructed. Typical also is the use of hilltop forts or camps in Book of Mormon strategy. When Amalickiah caused serious trouble between the Nephites and the Lamanites living in the land of Nephi, "all the Lamanites . . . fled to Onidah, to the place of arms" where they gathered themselves together "upon the top of the mount which was called Antipas, in preparation to battle"

(Alma 47:5-7). The hill was fortified and had a camp on top (Alma 47:10-14). Cumorah was another such rallying place.

This type of fortification is taken everywhere to signify a normal warfare of raids and counter-raids rather than of pitched battles, and such we find to be the case in the Book of Mormon, where we see the people "watering and feeding their flocks, and tilling their lands," and one day the Lamanite hosts came to raid their lands, "and began to slay them, and to take off their flocks, and the corn of their fields" (Mosiah 9:14). In the conventional manner the people flee to the city for protection (Mosiah 9:15). In this case their army counterattacked and in a single day drove the raiders out of the land, killing over 3,000 of them in the process (Mosiah 9:18). It all happened within a few hours.

A Small Population

Everything about the military picture in the Book of Mormon gives evidence of a very small population, scattered in little states (originally colonies) separated from one another by wide expanses of wilderness. The land of Zarahemla would be the only exception. The Nephites were greatly impressed by the signs of former habitation in the lands to the far north, "a land which had been peopled with a people who were as numerous as the hosts of Israel," they said with wonder (Mosiah 8:8). Yet by modern standards the hosts of Israel were never very numerous, though by Nephite standards they were fabulous. For them their New World population was nothing at all to what they remembered or had recorded of the Old. The greatest military slaughter except that at Cumorah was that which quelled the Amlicite uprising with 12,532 Amlicite and 6,562 Nephite casualties (Alma 2:18-19). That is a stiff day's loss for any army, but in terms of a war it is tiny by modern standards. Yet we are told that the Amlicites were "so numerous that they could not be numbered" (Alma 2:35), and that their Lamanite allies were "as numerous almost, as it

were, as the sands of the sea" (Alma 2:27). The "as it were" is a reminder that such statements are not to be taken literally. The routed host sought safety, as ever, in the wilderness, and ended up in Hermounts, "that part of the wilderness which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts," where the beasts and the vultures finished off the wounded (Alma 2:37). All this shows a military operation taking place in great stretches of empty and desolate territory. Where were the inhabitants?

The calamities of the Amlicite war brought the people back to a remembrance of God, and the Church strove mightily, "and many were baptized in the waters of Sidon and were joined to the church of God" (Alma 4:4). After Alma's enthusiastic account, which calls up images of thousands and tens of thousands flocking to the waters of the mighty Sidon,³ it comes as a shock to learn that the record increase of the church in the seventh year of the judges was just 3,500 souls. This is another reminder that terms like "great," "mighty," "numerous," etc., are purely relative and cannot for a moment be taken to indicate population on a modern scale. We are told, for example, that the people of the great northern migration "began to cover the face of the whole earth" (Helaman 3:8). What is meant by "cover"? In case one thinks of something like greater Los Angeles one need only read a few verses farther to learn that the Gadianton robbers established their cells "in the more settled parts of the land" (Helaman 3:23), which makes it clear that "covering the face of the whole earth" does not mean a dense and uniform occupation but can signify the thinnest possible settlement.

This is implied in Mormon's impression of the land of Zarahemla when he came as a boy from the north country with his father: "The whole face of the land had become covered with buildings, and the people were as numerous almost, as it were the sand of the sea" (Mormon 1:7). The "as it were" again bids us be cautious, but it is clear that

compared with his native north country the land of Zarahemla seemed to the youthful Mormon to be fairly bursting with people. Yet in the very year he made his visit a war broke out in the Zarahemla country "by the waters of Sidon," for which "the Nephites had gathered together a great number of men, even to exceed the number of thirty thousand" (Mormon 1:11). That is, the whole Nephite army gathered from a nation "as numerous almost as it were the sand of the sea" amounted to hardly more than a single modern infantry division! The overwhelmingly superior enemy host was only 50,000 – less than two infantry divisions.

To starve out the Gadiantons, the Nephites on one occasion joined "in one body, . . . having reserved for themselves provisions, and horses and cattle, and flocks of every kind, that they might subsist for the space of seven years" (3 Nephi 4:4). Since flocks and cattle of every kind have to be fed for seven years, and since horses are only necessary where there is a demand for transportation, it is plain that the Nephites were not all shut up in one city, but united within one land. The area was not enough to support such a host indefinitely but it must have been considerable. The gathering out of the surrounding lands went forward slowly and systematically, for we read that the robbers "began to take possession of all the lands which had been deserted by the Nephites, and the cities which had been left desolate (3 Nephi 4:1), "for the Nephites had left their lands desolate, and had gathered their flocks and their herds and all their substance, and they were in one body" (3 Nephi 4:3). Herebefore they had not been in one body, but settled in a number of "lands."

Concentration and Dispersion

A good deal of Nephite history takes place in a land so small that its whole expanse can be surveyed from the top of a high tower (Mosiah 11:12). Yet we read of Nephite communities so far apart that parties trying to get from one

to the other get lost in the wilderness for weeks. There is nothing contradictory about that. As the history of France is largely the history of the city of Paris and its environs, and the histories of Rome and Athens and Jerusalem, etc., rarely look beyond those territories (old Latium, Attica, "the land of Jerusalem," etc.) which can be seen in their entirety from the high place and seat of dominion – the Capitol, the Acropolis, the Rock of David⁴ – even so the history of the Nephites is centered in Zarahemla, with only occasional references to the provinces. Yet the provinces were there. When Coriantumr in a surprise raid actually got possession of Zarahemla he thought the whole land was his, "supposing that their greatest strength was in the center of the land" (Helaman 1:24), whereas actually their strength was in "the cities around about in the borders" (Helaman 1:26). So while the invaders "had come into the center of the land, and had taken the capital city . . . and were marching through *the most capital parts* of the land, . . . taking possession of many cities and of many strongholds" (Helaman 1:27), they were really playing right into Moroni's hands. For the most part the scenes of Book of Mormon history are laid "in the most capital parts of the land," as is the case with most ancient histories. In times of danger, as we have seen, it was the practice for the people to seek refuge in their cities, walled towns, and "places of security," driving their cattle with them. That many of them were so far from towns that special strong places had to be set up for them is an indication of how thinly settled much of the land must have been. In time of national emergency, as in the days of Lachoneus, the people would bypass the local centers and fall back on the big ones or even leave all the rest deserted to unite themselves in one body in the capital. From Rome to China this is exactly the way the ancients did everywhere.

The Great Retreat

In the days of Mormon the greatest national emergency of all occurred. The Nephite armies under Mormon being outnumbered and the land having become completely insecure, the people lost their nerve. "They would not fight, and they began to retreat towards the north countries" (Mormon 2:3). This was simply the old system of falling back to stronger positions, as the Greeks did before the Persians or the Great King did before Alexander's advance. In this case the armies of Mormon occupied the city of Angola and did "make preparations to defend ourselves against the Lamanites. And . . . did fortify the city with our might" (Mormon 2:4). But they lost the city and fell back again, being next driven "forth out of the land of David" (Mormon 2:5). So next there was a great rallying and gathering in the land of Joshua. "We did gather in our people as fast as it were possible, that we might get them together in one body" (Mormon 2:7). It was the old system faithfully and mechanically followed. But here the whole population was wicked and extensively infiltrated with Gadianton members, so that there was nothing but trouble, "one complete revolution throughout all the face of the land" (Mormon 2:8). Here the Lamanites attacked with an army of 44,000 (tiny by modern standards) and were beaten back by a Nephite army of 42,000 (the same size as the little army that Alexander led all over Asia). But fifteen years later the Lamanites again got the best of them and they were driven out of the land and pursued clear "to the land of Jashon, before it was *possible to stop them in their retreat*" (Mormon 2:16). By this time, unless they had been going in circles, they were years away from Zarahemla. Near the city of Jashon in the land of Jashon was the land of Ammaron, where Mormon picked up some record-plates which had been deposited earlier for safe keeping (Mormon 2:17). But the people could not stay in Jashon either, but were

driven northward, until they came to the land of Shem, where they "did fortify the city of Shem, and we did gather in our people as much as it were possible, that perhaps we might save them from destruction" (Mormon 2:21). Notice that the whole operation is strictly defensive – the whole problem is one of survival, and every move is made with great reluctance. In the city and land of Shem, Mormon made a passionate appeal to his people to "fight for their . . . houses, and their homes" (Mormon 2:23), though they had only been occupying the place for less than a year! Plainly the Nephite community was established in peace as rapidly as it was abandoned in war; semi-nomad is not too strong a term for such a society. Here the Nephite hosts, though numbering only 30,000, stood off a Lamanite army of 50,000 (Mormon 2:25), and within three years had won back "the lands of our inheritance" (Mormon 2:27). The lands were divided up in a treaty made with the Lamanites in the following year, and the share allotted to Mormon's people was all the land north of "the narrow passage" (Mormon 2:29).

Mormon's Account Only a Sampling

In all this account Mormon has been dealing only with the hosts under his command, "my armies" (Mormon 2:2-3). Here he makes a deal with the Lamanites for "lands of inheritance." We have seen before that any land settled by a Nephite group was called by that group "the land of [its] inheritance," following the Old World practice of Israel, meaning that the land taken was now the legitimate property of the family to hand on to its heirs. Here "the lands of our inheritance" are not to be confused with the "first inheritance" of the Nephites, which was far to the south. Nor is the "narrow passage" the same thing as the much-mentioned "narrow neck of land." A passage is a way through, "an entrance or exit," says the dictionary – a pass. Here it is specifically stated to be such: "the narrow passage

which *led* into the land southward" (Mormon 2:29). Now the Isthmus of Panama, never less than thirty miles wide, is *not* a "narrow passage" for an army of less than two divisions. Or will anyone maintain that after years of constantly being bested by the Lamanites in steady "retreat towards the north countries" (Mormon 2:3) the Nephites were in a position to contain all the Lamanites not only south of Zarahemla, where the long retreat began, but even south of Panama? (Mormon 2:29). It is quite another feature of the land to which Mormon here refers, and it is far, far from Zarahemla. Unless we are prepared to grant that the Lamanites willingly gave up all their gains clear back to Zarahemla and far to the south of it, yielding up to the defeated Nephites territories that had never belonged to them, we cannot identify the narrow passage as such with the Isthmus of Panama. To call the entire Isthmus of Tehuantepec, one hundred and thirty miles wide, a "narrow passage" is of course out of the question.

During the ten years that followed, the Nephites made great preparations for defense, at the end of which, on receipt of a letter from the king of the Lamanites formally declaring war, Mormon ordered the people "to gather themselves together" again, this time at their southernmost city "at the land Desolation . . . by the narrow pass which led into the land southward," where they "did fortify against them with all our force" (Mormon 3:5-6), hoping to stop them at the pass. This strategy, which was successful, shows that the narrow passage was a pass and not one of the Isthmuses, 30 to 150 miles wide, which of course could not be blocked by any little city or a few battalions of troops. Like Marathon, the pass was near the sea (Mormon 3:8). Two years later the Nephites foolishly took the offensive and as a result lost both the land and the city of Desolation, "and the remainder did flee and join the inhabitants of the city Teancum" (Mormon 4:3). This makes it clear that we are still reading only of Mormon's band of Nephites, and

not a history of the whole nation, for the people of Teancum, which was "in the borders by the seashore . . . near the city of Desolation" (Mormon 4:3), had up to then taken no part in the fighting. It must always be borne in mind that by this time the Nephite people had become broken up into "tribes," each living by itself and following its own tribal laws (3 Nephi 7:2-4,11). So what Mormon gives us is only a sampling of the sort of thing that was going on.

The Great Evacuation

The Nephites retook the city of Desolation in the following year, only to lose both it and Teancum three years later (Mormon 4:8, 13-14), and regain them again. But in 375 A.D. came the turning point. The Nephites lost their strong places and were never again able to make a successful rally and defense, "but began to be swept off by them [the Lamanites] even as a dew before the sun" (Mormon 4:18). They fled to the city of Boaz only to be driven out of it "and slaughtered with an exceedingly great slaughter" (Mormon 4:21). So they took to headlong flight, "taking all the inhabitants with them, both in towns and villages" (Mormon 4:22). Then it was that Mormon went to the hill Shim and got the records (Mormon 4:23). After that evacuation they fled to another land and city, the city of Jordan, where they held their own for a while (Mormon 5:3). At the same time the same sort of thing was going on in the rest of the scattered and disintegrating Nephite world. "And there were also other cities which were maintained by the Nephites, which strongholds did cut them [the Lamanites] off" (Mormon 5:4).

The next verse is very revealing. "But it came to pass that whatsoever lands we had *passed by*, and the inhabitants thereof were *not* gathered in, were destroyed by the Lamanites, and their towns, and villages, and cities were burned with fire" (Mormon 5:5). Here you have a clear picture of Nephite society. Separate "lands" living their

own lives, now in this last crisis terribly reluctant to move and join the swelling host in the retreat to the north. Those who refused to pull up stakes were one by one completely wiped out by the Lamanites. This was no planned migration but a forced evacuation, like dozens of such we read about in the grim and terrible times of the "Invasion of the Barbarians" that destroyed the classic civilizations of the Old World. In this case Mormon's people were only part of the general and gradual evacuation of the whole land. The Nephites lost a general battle in the next year and resumed their headlong flight, "and those whose flight was swifter than the Lamanites' did escape," says Mormon, not mincing words, while the rest "were swept down and destroyed" (Mormon 5:7). The fitful but continual falling back of the Nephites towards the north, which had now been going on for *fifty-three years*, became something like a rout, with speed the only hope of survival. So, says Mormon, "we did march forth before the Lamanites," and finally received permission to "gather together our people unto the land of Cumorah, by a hill which was called Cumorah, and there we could give them battle" (Mormon 6:1-2). To the very last they followed the usual custom of assembling the hosts around some fortified hill-camp for a formal showdown.

The Last Stand

By this time, we have seen, Mormon's migration was fused with the general migration of the nation, and as it had been the practice in the past for the whole nation in times of extreme danger to fall back on a single point of defense, so now they all by special arrangement and permission gathered for the last time at Cumorah, "in a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains" (Mormon 6:4). Such a description of the country would seem to come from people who are used to a relatively dry terrain and who are strange enough in the new setting to be impressed by

it. It was *four years* after their last marching before the Lamanites before the Nephites had completed their final gathering—a long march, and a long gathering! In the last assembly, which “gathered in all the remainder of our people unto the land Cumorah” (Mormon 6:5), the tribal order was still observed, the host being organized into independent armies of about ten thousand each (Mormon 6:10-15). All told they numbered 230,000, as against the largest Nephite army mentioned earlier, 42,000. Plainly Mormon has been showing us only one typical episode in Nephite history; here all the strands are drawn together for the last time.

The Way to Cumorah

It is often claimed that it is quite unthinkable that the Nephites could have met a military threat in Central America by fleeing to western New York. Such hasty pronouncements are typical of much Book of Mormon criticism, building impetuous conclusions on first impressions and never bothering to find out what the Book of Mormon says actually happened. Any schoolboy of another generation, raised on Xenophon and Caesar, would brush such objections aside with a laugh—apparently these self-appointed archaeologists have no idea of what ancient armies and nations could do and did in the way of marching and retreating. But what does Mormon tell us? That Operation Cumorah was only the culminating phase of many years of desperate shifts and devices to escape a steadily growing Lamanite pressure. The movement that ended at Cumorah was not a single project but the last of innumerable and agonizing hopes and setbacks, a bungling, peacemeal process of retreat that lasted for two generations. In the histories of the tribes many a nation, after being uprooted from its homeland, wandered thousands of miles in desperate search of escape and survival, fighting all the way, only to be eventually exterminated in some last great epic battle. We need only think of the tragic fate of the Visigoths, Bur-

gundians or any number of Celtic or Asiatic nations (including the Torguts in our own day) to realize that there is nothing incredible or even improbable about the last days of the Nephites.⁵ The Kirghiz, almost the same size as the Nephite nations, migrated just as fast and as far as the Nephites in attempting to escape their Chinese oppressors through the years—and they never knew just where they were going next.

The strategy of survival is a strategy of expedience in which a move cannot be planned far ahead. You move when and where you must. Chief Joseph, trying to escape the U. S. Army, took his people over 3,000 miles, always into the most remote and inaccessible regions possible. For the same reason the Nephites found themselves moving into uninviting regions—their motive was flight; they left their homes with great reluctance, they did not *want* to go anywhere, but they had to get away (Mormon 5:5). As long as a relentless hereditary foe pursued them, they had to keep moving. And the enemy was not to be appeased, as we see in the brutal and systematically thorough mopping-up operations which went right on after the Nephite nation had been destroyed in battle (Mormon 8:2).

Once one gets a mobile situation such as we have in the Book of Mormon from 375 A.D. on, distance takes on a wholly new aspect—the dimensions of mobile warfare (as against that of prepared lines) are unlimited. The battalions of Napoleon within the short space of fifteen years fought on the plains of Italy, on the banks of the Nile, in the high Swiss Alps, at the gates of Copenhagen and Vienna, all over the rocky uplands of Spain, and across the Russian steppes to Moscow. And many a trooper, present at all these operations, covered all that distance (except, of course, for the trip to Egypt) on foot. Yet over 2,000 years earlier Alexander performed far swifter and longer marches through hostile and unknown regions many of which remained unexplored and unknown to western man down

to our own day. There is no reason for supposing that ancient people could not walk or ride just as far as moderns. On the contrary, they constantly negotiated distances on foot that would appall us. There were Indians with Lewis and Clark who knew the continent all the way from the lower Mississippi to Puget Sound – why should the Nephites have been any less informed than they? Movement of the Nephites along the Gulf Coast to the Mississippi and hence up the valley to the eastern headwaters would be an ordinary, even a typical, performance by ancient standards.

Questions

1. Why did the Nephites in their early days confine their military operations to mobile defense?
2. What was the nature of Nephite fortifications?
3. Why is it difficult to date ancient mounds?
4. How large must a “great city” be to be great? How numerous must a “numerous” population be?
5. Describe the normal Nephite strategy for defense. How does it compare with that in the Old World?
6. What indication is there that Mormon’s account is not a history of the whole Nephite nation as such? What had already happened to the nation?
7. Is it conceivable that the Lamanites would actually give permission to the Nephites to gather their forces in order to oppose them?
8. Why does Central America seem so far away to us?
9. How far is far? Why is it best to avoid speculation on Book of Mormon geography?
10. What difference does it make whether the Hill Cumorah is in Central America or in New York state?