Lesson 17 - A Strange Order of Battle

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Abstract: This lesson is on an unusual theme. The Book of Mormon story of Moroni's "Title of Liberty" gives valuable insight into certain practices and traditions of the Nephites which they took as a matter of course but which are totally unfamiliar not only to the modern world but to the world of Biblical scholarship as well. Since it is being better recognized every day that the Bible is only a sampling (and a carefully edited one) of but one side of ancient Jewish life, the Book of Mormon must almost unavoidably break away from the familiar things from time to time, and show us facets of Old World life untouched by the Bible. The "Title of Liberty" story is a good example of such a welcome departure from beaten paths, being concerned with certain old Hebrew traditions which were perfectly familiar to the Nephites but are nowhere to be found either in the Bible or in the apocryphal writings. These traditions, strange as they are, can now be checked by new and unfamiliar sources turned up in the Old World, and shown to be perfectly authentic.

Lesson 17

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A New Discovery: It has always been known, if only from the pages of Varro and Livy, that the ancients had a ritual concept of war. The closely related functions of hunting and warfare were never undertaken without certain observations of a ritual or cultic nature, which are everywhere hinted at in ancient literature but nowhere fully expounded. It was the discovery among the Dead Sea Scrolls of a long and beautifully preserved text, now designated as the *Milhamah* ("Battle") Scroll, that for the first time cast a flood of light on the nature of sacred warfare among the Jews. The same text serves to illustrate and explain most remarkably a strange and wonderful episode in the Book of Mormon, which should serve as a reminder that the ways of the ancients are not our ways, and that to produce the Book of Mormon would have required far more than luck and learning of any man.

Moroni rouses the People: The episode to which we refer is the story of the Title of Liberty. One of those

strong and ambitious men around whom the usual resist-
ance to the Church crystalized in the first century B.C.
was Amalickiah, "... a man of cunning device and a man
of many flattering words ..." (Alma 46:10), whose am-
bition was to be king, and whose chief support came from
"... the lower judges of the land, and they were seeking
for power...." (Alma 46:4-5.) He made a deal with the
judges and began openly to rally his forces, whereupon
"... Moroni, who was the chief commander of the armies
of the Nephites, ..." and who had shortly before won a
magnificent victory over the traditional enemy, "... was
angry with Amalickiah." (Alma 46:11.)

And it came to pass that he rent his coat; and he took a piece
thereof, and wrote upon it—IN MEMORY OF OUR GOD,
OUR RELIGION, AND FREEDOM, AND OUR PEACE,
OUR WIVES, AND OUR CHILDREN—and he fastened it
upon the end of a pole. (Alma 46:12.)

Then he dressed himself in his full armor,

and he took the pole, which had on the end thereof his rent coat,
(and he called it the title of liberty) and he bowed himself to the
earth, and he prayed mightily unto his God for the blessings of
liberty to rest upon his brethren ... (Alma 46:13.)

And it came to pass that when he had poured out his soul to
God, he named all the land which was south of the land Desola-
tion, yea ... all the land ... A chosen land, and the land of
liberty. (Alma 46:17.)

And he said: Surely God shall not suffer that we, who are
despised because we take upon us the name of Christ, shall be
trodden down and destroyed, until we bring it upon us by our
own transgression. (Alma 46:18.)

Then Moroni "... went forth among the people,
waving the rent part of his garment, that all might see
the writing which he had written upon the rent part,
..." and calling upon "... whosoever will maintain this
title upon the land, ..." to "... come forth in the strength
of the Lord, and enter into a covenant, that they will
maintain their rights, and their religion, that the Lord
God may bless them." (Alma 46:19-20.) All who were
willing to join came together dressed for war, "... rend-
ing their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they

would not forsake the Lord their God; or, in other words, if they should transgress . . . and be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ, the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments." (Alma 46:21.) Then at the mustering place apparently ". . . they cast their garments at the feet of Moroni; . . ." witnessing to the chief that they asked God to ". . . cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression." (Alma 46:22.)

The Garment of Joseph: Moroni then reminded the multitude that they were actually a remnant of the seed of Jacob, and also ". . . a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces; . . ." and if they should do wickedly ". . . our garments shall be rent by our brethren, and we be cast into prison, be sold, or be slain." (Alma 46:23.) Then Moroni told an apocryphal story of how Jacob

before his death . . . saw that a part of the remnant of the coat of Joseph was preserved and had not decayed. And he said —Even as this remnant of garment of my son hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved . . . while the remainder of the seed of Joseph shall perish, even as the remnant of his garment. (Alma 46:24.)

Moroni suggested that the lost remnant of the garment may actually represent the Nephites who had fallen away from the church. (Alma 46:27.)

To the modern and the western mind all this over-obvious dwelling on types and shadows seems a bit overdone, but not to the ancient or Oriental mind. The whole Arabic language is one long commentary on the deep-seated feeling, so foreign to us but so characteristic of people who speak synthetic languages, that if things are *alike* they are the *same*. In the Israelite way of thinking, writes Pedersen, "the clothes follow and partake of the total character of the soul. . . . There may be garments, so penetrated by a definite physical substance, that they are indissolubly connected with its forms of manifestation. This holds good where special importance is at-

tached to the functions. Thus . . . the honour and glory of the priest is bound up with his garment (Sirach 50, 11). . . . The anxiety lest the holy garments should be defiled, appears from the careful ritual for the Day of Atonement, preserved in the Mishna."[1] It is interesting that the principal evidence here given comes from non-Biblical, that is, apocryphal sources, since the entire episode from the Book of Mormon has no parallel in the Bible and yet may be substantiated as genuine old Israelite lore from apocryphal texts.

When Moroni and his agents went around everywhere gathering recruits, all who would not join ". . . to stand against Amalickiah, and those who had dissented, . . ." they classed as Amalickiahites, (Alma 46:28.) Amalickiah tried to play the Lamanites against Moroni as his trump card, but Moroni beat him to it by making ". . . a covenant to keep the peace, . . ." while intercepting Amalickiah's forces before they could make contact with the Lamanites. (Alma 46:31.) Since Moroni had just won a miraculous victory over the Lamanites, who for a time had threatened the whole Nephite nation with extinction, it was nothing but the basest treason for Amalickiah, a Nephite, to go over to the Lamanites and try to revive the war. Moroni took strong but legitimate measures to put down the sedition:

And it came to pass that whomsoever of the Amalickiahites that would not enter into a covenant to support the cause of freedom, that they might maintain a free government, he caused to be put to death; and there were but few who denied the covenant of freedom. (Alma 46:35.)

One of the most remarkable aspects of the story is the manner in which Moroni sought to stir up patriotic fervor by appealing to ancient and traditional devices. He connected the whole business of the rent garment with the story of the tribal ancestors Jacob and Joseph, and suggested that ". . . those who have dissented from us . . ." were the very ". . . remnant of the seed of Joseph . . ." to which the dying Jacob prophetically referred. (Alma 46:27.) It was not merely a resemblance or a

type, but the very event foreseen by the patriarch of old. Plainly the whole background and explanation of Moroni's strange behavior is to be sought in the Old World and among traditions not preserved in the Bible.

The Battle Scroll: The *Milhama* ("Battle") is the title now given to the scroll that opens with that word, and which has heretofore been designated either as "The War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness," or "The Rule of Battle for the Sons of Light."[2] There has been a good deal of argument over whether the wonderful order of battle prescribed in the text actually represents an attempt at military organization, or whether it is purely a ritual or spiritual army that is described.[3] For our purposes it makes little difference, since we are concerned only with the fact that there was such a concept of holy war, whether ritual or actual. The arrangement of God's army and the conduct of warfare as described in this text is a highly idealized and impractical one, but is obviously of great antiquity, as is clear especially in the imagery of the hymn that comes near the end of the scroll.

An important part of this text is taken up with certain slogans and war cries which the army writes boldly upon its trumpets and banners, calling itself both the army of God and "the assembly of the congregation."

> When they are gathered together to the house of meeting they shall write 'The Testimonies of God for the Holy Council' . . . On the trumpets of the ranks of battle they shall write 'The Ranks of the Banners of God for the Vengeance of His Anger against all the Sons of Darkness,' 'The Powers of God for Scattering the Enemy and Putting to Flight Those Who Hate Righteousness' . . .[4]

This is the sort of slogan they march under. On the "trumpets of return" they describe themselves as "The Gathering of God," and on another devise designate the enemy as "The Faithless Slain."[5] They are the Church of God united for the extermination of all the Sons of Darkness, who are faithless betrayers. This is even clearer from the writings placed upon the banners of the various military units. Thus for the hundreds, "The

Hundred of God, a Hand of War against all Erring Flesh," for the fifties (see above, Lesson X) and tens, "The Camps of God," "The Congregation of God," "The Banners of God," "The Victory of God," "The Help of God," "The Deliverance of God," etc. etc., emphasizing as did Moroni's standard the program of deliverance from bondage and preservation of liberty. We are reminded of the great care the ancients took to establish the moral guilt of their enemies and thereby clear themselves of their blood by an inscription on a ritual dart: "Flashing of a Sword Consuming the Iniquitous Slain in the Judgment of God."[6] This dart was to be hurled ritually at the enemy before battle— three darts cast seven times. The Romans also before making war on a nation would throw three darts in its direction, dedicating it to destruction in the archaic rite of the *feciales*, the great antiquity of which establishes both the age and the genuineness of the Jewish practice.[7]

As to the army itself, the *Milhama* scroll specifies that they "shall all be volunteers for war (as were Moroni's host), blameless in spirit and flesh, and ready for the day of vengeance . . . for holy angels are together with their armies . . . And no indecent, evil thing shall be seen in the vicinity of any of your camps."[8]

Such ideal armies, consciously dramatizing themselves as the righteous host, are also met with in the Book of Mormon, notably in the case of Helaman and his two thousand sons. (Alma 53:17 ff.) The chief banners of the army described in the scroll are "the great ensign placed at the head of all the army," which bore the inscription: " 'Army of God' together with the name of 'Israel and Aaron' and the names of the twelve tribes of Israel," and the ensigns of the thousands which bore the title: "Wrath of God, full of anger, against Belial and all the people of his party, without any survivors." Throughout the many ensigns the same motifs predominate as in Moroni's program, namely the freedom of the host from all transgression and the dedication of all the opposition to extermination. Israel is the first and foremost name

occurring on the sacred banners, and in Moroni's exploit he is careful to trace the real origin of his banner and the custom he is following to Jacob himself, who is Israel, explaining the symbolism of all he is doing in terms of the actual teaching of Jacob.

The *Milhama* document is just as spiritual or "mystical" as the other scrolls, Dupont-Sommer has observed, but ". . . it is at the same time specifically military and ardently warlike, . . ."[9] which is exactly how Moroni wished to make his people. The priests and Levites ". . . have a role to play in the battle right in the midst of the combatants, . . ." actually directing each phase of the combat by means of blasts on sacred trumpets.[10] It is they also who like the Roman *feciales* (and like Moroni) formally dedicate the enemy to destruction. Before the battle the chief priest gives an address to the troops telling them not to fear since ". . . God goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to save you." Then he turns to the enemy and pronounces them the ". . . congregation of wickedness, the host of darkness, the troops of Belial, the seven nations of vanity, . . ." who are about to be overcome not by a savage army but by ". . . the poor whom thou hast redeemed." "Then the priest intones a warlike song, woven entirely of Biblical texts — truly a song of triumph of this mystical army, . . ." but a very savage and "Asiatic" one that bears all the marks of great antiquity.[11]

Moroni's Banner and Kawe's Banner: One interesting aspect of the Dead Sea Scrolls that many writers have commented on is the strong and undeniable affinity between certain important traditions and doctrines contained in them and the teachings of the ancient Iranians.[12] This connection hardly came as a surprise, since such a tie-up has often been noted in the apocryphal writings and many studies have pointed out the strongly "Iranian" nature of Jewish eschatology.[13] The Jews ranked Cyrus, the founder of the Persian nation, next to Solomon and David alone in glory and authority, and how well the Jews and Persians got to know each other is clear to

everyone from the Book of Esther. For the New Testament times we have the Lord hailed at his birth by the Magi. Though the apocalyptic side of the Book of Mormon naturally shares with the rest of Hebrew eschatology many of those things for which the scholars insist on detecting a possible Iranian background, we have in the Title of Liberty episode a clear and independent parallel, for Moroni's banner is just like the "Flag of Kawe" (*dirafsh-i-kawiyani*), the legendary founder of the Magi. In the beginning, runs the story, Iran was under the rule of the serpent, the oppressor, "the man of the Lie and king of madmen," Dahhak, who reigned a thousand years and forced all men to subscribe their names in the Book of the Dragon. To liberate the people there rose up in Isfahan a mighty man, a blacksmith named Kawe, who took the leather apron he wore at his work and placed it on the end of a pole; this became the symbol of liberation and remained for many centuries the national banner of the Persians as well as the sacred emblem of the Magi. Going about with his banner, Kawe called upon the people to rise in revolt and shake off the oppressor; to lead the people the hero Threataona was raised up in the mountains by a shepherd (like Cyrus), and he put Kawe in charge of raising and leading an army.[14] This Threatoana is a doublet of King Cyrus, the founder of the Persian nation and in Jewish lore the holiest of kings next to Solomon and David.

The parallel with the story of Moroni's banner is very striking, and it is certainly more than a mere coincidence. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide the link between the two, for along with the many clear Iranian affinities that have so impressed students of the doctrines and expressions found in the Scrolls, we have in the *Milhama* scroll revealed for the first time the actual practice and concern of the ancient Hebrews with regard to holy banners and the mustering of the holy army (cf. the Magi) of liberation.[15] Thus we find in the Old World a peculiar combination of things: 1) the garment as a banner, 2) the program of liberation from the wicked oppressor

(compare the treasonous Amalickiah with the usurper Dahhak, the "Man of the Lie"), 3) the peculiar custom of putting long sermonizing inscriptions on banners to rouse up and excite the people to a holy cause, 4) the proclamation of allegiance to God, religion, freedom, wives, children, etc. (Kawe, we are told, was only driven to revolt by the evil king's threat to his family), 5) the formal and legal condemnation to death of all opponents as transgressors and children of darkness, and 6) the attributing of the invention of the banner to the founder and ancestor of the nation—in the Scrolls and the Book of Mormon it is Jacob or Israel.

The Torn Garment, an Apocryphal Tale: When Moroni (Alma 46:24) begins his story by saying ". . . let us remember the words of Jacob . . ." he is plainly reminding his hearers of a tale that is familiar to them all. Yet who in the West has ever known anything about the story that follows, in which the words of Jacob are: "Even as this remnant of garment of my son hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved . . . while the remainder of the seed of Joseph shall perish, even as the remnant of his garment?" Here the survival of Joseph's garment guarantees and typifies the survival of Joseph.

In the tenth century of our era the greatest antiquarian of the Moslem world, Muhammad ibn-Ibrahim ath-Tha'labi, collected in Persia a great many old tales and legends about the prophets of Israel. After the fall of Jerusalem and the scattering of the Jews, many of the sectaries, such as those that once lived around the Dead Sea, moved East to be under the protection of the Persians. Thus groups of Jews representing various sects and shades of belief were scattered all over central Asia in the Middle Ages, and it is from such, no doubt, that Tha'labi gets his amazing fund of information, which is worthy to be set up beside the most enlightening volumes of Apocrypha. Among other things, Tha'labi tells a number of stories, which we have not found anywhere else, about Jacob and the garment of Joseph. In one, Joseph's

brethren bring his torn garment to their father as proof that he is dead, but Jacob after examining the garment, ("and there were in the garment of Joseph three marks or tokens when they brought it to his father") declares that the way the cloth is torn shows him that their story is not true; "Behold, if the bear had eaten him he surely would have rent his garment, and since he would (naturally) have fled towards the gate, verily the garment should have been torn behind. . . ." But since this is not the case it may be that Joseph still lives. Another account is the case of "the vizier" Potiphar, who by examining the tears in Joseph's garment knew that he was innocent and spared his life, "for he knew that if he (Joseph) had attacked his wife the tear would have been in front. . . ." So again his torn garment declared that Joseph should live.[16]

Most significant is Tha'labi's discussion of the two remnants of Joseph's garment, from which we quote:

> And when Joseph had made himself known unto them (his brethren) he asked them about his father, saying, 'What did my father after (I left)?' They answered, 'He lost his eyesight (from weeping).' Then he gave them his garment (*qamis,* long outer shirt). According to ad-Dahak that garment was of the weave (pattern, design) of Paradise, and the breath (spirit, odor) of Paradise was in it, *so that it never decayed* or in any way deteriorated (and that was) a sign (omen). And Joseph gave them that garment, and it was the very one that had belonged to Abraham, having already had a long history. And he said to them, 'Go, take this garment of mine and place it upon the face of my father so he may have sight again, and return (to me) with all your families. And when they had put Egypt behind them and come to Canaan their father Jacob said, 'Behold, I perceive the spirit (breath, odor) of Joseph, if you will not think me wandering in my mind and weakheaded from age. . . . (for) he knew that upon all the earth there was no spirit (breath, odor) of Paradise save in that garment alone . . . And as-Sadi says that Judah said to Joseph, 'It was I who took the garment bedaubed with blood to Jacob, and reported to him that the bear had eaten Joseph; so give me this day thy garment that I might tell him that thou art living, that I might cause him to rejoice now as greatly as I caused him to sorrow then. And Ibn-Abbas says that Judah took the garment and went forth in great haste, panting with exertion and

anxiety . . . and when he brought the garment he laid it upon his face, so that his sight returned to him.   And ad-Dahak says that his sight returned after blindness, and his strength after weakness, and youth after age, and joy after sorrow." (then follows a dialogue between Jacob and the King of Death).[17]

Note here that there were *two* remnants of Joseph's garment, one sent by *Joseph* to his father as a sign that he was still alive (since the garment *had not decayed*), and the other, torn and smeared with blood, brought by *Judah* to his father as a sign that Joseph was dead. Moroni actually quotes Jacob ("Now behold, this was the language of Jacob") as saying: "Now behold, this giveth my soul sorrow; nevertheless, my soul hath joy in my son . . ." (Alma 46:25 f.)   Compare this with Judah's statement in the Old World account, that the undecayed garment caused Jacob as much joy as the bloody garment caused him sorrow.   In both accounts Jacob is described as being near to death—hence Judah's haste to reach him with the garment and make amends for the evil he has done.

Surely there is "a type and a shadow" in this story, for the particular concern of Israel is with Joseph and Judah and how, after working at cross purposes they were reconciled after many years by the magnanimity of the one and the remorseful repentance of the other. It is another form of the symbolic story of the Two Sticks told in the 37th chapter of Ezekiel.   But aside from the great symbolic force of the tale, there can be no doubt that the story told by Moroni as one familiar to all the people actually was one that circulated among the Jews in ancient times and was taken to the East by them, being like much early Jewish lore completely lost in the West. It was totally unknown to the world in which Joseph Smith lived.

These interesting little details are typical apocryphal variations on a single theme, and the theme is the one Moroni mentions; the rent garment of Joseph is the symbol both of his suffering and his deliverance, misfortune and preservation.   Such things in the Book of Mormon

illustrate the widespread ramifications of Book of Mormon culture, and the recent declaration of Albright and other scholars that the ancient Hebrews had cultural roots in every civilization of the Near East. This is an acid test that no forgery could pass; it not only opens a window on a world we dreamed not of, but it brings to our unsuspecting and uninitiated minds a first glimmering suspicion of the true scope and vastness of a book nobody knows.

Questions

1. Why has the denunciation of war and the awareness of its evils in no way diminished the frequency of ferocity of wars?

2. Was Moroni justified in putting to death those who would not "support the cause of freedom"? Was that real freedom?

3. Is there any justification for war? Can we break the commandments of God every day and then profess indignation because he allows us to suffer the effects of our folly?

4. What things are strange and unfamiliar in the Title of Liberty story?

5. What Old World parallels are there to these things?

6. What common origin is indicated to explain the resemblance?

7. How does the concept of war in the *Milhama* Scroll and Alma differ from the modern view?

8. What considerations justify seeking illuminating parallels between the Book of Mormon customs and beliefs and practices as far away as Iran? Could there be any real connection between the two?

9. What indication is there in the story of Moroni's banner that the Nephites were familiar with apocryphal teachings since lost to the world?

10. Discuss the attitude of the Book of Mormon towards types and symbols.

To what extent can such things be realities?