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"That They May Be Kept Bright"

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Chapter 32

“THAT THEY MAY BE KEPT BRIGHT”

And now behold, since it has been as much as we could do to get our stains taken away from us, and our swords are made bright, let us hide them away that they may be kept bright, as a testimony to our God at the last day, or at the day that we shall be brought to stand before him to be judged, that we have not stained our swords in the blood of our brethren since he imparted his word unto us and has made us clean thereby . . . we will hide away our swords, yea, even we will bury them deep in the earth, that they may be kept bright, as a testimony that we have never used them. (Alma 24:15-16)

One of the great acts of faith recorded in the Book of Mormon is the burying of weapons of war by the Lamanites converted by the sons of Mosiah. Their king had advised the action, noting that “since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren . . . let us retain our swords that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren; for perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins” (Alma 24:12-13).

The desire of these Lamanites to make their swords bright by ridding them of the blood of the slain may reflect an idiom used in their language. A few centuries earlier, Jacob, declaring that he had warned the people of their sins, noted that “the God of Israel did witness that I shook your iniquities from my soul, and that I stand with brightness before him, and am rid of your blood” (2 Nephi 9:44). In this case, it is Jacob who, being “rid of . . . blood”

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retains his “brightness.”

Critics have maintained that this is illogical, since burying the weapons would only speed up the rusting process by exposing them to the more constant moisture of the soil. The best response is that the Lamanite swords were probably similar to Mesoamerican sword-like weapons, made of sharp obsidian blades embedded in wooden clubs. William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill have suggested that it was because of their wooden parts that the swords could be “stained” with blood, while blood could be simply wiped from a metal blade.¹ An inscription of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.) notes that, following a battle, his army marched to the Mediterranean sea, where they washed their weapons in the water.²

If the Lamanites’ swords were metal, it would make more sense to reshape the metal into agricultural implements, as the Bible suggests (Isaiah 2:4; Joel 3:10; Micah 4:3), rather than bury them in the ground. But it is also possible that the term “brightness” refers to the swords themselves. An early Jewish text, *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* 33, indicates that the “lightning” (Hebrew *bārāq*) that appears in parallel with “arrows” in Psalm 18:15 (and repeated in 2 Samuel 22:15) is the sword, noting that the word representing the brightness of the sword in Ezekiel 21:15 is also *bārāq*.

A belief held among a number of different societies may explain the rationale behind the converted Lamanites burying their weapons. It is the belief that an individual wounded by a weapon will heal only if the weapon itself is safeguarded by hiding it. For example, among the Lkuñgen Indians of British Columbia the

¹ William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, “Swords in the Book of Mormon,” in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret and FARMS, 1990). See also Matthew Roper, “On Cynics and Swords,” in Daniel C. Peterson, ed., *FARMS Review of Books* 9/1 (1997).

² See the English translation in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (3rd ed., Princeton University, 1969), 277.

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friends of a wounded man will hide the weapon that caused the injury. In other cultures, it was believed that, in order for the man to heal, the offending weapon must be anointed, evidently to prevent rusting and to keep it bright. The prevalence of this tradition in sixteenth-century England was attested by Roger Bacon. As late as the nineteenth century, farmers in Suffolk would oil or grease a wound-causing scythe or other implement (including nails and even thorns) to keep them bright.

In Suffolk, should a man be stabbed with a knife, the knife would be greased and laid across his sickbed. Inhabitants of the Harz mountains believed that if one were cut with a knife or scissors, it was necessary to smear the implement with fat and hide it away in a dry place; as the knife dried, the wound was believed to heal.³

CONCLUSION

We do not know if this practice prevailed among the Lamanites, though the anointing of accouterments of war by their Israelite ancestors is attested in the Bible (2 Samuel 1:21; Isaiah 21:5). But we cannot rule out the possibility that they held some such belief.

³ The accounts given here are drawn from Sir James Frazer and reviser Theodor H. Gaster, *the New Golden Bough* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 65-66.