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Nephi's Freedom Thesis and the Sons of Helaman

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Abstract: The role of Christ in preserving the freedom of those who inhabit the promised land spoken of in the Book of Mormon is consistent throughout. Prior to the family of Lehi departing on their journey to the promised land, the Lord told Nephi, “inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper.” Nephi later expands on this promise as he quotes the word of the Lord given to Lehi in his final blessing to his children after they had been established in the land of promise: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence.” This becomes a type of freedom thesis for the promised land which is repeated word for word or paraphrased many times throughout the rest of the Book of Mormon.



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The role of Christ in preserving the freedom of those who inhabit the promised land spoken of in the Book of Mormon is consistent throughout. Prior to the family of Lehi departing on their journey to the promised land, the Lord told Nephi, “inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper” (1 Nephi 2:20).

Nephi later expands on this promise as he quotes the word of the Lord given to Lehi in his final blessing to his children after they had been established in the land of promise: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence” (2 Nephi 1:20). This becomes a type of freedom thesis for the promised land which is repeated word for word or paraphrased many times throughout the rest of the Book of Mormon. Certainly this promise did not originate in the Book of Mormon—it is a continuation of God’s covenant with Israel found in the Old Testament (see Joshua 23:6–13; Exodus 3:8).

To understand this promise we need to define the word *prosper* in a Book of Mormon context. Certainly prosperity had to do with the physical and spiritual circumstances of the obedient, but beyond that it is used in the framework of deliverance. For example, Alma said to his son Helaman, “I swear unto you that, inasmuch as ye keep the commandments of God ye

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shall prosper in the land. I would that ye should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham, . . . and he surely did deliver them in their afflictions” (Alma 36:1–2). Notice how closely related the ideas of prosperity and deliverance are. The parallel usage of these two words is not uncommon in the Nephite text (see Omni 1:6–7; Mosiah 2:31; 7:29, 33; Alma 9:9, 13; 36:29–30). The promise applies to the people as a whole who dwell upon the land. However, prosperity is not without adversity and the text has several examples of individuals who obeyed the commandments and yet sealed their testimonies with their blood (see Mosiah 17:20; Alma 14:18).

Sons of Helaman

It has been fascinating to observe how the theme of being righteous and prospering weaves its way into the story of the sons of Helaman, also known as the stripling warriors. Mormon tells us, “I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people” (Words of Mormon 1:5). If Mormon recorded less than 1% of the history of the Nephites, why did he choose to include the account of the sons of Helaman? One answer is that Mormon included those things which he had been commanded to write (3 Nephi 26:12). Another factor may be that just as his son Moroni tells us, “Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me and I know your doing” (Mormon 8:35); we may be safe in assuming that Mormon also knew our day and chose to place in his record that which would be most profitable for us to liken unto ourselves (1 Nephi 19:23). I will submit a third option as a reason for Mormon’s including the record of the sons of Helaman on the plates, this being his continually giving evidence in support of Nephi’s Freedom Thesis. In the war chapters of Alma 43–63, it is referred to, at least in principle, in every chapter. In fact, Mormon quotes Nephi’s thesis shortly before introducing the story of the stripling warriors. Note that Mormon is paraphrasing

2 Nephi 1:20; “we can behold that his words are verified, even at this time, which he spake unto Lehi saying: . . . inasmuch as they shall keep my commandments they shall prosper in the land. But remember, inasmuch as they will not keep my commandments they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord” (Alma 50:19–20). Mormon is very much aware of the Freedom Thesis and chooses to include it not only as a testimony to the story line he had just shared, but also as a preface to that which he is about to share: the conflict involving the stripling warriors. Mormon reaffirms this teaching in the very chapter he introduced the sons of Helaman; “the Lamanites . . . on account of some intrigue amongst the Nephites, which caused dissensions among them, had gained some ground over the Nephites.” He continues in the next verse, “And thus because of iniquity amongst themselves yea, because of dissensions and intrigue among themselves, they were placed in the most dangerous circumstances” (Alma 53:8–9). Note that Mormon views the conflict between the Nephites and Lamanites from a spiritual context. There is no mention here of the superior military strength of the Lamanites as a reason for their advantage in battle, but it comes from the dissensions among the Nephites. This message is consistent throughout the Book of Mormon—the Lord defended the Nephites (or His covenant people) when they were righteous.

In the early pages of the Book of Mormon, the Lord promises Nephi that the Lamanites “shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also” (1 Nephi 2:23). This promise is fulfilled throughout the Book of Mormon regardless of the size of the armies on either side. Hugh Nibley has observed: “No matter how wicked and ferocious and depraved the Lamanites might be (and they were that!), no matter by how much they outnumbered the Nephites, . . . they were not the Nephite problem. They were merely kept there to remind the Nephites of their real problem which was to walk uprightly before the Lord” (Nibley 376).

To help us understand the stripling warriors, let's first see where they came from, their roots. In Alma 23 we are introduced to a group of Lamanites who were converted through the missionary efforts of the sons of Mosiah. These valiant converts called themselves Anti-Nephi-Lehies and unanimously took an oath never to take up arms again (Alma 23:7). To protect these newly adopted converts (later known as the "people of Ammon" or "Ammonites"), the Nephites gave them the Land of Jershon and set their armies between them and the Lamanites (Alma 27:24).

Well over a decade transpired before these converts were threatened by their former brethren, the Lamanites. This threat was directed at the Nephite nation as a whole, into which the Ammonites had been adopted. In response to this threat the People of Ammon "were about to take up weapons for they were about to break the oath which they had made" (Alma 53:14). At this point Helaman compelled them to maintain their original oath. Why does Helaman take a stand on this issue? He later explained his motive; "for I would not suffer them that they should break this covenant which they had made, supposing that God would strengthen us" (Alma 56:8). With the Ammonites maintaining their oath and not taking up arms in their own defense, it would seem that the Nephite army would be weakened. But Helaman taught that the Lord "would strengthen us," because the converts remained true to their covenant. This kind of reasoning was normal when the Nephites were righteous, but the reverse was true when they were unrighteous (see Mosiah 11:19). The problem of strengthening the Nephite armies was solved when 2,000 sons of these Lamanite converts, who had not taken the earlier oath, stepped forward and promised "to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, yea, to protect the land unto the laying down of their lives" (Alma 53:17).

Mormon gives us insight concerning the worth of these 2,000 sons: "As they never had hitherto been a disadvantage to the Nephites, they became now at this period of time also a great support" (Alma 53:19). The question arises: Of what "support"

could 2,000 young men be to an army—especially when they never had fought? The answer goes back to the spiritual strategy Helaman pointed out in his efforts to persuade the Ammonites not to fight. There is no mention of any military training for these new volunteers. In fact, Mormon keeps us focused on their spiritual strength by stating, “they were men who were true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted. 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” (Alma 53:20–21). This is the support or advantage they become to the Nephite army. How better could Mormon illustrate the Lord’s role in battle than to include in his record a story of green young volunteers who were ill equipped in a military sense? How better to illustrate the power of God than a Book of Mormon comparison to David and Goliath? What could these stripling warriors bring to battle other than their courage and faith in God?

Now the stage was set for a battle between the Lamanites, “a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people; a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites” (Alma 17:14), and the 2,000 stripling warriors who were militarily inexperienced, but spiritually as strong as iron. If this were a story of mortal flesh against mortal flesh, then these young men would be predictably doomed. But this is a story reminiscent of those in the Old Testament where the God of Israel dictated the fate of battle. The words of Elisha echo their way through time as the unseen armies of God once again marshaled their forces in defense of the righteous minority: “they that be with us are more than they that be with them” (2 Kings 6:16).

We are indebted to Helaman for most of the information concerning these young warriors. They are called his sons because of a wonderful relationship he developed with them on the battlefield (Alma 56:44–46). These sons of Helaman are mentioned in only four chapters in the Book of Mormon, (Alma 53, 56–58) yet, the message of their experience has been used as an example to the youth in the Church from Joseph Smith’s

time to our day. Note that Alma 53 is narrated in third person by Mormon who is making an abridgement of the Large Plates of Nephi. But in Alma 56–58, Mormon chooses to give us the account on the sons of Helaman from the original source, which happens to be a letter from Helaman to the Captain of the Nephite army, Moroni. (We may rightly assume that Mormon was impressed by the accounts he includes in the latter chapters of Alma, since he named his own son after Captain Moroni). With the exception of one verse of personal commentary, (Alma 56:52) Mormon lets us see their battles through the pen of the man who saw the courage of these stripling warriors first hand.

The first battle fought by these 2,000 oath-bound soldiers is filled with some interesting twists and turns, as well as a powerful message. The Lamanites had captured four Nephite cities in the Land of Zarahemla (Alma 56:13–14). Antipus, the leader of the Nephite forces in the city of Judea, decided on a plan to draw the Lamanite army from Antiparah, one of the cities captured. Helaman and his 2,000 sons would pass by the city and bring the Lamanite army out to fight. Then the army of Helaman was to flee and the army of Antipus was to overtake the Lamanites from the rear. The plan progressed favorably until the Lamanites saw the army of Antipus coming after them from behind. Rather than get sandwiched between the two Nephite armies, the Lamanites tried to catch Helaman's smaller force and destroy them before the larger army of Antipus could overtake them (Alma 56:37). The chase continued for three days, with both armies resting at night. On the third day the Lamanites stopped (Alma 56:42).

This unexpected stopping posed quite a dilemma for Helaman. If his army continued running they might be leaving the army of Antipus without their expected support. On the other hand, if the Lamanites stopped for the sole purpose of making Helaman think that Antipus had caught up with them, and if Helaman ordered his forces back against the Lamanites, he might be sending his sons into a trap (Alma 56:42–43). What he does next indicates his confidence and respect for his sons.

Rather than issue the order, he left the decision up to his untested young companions:

Therefore what say ye, my sons, will ye go against them to battle? And now I say unto you, my beloved brother Moroni, that never had I seen so great courage, nay, not amongst all the Nephites. For as I had ever called them my sons (for they were all of them very young) even so they said unto me: Father, behold our God is with us, and he will not suffer that we should fall; then let us go forth; . . . Now they never had fought, yet they did not fear death; and they did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them. And they rehearsed unto me the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it. (Alma 56:44–48)

Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, a Union colonel in the Civil War, saw combat as a test of character. “It makes bad men worse, and good men better” (Burns, Burns, and Ward 170). If this is true, then the battlefield was a place where the sons of Helaman tempered their spiritual mettle.

No one could question their courage or their faith. What was the source of the strength to be willing to sacrifice their lives for the “liberty of their fathers”? Mormon simply says their mothers told them that “if they did not doubt, God would deliver them” (Alma 56:47). Of course, they had known of righteous, believing men who had been killed by the Lamanites in battle. They undoubtedly were closely related to many of the Ammonites who refused to defend themselves from the Lamanite armies and were summarily killed. It is possible that some of these young men may have witnessed that event. What made them believe that their lot would be any different, especially, since they had never been tested in battle? In fact, the first assignment for the sons of Helaman was to fill the void left by the death of many men in the army of Antipus (Alma 56:10). Would it not have been normal for them to ask, “Many of these casualties were good men. How could we expect not to have the same risk of death?” Yet, the record gives us no indication of this kind of reasoning. They remained focused on the promise of the Lord given to them through their mothers. Their faith in

their mothers' words echoed the same courage that Ammon (one of the missionary sons of Mosiah) displayed at the waters of Sebus against impossible odds (Alma 17:29–37). Just like the stripling warriors, Ammon faced the Lamanites armed with little more than the promise of a righteous parent (Alma 17:35; Mosiah 28:7–8).

The same God who gave Mosiah a promise of safety gave the mothers of this untested army the similar promise, on the condition that they would not doubt (Alma 56:47). Even the most caring mothers would not make a promise like that without the confirmation of the Lord. A promise of deliverance such as this, spoken without the inspiration and confirmation of the Spirit, is (at best) a good intention left dangling. But, the sure word spoken through inspiration gave comfort and hope to the mothers and strength to their sons. At this point the Lamanites were not the enemy, they were the test of obedience—the fire in which these young men would be refined. The only possible enemy to these young warriors would be to waver in their faith in the power of God to deliver them.

Wendell Philips once said, “One on God’s side *is* a majority” (Burns, Burns, and Ward 399). Mormon is making the same point by including the story of the sons of Helaman in his record that he did with the story of the sons of Mosiah. When the Lord is on your side, the size and strength of the opposition makes no difference, bearing further witness to Nephi’s Freedom Thesis. What could draw us closer to Christ, as a nation inhabiting this promised land, than to show that the Lord is the one who makes us, “mighty even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20)? Mormon condenses part of Helaman’s epistle with one verse (Alma 56:52); not just for the economy of space, but to keep us on track with the theme of deliverance he is reinforcing. He keeps the focus not on the minute details of war, but the pay off to these sons of Helaman following their first battle with the Lamanites. “Behold, I numbered those young men who had fought with me, fearing lest there were many of them slain. But behold, to my great joy there

had not one soul of them fallen to the earth; yea, and they had fought as if with the strength of God” (Alma 56:55–56). True to form, Helaman gives credit for their deliverance to the “strength of God.” Even though Helaman’s forces are increased by 60 more volunteers from the Ammonites, (Alma 57:6) they are nearly overpowered in their second confrontation with the Lamanites (Alma 57:19–21). Helaman was careful to let Moroni know that as the opposition grew darker, the light of obedience glowed as brightly as ever within his sons. “Yea, and they did obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness; yea, and even according to their faith it was done unto them” (Alma 57:21).

I find the elements of obedience within this verse fascinating. What is the motivation for obeying with exactness? Could this be seen as blind obedience? Blind obedience is sheep following sheep, while following in exactness is sheep following the Shepherd; and Christ is the Good Shepherd (see Alma 5:37–39). This is the same principle the Lord was teaching the Saints in 1832, when he said, “I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise” (D&C 82:10). By obeying Helaman’s orders with exactness, they were showing they did not doubt the Lord’s promise made to them through their mothers.

The stripling warriors must have been aware that their obedience to their leaders was an extension of their obedience to their God. This was not a new concept to the Nephites. (See 1 Nephi 3:5–7; Mosiah 2:30–31; Alma 45:2–8) Their obedience to Helaman’s command was more than swift, it was exact. A celestial strategy was involved, even in that mortal battlefield. They had been promised that if they, “did not doubt, that they should be preserved by his [God’s] marvelous power” (Alma 57:26). Would it have been possible for them to support their God without supporting their leaders? This is the ultimate test of obedience; to show one’s allegiance to a perfect and infallible God by how we obey those less than perfect who are called to lead us.

Following the second battle, Helaman searches for his sons among the wounded and dead, and this is his account of what he found: “And it came to pass that there were two hundred, out of my two thousand and sixty, who had fainted because of loss of blood; nevertheless, according to the goodness of God, and our great astonishment, and also the joy of our whole army, there was not one soul among them who did perish; yea, and neither was there one soul among them who had not received many wounds” (Alma 57:25).

If Helaman had been an egotist trying to move up in the ranks, he might have taken some of the credit, but he was acutely aware of the heavenly power of command that extended beyond his own leadership. “And now, their preservation was astonishing to our whole army, yea, that they should be spared while there was a thousand of our brethren who were slain. And we do justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God, because of their exceeding faith in that which they had been taught to believe—that there was a just God, and whosoever did not doubt, that they should be preserved by his marvelous power” (Alma 57:26). Even though Helaman was their leader, he took no credit for their deliverance; he gave all the credit to God.

In his letter to Captain Moroni, Helaman includes a second testimony in regard to the Lord’s hand being in the battle. In the aforementioned conflict, the sons of Helaman were joined in battle by the army of Gid. Following this second battle Gid’s witness was recorded by Helaman: “We are again delivered out of the hands of our enemies. And blessed is the name of our God; for behold it is he who has delivered us” (Alma 57:45). What is Gid’s point? It is the same point Nephi made and Mormon has been making all along; the Lord had a mighty hand in the maintenance of their freedom. And we may rightly assume that as we liken the scriptures to ourselves, that “his hand is stretched out still” to deliver the righteous (2 Nephi 19:12, 17, 21).

Prior to a possible third conflict, Helaman’s strategy for his troops included spiritual preparation: “we did pour out our

whole souls in prayer to God, that he would strengthen us, and deliver us out of the hands of our enemies. . . . yea, insomuch that he did speak peace to our souls” (Alma 58:10–11). The events which transpired in regaining the city of Manti bore witness to the promise of deliverance made by the Lord. By once again drawing the Lamanites out of the city and then sending an army behind them into the defenseless city of Manti, “they did take possession of the city of Manti without the shedding of blood” (Alma 58:28).

Helaman continued his letter to Moroni by asking why the government had not sent the requested assistance. He feared lest the Nephite armies were too small to hold on to the cities they had recaptured. Then, almost as an apology for being negative he writes, “we do not desire to murmur” (Alma 58:35). Elder Neal A. Maxwell has said, “If our lips are closed to murmuring, then our eyes will be open” (Maxwell 82–84). Notice how Helaman has shared an unpleasant truth in a fashion that will still allow the lines of communication to remain open. His sensitivity to his leaders, as well as his subordinates, is commendable. President Harold B. Lee counseled, “The men under you will never be loyal to you if they see that you are disloyal to those who preside over you” (Lee 10). Helaman’s letter validates this principle. His was not the expression of a weak-kneed foot soldier trying not to be responsible for the bad news he had born. He is once again illustrating his total allegiance to his leaders; recognizing full well that he cannot expect God to stand by him if he doesn’t stand by his leaders. While he is not blind to a problem, he is relating the details to Moroni while at the same time reinforcing his own support. He concludes his letter by reaffirming his testimony of the source of his small army’s strength, “We trust God will deliver us, notwithstanding the weakness of our armies, yea, and deliver us out of the hands of our enemies” (Alma 58:37).

Helaman pays a tribute to his warriors that connects them once again to the power of the Lord to deliver the righteous: “they stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has made them

free; and they are strict to remember the Lord their God from day to day; yea, they do observe to keep his statutes, and his judgements, and his commandments continually” (Alma 58:40).

Is it not obvious that Mormon has not only attempted to show us the problems we may face, but also the solution to those problems? What is the solution? Getting the American people to obey God the same way. The same Lord that protected the stripling warriors will maintain the freedom of America, as He did that of the Nephites, if we will obey Him.

Conclusion

Perhaps none of the latter-day prophets has written more on this subject than President Ezra Taft Benson. “I fully realize that the Lord has predicted wars and rumors of wars (D&C 45:26). I recognize that only true repentance can stay the destructive forces of war and calamity” (*Teachings* 706).

He has also written: “Before the final triumphal return of the Lord, the question as to whether we may save our constitutional republic is simply based on two factors—the number of patriots and the extent of their obedience. That the Lord desires to save this nation which He raised up there is no doubt. But that He leaves it up to us, with His help, is the awful reality” (*An Enemy* 55).

While this paper may be on the stripling warriors, those sons of Helaman do not stand as just another inspiring story in the Book of Mormon. They witness that obedience in the most trying of circumstances is the condition of prosperity and deliverance. President Benson brought this message to our day as he spoke to the young men of the Church: “In the spiritual battles you are waging, I see you as today’s sons of Helaman” (“To the Youth” 43).

The sons of Helaman represent a timeless solution to a modern challenge: even though the battlefield may be mortal, the most powerful weapon in our defense is obtained by serving “the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ” (Ether 2:12).

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