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Finding the Prince of Peace in the War Chapters: An Analysis of Alma 44

DALLIN LEWIS

While serving as a missionary in Mexico, I frequently read Alma 44 in my personal scripture study. The story of Moroni and Zerahemnah was already familiar; in my mind I could effortlessly replay the seminary video of this fierce conflict. However, I began to ponder more on the story as I returned to it time and again. What is the Lord trying to teach me with this chapter? How might this story be significant to me? Slowly, I began to see parallels in the attitudes and actions of the fearless Captain Moroni with those of the Savior Himself. Likewise, I began to see humankind as a whole—and myself as an individual—in the rebellious and prideful Zerahemnah. This story no longer appeared to be simply another Nephite battle, but rather it became an allegory of the gospel of Jesus Christ, with eternal truths and teachings symbolized and personified on a real-life stage. I began to see that the story of Captain Moroni and Zerahemnah teaches us of God’s infinite justice and mercy, of our own rebellious and fallen state, and of our role in being reconciled with God through the Atonement and gospel of Jesus Christ.

To appreciate the value and truth Alma 44 contains, we must first recognize how miraculous it is that this story even made it into the Book of Mormon. The prophet Mormon, who compiled this sacred record, says that he could not write “a hundredth part of the proceedings of [the Nephite

and Lamanite] people” (Helaman 3:14; see also 3 Nephi 5:8). Yet with all the material Mormon could have selected for this record, he made a place for this story. After Alma 44, Zerahemnah never appears again anywhere in the book and these renegade Zoramites essentially disappear from this sacred record and are forgotten. Nonetheless, Mormon ensures that future readers will have this account. He even passed over other teachings of Alma when he included this story. Right before he recounts the battle between Moroni and Zerahemnah, Mormon remarks that Alma and his sons went forth to preach the word but that “we shall say no more concerning their preaching” (Alma 43:2; see also vv. 1–2). Mormon must have seen considerable reason to replace some of Alma’s teachings with a story about war.

Mormon would have recognized the spiritual significance often found in a tale of warfare. While it might seem strange for modern readers to relate battles and fighting with the Prince of Peace, the Nephites saw wars through a spiritual lens. Military fights were not only a measure of prowess, but their successes and failures on the battlefield were also interpreted as a measure of their own righteousness. As one scholar described it, “Most military events in the Book of Mormon have both religious and political importance. . . . To the Nephites, the matters of war were all-important religious affairs and sacred obligations, not the optional exploits of imperialistic monarchs or of mercenary soldiers of fortune.” We can gain greater insights into the gospel if we see warfare in the Book of Mormon with spiritual eyes.

The entire story of this battle includes both chapters 43 and 44 of Alma, but Alma 43 mainly describes the physical fighting and how the Nephites, with direction from the prophet Alma, are able to surround Zerahemnah and his army. This leads us to the war of words found in Alma 44 between Moroni and Zerahemnah, and it also relates the eventual surrender of the Zoramite army. It is this chapter, Alma 44, that has allegorical elements. Using Moroni as a type of Christ and placing humanity in Zerahemnah’s role, this story teaches us how we are surrounded by the demands of justice and that only Christ can offer us mercy to fulfill that justice if we will but make a “covenant of peace” with

Him. It also warns us of the consequences of refusing this covenant and gives insight into the great mercy and long-suffering of the Lord on our behalf.

The chapter begins with Moroni having encircled Zerahemnah and his army with his own soldiers and explaining the dire reality of the situation to him: “Ye know that ye are in our hands, yet we do not desire to slay you. Behold, we have not come out to battle against you that we might shed your blood for power; neither do we desire to bring any one to the yoke of bondage. But this is the very cause for which ye have come against us” (Alma 44:1–2). By sinning and rebelling against God (see 3 Nephi 6:18), we too find ourselves in the “hands” of justice, condemned to die spiritually. Christ, typified by Moroni, does not desire to place us in a “yoke of bondage,” but we have ensnared ourselves by our own free will.

Moroni then declares to Zerahemnah that “the Lord is with [the Nephites],” that they have beaten the Lamanites “because of [their] religion,” and that Zerahemnah and his army “cannot destroy this [their] faith” (Alma 44:3). The Nephite captain goes on to say, “This is the true faith of God; yea, ye see that God will support, and keep, and preserve us, so long as we are faithful unto him, and unto our faith, and our religion” (v. 4). God has decreed eternal laws that we cannot destroy, and by fighting against these laws we only deliver ourselves into the hands of justice. These laws are found and taught in God’s religion and true faith. Only by being faithful unto Him and the plan of salvation will He then “support, and keep, and preserve us” (v. 4). For both Zerahemnah and ourselves, the key to securing the blessings of liberty and eternal life—and likewise avoiding captivity and death—is faith in and obedience to God, His plan, and His laws.

But by rebelling against the Nephites, Zerahemnah has forfeited these blessings and securities. Having broken these basic laws, he has to comply with other conditions. Moroni explains these new demands: “I command you by all the desires which ye have for life, that ye deliver up your weapons of war unto us, . . . and we will spare your lives, if ye will go your way and come not again to war against us” (v. 6). Moroni commanding Zerahemnah and his army to surrender can be compared to Christ

and His prophets commanding us to repent when we have rebelled and sinned against God: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you” (Acts 2:38; see also 2 Nephi 9:23; 3 Nephi 11:38; D&C 18:22). Moroni is asking them to change their lives and habits by giving up their tools of destruction and by then promising never to fight the Nephites again.

Weapons in the Book of Mormon often represent tools or habits of sin, and giving them up represents a change of heart and repentance. Mormon, speaking of a certain group of Lamanites that were taught the word of God by recent converts, says that “as many as were convinced did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the tradition of their fathers” (Helaman 5:51). Another example of this change of heart is the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. They associated their weapons with rebelling against God as “they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren” (Alma 23:7). Later on, this same group buried their weapons, “saying that it was a testimony to our God . . . that we have not stained our swords in the blood of our brethren since he imparted his word unto us and has made us clean thereby” (Alma 24:15). For this righteous people, their weapons were directly connected with sin and their repentance before God.

As we return to the original narrative, Captain Moroni explains to Zerahemnah that he and his army can go free if they “will go [their] way and come not again to war against [the Nephites]” (Alma 44:6). Moroni is commanding Zerahemnah to make a covenant with him—what will later be called “a covenant of peace” (v. 14). The conditions of the covenant are not outlandish. In fact, there is only one condition, and it is amazingly simple and merciful: “come not again to war.” Do that, and they can depart in peace.

But is that just? Zerahemnah and his men have slaughtered hundreds of Nephites, and Moroni is willing to let them off that easily? These conditions hardly seem fair to us, but we must remember that we likewise face the demands of justice. Christ has promised that if we will only give up our “weapons of war”—our sins—and promise never to rebel against Him or His commandments again, then He will release us from the

“yoke of bondage” that justice has placed upon us. Neither the covenant of Moroni nor of Christ is “fair,” but it is merciful. Christ does not ask us to undo the evil we have done any more than Moroni asks Zerahemnah to return the Nephite lives he has taken. Instead, Christ pleads for us to give up our rebellious ways and promise to be obedient, and then He will appease justice.

Nonetheless, Zerahemnah’s stubborn reaction to Moroni’s offer reflects a tragic attitude that we often display toward the gospel of Jesus Christ. Zerahemnah delivers up his weapons to Moroni but with some conditions: “Behold, here are our weapons of war; we will deliver them up unto you, but we will not suffer ourselves to take an oath unto you, which we know that we shall break, . . . but take our weapons of war, and suffer that we may depart into the wilderness” (Alma 44:8). Zerahemnah’s repentance is thus only partially complete. While he is willing to give up his weapons, he refuses to make an oath that he knows he will break. It is the attitude of a person who is only willing to make what we may call a “half covenant.”

In a gospel context, Zerahemnah represents all who want the blessings of the Atonement, who desire eternal life, but who are not willing to pay the full price required. They are not willing to make covenants—or to strive to obey their previous covenants—but they do not want to be denied salvation. They believe Christ is their Savior, and they want eternal life, but they are not willing to make all the required sacrifices to receive Christ’s saving grace.

For those that might hold to this “half-covenant” attitude, consider these words of President Marion G. Romney:

I conceive the blessings of the gospel to be of such inestimable worth that the price for them must be very exacting. . . . What is required is wholehearted devotion to the gospel and unreserved allegiance to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . . A half-hearted performance is not enough. . . . We must be willing to sacrifice everything. Through self-discipline and devotion we must demonstrate to the Lord that we are willing to serve him under all circumstances. When we have done this, we shall receive an

assurance that we shall have eternal life in the world to come. Then we shall have peace in this world.²

Christ's grace is infinite and powerful enough to cleanse us, but He will not save us *in* our sins, only *from* our sins (see Helaman 5:10). The Atonement of Jesus Christ will save us, but only after *all* we can do (see 2 Nephi 25:23). The Savior does not expect us to do more than we are able, but He does expect us to obey and repent as far as our power allows us, for God is a just God as well as a merciful God.

Alma, only a couple of chapters earlier, explains that “the plan of redemption could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance . . . , for except it were for these conditions, mercy could not take effect except it should destroy the work of justice” (Alma 42:13). Instead, “there is a law given, and a punishment affixed,” and unless we repent, “the law inflicteth the punishment.” If Christ saved us from the punishment of sins for which we have not repented, then mercy would overrule justice, and “the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God” (v. 22). God's mercy is reflected in His willingness to let us repent and then cleanse us, but He cannot redeem us if we do not allow Him to.

Captain Moroni, while mercifully offering Zerahemnah an opportunity to repent, recognizes these demands of justice. When Zerahemnah agrees to a “partial” repentance but refuses to make a covenant of peace, “Moroni returned the sword and the weapons of war, which he had received, unto Zerahemnah, saying: Behold, we will end the conflict. Now I cannot recall the words which I have spoken” (Alma 44:10–11). While Moroni would prefer that Zerahemnah had surrendered and promised never to fight the Nephites again, he cannot “recall” his words any more than God can recall eternal laws and decrees, or the “works of justice would be destroyed.” If we refuse to repent, God cannot simply repeal the law, but justice demands that we be exposed to the full force of the punishment.

Moroni delivers one final warning: only through complete repentance—a surrender of sin and a willingness to make a covenant—will

Zarahemnah and his men be allowed to leave in peace. This time, Zarahemnah doesn't try to reason with him—he simply retaliates. Zarahemnah rushes at Moroni to slay him, but one of Moroni's soldiers stops him, breaks his weapon, and scalps him before the Zoramite captain can retreat into his ranks. Then this Nephite soldier, hanging Zarahemnah's scalp on his sword, raises it aloft for everyone to see and cries out: "Even as this scalp has fallen to the earth, which is the scalp of your chief, so shall ye fall to the earth except ye will deliver up your weapons of war and depart with a covenant of peace" (Alma 44:14). Even Zarahemnah's scalping is not without meaning. It represents an admonition to change and repent, or death is inevitable. This brave Nephite soldier was trying to warn Zarahemnah and his soldiers that something much worse than being scalped would befall them if they did not repent.

Likewise, the Savior, in His great mercy, will often warn us of the more devastating and eternal consequences of sin with temporal hardships and sufferings. Mormon expounded on this when he wrote: "And thus we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him" (Helaman 12:3). The Lord also taught this in a modern-day revelation when He warned the Church in Kirtland that He "will chasten them and will do whatsoever [He] list, if they do not repent and observe all things whatsoever [He has] said unto them" (D&C 98:21). Sometimes, the trials, hardships, and obstacles that we face are not God's punishment upon us but a merciful reminder and warning of a more eternal punishment that comes unless we repent and obey. The Nephite soldier did not seek to punish Zarahemnah by scalping him but instead hoped to warn the Lamanites of the inevitable doom by continuing in their rebellion and sin.

Fortunately, the scalping of Zarahemnah was effective in getting the attention of his soldiers. The scriptures say many heeded the warning, laid down their weapons, and made a covenant of peace (see Alma 44:15). However, many others, including Zarahemnah, scorned the warning and tried to fight the Nephites again, but the Lamanites were quickly swept

down. Here, Mormon gives us valuable insight into why the Lamanites were so ineffective at this time. He explains that “their *naked* skins and their bare heads were exposed to the sharp swords of the Nephites,” and they “did fall exceedingly fast” (Alma 44:18; emphasis added).

Reasonably, without any physical protection, the Lamanites were doomed to perish in battle, but this imagery also has spiritual significance. Nakedness is used throughout the scriptures to denote being sinful before God and exposed to the demands of justice after not repenting. Jacob, describing the judgment bar of God, said, “We shall have a perfect knowledge of all our guilt, and our uncleanness, and our *nakedness*.” He then contrasts this image with the righteous “being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness” (2 Nephi 9:14; emphasis added). Moroni, also speaking about the Judgment, said that the wicked will “be brought to see [their] nakedness before God” and that Christ’s holiness “will kindle a flame of unquenchable fire upon [them]” (Mormon 9:5). In both cases, being naked represents standing before God as sinful, unrepentant, and unprotected by the Atonement of Christ. Even the Hebrew word for *atonement* means “to cover,”³ much as armor or a garment is meant to cover nakedness. The doctrine is clear: spiritual death awaits the unrepentant as dramatically and assuredly as the naked soldier confronting a well-protected and well-armed opponent.

Finding his army so devastated by this final onslaught, Zerahemnah “cried mightily unto Moroni, promising that he would covenant and also his people with them, if they would spare the remainder of their lives, that they never would come to war again against them” (Alma 44:19). Immediately, Moroni “caused that the work of death should cease again among the people” (v. 20). Once more, Moroni demonstrates that he is truly merciful and long-suffering—a man who desires peace, not war.⁴

The Savior’s mercy is also constantly extended to us. No matter how disobedient we might become, “his hand is stretched out still” (Isaiah 9:21). Consider these two statements that Christ Himself made, one to His prophet Alma and the other to his Nephite disciples, about those who postpone their repentance: “Yea, and as often as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me” (Mosiah 26:30), and “Ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for

unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them” (3 Nephi 18:32). Our merciful Savior is always inviting us to come unto Him, to repent, and to be cleansed. In this same manner, Moroni once more offers peace to Zarahemnah. The rebellious Zarahemnah accepts this proposal, promises never to come against the Nephites again, and is “suffered to depart into the wilderness” (Alma 44:20). And thus peace is established once more in the land.

Through the conflict of Moroni, Zarahemnah, and their armies, we learn of the great and eternal plan of salvation and how it applies directly to us. We can see our own mistakes, sins, and pride in the rebellious and hard-hearted attitude of Zarahemnah. By looking at the merciful, just, and loving manner of Moroni, we can more fully understand the nature of our Savior and appreciate how much He wants us to renounce our sins and make a “covenant of peace.”

As we discover these great eternal truths in what might appear to be nothing but a war chapter, we can not only be inspired to be more Christlike, but we can also be encouraged to seek other lessons found in the stories of this great book. As we begin to look at the different tales of the Book of Mormon through spiritual eyes, as Mormon did, we can recognize more fully the many gospel principles that are taught and personified throughout this volume of scripture. More and more, we can come to realize that “none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ” (Jacob 7:11) and that all scripture is written “to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God” (2 Nephi 25:23).

Notes

1. John W. Welch, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 4.
2. Marion G. Romney, in Conference Report, October 1949, 43–44.
3. See Russell M. Nelson, “The Atonement,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 33.
4. See Thomas R. Valletta, “The Captain and the Covenant,” in *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the World* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 241.