

## Comments on Alma 54

This chapter recounts an exchange of letters between the military leaders of the warring Nephites and Lamanites. The interesting (dare I say "entertaining"?) thing in these letters is the complete lack of decorum in trading insults, which is apparently started by Moroni.

Moroni insults the Lamanites as being squatters in what was originally Nephite land (v. 6, 12), and then threatens them with taking it back from them by force (v. 13). He insults Ammoron personally by labeling him an apostate (v. 8), a child of hell (v. 11), and a murderer (v. 13).

Ammoron responds in kind by calling Moroni a murderer (v. 16, 22), accuses the Nephites of not following the traditional norms of patriarchal government (v. 17), mocks Moroni for what he considers feeble threats (v. 19), and insults the Nephites for being kidnappers (v. 23).

To top it all off, Moroni gets angry at Ammoron's response (cf. 55:1). Well, Moroni, what do you expect when you call someone an apostate murdering child of hell? Even if Ammoron was an apostate murdering child of hell, and it certainly looks like he was, you don't get very far in negotiations with people like that when you point out to them that is what they are. Doesn't matter if it is true if you end up with a negative outcome. And even still, Ammoron agreed to Moroni's condition to turn over the whole family, but Moroni refused because he was angry about Ammoron's lies and false justification. Well, what do you expect from an apostate murdering child of hell, an apology? Overall, not an effective attempt at diplomacy.

Historians revere Abraham Lincoln for his extraordinary facility at writing diplomatically. Moroni and Lincoln are opposites. Moroni was more like George S. Patton. While Moroni was a military genius, he was a failure at diplomacy. We all have our strengths and weaknesses.

Aside from the matter of diplomacy, the correspondence is an enlightening look at the psychology of these two men. Both Moroni and Ammoron present logical arguments with merit when judged superficially, and to their respective followers the arguments would be persuasive. In Ammoron's case his arguments likely reflect the propaganda apostate Nephites are using on the Lamanites to whip them up into anger to prepare for and keep them in a war with the Nephites. Mormon preserves Ammoron's

jingoism, shedding light on how false justifications are used to promote anger, hate and war.

1 AND now it came to pass in the commencement of the twenty and ninth year of the judges, that Ammoron sent unto Moroni desiring that he would exchange prisoners. 2 And it came to pass that Moroni felt to rejoice exceedingly at this request, for he desired the provisions which were imparted for the support of the Lamanite prisoners for the support of his own people; and he also desired his own people for the strengthening of his army. 3 Now the Lamanites had taken many women and children, and there was not a woman nor a child among all the prisoners of Moroni, or the prisoners whom Moroni had taken; therefore Moroni resolved upon a stratagem to obtain as many prisoners of the Nephites from the Lamanites as it were possible.

v1-3 Moroni gets word from Ammoron via one of his servants (cf. v. 4) that he is interested in exchanging prisoners (v. 1). Moroni is pleased about the opportunity to exchange as then he can use available provisions for his own men and strengthen his army (v. 2). But, as the Lamanites had taken many women and children hostage in addition to the men, Moroni wants them back too as part of the exchange (v. 3).

v1 "Ammoron sent unto Moroni", there is no explicit reference to a letter being written by Ammoron. It is plain from v. 4 that Ammoron sent one of his servants to Moroni, so its entirely possible the message was transmitted live by the servant and wasn't written down. This would explain the lack of documentation of Ammoron's first message when Mormon quotes the two subsequent letters apparently verbatim.

v2 If Moroni was so eager to do the exchange then his approach in the letter was certainly counterproductive. While Moroni was obviously a great military leader he certainly was no diplomat.

v3 "the Lamanites had taken many women and children", it is only natural to assume the worst when you read about women and children being taken captive during war. However, the text indicates the men and women and children were all held captive together, cf. 55:6-7.

As the Lamanites were invading the Nephites there wouldn't have been any opportunity for the Nephites to capture Lamanite women and children as they were left at home. And, when the Lamanites captured a Nephite city, all women and children present were present with the men. There is nothing in the text to suggest anything despicable with respect to the women and children. What little there is suggests quite the opposite.

There are references to slaves and slavery throughout the text of the Book of Mormon, but none of them specifically document it as a result of war. Slavery is only present as an implicit threat (cf. 48:11, 3 Ne. 3:7). It isn't until the very end when things spiral out of control on both sides (cf. Moroni 9:7-10).

4 Therefore he wrote an epistle, and sent it by the servant of Ammoron, the same who had brought an epistle to Moroni. Now these are the words which he wrote unto Ammoron, saying:

5 Behold, Ammoron, I have written unto you somewhat concerning this war which ye have waged against my people, or rather which thy brother hath waged against them, and which ye are still determined to carry on after his death. 6 Behold, I would tell you somewhat concerning the justice of God, and the sword of his almighty wrath, which doth hang over you except ye repent and withdraw your armies into your own lands, or the land of your possessions, which is the land of Nephi. 7 Yea, I would tell you these things if ye were capable of hearkening unto them; yea, I would tell you concerning that awful hell that awaits to receive such murderers as thou and thy brother have been, except ye repent and withdraw your murderous purposes, and return with your armies to your own lands. 8 But as ye have once rejected these things, and have fought against the people of the Lord, even so I may expect you will do it again.

9 And now behold, we are prepared to receive you; yea, and except you withdraw your purposes, behold, ye will pull down the wrath of that God whom you have rejected upon you, even to your utter destruction. 10 But, as the Lord liveth, our armies shall come upon you except ye withdraw, and ye shall soon be visited with death, for we will retain our cities and our lands; yea, and we will maintain our religion and the cause of our God. 11 But behold, it supposeth me that I talk to you concerning these things in vain; or it supposeth me that thou art a child of hell;

therefore I will close my epistle by telling you that I will not exchange prisoners, save it be on conditions that ye will deliver up a man and his wife and his children, for one prisoner; if this be the case that ye will do it, I will exchange.

12 And behold, if ye do not this, I will come against you with my armies; yea, even I will arm my women and my children, and I will come against you, and I will follow you even into your own land, which is the land of our first inheritance; yea, and it shall be blood for blood, yea, life for life; and I will give you battle even until you are destroyed from off the face of the earth.

13 Behold, I am in my anger, and also my people; ye have sought to murder us, and we have only sought to defend ourselves. But behold, if ye seek to destroy us more we will seek to destroy you; yea, and we will seek our land, the land of our first inheritance. 14 Now I close my epistle. I am Moroni; I am a leader of the people of the Nephites.

v4-14 Moroni writes a letter to Ammoron and sends it back with the servant who delivered the first message (v. 4). The letter threatens Ammoron with death if he does not withdraw the invasion (v. 5-10). He offers to exchange prisoners if Ammoron delivers up entire families (v. 11). Moroni then goes on to threaten Ammoron with a counter-invasion if he doesn't withdraw (v. 12-13), and then concludes (v. 14).

v4 As Moroni wrote the response letter and sent it back by the same servant who delivered it, Moroni's reply was clearly made on the spot. If he had more time to think it through, perhaps he would have toned the letter down.

v5-8 Moroni appears to just be venting in these verses. He himself says Ammoron is not capable of accepting the words, and yet he goes on and writes them anyway. Given the rare opportunity to correspond directly with his adversary, Moroni's anger overflows. Understandable, given the death and destruction he has seen firsthand.

v12-13 This threat by Moroni is rather out of character for him, nonetheless he seems serious about it as is evidenced by his statement in 55:3. He is the one who never sheds blood needlessly (cf. 43:54, 44:20, 55:19). However, from 44:17 it is plain that when Moroni is sufficiently angered he will go all out for blood. However, the threat is never fulfilled.

15 Now it came to pass that Ammoron, when he had received this epistle, was angry; and he wrote another epistle unto Moroni, and these are the words which he wrote, saying:

16 I am Ammoron, the king of the Lamanites; I am the brother of Amalickiah whom ye have murdered. Behold, I will avenge his blood upon you, yea, and I will come upon you with my armies for I fear not your threatenings. 17 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. 18 And now behold, if ye will lay down your arms, and subject yourselves to be governed by those to whom the government doth rightly belong, then will I cause that my people shall lay down their weapons and shall be at war no more. 19 Behold, ye have breathed out many threatenings against me and my people; but behold, we fear not your threatenings.

20 Nevertheless, I will grant to exchange prisoners according to your request, gladly, that I may preserve my food for my men of war; and we will wage a war which shall be eternal, either to the subjecting the Nephites to our authority or to their eternal extinction.

21 And as concerning that God whom ye say we have rejected, behold, we know not such a being; neither do ye; but if it so be that there is such a being, we know not but that he hath made us as well as you. 22 And if it so be that there is a devil and a hell, behold will he not send you there to dwell with my brother whom ye have murdered, whom ye have hinted that he hath gone to such a place? But behold these things matter not.

23 I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem. 24 And behold now, I am a bold Lamanite; behold, this war hath been waged to avenge their wrongs, and to maintain and to obtain their rights to the government; and I close my epistle to Moroni.

v15-24 Ammoron replies back with a letter full of anger (v. 15). Ammoron returns slap for slap by saying it is Moroni who is the murderer, and he is avenging the blood of his brother in attacking the Nephites (v. 16).

He then gives the standard Lamanite position on why they hate the Nephites (cp. 20:13, Mosiah 10:12-18) and uses that as justification for the current invasion (v. 17-18).

He reiterates he finds Moroni's threats to be unimpressive (v. 19), but regardless, Ammoron agrees to Moroni's conditions of exchange so he can save his provisions for his own men so they can wage war against the Nephites (v. 20).

Ammoron then responds to the personal attacks by saying God will punish Moroni for murdering his brother just as much as He is going to punish himself (v. 21-22).

Ammoron takes a final shot at Moroni by saying his ancestor Zoram was kidnaped by Nephi (v. 23).

He closes the letter by reiterating the justification for the war (v. 24).

v17, 23 The interesting thing here is Ammoron accepts the secular history of their ancestors yet rejects the religious history in v. 21-22. His selective use of such historical details as arguments undercuts his own position, as the historical events are closely tied to their religious history.

v19 Given Moroni's record on sparing the Lamanites whenever they are losing and willing to surrender, it is not hard to see why Ammoron doesn't find his threats convincing. Moroni is not a "take no prisoners" leader.

v23 Ammoron apparently uses this as an additional indicator of Nephi's faulty character to bolster the accusation in v. 17. He is probably also intending to use it to foil Moroni's accusation of apostasy in v. 8. Thus, Ammoron would be saying he is truly a Lamanite, and not a dissident Nephite, fighting for his rights because his ancestral father was kidnaped from Jerusalem by Nephi.

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