

An Oath of Allegiance in the Book of Mormon

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An important element in any military endeavor is the loyalty of the soldiers. Obviously, even the most brilliant military tactics will fail if the troops are unfaithful in fulfilling their duty. Often, to instill this loyalty, an oath of allegiance is administered to recruits. The well-known title-of-liberty episode in Alma 46 of the Book of Mormon includes an interesting example of just such an oath. This paper will examine that oath, drawing upon parallels from the ancient Near East for comparison.

Moroni's Call for Liberty

Amalickiah, "the man who would be king," had drawn a considerable portion of the Nephite population after him. Moroni, chief captain of the Nephite army, perceived the danger and realized that he needed the support of the people. He rent his coat and used it as a banner to rally the people. After a fervent prayer and a speech,

the people came running together with their armor girded about their loins, rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God; or, in other words, if they should transgress the commandments of God, or fall into transgression, and be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ, the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments. Now this was the covenant which they made, and they cast their garments at the feet of Moroni, saying: We covenant with our God, that we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression. (Alma 46:21-22.)

This oath is similar to a number of Near Eastern oaths that have two characteristics. First, they are self-execrative in nature: the party making the covenant or treaty takes upon himself a conditional curse, swearing that, if he fails to fulfill his part of the agreement, he is willing to endure a specified punishment. Second, they are accompanied by various rites that in some way symbolized the punishment to be inflicted. I have employed the term "simile oath" to refer to oaths of this type.¹

The Hittite Soldiers' Oath

Simile oaths occur throughout the ancient Near East. They are most generally used to strengthen the validity of treaties between states, the stronger of the two states forcing the weaker to swear the oath. There are instances, however, in which simile oaths were used to gather troops or insure their fidelity. The clearest example of this is the so-called Hittite Soldiers' Oath uncovered at Boghazköy in present-day Turkey.² The tablet dates roughly to the middle of the second millennium B.C. and is designated as the second in a series entitled "When they lead the troops to the oath." It contains a series of rituals in which an officer (presumably a priest) presents the participants with an object that, either through its destruction or by its very nature, represents the punishment for breaking the oath or for showing disrespect to the king. Two sections will be cited:

Then he places wax and mutton fat in their hands. He throws them on a flame and says: "Just as this wax melts, and just as the mutton fat dissolves, whoever breaks these oaths [shows disrespect to the king] of the Hatti [land], let [him] melt lik[e wax], let him dissolve like [mutton fat]!" [The me]n declare: "So be it!"³

As in the Book of Mormon, an object is “likened” to the participants in the ritual. In this case, wax and mutton fat are used instead of a piece of clothing.⁴ Should the soldiers break their oath, they would suffer the fate of the object.

The second section is strikingly similar to the Book of Mormon passage. Here the two are placed in parallel columns:

He [the priest] presents to them [a ...]. Before their eyes he [throws] it on the ground; they trample it under foot and he speaks as follows: “Whoever breaks these oaths, even so let the Hatti people come and trample that man’s town under foot.”⁵

Now this was the covenant which they made, and they cast their garments at the feet of Moroni, saying: We covenant with our God, that we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression (Alma 46:22).

Unfortunately the tablet is unreadable at the spot where the object in the Hittite ritual is mentioned. Norbert Oettinger has suggested that a figurine (*Figur*) was used.⁶ His suggestion seems to be based on the fact that a figurine is used in the previous section. If the object were indeed a figurine, it would be the only instance in which the same object is used in more than one section of the ritual. Regardless of what the object was, the act of throwing it on the ground and trampling it underfoot is identical to the Book of Mormon rite.

One way in which the two rituals differ is that in the Hittite Soldiers’ Oath, the official does all of the speaking. The soldiers only respond “So be it!” once the object has been presented and the conditional curse pronounced. In the Book of Mormon, the people have the object already in hand when they approach Moroni and they swear the entire oath rather than just utter a response to a prompt. This difference may be due to the types of documents we are dealing with. The Soldiers’ Oath is a description of a ritual. As such, it carefully records every detail (Hittite ritual is in fact known for its richness in detail). The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, is a narrative; its purpose is to tell a story. Specific details are of secondary consideration.

Note that before Moroni went out among the people he used the word “trodden” in the following statement: “Surely God shall not suffer that we, who are despised because we take upon us the name of Christ, shall be trodden down and destroyed, until we bring it upon us by our own transgressions” (Alma 46:18). Furthermore, the title of liberty was made of Moroni’s rent coat. These two actions—rending and treading upon — are repeated in the people’s oath.

It may be reasonable to assume that the people, seeing Moroni’s rent coat, used the rending of their own garments as a symbol of punishment in their simile oath. The same assumption cannot be made for the treading of their garments. They could not have known that Moroni used such a phrase unless he himself had told them. There are at least four possible ways to explain the treading of the garments:

(1) The author of the narrative gave us only part of a planned, more elaborate ceremony, in which Moroni, like the official in the Hittite oath, told the people to rend and tread their garments. (2) The rending and trampling of garments was a common form of simile oath already in use among the Nephites at this time. In Mosiah 12, Abinadi prophesies the death of King Noah. Among a series of images depicting the king's death is the following: "It shall come to pass that the life of king Noah shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace; for he shall know that I am the Lord" (Mosiah 12:3). This is another instance in the Book of Mormon when a garment symbolized the fate of an individual. Note also that Noah did indeed suffer death by fire. (3) When Moroni prayed, named the land, and spoke of being trodden down (see Alma 46:16-18), some of his officers or men may have been with him, hearing what he said and seeing what he did. They could have instigated the symbolic simile responses among the people at large. (4) The author of this section of the narrative (Mormon, or possibly an eyewitness of the event whose writing Mormon used in his compilation) was influenced by the words of the oath, and he wrote the reference to "treading" into Moroni's statement.⁷

A Mesopotamian Call to Arms

A letter from the archive at Mari describes a call to arms perhaps involving an oath:

Tell my lord: your servant Bandi-Lim sends the following message: I have been waiting now for five days for the Hanean [a nomadic tribe in ancient Syria] auxiliaries at the place agreed upon, but the soldiers are not assembling around me. The Hanean auxiliaries did come out of the open country but they are now staying in their own encampments. I sent messages into these encampments once or twice to call them up, but they did not assemble; in fact, it is three days now and they still are not assembling.

Now then, if this meets with the approval of my lord, one should execute some criminal kept in the prison, cut off his head, and send it around outside the encampments as far away as Hutnim and Appan, so the soldiers will become afraid and will assemble here quickly.⁸

The problem here was the same as in the aforementioned calls to arms: how to get the troops to assemble. The solution was similar in that it involved the death and dismemberment of a victim. The sender of the letter mentions a "place agreed upon," but it is not clear whether the agreement had been made with the Haneans. Assuming that it had been made with them, the killing of the criminal might have been intended to represent those who would not assemble, thus violating the agreement. On the other hand, the action might rather have been a simple threat.

A Mutual Protection Covenant in the Old Testament

The final example for comparison to the Book of Mormon is from the Old Testament, the product of a culture that is more directly related to that of the Book of Mormon. This example differs from the record of the Hittite ritual in that it is not a verbatim quote of a simile oath. Rather, it is a pair of incidents demonstrating that such an oath had been sworn in ancient Israel.

The first incident, recorded in Judges 19-21, is the tale of a man and his concubine who, while traveling, stop for the night at the city of Gibeah. In a manner reminiscent of Lot's experience at Sodom and Gomorrah, men from the city accosted the man. He eventually sent his concubine out to the men, who "abused" her to death during the night. In the morning, the man found his concubine's body at the door of the house where he had been staying. He took the body and returned home. "And when he was come into his house, he took a knife, and laid hold on his

concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel” (Judges 19:29).

When the Israelites had received the pieces, they came out “as one man” to Mizpeh and heard the man tell his story (Judges 20:1-7). A large group of men was chosen to go to Gibeah and demand that the culprits be turned over. Gibeah was within the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. The Benjaminites, rather than comply with this request, decided to defend the city and its criminals. A series of horrific battles ensued, and nearly the entire tribe of Benjamin was destroyed (see Judges 20:8-48). Afterwards, “the children of Israel said, Who is there among all the tribes of Israel that came not up with the congregation unto the Lord? For they had made a great oath concerning him that came not up to the Lord to Mizpeh, saying, He shall surely be put to death” (Judges 21:5). They discovered that the city of Jabesh-gilead had not sent anyone. “And the congregation sent thither twelve thousand men of the valiantest, and commanded them, saying, Go and smite the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead with the edge of the sword” (Judges 21:10).

The second incident is reported in 1 Samuel 11. In this story, Jabesh-gilead, the same city that had earlier been destroyed for not complying with the oath requiring all Israel to send representatives to Mizpeh in time of need, was saved by an army gathered by that same oath. Amorites had attacked the city, and the Gileadites sent messengers to inform Saul of the situation. Upon hearing of Jabesh’s plight, Saul “took a yoke of oxen, and hewed them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the coasts of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, Whosoever cometh not forth after Saul and after Samuel, so shall it be done unto his oxen. And the fear of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out with one consent” (1 Samuel 11:7). P. Kyle McCarter has suggested that in the original text the people themselves, not just their oxen, were to be the recipients of the potential punishment.⁹ Whatever the punishment, the Israelites gathered in great numbers and delivered Jabesh from the Amorites.

These two incidents can be best understood when viewed together. The fact that the same city plays a part in both stories strengthens this notion. The common elements in these stories are the almost ritualistic hewing into pieces of the concubine in the first instance and of the pair of oxen in the second and the sending out of pieces as a sign to indicate the need to gather a military force. In the first narrative, the need was to administer internal justice; and in the second, it was to protect against incursions by outside forces. The writer of Judges mentions that a “great oath” had been sworn, the violation of which meant death to the oath taker (Judges 21:5). The message Saul sent indicates that the bloody pieces were both a call to arms and a representation of the punishment that would befall any who did not participate. Judges 20-21 reports an actual case of nonparticipation and its consequences. The destruction of the Benjaminites provides ample testimony of the seriousness of the oath.

On the basis of these two stories, we can reasonably assume that the oath referred to was a simile oath and that the ritual symbolizing the punishment for the oath breaker was an animal sacrifice.¹⁰ The oath and ritual might have gone something like the following: An animal was sacrificed, and all Israel swore “May the Lord do to us as we have done to this animal if we should fail to live up to the terms of the covenant,” which most likely included a mutual protection clause. The abundant use of animal sacrifice in simile oaths in Syria and Mesopotamia supports this notion.¹¹

In some respects, the Book of Mormon oath resembles the biblical example more closely than the Hittite one, even though one section in the Hittite ritual has a very close parallel to the Book of Mormon oath. The Hittite oath includes a variety of rituals. In this regard, it is similar to the ceremony that accompanied Neo-Assyrian treaties, some of which are quite complex. In one section the troops are shown a distaff and mirror and are told that they will be turned into women should they be untrue to their oath. This threat can either be taken literally, in which

case supernatural intervention is needed for realization, or may refer to a symbolic insult or legal transformation. The Book of Mormon and biblical oaths on the other hand are much simpler, involving just a few actions rather than a whole series of rites. Furthermore, the biblical and Near Eastern curses are brutally realistic, as evidenced by the objects used to symbolize the punishment and its infliction in the incident of the murdered concubine.

Returning to the Book of Mormon, we see a pattern similar to the biblical examples: “Now it came to pass that when Moroni had said these words he went forth, and also *sent forth in all the parts of the land* where there were dissensions, and *gathered together all the people* who were desirous to maintain their liberty, to stand against Amalickiah and those who had dissented, who were called Amalickiahites” (Alma 46:28; italics added). Just as in the Old Testament, there are two aspects: (1) a sending forth to all parts of the land and (2) a gathering together of armed people. “Moroni thought it was expedient that he should take his armies, who had gathered themselves together, and armed themselves, and entered into a covenant to keep the peace” (Alma 46:31).

That this oath was taken just as seriously as the biblical one is demonstrated in the following verse: “Whomsoever of the Amalickiahites that would not enter into a covenant to support the cause of freedom, that they might maintain a free government, he [Moroni] caused to be put to death; and there were but few who denied the covenant of freedom” (Alma 46:35).

It is impossible to tell to what degree, if any, the Old Testament example influenced Moroni in establishing the oath of liberty. His use of the story of Joseph to inspire the people is evidence that he had access to and knowledge of the writings contained upon the plates of brass. To say anything more than this would be pure speculation.

A word or two should be said about the title of liberty that Moroni caused “to be hoisted upon every tower which was in all the land, which was possessed by the Nephites; and thus Moroni planted the standard of liberty among the Nephites” (Alma 46:36). The wonderful thing about symbols is that they can stand for any number of things. To the Nephite who saw the title of liberty, thoughts of Joseph’s coat rent by his brethren probably came to mind because of Moroni’s talk. Perhaps it also symbolized for him a garment that he himself had rent, which in turn represented his own person, which he swore would be rent if he should “fall into transgression.”

As stated previously, no provable direct genetic links exist between the Book of Mormon oath and those of the Bible and the Near East. However, Moroni’s simile oath fits the mold cast by such oaths in the Bible and the ancient Near East, both in its form — a simple graphic action representing the punishment — and in its specific use — the gathering of a military force and the insuring of its loyalty. There is evidence of a similar mind set — a fascination with the use of symbols and the importance given to the oath. In all cases, the simile oath seems to have been an effective means both of assembling and enlisting troops and of guaranteeing their loyalty once gathered.

Notes

¹. I hope in the future to publish a paper treating simile oaths in Latter-day Saint scripture and in ancient Near Eastern texts in general. The interested reader can find information on these types of oaths in the following: J. M. Munn-Rankin, “Diplomacy in Western Asia in the Early Second Millennium B.C.,” *Iraq* 18 (1956): 68-110; Robert Polzin, “HWQY’ and Covenantal Institutions in Early Israel,” *Harvard Theological Review* 62 (1969): 227-40; Angel Gonzalez- Nunez, “El Rito de la Alianza,” *Estudios Biblicos* 24 (1965): 217-38; P. J. Henninger, “Was bedeutet die rituelle Teilung eines Tieres in zwei Hälften?” *Biblica* 34 (1953): 344-53; Gerhard Wallis, “Eine Par- allele zu Richter 19:29 ff. and 1. Sam. 11:5 ff. aus dem Briefarchiv von Man,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 64 (1952): 57-61. See also Mark Morrise, “Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament, and Book of Mormon,” F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, 1982.

² The most readily available English translation of this text, and the one used here, is Albrecht Goetze, "Hittite Rituals, Incantations, and Festivals," in James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: University of Princeton, 1955), 353-54. More recent is Norbert Oettinger, *Die militärischen Eide der Hethiter* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976).

³ Goetze, "Hittite Rituals," 353.

⁴ Wax is often used in such oaths. See, for example, the treaty of Esarhaddon, in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 540; also Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Aratnaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 15.

⁵ Goetze, "Hittite Rituals," 354.

⁶ Oettinger, *Die militärischen Eide der Hethiter*, 13.

⁷ Before shifting focus to another Near Eastern oath, I should state that I do not believe that there is any *direct genetic link* between the Book of Mormon and the Hittite rituals. The spatial and temporal distances between them preclude such a possibility.

⁸ Charles François, *Archives royales de Mari II, Lettres diverses, transcrites et traduites* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1950), text 48.

⁹ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980), 203.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Donald J. Wiseman, "Abban and Alalah," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 12 (1958): 129. Oddly enough, the military use of sacrifice is not entirely dead. In 1986, after America had attacked Libya, Khadafi gave an inflammatory speech to a group of 3,000 Libyan soldiers. "Afterward, the youths dragged a struggling cow with the name Reagan painted on its side into the square outside the barracks and cut its throat. They thrust their hands into the wound and raised blood-covered fists into the air as they chanted 'Down, Down, USA!' and called for a *jihad* (holy war) against America." (Michael Ross, "Kadafi Calls U. S. 'Great Liar,'" *Los Angeles Times*, Saturday, 29 March 1986, part 1, p. 14.) Although here the sacrifice was more of a threat than any kind of an oath, it was used to stir up feelings and eventually to gather a militia.