

General Comments on Alma 53-63

In the last section of text of ch. 43-52, we saw the theme of conflict between Moroni and various apostate Nephites. Here, that theme continues with some additional Nephite dissensions occurring in Moroni's absence:

- Moroni versus Ammoron, continued (ch. 53-55)
- Nephite dissension in Moroni's absence (53:8-9)
- King men revolt again in Moroni's absence (61:3-8)
- Moroni versus King men (62:7-11)
- Moroni versus Ammoron, finale (62:12-37)
- Moroni versus Lamanites (62:38)

Then the book of Alma closes with Moroni's son Moronihah in a conflict with yet another group of apostate Nephites who inspire the Lamanites to war:

- Moronihah versus Lamanites (63:14-15)

One new interesting feature in these chapters is several exchanges of letters documented in the text:

- Ammoron to Moroni [letter?] (54:1)
- Moroni to Ammoron (54:5-14)
- Ammoron to Moroni (54:16-24)
- Helaman to Moroni (ch. 56-58)
- Moroni to Pahoran (59:3)
- Moroni to Pahoran (ch. 60)
- Pahoran to Moroni (ch. 61)
- Nephite "king" to Lamanite king (61:8)

There are written edicts sent among the Nephites from time to time prior to this (cf. Mosiah 2:8, Mosiah 27:2, Mosiah 29:4), but this is the first we hear of written correspondence in the Book of Mormon. Subsequent to this there are several references to letters.

One would assume at some point the antiquity of the letters would result in them being lost due to decay if they were not included in the plates. But this wouldn't seem to be the case

in the present text as the letters Mormon is quoting, apparently verbatim, are well over 300 years old to him. It doesn't seem likely that letters that old would survive if they weren't in the plates.

So, we might speculate the appearance and persistence of letter writing is indicative of some kind of institutional or technological shift in the Nephite culture so that it became commonplace where previously it was uncommon. Another thing suggesting a kind of institutional shift in writing is Helaman's having the engraved scriptural record being written down and sent among all the Nephites (cf. 63:12). This is the first explicit mention of widespread public access to the Scriptures. There are implicit statements prior to this (cf. Jacob 7:23, Alma 13:20, Alma 14:1, Alma 14:8, Alma 17:2, Alma 33:3), but it is never clear how widespread or public the access was to the written scriptures. Perhaps there is some technological innovation that enables easier production of ink and writing material.

Comments on Alma 53

1 AND it came to pass that they did set guards over the prisoners of the Lamanites, and did compel them to go forth and bury their dead, yea, and also the dead of the Nephites who were slain; and Moroni placed men over them to guard them while they should perform their labors.

2 And Moroni went to the city of Mulek with Lehi, and took command of the city and gave it unto Lehi. Now behold, this Lehi was a man who had been with Moroni in the more part of all his battles; and he was a man like unto Moroni, and they rejoiced in each other's safety; yea, they were beloved by each other, and also beloved by all the people of Nephi.

3 And it came to pass that after the Lamanites had finished burying their dead and also the dead of the Nephites, they were marched back into the land Bountiful; and Teancum, by the orders of Moroni, caused that they should commence laboring in digging a ditch round about the land, or the city, Bountiful. 4 And he caused that they should build a breastwork of timbers upon the inner bank of the ditch; and they cast up dirt out of the ditch against the breastwork of timbers; and thus they did cause the Lamanites to labor until they had encircled the city of Bountiful round about with a strong wall of timbers and earth, to an exceeding height. 5 And this city became an exceeding stronghold ever after; and in this city they did guard the prisoners of the Lamanites; yea, even within a wall which they had caused them to build with their own hands.

Now Moroni was compelled to cause the Lamanites to labor, because it was easy to guard them while at their labor; and he desired all his forces when he should make an attack upon the Lamanites. 6 And it came to pass that Moroni had thus gained a victory over one of the greatest of the armies of the Lamanites, and had obtained possession of the city of Mulek, which was one of the strongest holds of the Lamanites in the land of Nephi; and thus he had also built a stronghold to retain his prisoners.

7 And it came to pass that he did no more attempt a battle with the Lamanites in that year, but he did employ his men in preparing for war, yea, and in making fortifications to guard against the Lamanites, yea, and also delivering their women and their children from famine and affliction, and providing food for their armies.

v1-7 After having won the battle documented in the last chapter, Moroni has to deal with a large number of enemy combatants. Since Moroni is unwilling to wantonly shed Lamanite blood (cf. 44:1-2, 48:16, 48:23-25), he has to arrange to keep them out of trouble by having them construct a giant prison-fort to keep them in.

It seems likely Mormon includes these details to show how unwilling Moroni was to simply execute the Lamanites, even when it would have been very convenient to do so.

8 And now it came to pass that the armies of the Lamanites, on the west sea, south, while in the absence of Moroni on account of some intrigue amongst the Nephites, which caused dissensions amongst them, had gained some ground over the Nephites, yea, insomuch that they had obtained possession of a number of their cities in that part of the land. 9 And thus because of iniquity amongst themselves, yea, because of dissensions and intrigue among themselves they were placed in the most dangerous circumstances.

v8-9 As Moroni was busy dealing with the large population of Lamanite prisoners, he isn't able to keep the peace among the Nephites, and they end of losing some cities because of it. Once again, the Nephites are their own worst enemy.

10 And now behold, I have somewhat to say concerning the people of Ammon, who, in the beginning, were Lamanites; but by Ammon and his brethren, or rather by the power and word of God, they had been converted unto the Lord; and they had been brought down into the land of Zarahemla, and had ever since been protected by the Nephites. 11 And because of their oath they had been kept from taking up arms against their brethren; for they had taken an oath that they never would shed blood more; and according to their oath they would have perished; yea, they would have suffered themselves to have fallen into the hands of their

brethren, had it not been for the pity and the exceeding love which Ammon and his brethren had had for them. 12 And for this cause they were brought down into the land of Zarahemla; and they ever had been protected by the Nephites.

13 But it came to pass that when they saw the danger, and the many afflictions and tribulations which the Nephites bore for them, they were moved with compassion and were desirous to take up arms in the defence of their country. 14 But behold, as they were about to take their weapons of war, they were overpowered by the persuasions of Helaman and his brethren, for they were about to break the oath which they had made. 15 And Helaman feared lest by so doing they should lose their souls; therefore all those who had entered into this covenant were compelled to behold their brethren wade through their afflictions, in their dangerous circumstances at this time.

16 But behold, it came to pass they had many sons, who had not entered into a covenant that they would not take their weapons of war to defend themselves against their enemies; therefore they did assemble themselves together at this time, as many as were able to take up arms, and they called themselves Nephites. 17 And they entered into a covenant 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. 18 Now behold, there were two thousand of those young men, who entered into this covenant and took their weapons of war to defend their country. 19 And now behold, as they never had hitherto been a disadvantage to the Nephites, they became now at this period of time also a great support; for they took their weapons of war, and they would that Helaman should be their leader. 20 And they were all young men, and they were exceedingly valiant for courage, and also for strength and activity; but behold, this was not all--they were men who were true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted. 21 Yea, they were men of truth and soberness, for they had been taught to keep the commandments of God and to walk uprightly before him. 22 And now it came to pass that Helaman did march at the head of his two thousand stripling soldiers, to the support of the people in the borders of the land on the south by the west sea. 23 And thus ended the twenty and eighth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi.

v10-23 Mormon briefly reviews ch. 23-24 and 27 for context (v. 10-12). The Anti-Nephi-Lehi's are about to take up arms again, but Helaman, et al. persuades them not to (v. 13-15). However, the Anti-Nephi-Lehi's have adolescent sons who have not taken the same oath, and they volunteer to help (v. 16-20). All of the volunteers are valiant (v. 21). Helaman marches with them down to the front line (v. 22).

v19 "never had...been a disadvantage", cf. 27:24.

"Helaman should be their leader", there is nothing to suggest Helaman had any military experience previous to this. He had been a missionary was now acting as the high priest. Them selecting him as their leader clearly suggests the intention was to keep them out of battle. One can cynically ascribe this choice to naivety, but the alternative is to see the choice as inspired or faithful given the outcome.

v20-21 It seems likely Mormon is foreshadowing, and therefore presently describing them as a result of their future exploits (cf. 56:30-57). They certainly were brave to volunteer for combat, having no experience, but the description seems unwarranted for inexperienced soldiers.

v22 "stripling", this combined with the "young men" appellation of v. 20 tells us they were adolescents, not young adults.

Copyright © 2020 by S. Kurt Neumiller <kurt.neumiller@gmail.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.