



# Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

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Volume 22 | Number 1

Article 3

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January 2002

## “Let Us Stain Our Swords No More”

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### Recommended Citation

Linn, David and Barney, Kevin (2002) "“Let Us Stain Our Swords No More”," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 22: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol22/iss1/3>

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## “Let Us Stain Our Swords No More”

In Alma 24 we read of the courage of the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, Lamanites who had converted to the Lord. Their king pleaded with them, “Let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren” (Alma 24:12). So great was their faith that they covenanted never to take up arms again and buried their weapons of war. When the unconverted Lamanites came against them, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, rather than resist their attackers, prostrated themselves

on the ground to pray and allowed their brethren to slay them.

An interesting parallel to their courage is found in a story from ca. A.D. 287, preserved by Saint Eucher, bishop of Lyon (died A.D. 494).<sup>1</sup> He wrote of the Theban Legion, Christians from the region of Thebes in Upper Egypt who had been recruited for the Roman army in the third century A.D. When the Bagandae of Gaul (today’s France) rebelled, the emperor

Maximian assembled an army to which he added the Theban Legion, composed of 6,600 men. After the rebellion was quelled, Maximian ordered that the army join in offering sacrifices to the Roman gods for the success of their mission. This included the killing of Christians.

The Theban Legion refused to comply and was moved by their commander, Maurice, to Aguanum, present-day St. Maurice-en-Valais in Switzerland. When news of their disobedience reached Maximian’s camp at nearby Octudurum, he sent several messages repeating his order, each of which was refused. He then ordered that the legion be “decimated,” that is, that every 10th man (Latin *decimalis*) be put to death. He threatened a second decimation unless the men obeyed. The Christians from Thebes shouted that they would never commit the sacrilege the emperor demanded. The second decimation was ordered, yet the Thebans remained adamant. In this, they were like the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, of whom we read, “Now there was not one soul among all the people who had been converted unto the Lord that would take up arms against their brethren; nay, they would not even make any preparations for war; yea, and also their king commanded them that they should not” (Alma 24:6). The stirring speech of king Anti-Nephi-Lehi strengthened their resolve (Alma 24:7–16).



*The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice and the Theban Legion*, by El Greco. The Theban Legion, a third-century group of Egyptian Christians in the Roman army, was massacred by the order of the emperor Maximian after they refused to offer sacrifices—which included the killing of Christians—to pagan gods.

*Courtesy National Museum of Art of Romania*

Like the Lamanite king, the Theban commander, Maurice, addressed his legion, calling attention to the example of their slain comrades and persuading them all to be ready to die to keep their baptismal vows, which included the renunciation of Satan and the worship of God only. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies, too, had made a covenant, in which they vowed never to take up arms against their brethren (Alma 24:18).

Maurice sent a message to Maximian in which he declared, “We readily oppose your enemies whoever they are, but we cannot stain our hands with the blood of innocent people. We have taken an oath to God before we took one to you; you cannot place any confidence in our second oath if we violate the other. . . . We have arms in our hands, but we do not resist, because we would rather die innocent than live by any sin.” His words remind us of those of the Lamanite king, who said, “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).

Upon hearing the message from the Theban commander, the emperor sent troops to mas-

sacre the remaining Thebans. Declining to resist, they put aside their weapons and offered their necks to the executioners. St. Eucher wrote that, in doing this, they bore witness to Christ, who similarly died without protest. Here, too, we are reminded of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, who upon seeing the enemy coming against them “went out to meet them, and prostrated themselves before them to the earth, and began to call on the name of the Lord; and thus they were in this attitude when the Lamanites

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**“We have arms in our hands, but we do not resist, because we would rather die innocent than live by any sin.”**


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began to fall upon them, and began to slay them with the sword. And thus without meeting any resistance, they did slay a thousand and five of them; and we know that they are blessed, for they have gone to dwell with their God” (Alma 24:21–22).

At this point, we read that some of the attacking army, seeing the faith of those who were being slain, “repented of the things which they had done” and “threw down their weapons of war, . . . and they came down even as their brethren, relying upon the mercies of those whose arms were lifted to slay them. And it came to pass that the people of God were joined that day by more than the number who had been slain; and those who had been slain were righteous people, therefore we have no reason to doubt but what they were saved” (Alma 24:24–26).

The story of the Theban legion contains similar elements. Some members of the legion had been posted along the military highway used during the campaign, and they were sought out and slain. Eucher reported that miracles occurred during the slaughter, resulting in massive conversions to Christianity among local populations. Several soldiers were tortured by Hirtacus, Roman governor of Solothurn, in what is today Switzerland. The shackles binding them suddenly broke open

and the fire was extinguished.<sup>2</sup> When Hirtacus ordered their beheading, they offered their necks to the executioners.

We are not suggesting that the Book of Mormon account of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies derives from the story of the Theban Legion. They are too remote in time and place, and it is safe to say that Joseph Smith was unaware of the writings of St. Eucher. Rather, what we have are two accounts of people whose faith in Christ was so strong that they chose death over a betrayal of their sacred vows. It has always been thus with true believers. 

#### Notes

1. The story is recounted in a number of sources, of which perhaps the most complete is in Aziz S. Atiya, ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 7:2231–34.
2. Similar miracles are reported in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 7:16–18; Alma 14:26; 3 Nephi 28:19–22; 4 Nephi 1:31–33).

**By David Linn and Kevin Barney**