

NOTES ON A CURIOUS VERSE

BOOK OF MORMON LOGISTICS, CULTURE AND GOVERNMENT

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In a letter to the Chief Captain of the Nephite armies, the military leader Helaman includes an astounding detail. The verse reads:¹

And also there were sent two thousand men unto us from the land of Zarahemla. And thus we were prepared with ten thousand men, and provisions for them, and also for their wives and their children.

To a modern western reader it seems strange that soldiers would travel with their families into a war zone, and begs the question of why Helaman included that detail in his letter. Yet upon further study it was not strange, but consistent with other ancient armies to bring civilians on a campaign; and further study will reveal insights into the military policy of the Nephite government, logistical features of their armies, and insights into the motivations of the people.

First, this paper will discuss other armies and their tendency to include women in children as moral boosters and logistical labor. This piece will also discuss the impact that the Title of Liberty in shaping Nephite policy in constructing and fielding their armies. As a corollary, this essay will build upon the suggestions of other scholars regarding the effect of family status on a soldier's identity, the composition of Nephite armies, and the legal framework in the description of "young men" in *The Book of Mormon*. It will also discuss the possibility that women and children were viewed as psychological triggers by Nephite leaders and soldiers. This concept will then be compared to ancient eastern armies and their government's use of similar policies in order to motivate their soldiers. Next, this article will examine the possible establishing

¹ *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* Joseph Smith Trans. (Salt Lake City, Intellectual Reserve Inc., 1981) Alma 56:28.

of a military colony, represented by the relocation of entire families and not simply an army. That will lead to a discussion of the possible effects upon Nephite politics of moving loyal citizens to frontier region, in light of the subsequent coup in the Capital.

A modern reader would react with a great deal of surprise that women and children would accompany an army to the battlefield. Modern armies usually travel far greater distances from home and operate increasingly as an all professional force. These professionals often have organic logistical supports built into the unit that are also staffed by professionals. Ancient armies normally operated under different constraints.² The battlefields were often just outside their city walls and rulers constructed armies composed of people who were normally peace time farmers. With limited manpower, the bulk of the conscripts were needed for fighting and the remaining camp followers transported supplies, prepared the food, and performed other non combat functions in order to maximize the use of fighting men. The lack of weapons and armor for camp followers would allow them to carry more supplies than soldiers; thus extending the operating range of soldiers, and speed their march to the destination city. Based on rough estimates from other ancient armies,³ there were an estimated 700 to 1,000 additional women and children following the army.⁴ Since their destination was to garrison a city,⁵ it is assumed that these additional women and children would

² As William Hamblin noted see p. 491 in "The Importance of Warfare in Book of Mormon Studies" in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* Stephen Ricks, William Hamblin ed. (Salt Lake City, Provo: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990) 481-499.

³ Donald W. Engels *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 13. Ross Hassig *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press), 64.

⁴ This assumes that every soldier was married with children, which is impossible to say for certain.

⁵ Alma 56:15-28.

allow the maximum number of soldiers to perform military tasks, in this case providing scouts and building and manning the city walls.

Additionally, this would bolster the morale of the fighting men who were presumably conscripted for the duration of the war. Under this assumption, and unlike America's modern tour of duty system, the soldiers stationed on the frontier at Judea would not see their family until their release at the end of the war. The pragmatic solution of bringing the families along, not only bolstered morale,⁶ but would also solve the manpower problem that plagued the Nephite nation.⁷

This would also strengthen the Nephites' ideological basis for the war. In multiple verses Moroni invokes the memory of families as motivations worth fighting for.⁸ The right to defend the family was also cited in the attempts of Moroni to rally the people against enemies of the government.⁹ Since the leader of the enemy armies, Amalickiah and Ammoron, both opposed these rights, it would undercut support for war if the prosecution of the war by the Nephite government tore apart families. The fact that many of the "young men" in the military had families supports an argument advanced by John Welch.¹⁰ He cites the Jewish legal customs that classified young men as adults legally obligated to give military service and pay taxes. He also cites the

⁶ Engles, *Alexander the Great*, 13.

⁷ Alma 58:8, 32; Alma 51:11

⁸ Alma 43:45; 48:10.

⁹ Alma 46:12

¹⁰ p. 65-66 John W. Welch "Law and War in the Book of Mormon" in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* Stephen Ricks and William Hamblin ed. (Salt Lake City, Provo: Deseret Books, F.A.R.M.S., 1990) 45-102.

internal consistency of the Book of Mormon that categorized eligible fighting men as “young men” similar to Jewish law.¹¹

If these soldiers had families they were presumably eligible for military service long enough to serve in previous wars. The first Zoramite War was only eight years before.¹² There is no word on how many of these two thousand were married or single. Assuming an average percentage of soldiers married with children, it is likely that these soldiers were eligible for service in previous wars. It is also plausible that many of these soldiers were veterans as well, based on their eligibility for prior wars and limited available manpower of the Nephite nation.

Likely explanations of Alma 56:28 also include a psychological motivation for the inclusion of women and children on a border city. Classic Chinese military theorists such as Sun-Tzu wrote that when a commander “[throw’s] his soldiers into a place from which there is nowhere to go, they will die rather than flee. When they are facing death, how can one not obtain the utmost strength from the officers and men?”¹³ Historian David Graff called this a “psychological trigger” that commanders would employ in order to “stimulate” a soldier that would otherwise act indifferently.¹⁴ In this case, the deployment of both soldiers and family could be viewed as a governmental policy designed to help conscripts fight with greater élan. Moroni could have thought that having the family of fighting soldiers live in the threatened city would spur the Nephite

¹¹ Mosiah 2:40; 10:9.

¹² Using John Welch’s Classification on page 9 in John Welch “Why Study War in the Book of Mormon” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* Stephen Ricks, William Hamblin ed. (Salt Lake City, Provo: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990) 4-32.

¹³ Ralph Sawyer trns. *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (New York: Basic Books, 1993.)179, also see footnote 162.

¹⁴ David Graff *Medieval Chinese Warfare 300-900* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2002) 169.

armies more than leaving the family safely at the capital. In support of this argument, Moroni hinted at the apathy associated with staying in the capital when he condemns the civil government for lack of effort.¹⁵ Plus, previous events in the Book of Mormon contribute to the deadly combination of family and military service. The soldiers of King Noah burned him at the stake for his order to abandon their families and his refusal to allow them to return.¹⁶ This event could be an abnormal exception, or it could be the logical and expected sequence of events for soldiers that are forced to abandon their families by order of the government. The Nephites abnormal behavior of burning their king could be considered a psychologically motivated event based on familial concern.

The foregoing explanation assumes that the average Nephite soldier needed this boost, and that the government and Moroni would be harsh enough to place families in a dangerous situation simply to incite greater effort. This would also seem to counter the ideological imperative stated in the Title of Liberty- that the rights of their family trump the right of the Nephite leadership to use them as psychological props. A compromise position could consist of Moroni including the wives and children of soldiers in the field armies for their pragmatic benefits of increased morale, more efficient use of combat power and ideological purity; with the unstated or even unintentional benefit of a psychological trigger as well.

The brevity of the text excludes definitive statements but another possible explanation for the verse is the transfer of loyal soldiers and their families to the frontier as anchors. The Han Dynasty in the first century B.C. established military colonies to

¹⁵ Alma 60:21-22

¹⁶ Mosiah 19: 16-20

protect their frontier and reduce logistical burdens by establishing local farms.¹⁷ Caesar and other early Emperors of Rome granted land bonuses upon the retirement of their soldiers.¹⁸ These soldiers would gain the chance to become local magistrates and their sons could become patricians and senators.¹⁹ In return, the central government had knowledge that their frontiers contained a greater number of demonstrably loyal citizens capable of organizing and leading local militias in the defense of the Empire. In the case of the Nephites, they desperately needed more soldiers in the theater, and there is evidence that they needed more loyal soldiers as well. The war chapters in this section of the Book of Mormon are replete with references to subversive elements and anti war factions.²⁰ In this theater Mormon also mentions how the enemy gained advantage through “intrigues” on the Nephite side. Thus it is believable that the central government and Moroni sought to bolster a faltering theater with a relocation of loyal soldiers and their families. After the relocation of these soldiers, the Nephite commander felt they were prepared with the addition these reinforcements. Also noteworthy is the fact that the departure of these soldiers from the capital was followed shortly thereafter by a coup against the government by anti war factions. There is no direct causal connection between two events, but it is consistent that after loyal soldiers left the capital it took away the critical mass needed to sustain the pro war government. It is also consistent with the plausibility that soldiers with children would have served in previous Nephite wars and be considered demonstrably loyal veterans. Other factors

¹⁷ Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 29. Lewis, Mark. “Han Abolition of Universal Military Service” in *Warfare in Chinese History* Hans Van De Ven Ed. (Boston: Brill CO, 2000) 64-65.

¹⁸ P.A. Brunt *The Fall of the Roman Republic: And other Related Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)264.

¹⁹ John Patterson “Military Organization and Social Change in the Later Roman Republic” in *War and Society in the Roman World* John Rich, Graham Shipley ed (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1993)92-112.

²⁰ Alma chapters 43, 48, 51, 53:8-9.

could have resulted in the coup against the government: the length of war and sacrifices demanded of the population could have eroded support for the war, or the brief account could have excluded unspecified political failings of the chief judge. Since there is even less evidence for these positions, the transfer of loyal soldiers to the frontier appears the more likely cause.

Bolstering the case for relocation, are the accounts earlier in the Book of Mormon where Moroni “caused” the removal of Lamanite settlers and established military cities.²¹ Moroni also had the power to settle land disputes between cities.²² Thus it is plausible that Moroni continued his policy of strengthening the Nephite strategic position through colonization by ordering soldiers and their families to the city of Judea. The unknown geographic nature of Nephite lands compared to Roman and Chinese Empires preclude a definitive use of the military colony idea, but there are enough similarities for this reader to conclude (albeit, tentatively) that Alma 56:28 is a tangential reference to a military colony.

Again, the terse narrative prevents any definitive analysis of the verse, yet parallels from other armies and governments in similar situations offer reasonable interpretations of the text.²³ The Nephite armies operated under conditions similar to other ancient armies. They included women and children as camp followers, allowing for a greater concentration and better use of combat power. This was likely done to increase morale as well. Culturally, the Nephites appeared susceptible to the

²¹Alma 50:6-15

²² Alma 50:25-27

²³ One of my peer reviewers mentioned Mormon 6:7 as an additional internal example of the implicit connection between armies and their wives and children within the *Book of Mormon*.

psychological trigger that Eastern military theorists described. Politically, the Nephites possibly adopted a system of military colonies that resulted in the transfer of loyal veterans and their families to the frontier as anchors.

Overall, this paper provides insights into Nephite logistical practice, cultural forces within the nation, and Nephite war planning. The study of logistics while briefly done here, is the first attempt this writer knows of that examines that important aspect of Nephite culture. As modern research has shown, it appears that the “tail wagged the dog” in regard to strategy and logistics. While commonly thought that logistical concerns were undertaken after strategic priorities were determined; an increasing number of scholars have shown that logistical challenges determined strategy.²⁴ Thus this paper attempts to address logistical concerns as the root of strategy and not its branches. This paper also showed that the logistical concerns in Alma 56:28 contain insight into the Nephite “face of battle”. Historians covering every time period have tended to focus on “drum and trumpet” history that examines the grand events and the elite decision makers. The text’s inclusion of women and children helps to identify and explore the motivations, fears, and concerns for the average Nephite person and helps begin the process of exploring not just the eye of command but the face of battle.²⁵ Additionally, this verse helps us explore the interplay between military expediency and government policy. This can help us explore the strategic culture of the Nephite nation, and how its military needs affected civilian decisions and Nephite society.

²⁴ Such as John Lynn Ed. *Feeding Mars: Logistics in Western Warfare from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1993).

²⁵ David P. Honey “Paradigms and Pitfalls of Approach to Warfare in the Book of Mormon” *F.A.R.M.S. Review of Books* 3. 1 (1991) <http://mi.byu.edu/publications/review/?vol=3&num=1&id=64> (Accessed, November 28th, 2008)

Outside of military history, this paper helps faithful readers of the *Book of Mormon* realize they are reading accounts of real people. These people were not simply a couple lines in a sometimes dense narrative, but flesh and blood actors with their own actions, beliefs, and problems. They acted and reacted in a time different than ours, and this paper was a brief attempt at expanding an intriguing idea buried within the text. Many verses within the *Book of Mormon* provide hidden nuggets like the one elucidated in this paper. While this paper does not provide a full treatment of these issues, both in military history and wider circles, but it is hoped that this provides a springboard for future study of Nephite logistics, culture and government policy.

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