

The Nephite Calendar in Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman

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Alma 16:1 "in the eleventh year of the reign of judges over the people of Nephi, on the fifth day of the second month"

At many points in the Book of Mormon, especially in the books of Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman, the record keepers refer to dates in their time-reckoning system ("thus ended the ninth year of the reign of the judges," "it came to pass in the fifty and fourth year," etc.). Translating these references to our calendar has seemed impossible. For example, the Israelite new year began in August, but we have no idea what changes might have taken place from Lehi's day to Mosiah's.

An aspect of the Book of Mormon that has just been noticed may give us a key to solving the problem. With remarkable consistency, the Nephite record reports a pattern of seasonality in Nephite warfare. Since wars in pretechnical societies are usually launched at opportune times of the year, the Nephite pattern of warfare tells us something about the seasons and their calendar.

The beginning and ending of the Nephite year frequently falls around the time of major battles. For example, Alma 44 ends with the defeat of a Lamanite army and the return of Moroni's forces to their houses and their lands: "Thus ended the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges" (Alma 44:24). When all such dates are tabulated, the distinct pattern emerges that most wars were fought in the eleventh through second months of the year. (Actually, we are not certain that there were twelve months in this calendar, since the highest number mentioned is eleven; yet based on Near Eastern and Mesoamerican calendar systems, the likelihood is very high that the Nephites at this time followed a pattern of twelve months probably with thirty days per month.) But virtually no battling took place in months six through ten. Instead, that period was when the mass of part-time soldiers were required to till the ground, "delivering their women and their children from famine and affliction, and providing food for their armies" (Alma 53:7).

When the seasons for cultivation and warring in Mesoamerica before the time of Columbus are studied, an equally sharp division is seen. (The schedule is essentially the same anywhere in tropical America, in fact.) The preparation and cultivation of farmlands and other domestic chores went on from about March through October, which constituted the rainy season. Wars began after the harvest and mainly went on during the hot, dry months, November through February. Of course, camping in the field was sensible at this time, and movement was least hampered by the swollen streams or boggy ground common in the other part of the year.

Putting these two sets of information together, we see that the fighting season referred to in the annals of the wars in the books of Mosiah through Helaman—their months eleven through two—likely coincided approximately with November through February in our calendar. Moreover their new year's day is likely to have fallen near winter solstice (December 21/22), as with many other peoples of the ancient world.

Interestingly, December was a hot season both in Mesoamerica and in the Book of Mormon, as we read in Alma 51:32-37 and 52:1. Recall that Teancum slew Amalickiah on the Nephite/Lamanite new year's eve as he slept deeply from fatigue "caused by the labors and heat of the day" (Alma 51:33). In Joseph Smith's New England, of course, New Year's Eve would have been icy.

If our equation is correct, the Nephite months ran like this:

First month began near our December 22. Second month began near January 21. Third month began near February 20. Fourth month began near March 22. Fifth month began near April 21. Sixth month began near May 21. Seventh month began near June 20. Eighth month began near July 20. Ninth month began near August 19. Tenth month began near September 18. Eleventh month began near October 18. Twelfth month began near November 17.

Probably five extra (leap) days completed the year, as in both Egyptian and Mesoamerican calendars. After the birth of Christ, of course, the calendar was changed (see 3 Nephi 2:8); by how much, we cannot tell from the Book of Mormon.

Based on research by John L. Sorenson, June 1990. The extensive tabulation of Sorenson's data is presented in his article, "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica," in Stephen Ricks and William Hamblin, eds., Warfare in the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 445-77, and a useful popular summary appears in his "Seasons of War, Seasons of Peace in the Book of Mormon," in John Sorenson and Melvin Thorne, eds., Rediscovering the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 249-55.