

ALMA 53–63

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Premodern Warfare

The eleven chapters in this lesson continue the lengthy coverage given by Mormon to the seven years of war at the end of the Book of Alma, spanning the 25th to the 31st years of the reign of judges. Mormon puts on display here three of his areas of expertise: (1) as abridger, he masterfully understands and selects from the records that he had at hand and straightforwardly narrates the main storylines, (2) as prophet and spiritual leader of his own struggling generation, he conveys meaningful messages that he knew would be pertinent and memorable for his future readers in their times of need, and (3) as commander in chief of the total Nephite nation at war, he displays his firsthand expertise in all areas of the order of battle in premodern times, that is, how military conflict was carried out in the world before the invention of gunpowder.

Much has been written about the multiple subjects involved with warfare in these chapters. Two of the scholars who have most effectively led the charge in this area and have helped us understand this subject literally from the ground up are Hugh Nibley and Bill Hamblin. Nibley served throughout World War II, carrying out strategic duties in Army Intelligence. In this capacity, he studied the vast records of military history from ancient to modern times. It is not an exaggeration to say that he found everywhere repeated confirmations of the reality of Mormon's war chapters. His story is told by his son Alex in the book *Sergeant Nibley*, and by his son-in-law Boyd Peterson in the biography, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*. Both books are nigh to impossible to put down.

Bill Hamblin, with a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, was a cultural historian who drew extensively from every kind of subject imaginable dealing with warfare, anywhere

in the world, before the Middle Ages. His works on weapons, armor, fortifications, and military tactics offer readers an expert tool kit for getting a handle on truly comprehending the brutal costs of armed conflict in the ancient world. Hamblin was instrumental in organizing a large symposium at BYU in 1989 on warfare in the Book of Mormon, which resulted in the publication of a book and several subsequent articles, dealing with everything from the purposes and importance of warfare in the Book of Mormon, to military policies and leadership, the sacred aspects of “holy war,” the legal aspects of martial law, the weapons, logistics, weather, and geography of the conduct of military engagement.

For example, there are seventeen instances of particular or extensive warfare in the Book of Mormon, each with identifiable dates, locations, causes, tactics, and outcomes. Throughout these conflicts we learn of:

- the sacral nature of consulting with omens and prophets before going to war
- the need for purity, covenants, and ritual preparations for battle
- one-on-one stand-offs between leaders themselves
- the elevation of heroes who excel and who become essential role models
- the use of sacred implements, such as the sword of Laban
- the duty of all able-bodied men to serve
- tribal affiliations and organizing roles
- the perpetuation of the military arts by a military caste
- numbering the men, and almost putting women under arms (Alma 54:12; 55:17)
- granting limited exemptions and requiring alternative forms of service
- the use of mercenaries and the formation of alliances
- the compulsion of subjugated people to support the war effort
- the array of enemies, including formal armies, bandits, robbers, and rebels
- personal weapons, slings, stones, bows, arrows, clubs and slashing handheld weapons
- suspension of judicial process and legal rights during times of extreme crisis (Alma 51:19)
- the powers of captains and chief captains
- restrictions on the freedom of travel during seasons of war
- warnings and exchanging of taunts, and offers of peace
- fortifications, walls, stone and earthen embankments
- geographical constraints and targeted significance
- seasonality of war during specific months, probably due to weather
- daytime engagements only, as the normal rule
- ethical problems with the use of stratagems
- taking captives, and what to do with them
- releasing captives, usually with an oath

- the prominent use of religious rituals, regularly seeking divine intervention and protection
- prohibitions against taking personal plunder or booty (Mosiah 2:13)
- the importance of new innovations and improvements in military technology
- counting the troops, and knowing how to deploy them effectively
- feeding the troops, and the need for large-scale farming
- moving the troops, the need for roads and local knowledge of the terrain
- commanding the troops and maintaining order and loyalty
- tense interactions between the officers in the field and the political leaders at home
- burying the dead
- the economic costs and public health consequences of war
- grudges and irreconcilable enmity between certain leaders, leading to prolonged eras of intense militarization among competitors for power and control
- wars of extermination, and the annihilation of opposing populations

All of this extensive coverage is fairly astonishing. Whoever wrote the Book of Mormon basically knew everything a person would need to know in order to conduct warfare in the ancient world. Here we see accurate reports reflecting the complexities and developments of premodern warfare. Embedded in these records are deliberate decisions expertly made according to proven and professionally standard best practices. Warfare as reported in Mormon's record comports with the military practices developed and used in major civilizations in the pre-technical world prior to the times of gunpowder, rifles, canons, and before all the changes that came with them.

Through the intense examination of vast libraries of ancient historical records and numerous new archaeological discoveries, the patterns and practices of ancient warfare are better understood today than ever before. And there may well be much more yet to come. By the use of the new LiDAR technology in just the last few years, archaeologists now know more than anyone could previously imagine about the prolonged eras of intense militarization among competitors for power and control two millennia ago in Central America among the Maya and their neighbors.

Further Reading

William J. Hamblin, "Warfare in the Book of Mormon," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 241–248.

William J. Hamblin, "The Importance of Warfare in Book of Mormon Studies," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 523–543.

Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: FARMS and Deseret Book, 1990).

Alex Nibley and Hugh Nibley, *Sergeant Nibley: Memories of an Unlikely Screaming Eagle* (Salt Lake City, UT: Shadow Mountain, 2006).

Boyd J. Peterson, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002).

Alma 53

In this chapter we encounter the following episodes with several interesting morals:

1. The Nephites put the Lamanite prisoners to work (53:1–5). This was the typical treatment of prisoners of war in the ancient world; they were treated as slaves, if they weren't killed. But there were no "prisoner of war camps" as such in the ancient world. One might see their work as a lesson to do the best you can under the circumstances. Eventually, willing Lamanite captives were rewarded with property in the land of Jershon (62:17, 27).
2. Dissensions and intrigue cause trouble for the Nephites on the west seacoast in Moroni's absence (53:8–9): When the cat's away, the mice will play. From this, good leaders (and parents) can learn the importance of remaining attentive, even from a distance.
3. The 2,000 stripling Ammonite young men went to Helaman, the High Priest, and asked him to be their commander, and he agreed (53:10–22): Youth can see here the importance of actively seeking out the most righteous leaders they possibly can find. Under their guidance, you can realize your highest potentials!
4. These young men take an oath (53:17) and they were needed to fight in the south. A lesson here: Make righteous commitments, and do your share!

Alma 53:3–7 — Ancient Fortified Sites in the Americas

Although not all people consider central America as the site of these Book of Mormon events, it is interesting to note that a civilization existed there with fortifications strongly similar to those described in the Book of Mormon, and which date to the right time period. Twenty-five years ago, John L. Sorenson's book, *Images of Ancient America* (pp. 128, 132), broke new ground by showing fortified sites discovered by archeologists from this era, beginning about 600 B.C. To quote Professor Sorenson:

Not many years ago archaeologists were confident that very rarely were sites in pre-Spanish Mesoamerica fortified. The last twenty-five years have seen a huge body of data come to light to the contrary. We now know of over three hundred places that were fortified or sited in relation to protective terrain, and they date from no later than 1000 BC, up to the Spanish Conquest. Instead of being the rarity it was considered a few years back, military fortification now appears to have been a normal cultural pattern for Mesoamerica with many interesting variations.

	Definite Fortified Sites	Possible Fortified Sites
Before 600 B.C.	0	3
Late Pre-Classic: 600-50 B.C.	35	3
Proto Classic: 50 BC- 200	26	8
Early Classic: 200-400	14	8
400-650	11	13

Again, quoting Professor Sorenson:

The most basic form was begun by digging a dry moat. The earth from the excavation was thrown up to form an inner embankment. Atop that, a palisade of tree trunks was erected. The combined moat and bank provided defenders a downward sloping field of fire for their weapons that gave them substantial advantage over attackers.

The Book of Mormon describes some of the same forms of fortifications. In the simplest type, the Nephites “cast up dirt around about to shield them” (Alma 49:2; see 49:4). “The highness of the bank which had been thrown up, and the depth of the ditch which had been dug round about” prevented the Lamanite enemy from climbing over or digging away the ridge without being exposed to deadly fire from above (Alma 49: 18; 49:22). A refined form had “works of timbers built up to the height of a man” (Alma 50:2) atop the earthen ridge. Protected towers were erected overlooking those palisades from which defenders could gain even more height to rain down weapons against attackers (see Alma 50:3–5). The original city of Nephi had a stone wall around it, apparently modeled upon the wall at Jerusalem in Israel (Nephi, the city’s founder, had firsthand knowledge of Jerusalem; see Mosiah 22:6), and the Nephite armies also constructed small stone-walled redoubts to protect garrisons (see Alma 48:8) (Sorenson, 132).

Sorenson's bold presentations of this evidence challenged the received opinions that the inhabitants of the Western hemisphere were peaceful and largely rural peoples. But especially with the new breath-taking LiDAR discoveries, reported especially in 2019 by Stephen Houston, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nxh3MjL9Y6Q>), and by the National Geographic (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2019/03/lasers-reveal-maya-war-ruins/>), all of those previous views are now being totally revised.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[What Was the Nature of Nephite Fortifications?](#) (Alma 50:6)," *KnoWhy* 158 (August 4, 2016).

Sorenson, John L., *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*; (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 128–132.

Alma 53:10–22 — The Stripling Warriors Volunteer to Serve

The 2,000 stripling Ammonite warriors wanted Helaman to be their commander and he agreed. The young men volunteered to fight in place of their fathers who had taken an oath "that they never would shed blood more" (Alma 53:11). As previously mentioned, oaths were powerful forces, and Helaman encouraged these older Ammonites to keep their solemn vows: "They were overpowered by the persuasions of Helaman and his brethren" (v. 14). Fortunately, they had 2,000 sons (and 60 more arrived later) who had been too young at that time to have taken that oath back in the land of Nephi. Now they were willing to help in the battles to save their lands and offered to do what their fathers could not do (v. 16). The young men entered into their own covenant, pledging

to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, yea, to protect the land unto the laying down of their lives; yea, even they covenanted that they never would give up their liberty, but they would fight in all cases to protect the Nephites and themselves from bondage to protect the land to the laying down of their lives (v. 17).

They were only one generation away from those in their fathers' generation who laid down their lives rather than break their covenants. These were covenant-keeping people. The many afflictions and tribulations of the most recent war had moved them with compassion. It is interesting to note that these Ammonite youth now called themselves *Nephites* (v. 16)—probably at the time of the covenant-making.

The young people needed a leader, and they wanted Helaman to fill that role. Helaman was the High Priest, the leader of the Church; they knew they could trust him.

Verse 20 tells us that they were exceedingly valiant for courage, for strength, and for activity. They were true at all times, men of truth and soberness, taught to keep the commandments of God in their youth. In fact, they were, “true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted,” reminding us of the Scout Law: “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful...” How does being trustworthy develop strong relationships and build confidence within the people around us? Love cannot exist where there is no trust. I remember well the Director of the BYU Honors Program once saying to me, “Remember, it is better to be trusted than to be loved.” I wondered about that arresting idea at first, but then realized that the desire to be loved is kind of a selfish wish, whereas the desire to be trusted is an unselfish virtue of seeking to be a dependable servant to others.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[How Old Were the Stripling Warriors? \(Alma 53:20\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 161, (August 9, 2016). “Their notable youth also amplifies the greatness of their courage. In the face of an older, larger, more menacing army of blood-thirsty Lamanites, these striplings “did not fear death” (Alma 56:47). No wonder Helaman remarked, ‘Never had I seen so great courage, nay, not amongst all the Nephites’ (v. 45).”

John A. Tvedtnes, “[What Were the Ages of Helaman’s Stripling Warriors?](#)” *Ensign* (September 1992), 28.

John W. Welch, “[Law and War in the Book of Mormon](#),” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 65. “In ancient Israel, ‘twenty appears to have been the age at which Israelite males became obligated to serve in the military’ (see, e.g., Numbers 1:3).”

Alma 52–55 — Mormon’s Vocabulary Comes through in these Chapters

In these war chapters, careful readers will spot a number of interesting words and phrases that one does not encounter elsewhere in the Book of Mormon. These bold and colorful expressions may reflect the exigencies and experiences of war. They may reflect parts of Mormon’s vocabulary and personality, which come through more directly here than in other parts of his writing. This list is just a few of these new wordings that jumped out at me. Others may occur to you. Ask yourself: In what context do they appear? What do they say to me personally today? Can I relate to these situations in light of some past experience in my own life? What lessons can I extract from the way Mormon has crafted the narratives in these chapters?

- “they were affrighted” (Alma 52:2; also 62:24, only these 2 times in the Book of Mormon. Ancient war, with its hand-to-hand combat and face-to-face encounters, was a theater of fear.)

- “power to harass them on every side” (52:10; the word harass appears only 4x in the Book of Mormon, all of them in this section; 51:32, 52:9, 52:13, 52:13)
- “as much as was in his power” (52:10; careful commanders are constantly assessing their strengths and weaknesses, the limits of their power)
- “to wait for the coming of Moroni” (52:17; this phrase reappears in 58:3, 58:4, 58:7, 60:30, infrequent in this sense in the Book of Mormon, but the anxieties and uncertainties of soldiers needing to wait are intense, and unforgettable; we too must learn to wait and not jump too soon)
- “held a council of war” (52:19, only here and in Alma 24:5 and Mosiah 12:17; these councils must have been high-level, high-stakes meetings; we hold ward councils, which also are high-stakes meetings, but in another sense)
- “that he might decoy the Lamanites out” (“to decoy,” used here as a verb, see 52:21 and 58:1, the only 2 times this language is found in Book of Mormon; the use of stratagems and ploys are always high-risk experiments that hope for good luck and good fortune)
- “having an unconquerable spirit” (52:33, “unconquerable spirit” also appears in 3 Ne 3:4, the only other time in the Book of Mormon; obviously the way that a commander such as Mormon would describe the quality of courage in a strong man of war)
- “conquer” appears only six times in Book of Mormon, all of them in writings composed by Mormon (Alma 44:8; 56:17; 58:12; 61:8; Moroni 9:2, 6)
- “being much confused” (only in 52:28, 56:51; reflects awareness of the actual chaos and tumult of battle; the word “confusion” only in 52:28, 52:37; and note Isaiah 8:5; 2 Ne 19:5, in particular where it is the “battle of the warrior” that “is with confused noise”)
- “they rejoiced in each other’s safety” (53:2; safety appears dominantly in 48:12, 49:27, 53:2, 62:10, 3 Ne 2:12, in these military contexts, and is no small matter in a military setting, but also something that should be rejoiced over in ordinary daily life as well)
- “they were beloved by each other, and also beloved by all the people of Nephi” (53:2, used prominently here, as Mormon knows the power of deep gratitude for those who render services at great expense)
- “they were exceedingly valiant for courage, strength and activity” (the word valiant appears only in 53:20, 56:13, and in Isaiah 10:13; 2 Nephi 20:13 as a high term of honor and praise)
- “they were true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted” (the word “entrusted” appears only in the sense of military duty, in 53:20, but otherwise when

- talking about being entrusted with records or ministry, Alma 37:1, 14, 39:4; Mormon 6:6; being trusted is the first order of importance in the Marines, *semper fideles*)
- “they were men of truth and soberness” (53:21; “truth and soberness” are words that come from Benjamin in Mosiah 4:15, otherwise used only here and by Alma in 42:31)
 - “they were taught to keep the commandments of God and to walk uprightly before him” (“walk uprightly” is found here in Alma 53:21 and 5 other times in the Book of Mormon, 1 Ne 16:3; Mosiah 18:29; Alma 1:1; 45:24; 63:2; it being a prominent virtue mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, see Psalms 15:2; 84:11; Proverbs 2:7; 10:9; 15:21; 28:18, Isaiah 33:15; Micah 2:7, inviting people today to consider what this word is trying to tell us)
 - “I am in my anger” (54:13; see Deuteronomy 31:17; also Mosiah 12:1; 20:15)
 - “I will avenge his blood upon you” (Alma 54:16; “avenge themselves of the blood” Mormon 3:9; in Ether 14:24 we find that this was part of the forbidden Jaredite oaths)
 - “we will wage a war which shall be eternal” (the term “wage war” is found in the Book of Mormon only in Alma 54:5, 20, 24; 55:1; and 57:7, an expression one would expect from Mormon)
 - “it was not a just cause that had caused him to wage a war” (55:1, reminding us that one must be careful to wage war only on just grounds)
 - “he did not delight in murder or bloodshed, but he delighted in the saving of his people” (55:19, in this description Mormon is no doubt reflecting his own deepest personal desires as well as his abhorrence of murder and bloodshed)
 - “if their wine would poison a Lamanite it would also poison a Nephite” (55:3, 32, perhaps reminding us of our own limitations, we are not invulnerable; poison was mentioned in Alma 47:18 because it had been used to kill King Lehonti, and in Ether 9:31 it appears as a Jaredite tactic, but the use of poison would have been considered by Mormon well beyond the scope of justifiable rules of military engagement)

Alma 54

In this chapter, Mormon tells how, amidst insults and curses, negotiations broke down between Moroni and Ammoron in their negotiations over the exchange of captives and ultimate demands (54:1–55:3). In the heat of such strong feelings and rudeness, negotiations will never succeed. But at least they tried to negotiate!

Alma 54:1–11 — Negotiation for Prisoner-Exchange

Moroni and his army had not taken women and children as prisoners (nor would it have been possible them to do so, seeing that the invading Lamanite armies were surely mostly composed of men); but Ammoron and his troops had. Ammoron now wanted to use them as bargaining chips (keeping them would have been costly and burdensome) and accordingly had requested a trade of prisoners, presumably offering the women and children for captured soldiers (obviously he would have wanted more men to fight in his ranks and fewer Nephite prisoners to feed). Moroni, obviously liked that idea, for the same military reason. However, Moroni was very strategic in his answer. He called Ammoron to repentance for waging the war, warning him of the consequences of his evil designs and effectively for his mistreatment of women and children. Moroni's terms for the exchange required Ammoron to withdraw his purposes, go back to the Land of Nephi in the south and stop the war (v. 10). He also required the prisoner exchange to consist of one man and his wife and children from the Lamanites for every man to be released by the Nephites (v. 11). Capturing women and children was allowed under Israelite law, but they had to be treated humanely and taken in as family members (Deuteronomy 21:10–14). The Lamanites were breaking those laws.

Alma 54:11–13 — “Behold, I Am in My Anger”

This chief captain Moroni became angry: “Behold, I am in my anger, and also my people; ye have sought to murder us, and we have only sought to defend ourselves” (Alma 54:13). Whether it was anger in the sense we use it today, or whether it was great passion for what he believed and knew was right is debatable, but he did call Ammoron “a child of Hell,” and his tone was one that suggests this was real anger. Maybe we can suppose it was righteous anger. In Alma 59:13, we later read that Moroni was again angry, this time with the central government. The letter he sent to Pahoran was even more excoriating than the one he sent to Ammoron here. His anger would have been justified, but maybe he should have held his tongue. Although such insults may appear to project a strong negotiating posture, being insulting is usually not a good way to work out a peaceful settlement.

Alma 54:20–23 — Ammoron and Amalickiah Were Zoramites

Recall that Amalickiah, the king of the Lamanites, by treachery had been killed in his sleep by Teancum on New Year's Eve. Ammoron, his brother, had taken over as the king and commander. In this verse, which is part of Ammoron's response to Moroni, we learn that Amalickiah and Ammoron were direct descendants of Zoram: They were Zoramites. Ammoron ends his letter with the normal ending, a statement of personal identification.

As a clarification of what Ammoron saw as his purpose, and as an indicator of his bitterness, Ammoron wrote as his identity, “I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram,”

then added, “whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem.” In verse 17, in the earlier part of his letter, he had claimed: “For behold, your fathers did wrong their brethren, insomuch that they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them.” He claimed, then, that these wars were fought to avenge those wrongs. (See above in Alma 46:1–4 — *Who Was Amalickiah?*).

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Was Ammoron Determined to Avenge the Blood of His Brother?](#)” (Alma 54:16), *KnoWhy* 162 (August 10, 2016). “The dynamics fueling Ammoron’s worldview and objectives are complex. At a most basic level, this is a rather obvious example of tribalism and ethnic tension. While political aspirations were undoubtedly tied up in Ammoron’s declaration, it is important to note that he appealed to a deeply rooted tribal or clan rivalry as the motivation for his political goals. In perpetuating this tribal antagonism, Ammoron promoted an ideology fundamentally at odds with the egalitarian and anti-tribal ideals of Nephite prophets (cf. 2 Nephi 26:33; Mosiah 4:19; 4 Nephi 1:2, 17)”.

Ze’ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times* (Provo, UT and Winona Lake, IN: BYU Press and Eisenbrauns, 2001), 72. Regarding revenge by the tribal redeemer of blood, Professor Falk has written: “Cases of murder, as mentioned above, were not originally considered to be of public concern but only of consequence to the relatives of the victim. Besides the obligation placed upon the redeemer of the blood, there also existed the religious idea of pollution, which in turn was connected with the institution of the asylum and the distinction between intentional and unintentional acts [*mens rea*] (Exodus 21:12–14; Numbers 35; Deuteronomy 19:1–13). Biblical law, in fact, represents the transition from tribal revenge to judicial procedure, the latter being necessary once *mens rea* was recognized as a prerequisite to crime.” While all of that is very true under normal circumstances, in the case of Teancum, Amalickiah and Ammoron, not only did this occur in wartime, but Amalickiah himself had committed treachery and murder.

Alma 55:4–26 — The Nephites Rescued the Prisoners

In this chapter Mormon tells at length the following episode: Using both a stratagem and a former Lamanite, a man named Laman (one of the servants falsely accused of killing the Lamanite king), the Nephite prisoners in the city of Gid are liberated (55:4–26).

Moroni would not accept Ammoron’s terms—“Behold, I will not exchange prisoners with Ammoron save he will withdraw his purpose”—because he did not want to give Ammoron any more power than he already had. Nor would he take the “new terms” that Ammoron was suggesting, which was to surrender to the Lamanites and allow them to exercise what they regarded as their right of government. Ammoron accepted the prisoner

exchange deal that was clearly in his best interest, but Moroni was not willing to reciprocate unless Ammoron withdrew his purposes, which Moroni considered fraudulent (see v. 1).

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "Why Did Moroni Change His Mind about Exchanging Prisoners with Ammoron? (Alma 55:2)," *KnoWhy* 163 (August 11, 2016).

Alma 56

In these chapters, Mormon wants us as his readers to ponder and appreciate the greatest moments in the life of Helaman, the son of Alma. As you think about what you know about Helaman and as you read Alma 55–57, think of the following:

1. What would you count as the greatest moments in Helaman's life? What do you find most impressive about his character and how he rose to meet truly amazing challenges?
2. What prepared Helaman to righteously and successfully meet those challenging opportunities and responsibilities?
3. In what ways did Helaman carry forward the teachings and objectives of his father Alma the Younger and also his grandfather Alma the Elder?
4. In what ways does the life of Helaman inspire you? What lessons for life do you learn from him? How do his great moments encourage you personally and spiritually?

Alma 56:1–14 — What Were the Nephites Up Against?

The Lamanites from the Land of Nephi had invaded from the South and captured Manti and Zeezrom. Zeezrom is a fairly new, probably small, city that is never mentioned again. Then they took Cumeni, then Antiparah. They were threatening the city of Judea, which was closer to Zarahemla.

Alma 56:16 — Helaman Marched with His "Sons"

Helaman reported the activities of the young Ammonites in his letter to Moroni. He had marched at the head of his "sons" to the city of Judea where Antipus, who had been appointed the leader, and the citizens were fighting by day and reinforcing the city by night. They knew that Judea was next to be attacked. The people of Judea were "depressed in body as well as in spirit" there, but they took "great hopes and much joy" (v. 17) when Helaman arrived.

This is a rare occurrence of the term “depressed.” The people had suffered many afflictions, and they sensed the inevitability of this next city to be taken. They toiled even by night. Moroni had left the west coast to get up to Bountiful, so there was not much of an army left there to meet the Lamanites.

Alma 56:18–57 — Helaman’s Sons Fight and Are Not Killed

When Ammoron’s army saw the arrival of the new battalion of young men, they retreated and delayed their attack on Judea, allowing time for the Nephites to work on reinforcement. “And thus were we favored of the Lord; for had they come upon us in this our weakness they might have perhaps destroyed our little army; but thus were we preserved” (v. 19).

Helaman and his young warriors moved out as bait appearing to go to a neighboring city (v. 30); the Lamanites pursued them; Antipus, the Nephite commander, and his army chased the Lamanite army. Eventually Helaman turned back, not knowing what had happened to Antipus, and arrived at the battle just in time with his 2,000 brave warriors to allow the weak and worn out Nephites to regroup and surround and conquer the Lamanites. Although Antipus had been killed, not one of Helaman’s sons had fallen. The city was spared on the third day of the seventh month (v.42). The seventh month of the year was Passover month. This event occurred on the third day of the seventh month about 66 B.C., and Passover was celebrated on the fourteenth [in the evening] and fifteenth days. As it were, the destroying angel passed over these young soldiers on this occasion. They had great courage (v. 45), did not fear death, and fought for the liberty of their fathers having been taught by their mothers “that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them” (v. 47).

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, [How Realistic are Nephite Battle Strategies? \(Alma 56:30\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 164 (August 12, 2016). “These seemingly sudden, illogical actions ... speak volumes about the authenticity of the text and the military expertise of the author, as when all of the clues provided in the text are examined in depth, the logic becomes apparent” (David E. Spencer, *Captain Moroni’s Command: Dynamics of Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2015)).

Alma 57

Alma 57:1–4 — Ammoron Desired a Prisoner Exchange of Helaman

Ammoron wrote to Helaman asking to exchange Lamanite prisoners for the city of Antiparah. Note that the date Helaman gives was the end of the “twenty-eighth year of the judges.” Surprisingly, this request for a prisoner exchange occurred somewhat before the famous prisoner-exchange-negotiations between Moroni and Ammoron, which was at the beginning of the twenty-ninth year of the judges. Recall that Helaman was writing a letter to Moroni about what had previously happened, a history. Another brief flashback.

Ammoron was fighting the city of Mulek, and was desperate for more soldiers. Getting back his prisoners would have greatly enhanced his military strength. Here he wanted to exchange them for a city. Helaman refused to trade prisoners for the city, and the Lamanites voluntarily abandoned Antiparah to Helaman without bloodshed. About a year later, Ammoron wanted to exchange prisoners, this time with Moroni, who refused, and promptly rescued the prisoners.

Alma 57:6 — Helman’s Army Receives Reinforcements

At the same time that Ammoron was asking Moroni for a prisoner exchange, in the commencement of the twenty and ninth year (Alma 54:1 and Alma 57:6), Helaman received a supply of provisions, and additional soldiers. They received a unit of 6,000 men from Zarahemla, and sixty more young men of the Ammonites. His statement was, “we were strong, yea, and we had also plenty of provisions.” An army marches on its stomach. This saying, which attests to the importance of forces being well-provisioned, has been attributed to both Frederick the Great and to Napoleon, who also said, ‘C’est la soupe qui fait le soldat.’

Alma 57:7–12 — Why Did the Lamanites Give Up So Easily?

Helaman, being alert to the importance of provisions, surrounded the city of Cumeni “a little before the Lamanites there were to receive a supply of provisions” (v. 8). Helaman’s band picked off the Lamanite supply trains going into the city, and took them and their prisoners of war far away to Judea. Cumeni was retaken after the Lamanites lost all hope of receiving supplies and left without conflict.

Alma 57:13–17, 28–36 — Unruly Lamanite Prisoners

Helaman recounted that there were so many Lamanite prisoners that this band of Nephites were unable to keep them under control. Helaman said, “our prisoners were so numerous that, notwithstanding the enormity of our numbers, we were obliged to employ

all our force to keep them, or to put them to death” (Alma 57:13). The prisoners would burst into rebellion, and large numbers of them—about 2,000—ended up being put to death in the fights. Helaman expressed that this was after they had surrendered themselves as prisoners of war; he was apparently uncomfortable with the situation. Hebrew law forbade the execution of prisoners. Helaman considered the circumstances as critical.

In addition to the unruliness of the prisoners, there were barely enough provisions for the army, but even so, executing prisoners was not his first choice. “It became a very serious matter to determine concerning these prisoners of war” (v. 16). They decided to transport them to Zarahemla. Part of the army were given charge over the prisoners to march them from the area of Cumeni to Zarahemla. Gid, the leader of the party, returned the next day, fought to help liberate Cumeni, then explained that the prisoners had been stirred up into rebellion at news that the Lamanites had an army marching toward Cumeni. Many prisoners had died, and many had escaped.

Alma 57:18–27 — Gid’s Army Helps Save Cumeni

The Lamanites did indeed march forth and attack Cumeni, seeing that Gid and many soldiers had left for Zarahemla. But Gid returned just in time to help Helaman’s band win the day. Heavy losses were suffered, but not by the stripling warriors.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did the Stripling Warriors Perform Their Duties ‘With Exactness’? \(Alma 57:21\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 165, (August 15, 2016).

Alma 58

Alma 58:10–11, 37 — Divine Assurance

Helaman and his troops, along with those fighting with them were trying to find a way to retake Manti from the Lamanites. They were, however, without provisions, short on manpower, and unsure of what tactics to use. Supplies were apparently not coming; the wait was “many months,” and the situation was dire. They went to the best source for help. “Therefore we did pour out our souls in prayer to God, that he would strengthen us and deliver us out of the hands of our enemies” (v. 10). Before the provisions and additional troops arrived, they were strengthened by the Lord, who, they said, “Did visit us with assurances that he would deliver us; yea, insomuch that he did speak peace to our souls.”

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[How Did Helaman's Army Maintain Faith While Being Cut Off from Provisions? \(Alma 58:37\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 167 (August 17, 2016). "The logistics of maintaining a force in the field in Mesoamerica, either defensively or on the attack, was a serious challenge under ancient conditions. ... Typically, a supply of food was carried by soldiers on their backs from their home communities, ... [and then] supplies continually brought from the home base by a transport column were required or desirable" (John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 419).

Alma 58:13–38 — Manti Is Retaken

The retaking of Manti was accomplished without bloodshed after a long siege with few provisions: The Nephites had been unable to use the previously successful decoy tactics, and attacking them in their fort was impractical. Finally, provisions arrived after a very long wait, accompanied by 2,000 men to help. With this assistance, Helaman's striplings prepared to attack Manti. The troops of Gid and Teomner hid to cover the right and left flanks in the wilderness, while Helaman remained at the camp. The Lamanites, who had already determined that the Nephites had less manpower, brought out the whole army from Manti and marched toward them. Whereupon Helaman and his young warriors retreated rapidly into the wilderness area, passing through the hidden troops of Gid and Teomner, and drawing the Lamanites after them. Gid and Teomner slipped in to retake Manti; "Now this was done because the Lamanites did suffer their whole army, save a few guards only, to be led away into the wilderness" (v. 22). By marching at night, Helaman's army got back to Manti before the Lamanites returned. The Lamanites fled into the wilderness and "out of all this quarter of the land."

In the end of this campaign, here are a few questions to discuss or think about:

1. What have you found that helps you to combat depression? What gives you hope?
2. How can we be like the parents of the striplings and increase the faith of our youth?
3. What events in your recent life can you "justly ascribe to the miraculous power of God" (Alma 57:26)?
4. What might you do to better "obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness" (Alma 57:21, another unique word here)?
5. What other lessons of life can you extract from the stories in each of these episodes?

Alma 59

Alma 59:1 — Moroni Was Glad to Receive Helaman’s Epistle

Moroni received and read the letter at the beginning of the thirtieth reign of the judges. He was very happy to receive this letter from Helaman “because of the welfare, yea, the exceeding success which Helaman had” He had not, until the letter came, known much about what had actually been going on.

The most common writing material used in Mesoamerica and widely throughout the western hemisphere was fig bark or a tree bark that they would cut, peel off, smooth out and dry. It made quite a good writing surface. It was smooth and when it dried, it was like a good parchment, and was quite durable. They would stitch pieces together and stack them to make accordion folds, so it was all in one piece. The runner was not carrying a big flier. The Spaniards thought that these documents were all pagan, so they burned thousands and thousands of them, which is a real catastrophe. They proudly reported that they were eradicating all the pagan beliefs.

Further Reading

John L. Sorenson, “[The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record](#),” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997), 391–521.

Alma 59:3–13 — Moroni Becomes Angry at the Government

Moroni needed as much help as he could get, but his first concern was about the immediate need of Helaman and the 2,000-plus stripling warriors. They had taken all that part of the land back from the Lamanites, but did not have very much manpower to maintain it.

First, Moroni asked for help from Pahoran to strengthen Helaman and the troops that were sustaining that part of the land. However, then Moroni discovered that Helaman had done so well in defending the city of Manti, that all those Lamanite soldiers had fled from Manti to Nephihah, an area that Moroni was trying to defend. Now Moroni had double trouble. He tried to hold on, but ultimately lost the city of Nephihah. This loss caused him to worry about the wickedness of his people, and he feared that they may lose their lands to the Lamanites.

And famously, “And it came to pass that Moroni was angry with the government, because of their indifference concerning the freedom of their country” (v. 13).

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "Why Was Moroni's Correspondence with Pahoran Significant? (Alma 59:3)," *KnoWhy* 168 (August 18, 2016). "The correspondence between Moroni and Pahoran also provides important glimpses into the personalities of these men. Although a man of great faith, it is clear that Moroni was also susceptible to anger, frustration, doubt, and misplaced outrage at those whom he assumed had slighted him. At the same time Pahoran is revealed in his letter to be a man of patience in the face of being wrongfully accused."

Alma 60–61

Alma 60:1–36 — Moroni Writes to Pahoran

What adjectives would you use to describe Captain Moroni's letter? His tone? His attitude?

- He is angry. This is about the fourth time that we read that Moroni was angry. This is usually not considered a great virtue.
- Moroni was discouraged with the people that he had tried so hard to teach.
- This war had been going on now for about a dozen years, so he was likely worn down and weary.
- He was harsh, but he thought he was justified. I think he was making some big assumptions and being judgmental against the government. He had no idea what had really been going on at the capital.
- Perhaps he was impulsive. He certainly jumped to conclusions.
- Discouraged and desperate. They had no supplies, no reinforcements, and many had fallen by the sword. I think he really cared about the people.

It may be easy for us to assume that Moroni was quite a hothead. However, Teancum killed Amalickiah with extraordinary daring, and maybe even foolhardiness—as we shall see when he tries to do it a second time. In this war, their backs were against the wall, and desperation sometimes requires more than just kind efforts to persuade. He did get Pahoran's attention.

Moreover, he may have worried that a less pointed or bold correspondence would result in inaction by whoever was responsible for the deprivation of the Nephite armies. After all, he had already written once and received no answer. Pahoran revealed in his reply that he was up to his neck in his own problems. Perhaps the letter was delivered to Zarahemla after Pahoran had left. It may have not been delivered—on time anyway.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, [“Why Did Moroni Refer to Vessel Impurity in Condemning the Central Government? \(Alma 60:23\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 169 (August 19, 2016).

Alma 60:1 — Who Was Directing the War in Zarahemla?

Just before the beginning of the book of Alma, all governmental power was held by one man—the king. He was the supreme ruler of the whole country, of everything. However, Alma divided up the powers. He kept for himself the responsibility of high priest and the head of the church, but he eventually gave to someone else the chief judgeship, and he also assigned to someone else the military, so they had a division of power. We do not know exactly how they tried to balance power, but we (in the United States) have a balance and separation of powers within our federal and state systems. Alma probably realized that for a democracy to work, for the voice of the people to really have a chance of surviving, all the power could not be concentrated in the hands of one person. Pahoran, as chief judge, then, probably did not have control over the military, over Moroni.

Without good people, a democracy is never going to work. This type of government causes a very real struggle for the voice of the people. Maybe that is one of the big themes of the whole Book of Alma—trying to make this experiment work.

We are so comfortable with the idea of democracy, the American Revolution, and how successful our efforts in this regard have been, that we forget what an enormous and risky undertaking it was. No one had ever tried to do something like what America did, and it was not easy to make it work.

We know that Pahoran was rather reluctant to take office, and was drafted into his position. When Nephiah stepped down, Pahoran did not even want to take the records, and he was not eager to get into this, but who would have been? They were in a war-torn situation. Pahoran was certainly not like Captain Moroni who was willing to charge right into things.

Alma 60:27–29 — Moroni’s Use of Warnings in His Epistle

Moroni offered some pretty strong warnings. He essentially told Pahoran that he would come to the city and stir up insurrections among the people if they desired freedom. He threatened to come in and clean house if the government languished in their luxury. That was more than a warning, it was a threat.

Also characteristic was his use of warnings of divine retribution: “Except ye do bestir yourselves in the defence of your country and your little ones, the sword of justice doth hang over you; yea, and it shall fall upon you and visit you even to your utter destruction” (v. 29).

There are a lot of good adjectives to use here. I think too often when we talk about this letter, people only think of how angry he was and how impetuous he appeared to be, jumping to a conclusion when he did not really know all the facts. We need to be careful about putting ourselves in that situation. However, chief captain Moroni had a great reputation and he had certainly paid a very heavy price for everything that he had done. He deserved, in a way, to be able to speak his mind openly.

He was certainly an honest man. He was not mincing words or hiding behind any kind of protocol, and maybe we can give him the benefit of the doubt for his circumstances.

In the end, Pahorah wrote back to Moroni (61:1–21). Pahoran himself had fled to the city of Gideon when Pachus and his deserters had taken over Zarahemla.

Alma 62–63

Holding no grudges, Moroni rushed to the aid of Pahorah in Gideon. Pachus was killed, and the kingmen were tried. Moroni sends aid to Helaman, Lehi, and Teancum. Willing Lamanite captives were then settled in the land of Jershon (62:17, 27). They produced and supplied provisions to the army.

Nephihah was recaptured without any losses by use of ropes and ladders at night (62:23). Moroni drove the Lamanite army from the land of Lehi to the land of Moroni, where they camped (62:30–32). At night, Teancum crept into the enemy camp and killed Ammoron, and Teancum himself was also killed (62:35–37), but the war ended (62:38–39). As you reflect on this long campaign, you might wonder what you have learned from this and done in building your character to be sure that your heart has been softened and not hardened by trials and difficulties in your life (62:41). This seems to be something that Mormon wants his readers to think about. See Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Was Teancum Captured and Killed?](#) (Alma 62:36)," *KnoWhy* 170 (August 22, 2016).

Moroni retired and died only two years later (62:43; 63:3). Was his death premature? Was it the result of war injuries, disease, or other stresses of seven years of high-tension conflicts and challenges?

In addition, Helaman regulated the church and but then also died, only one year later (62:45–52).

Helaman's brother Shiblon took charge of the plates, but he also died only three years later (63:1, 10).

Helaman's son Helaman, still quite young, was at least a little older and could take charge of the plates (63:11).

Pahoran returned to the judgment seat but he too will die only four years later (62:44; Helaman 1:1).

Obviously, all of these deaths, along with the numerous casualties sustained during the past years of warfare, must have taken a high toll, leaving a power vacuum and weakening the central Nephite governmental and depth of church leadership.

Hagoth and others, including Helaman's youngest brother Corianton, began moving to the land northward or sailing away (63:5, 9). They were never heard from again, as far as we are told. See Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Did Mormon Mention Hagoth? \(Alma 63:8\)](#)," *Knowhy* 171 (August 23, 2016).

The Book of Alma in Retrospect

As you think back over the entire book of Alma, which threads do you find most significant and the most meaningful to you? How have those threads laced the 63 chapters of Alma together as a unified text?

And which of its religious themes and spiritual lessons do you find the most interesting, memorable, and compelling? For example, how and when does the pride cycle circulate through the book of Alma? See Book of Mormon Central, "[How Does Chiasmus Teach Us to Reverse the Pride Cycle? \(Alma 62:48\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 468 (September 18, 2018).

As you think ahead to the end of the Book of Mormon, how has Mormon laid the groundwork to prepare us as readers to understand what will ultimately happen in the finale of the Book of Mormon by including all these episodes in such detail and at such great length in the book of Alma?