



Type: Journal Article

Stained Swords: A Psalm of Redemption

Author(s): Loren Blake Spendlove

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,
Volume 54 (2022)

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

Page(s): 195–206

Abstract: The author proposes a novel ideal for understanding the stained swords of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies that involves repetition, parallelism, and metaphoric Hebrew wordplay.

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 54 · 2022 · Pages 195 - 206

Stained Swords: A Psalm of Redemption

Loren Blake Spendlove

Offprint Series

© 2022 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org. You may subscribe to this journal at InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription.

STAINED SWORDS: A PSALM OF REDEMPTION

Loren Blake Spendlove

Abstract: *The author proposes a novel ideal for understanding the stained swords of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies that involves repetition, parallelism, and metaphoric Hebrew wordplay.*

A favorite story in the Book of Mormon recounts the miraculous conversion of many of the Lamanites from the preaching of the sons of Mosiah. Although many were converted, we are told that those “which had not been converted and had not taken upon them the name of Anti-Nephi-Lehi were stirred up by the Amlicites and by the Amulonites to anger against their brethren” (Alma 24:1).¹ Within the framework of this looming threat, Mormon added an eloquent and moving speech by the king of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, who himself had been renamed Anti-Nephi-Lehi. Part of his speech reads:

Now my best beloved brethren, since God hath taken away our stains and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren. Behold, I say unto you: Nay, let us retain our swords that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren. For perhaps if we should stain our swords again, they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins. (Alma 24:12–13)

In this speech, the king admonished his people that “since God hath taken away our stains and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren.” William Hamblin and Brent Merrill noted, “Two separate metaphors are used

1. All Book of Mormon citations are from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

here: first, that the swords had been stained with blood, and second, that they had been made bright again by God.”² Observing that metal swords could be difficult to stain with blood, Hamblin and Merrill proposed an idea for the construction of these swords:

From the Mesoamerican perspective, the most likely candidate for the Book of Mormon sword is the weapon known in Nahuatl (Aztec) as the *macuahuitl* or *macana*. The *macuahuitl* was constructed from a long staff or large paddle-shaped piece of wood. Sharp obsidian flakes were fixed into the edges of the wooden blade, giving it a deadly cutting edge. There are numerous representations of the *macuahuitl* in Mesoamerican art, the earliest dating back to the Pre-Classic era.... [A]lthough not impossible, the metaphor of staining metal swords with blood is somewhat unusual. However, if the Nephite sword were the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl* with a wooden shaft, blood would naturally stain and discolor the wood when an enemy was wounded. Furthermore, if a metal weapon becomes bloody, the blade can be easily wiped clean. Removing a bloodstain from wood is virtually impossible since the blood soaks into the fibers of the wood.³

Hamblin’s and Merrill’s idea that swords in the Book of Mormon were constructed in a manner similar to the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl* is intriguing and convincing.⁴ While I consider their proposal entirely plausible, I propose a different approach to the king’s speech that does not rely on any specific materials or method of construction for the swords. The proposal that I outline relies on repetition, parallelism, and metaphoric Hebrew wordplay.

2. William J. Hamblin and Brent A. Merrill, “Swords in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 342, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/swords-book-mormon>.

3. *Ibid.*, 338–40, 342.

4. Other Later-day Saint scholars have also supported this idea. See Matthew Roper, “Swords and Cimeters in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 34–43, 77–78, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol8/iss1/7>.



Figure 1. Drawing from the 16th century Florentine Codex showing three Aztec warriors each wielding a macuahuitl.⁵

Part 1: Prologue

I have divided the king’s speech into five separate sections: a prologue, three internal sections, and an epilogue. In the prologue to his speech, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi used a type of rhetoric that I call *spiral progression*, based on a pedagogical approach of the same name⁶ (see Table 1).

5. “Aztec Warriors (Florentine Codex),” *Wikimedia Commons*, last edited March 8, 2021, 21:14, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aztec_Warriors_\(Florentine_Codex\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aztec_Warriors_(Florentine_Codex).jpg).

6. Spiral progression is an instructional approach where a teacher introduces a concept to students and repeatedly returns to the same concept. Each time the concept is revisited, increased levels of depth or complexity are added.

Table 1. Prologue.⁷

- A 7 *I thank my God*
 B that *our great God* has in goodness sent *these our brethren, the Nephites*
- A 8 *I thank my great God*
 C that we have *opened a correspondence*
 B with *these brethren, the Nephites*.
- A 9 *I also thank my God*
 C that by *opening this correspondence*
 D we have been convinced of *our sins and of the many murders which we have committed*.
- A 10 *I also thank my God, yea, my great God*
 D that we might repent of these things, and also that he hath forgiven us of these *our many sins and murders which we have committed*
- E and took away the *guilt* from our hearts *through the merits of his Son*.

The first spiral in the progression begins with an expression of gratitude that God had sent “these our brethren, the Nephites” to teach them. In the next spiral the king repeats his thanks to God for the coming of “these brethren, the Nephites,” and he also adds a second element: that they had opened a correspondence with the Nephites. The third spiral, like the first and second, begins with another declaration of thanks to God, and the king repeats that a correspondence had been opened with the Nephites. Following these, the king adds that they have been convinced of their “sins and of the many murders” which they had committed. In the final spiral the king again leads off by expressing thanks to God, and then he repeats that they have committed “many sins and murders.” Completing the progression, the king adds his final thought, that “through the merits of his Son,” God has taken away “the guilt from our hearts.”

With his prologue building to a climax, the king laid out a four-step progression, with each spiral circling back to express thanks and to repeat the prior concept. The four-step progression can be summarized as follows:

7. In order to simplify the analysis of these verses, I have removed all but the essential passages. See the Appendix for a full exposition of King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s speech.

1. God sent the Nephites to preach to the Lamanites;
2. The Lamanites opened a correspondence with them. In other words, they responded to this preaching and positively engaged with the Nephites;
3. The Lamanites became convinced of their sins and murders; and,
4. They repented, were forgiven, and their guilt was taken away through the atonement of Jesus Christ.

Part 2: Expanded Progression

In the next section of his discourse, verses 11–13, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi crafted an expanded progression built upon the framework of his message in verse 10: repentance and forgiveness of sins through the atonement of Christ (see Table 2).

Table 2. Expanded Progression.

- | | |
|---|--|
| A | 11 <i>Since it has been all that we could do, as we were the most lost of all mankind, to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed and to get God</i> |
| B | <i>to take them [our sins and the many murders] away from our hearts —</i> |
| A | <i>for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God</i> |
| B | <i>that he would take away our stains —</i> |
| B | 12 <i>since God hath taken away our stains</i> |
| C | <i>and our swords have become bright,</i> |
| D | <i>then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren.</i> |
| D | 13 <i>Nay, let us retain our swords that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren.</i> |
| D | <i>For perhaps if we should stain our swords again,</i> |
| C | <i>they can no more be washed bright</i> |
| E | <i>through the blood of the Son of our great God,</i> |
| E | <i>which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins.</i> |

The king begins this section (Part 2) by repeating many of the same expressions that he used in the final lines of the prologue: repentance, their many sins and murders, and the removal of the guilt/sins from their hearts. In the prologue and in the opening line of this section, the king repeated variations of the phrase “our many sins and murders.”

In this section, the king also introduced a metonymic replacement for the people’s “many sins and murders”: *stains*. Although he initially associated these stains with the people’s sins and murders, calling them “our stains,” the king promptly shifted these stains from his people to their swords: “let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren.”

The only other mention of *stain* in the Book of Mormon occurs in Alma’s preaching to the members of the church in Zarahemla:

I say unto you: Ye will know at that day that ye cannot be saved; for there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until it is cleansed from all *stain* through the blood of him of whom it hath been spoken by our fathers which should come to redeem his people from their sins. And now I ask of you my brethren: How will any of you feel if ye shall stand before the bar of God, having your garments *stained* with blood and all manner of filthiness? Behold, what will these things testify against you? (Alma 5:21–22)

Alma’s metonymic usage of *stain* in these verses parallels that of King Anti-Nephi-Lehi, with one variation. While King Anti-Nephi-Lehi transferred the people’s sins/stains to their swords, Alma portrays their sins as stains on their garments. Like the king, Alma also explains that we can be “cleansed from all *stain* through the blood of him of whom it hath been spoken by our fathers which should come to *redeem* his people from their sins.”⁸ (We will later return to the significance of Alma linking “redeem” with “stains” in this passage.)

I propose that King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s metonymic shifting of the *stains* from the people to their swords represents wordplay on the Hebrew root ל-א-ל (*g-a-l*) with its derived verb גאל (*gaal*) and noun גאל (*goel*). This Hebrew root principally means to *pollute* or *defile* but can also carry the connotation of *to stain*. In the following passage from Isaiah, the prophet uses a nearly identical metaphor to that of King Anti-Nephi-Lehi when

8. Jacob employed a similar metaphor when he removed his garments and shook them before the people: “O my beloved brethren, remember my words. Behold, I take off my garments and I shake them before you. I pray the God of my salvation that he view me with his all-searching eye. Wherefore ye shall know at the last day, when all men shall be judged of their works, that the God of Israel did witness that I shook your iniquities from my soul and that I stand with brightness before him and am rid of your blood” (2 Nephi 9:44).

he identifies the people's hands that have been defiled/stained with blood and their fingers that likewise have been defiled/stained with iniquity:

For your hands are *defiled* [נגאלו *negoalu*] with blood, and your fingers with iniquity. (Isaiah 59:3 KJV)

The New International Version (NIV) renders these lines somewhat differently, translating נגאלו (*negoalu*) as *stained* rather than *defiled*:

For your hands are stained [נגאלו *negoalu*] with blood, your fingers with guilt. (Isaiah 59:3 NIV)

In a second passage from the KJV, Isaiah uses the same Hebrew verb to indicate that messiah's garments would be *stained* with the blood of the people:

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain [תגאלתי *egalti*] all my raiment. (Isaiah 63:3 KJV; cf. D&C 133:46–52)

The many sins and murders of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies have *defiled* their hearts and *stained* their hands with the blood of their enemies. However, God in his mercy took away this guilt from them “through the blood of the Son.” In a metaphorical and literal sense, the swords of these converted Lamanites had also been *defiled* and *stained* with the blood of their enemies. By shifting the stains — their sins and many murders — from the people to their swords, the king expertly employed a form of enallage,⁹ allowing his audience of converts to view their past iniquity from a distance. In addition, as “they did bury them up deep in the earth,” the people's swords became metaphorical scapegoats by absorbing and carrying away their stains.¹⁰

The wordplay in this section becomes even more intriguing when we recognize that another Hebrew root, with its accompanying verb and noun, shares the same spelling and pronunciation as the root for *defile*, *pollute*, or *stain*: to *redeem*. The Hebrew root for *redeem* — ל-ג-ג

9. *Enallage* is “an intentional substitution of one grammatical form for another. This technique can be used to create distance or proximity between the speaker, the audience, and the message.” Loren Spendlove, “Limhi's Discourse: Proximity and Distance in Teaching,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 8 (2014): 1, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/limhis-discourse-proximity-and-distance-in-teaching>.

10. See Leviticus 16.

(*g-a-l*) — and its derived verb and noun — גאל (*gaal*, to redeem) and גאל (*goel*, redeemer)¹¹ — are true homonyms of the verb *to defile* or *to stain* (גאל *gaal*) and the noun *defilement* or *stain* (גאל *goel*). Seeing that the king’s discourse is focused on the people’s redemption from their sins (stains) through the atonement of Christ, this wordplay is both fitting and appropriate.

Knowing that both *stain* and *redeem* are derived from the same Hebrew root, it appears that Alma also employed the same Hebrew wordplay as King Anti-Nephi-Lehi when he linked the people’s *stains* with the *redemption* of Christ in Alma 5:21–22, previously quoted.

Another Hebrew wordplay in Part 2 of King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s speech also merits discussion. The king explained that the people’s “swords have become *bright*.” In the following passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah, the italicized words are all derived from the Hebrew root ב-ר-ר (*b-r-r*):

He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, In the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; And He has also made Me a *sharpened* [ברור *barur*] arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver. (Isaiah 49:2 NASB20)

Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; *be ye clean* [הברו *hibaru*], that bear the vessels of the LORD. (Isaiah 52:11 KJV)

Make bright [הברו *hivaru*] the arrows; gather the shields: the LORD hath raised up the spirit of the kings of the Medes: for his device is against Babylon, to destroy it; because it is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance of his temple. (Jeremiah 51:11 KJV)

Carrying the connotation of *to be sharp* or *be clean*, this Hebrew verb, most likely originating from the Ugaritic root¹² *brr* meaning *shining*,¹³ can also mean *to be bright*. Given these definitions, it is likely that the swords of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies became bright through sharpening. It is very possible that these converted Lamanites, prior to burying their

11. Also, גאל (*goel*).

12. In the Ugaritic language, the root *brr* carried the meaning of “to be or remain pure, clean, free.” Gregorio del Olmo Lete, Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2015), 237.

13. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2001), s.v. ברור.

swords as a testimony to God, also sharpened them to make them shine as a further testimony that they were buried unstained, or undefiled, with the blood of their enemies.

Part 3: Chiasm

In Part 3 of his discourse, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi presents a well-crafted chiasm focused on God’s mercy and love for his children:

Table 3. Chiasm.

A	14	And the <i>great God</i> has had <i>mercy</i> on us
B		and <i>made these things known unto us</i> that we might not perish.
B		Yea, and <i>he hath made these things known unto us beforehand</i>
C		because <i>he loveth our souls</i>
C'		as well as <i>he loveth our children.</i>
B'		Therefore in his mercy he doth visit us by his angels, that the plan of salvation <i>might be made known unto us</i>
B'		as well as <i>unto future generations.</i>
A'	15	O how <i>merciful</i> is our <i>God!</i>

Part 4: Chiasm

In Part 4 we discover additional wordplay on the Hebrew root ב-ר-ר (*b-r-r*). As discussed in Part 2, this root can mean to *be sharp*, to *be clean*, or to *be bright*. In the chiasm in this section, the king contrasted (1) the taking away of the people’s *stains* (sins) and their *swords* that were *made bright* (sharpened) with (2) the preaching of *the word* that *made them clean* (see Table 4).

Table 4. Chiasm.

A	15	Since it has been as much as we could do to get our <i>stains taken away</i> from us and our <i>swords are made bright</i> ,
B		let us hide them away that they may be <i>kept bright</i>
C		as a <i>testimony</i> to our <i>God at the last day</i> —
C'		or <i>at the day</i> that we shall be brought to stand before him to be <i>judged</i> —
B'		that we have <i>not stained</i> our <i>swords</i> in the blood of our brethren
A'		since he imparted <i>his word</i> unto us and has <i>made us clean</i> thereby.

The wordplay in this section involving the root 7-7-2 (*b-r-r*) revolves around the parallel phrases “our swords *were made bright*,” and “*has made us clean* thereby.” While the swords would have been made *bright* through *sharpening*, the text does not explicitly explain how the people were made *clean*. However, the text might provide a clue. In Table 4, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi explained that the people’s stains (sins) were taken away from them, and in Table 2, we are told that this was accomplished through the atonement of “the Son of our God.” In the final line of Table 4, we are given a parallel teaching: the people were made clean because “he [God] *imparted his word* unto us.” Synonyms for *imparted* include *gave*, *communicated*, *proclaimed*, *divulged*, and *revealed*, among others. If we understand *his word* as a metonym for *his Son*,¹⁴ then the final line of Table 4 could be rendered “since he revealed *his Son* unto us and *made us clean* thereby.” The king had previously taught his people that their swords were “washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins.” In light of this teaching, it is reasonable to understand that through *his Word*, or through *Christ*, the people were made *clean*.

Part 5: Epilogue

In this final section, the king repeats the same elements found in Table 4: their swords are to be hidden, or buried, to keep them bright as a testimony at the last day. Finally, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi concludes by adding that if their enemies do destroy them, all will be well because they will go to their God “and shall be saved” (see Table 5).

Table 5. Epilogue.

- A 16 *If our brethren seek to destroy us,*
 B *behold, we will hide away our swords;*
 B *yea, even we will bury them deep in the earth,*
 C *that they may be kept bright*
 C *as a testimony that we have never used them, at the*
 last day.
- A *And if our brethren destroy us,*
 D *we shall go to our God*
 D *and shall be saved.*

14. See Loren Blake Spendlove, “The Word of the Lord as a Metonym for Christ,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 137–66, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-word-of-the-lord-as-a-metonym-for-christ/>.

In this section, the king proposed that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies bury their swords “deep in the earth” to keep them bright, or sharp. Since tools and instruments of war typically become dull through use, these sharpened swords would serve “as a testimony that we have never used them.”

Conclusion

Through the use of repetition, parallelism, and Hebrew wordplay, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi delivered a discourse of redemption and salvation to his people. In a well-crafted sermon, the king elegantly used several Hebrew roots to accomplish this wordplay. The people’s many sins and murders — identified as stains by the king that he metonymically transferred to their swords — were washed clean through the blood of Christ.

In Ephesians 6:17, Paul counseled the saints to take up the “sword of the Spirit,” which he identified as “the word of God.” As previously discussed, the *Word of God* can be understood as a metonym for Christ. So, when King Anti-Nephi-Lehi transferred the stains/sins of the people to their swords — an act of atonement similar to the expiation ritual of the scapegoat in ancient Israel — this can be understood as a metaphor for Christ taking upon himself their sins. And just as their swords were buried in the earth, Christ also was buried for our sake and then raised from the dead so that we, like the converted Lamanites, can “go to our God” and “be saved.”

Appendix: King Anti-Nephi Lehi’s Speech

I thank my God, my beloved people, that our great God has in goodness sent these our brethren, the Nephites, unto us, to preach unto us and to convince us of the traditions of our wicked fathers. And behold, I thank my great God that he has given us a portion of his Spirit to soften our hearts, that we have opened a correspondence with these brethren, the Nephites. And behold, I also thank my God that by opening this correspondence we have been convinced of our sins and of the many murders which we have committed. And I also thank my God, yea, my great God, that he hath granted unto us that we might repent of these things, and also that he hath forgiven us of these our many sins and murders which we have committed and took away the guilt from our hearts through the merits of his Son.

And now behold, my brethren, since it has been all that we could do, as we were the most lost of all mankind, to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed and to get God to take them

away from our hearts — for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stains — now my best beloved brethren, since God hath taken away our stains and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren. Behold, I say unto you: Nay, let us retain our swords that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren. For perhaps if we should stain our swords again, they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins. And the great God has had mercy on us and made these things known unto us that we might not perish. Yea, and he hath made these things known unto us beforehand because he loveth our souls as well as he loveth our children. Therefore in his mercy he doth visit us by his angels, that the plan of salvation might be made known unto us as well as unto future generations. O how merciful is our God!

And now behold, since it has been as much as we could do to get our stains taken away from us and our swords are made bright, let us hide them away that they may be kept bright as a testimony to our God at the last day — or at the day that we shall be brought to stand before him to be judged — 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. And now my brethren, if our brethren seek to destroy us, behold, we will hide away our swords; yea, even we will bury them deep in the earth, that they may be kept bright as a testimony that we have never used them, at the last day. And if our brethren destroy us, behold, we shall go to our God and shall be saved. (Alma 24:7–16)

Loren Spendlove (*MA, Jewish Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; PhD, Education, University of Wyoming; MBA, California State University, Fullerton; and, BS, Finance, Brigham Young University*) has worked in many fields, including academics and corporate financial management. A student of languages, his research interests center on linguistics and etymology.