

Seasons of War, Seasons of Peace in the Book of Mormon

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When we look carefully at what the Book of Mormon says about war, we find that the many military activities reported did not take place just anytime during the calendar year. Rather, they occurred according to a definite pattern. Certain months were war months while others were not. The complete consistency of this pattern reminds us of how many details the writers of this scripture kept straight.

Useful information on this matter is found chiefly between Alma 9 and 47. A handful of cases report a specific day and month for a battle. For example, Alma 16:1 says that a Lamanite army attacked around the city of Ammonihah on “the fifth day of the second month in the eleventh year” of the reign of the judges over the Nephites.

Far more frequent is the kind of report given in Alma 44. The account of a huge battle between the Nephites and Lamanites near Manti ends this way: “They did cast their dead into the waters of Sidon, and they have gone forth and are buried in the depths of the sea. And the armies of the Nephites, or of Moroni, returned and came to their houses and their lands. And thus ended the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges” (verses 22-24). These statements indicate to me that this battle took place near the end of the year, probably during the final month. On the basis of statements like this, I count thirty-two cases in which the wording places the action near the end or the beginning of the year.

Finally, in about a dozen other cases, arriving at an approximate date for a military action is possible by noting everything said to have happened during the year, then dividing up the year according to how long each activity might logically have taken. These cases provide us with reasonable month dates, even though they might be off a little.

Unfortunately, all these dates are given only in terms of the Nephite calendar of that time. We would like to know a great deal more about that calendar than the statements about it in the Book of Mormon reveal. But at least we do learn some things and can infer other things. For example, the highest numbered month mentioned is the eleventh (see Alma 49:1). And the highest numbered day mentioned is the twelfth (see Alma 14:23). How many months were there in one year, and how many days did one month contain? If we are to answer those questions and construct a picture of what their calendar was like overall, we must look outside the scripture at the cultural background from which they came. (Keep in mind that the Nephites, and the Lamanites separately, could have made changes in their system over the years. Furthermore, they may have used more than one calendar at a time, as many other ancient peoples did.)

The Near Eastern background of Lehi’s people is one place to learn some things about what calendar system they might have carried to America with them. While not as many details on calendars are given in the Bible as we would like, still it appears as if the Jews in Lehi’s day used twelve months of thirty days each. (Peoples around the world have thought up and used a surprising variety of other forms of months and years, by the way.) Scholars assume that the Jews probably added five extra (“leap”) days at the end of the year (and perhaps another extra one periodically) in order to keep the calendar from getting out of agreement with the sun. (The actual sun year is a little more than 365 and one-quarter days long.) Without discussing here much of the other information on the matter known to scholars, I will assume that the Nephites did observe twelve months to the year, each month thirty days in length.

This timing pattern is striking. Clearly, wars went on mainly at the end and beginning of the year, while months six through nine were quiet. Also, what fighting there was in the fourth and fifth months tended to be minor skirmishes, not major wars. What reasons can we find for this pattern?

When we search this same section of Alma for statements about growing or harvesting food and about hunger or the resupply of armies, a pattern appears that makes sense in relation to the schedule for battles. The fourth through ninth months, when combat was rare or absent, were the months when crop cultivation was reported. Getting food to the armies seems to have been a concern chiefly in the twelfth through second months. So, allowing a couple of months to transport the crop from the fields to where the troops were, it looks as though the harvest was in months ten to twelve. The upshot of this is a picture of the Nephite year arranged something like the following:

Field preparation and cultivation	months 4-9
Main harvest	months 10-12
Time of warfare	chiefly months 11-3

Notice the logic of this calendar. Since the soldiers were also farmers (armies were made up almost totally of the equivalent of today's "reservists"), they were not normally available for war during the season when they had to labor "delivering their women and their children from famine and affliction, and providing food for their armies" (Alma 53:7). Logically, then, war went on after the farm work was done but before the next planting season had begun.

On this basis we can be confident that we know in what months, according to the Nephite calendar, the wars were fought. But we are still left with the question, How do the Nephite months correspond to our months?

The Nephite lands where this fighting went on were most likely in the American tropics. The weather pattern is generally similar anywhere in that warm zone. That region has its main rainy season at the same time as the North American summer. The major reason is that the strong sun heats the land, then the air that is heated at the surface expands and rises. When it goes up, moist air is pulled in off the oceans to replace it, producing rain. This May-through-September period, when there is both heat and moisture, is of course when the chief crops grow. On the contrary, October through April is much drier.

In the civilizations of Mesoamerica (southern Mexico and northern Central America)—the most probable scene for the Nephite society—before the time of Columbus, military campaigns were carried out between late October and about the end of February. The farmers were then mostly free of duties in the fields, and food from the year's crops (harvested from October into December) was at hand either from one's own people or by capturing it from the enemy. At the same time, rivers that had been full from the rain waters and land that was soggy during the wet season had become passable, and living in field camps could then be tolerated.

If we compare the picture of the seasons drawn from the Book of Mormon with what we know about Mesoamerica, the parallels are obvious. The Nephite war season, their tenth or eleventh through second or third

months, must coincide with the period for Mesoamerican conflicts, that is, roughly November through February. That means that the Nephite year (at least in the first century B.C. when these wars were recorded) ran from the latter half of December around through December again. A good guess is that their new year would have fallen at the winter solstice, December 21 or 22, when the sun appears to start moving northward again. (Many different ancient peoples followed such a “new year” dating.) Therefore, Nephite month twelve would have ended and month one begun near December 22—quite close to our own calendar.

The Mesoamerican data and the Book of Mormon account concerning seasons seem to fit so strikingly that it seems to me safe to assume that the matchup is correct. In its light, we can understand how a classic case of war among Book of Mormon peoples fits the facts of calendar and seasons. Alma 51:22-37 reports Amalickiah’s sudden attack on the “east borders by the seashore.” The Nephite dissenter Amalickiah, who had gained the kingship over the Lamanites by murder, had been getting his troops into position for months. At the same time, Captain Moroni, head of the Nephite armies, was putting down the “king-men” rebellion among his own people (see Alma 51:9-14, 22). The Lamanites struck first at the east (seaward) end of the Nephite defense line, capturing the city of Moroni. Then they headed for the narrow neck of land, staying “down by the seashore . . . driving the Nephites before them and slaying many” (verses 25, 28). Over a few weeks, they captured at least five more cities before the Nephites could stop them.

At that point they were practically at the land and city of Bountiful, the last obstacle before capturing their key objective, “the narrow pass” into the land northward. In this dangerous situation, both armies made camp right next to the beach because they were overpowered by “their much fatigue . . . caused by the labors and heat of the day” (verses 32-33). But Teancum, the leader of the local Nephite army, did not sleep. He sneaked into the enemy camp to Amalickiah’s tent, killed him without a sound, and got out without any of the Lamanites knowing about it.

“Thus endeth the twenty and fifth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi; and thus endeth the days of Amalickiah. And now, it came to pass in the twenty and sixth year . . . , when the Lamanites awoke on the first morning of the first month, behold, they found Amalickiah was dead in his tent” (Alma 51:37-52:1).

Our findings about the seasons permit us to pinpoint this operation on our calendar quite closely. The Lamanite forces had had a long haul from their homeland in Nephi to the scene near the city of Moroni where they were to launch their attack. They apparently began moving advance men and supplies well before they attacked, likely by the middle of month nine (the first week in September?). As the rains dried up sufficiently and the most crucial part of the harvest passed, freeing men to be mustered into the army, the main force would have moved from the land of Nephi in the next six weeks. By the beginning of the twelfth month (around November 17?), they would have been in place. (During that time, Moroni had been busy, getting a public vote of approval from key areas around the capital, Zarahemla, to put down the revolt of the king-men, then attacking and defeating those rebels.)

The capture of the city of Moroni and the others that fell would have consumed a few weeks, I suppose, based on the distances separating them. By late November and early December, the rain-swollen rivers would have finally shrunk to a size travelers could manage (the “east borders by the seashore” cannot be anything but a rather wet, low-lying, hot area), and the trails would have become passable. Finally, on the last day of the year (December 21?), they found themselves camped near the shore of the east sea not many miles from their objective, the pass leading north. Even though the hottest weather was several months away, still the bright sun and mugginess had made the soldiers weary, and they slept hard. Then Teancum’s daring feat in the middle of the night eliminated the Lamanite leader. The shocking discovery of their dead king on new year’s day had a predictable effect on the Lamanites (who seem to have observed the same new year day). They took it as an ill omen for the coming year (but they were

already field weary and might have been looking for an excuse to rest), so they hunkered down inside Mulek, the nearest of the cities they had captured.

Perhaps our establishing these dates is not important in understanding this attack or appreciating its results, but the concreteness of the setting, including the date and the weather, makes the entire business more “real” to me, more believable as history.

Over all, we find remarkable consistency in the handling of these highly technical bits of war and calendars. Most of us would not have been alert enough in writing a book about wars to have kept all this straight in our heads. If Joseph Smith had simply made up a “golden Bible” on the basis of his own experience and the locality where he lived, as some critics believe, then the thirty-two battles at the end and start of the year in the Book of Mormon would have fallen in western New York’s windy, icy winter, a major error! The “heat” suffered by the Nephite and Lamanite soldiers and Amalickiah’s death on new year’s eve (Alma 51:33-52:1) would have been a hilarious blunder. Instead, the timing of wars we find in the scripture is part of a consistent pattern. It all agrees with what the Book of Mormon says about itself—that it is a translation from an authentic ancient American record.