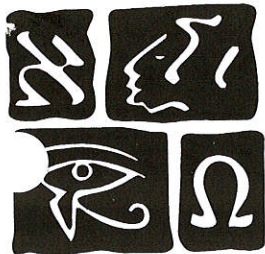




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John L. Sorenson

The Significance of the Chronological Discrepancy between Alma 53:22 and Alma 56:9

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Summary:

John Sorenson analyzes the extent and significance of the discrepancy between two reports of the same event in the Book of Mormon and explores how the two versions may have arisen. He looks at the scope of the problem and the fallibility of the historical record before analyzing the problem and offering a resolution. He also provides a reconciled chronology of the years in question and discusses some lessons we can learn from the discrepancy.

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The Significance of the Chronological Discrepancy
Between Alma 53:22 and Alma 56:9

John L. Sorenson

Examination of a conflict in two reports of the same event in the Book of Mormon opens new perspectives for us on how the record was formed and how we need to read it. Alma 53:22-23 says:

And now it came to pass that Helaman did march at the head of his two thousand stripling soldiers, to the support of the people in the borders of the land on the south by the west sea. And thus ended the twenty and eighth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi.

This report was evidently phrased by Mormon during his editing of the Nephite record approximately 450 years after the reported event took place.

The same event is reported in Alma 56:9 in the epistle which Helaman wrote to Moroni near the end of the 29th year of the judges (Alma 56:1; 59:1):

For behold, in the twenty and sixth year, I, Helaman, did march at the head of these two thousand young men to the city of Judea, to assist Antipus, whom ye had appointed a leader over the people of that part of the land.

The same event is said in the first account to have taken place in the 28th year and in the second record in the 26th year.

The intent of this paper is to analyze the extent and significance of the discrepancy and then to explore how the two versions may have arisen. Finally a reconciliation will be presented.

I begin with a detailed chronology of the events reported in the two sources. The events are presented following a calendrical scale which takes account of each statement involving chronology that is made in the text. Where events have no direct chronological assignment given by the text, I interpolate them between stated dates on the basis of their historical and geographical implications in the most plausible way I can. The form of the dates is: 27.VII.21, signifying the 21st day of the 7th month¹ of the 27th year of the reign of the judges.

The Scope of the Problem

When we compare the two accounts of Helaman's move from Melek to the war zone at Judea, we encounter the following difficulties:

1. The sheer dates for the arrival of Helaman and his soldiers on the west sea/south differ by two full years. This difference is part of a pattern, not a simple mis-speaking, as the following points show.

2. Moroni was almost certainly in Zarahemla in the 7th month of the 27th year when, if we follow the dating in Helaman's epistle, prisoners taken by Helaman and his forces at the battle in the wilderness north of Antiparah and their guards would have reached the capital (Alma 56:57). Moroni had to be in Zarahemla at the time recruiting and organizing the army he used to reinforce Teancum's troops which were defending Bountiful from the Lamanites in their base at captured Mulek (Alma 52:2). He reached Bountiful with his relief army near the end of that year; given the distance from Zarahemla to Bountiful stated and implied elsewhere, we can be sure that he would not have left the capital before the 10th month. So if the dates given in Mormon's account (presumably based on official annals kept in Zarahemla) and in Helaman's epistle were both taken to be accurate, we would have to ask, how was it that Moroni knew nothing about the near-Antiparah battle until Helaman wrote to him about it? It is impossible to believe that while going about his military duties in the capital city he could have failed to hear from the guards over the Lamanite prisoners, or at least second hand, about the battle and the miraculous preservation of the 2000 youths.

3. Alma 53:8 clearly implies that Moroni himself was at the west sea/south front in the latter half of the 28th year shortly before the Lamanite offensive there. Nevertheless, Helaman writes a year later as though Moroni was entirely ignorant of events in the area since late in the 26th year. According to the dating in his own letter, Helaman would have been in action in that very same area at the time when Moroni was there as indicated in Alma 53:8.

4. By Helaman's dating (Alma 57:4), Antiparah would have been recaptured only a few months after its fall to the Lamanites as given in the official annal (Alma 53:8). This would make incomprehensible the lengthy military activities in the area related in Alma 56:15-57:4.

Other points could be added, but the matter is already clear enough--the two parallel records do not match up at every point. The only conclusion to be reached is that one or the other of the chronologies is in error, or else both are.

The Fallibility of the Historical Record

The Nephite volume itself warns us that their records were fallible in details.

- The title page of the Book of Mormon indicates that Mormon (or Moroni) considered that their record could contain "the mistakes of men;" they did not believe it infallible.

- Mosiah 6:4 dates the beginning of Mosiah's reign as "about" 476 years from the time Lehi left Jerusalem, suggesting that the historical/calendrical information in the record was indeterminate.²

- In 3 Nephi 1:5 it is apparent that not all the people agreed on calendrical matters ("there were some who began to say that the time was past")

- 3 Nephi 8:1-2 notes the chance for error, while expressing faith that the problem was not likely to be serious ("according to our record, and we know our record to be true," nevertheless, "if there was no mistake made by this man in the reckoning of our time") But, obviously, substantial omissions could occur, even in regard to sacred matters; Nephi was chided by the Lord for failure to make a complete record about Samuel--3 Nephi 23: 7-13.

- Moroni is apologetic in Mormon 9:31-33 and Ether 12:24-25 about "imperfection" he suspects may occur throughout the Nephite record. Some of this he attributes to the difficulty of making a clear and complete record using their imperfect writing system and difficult-to-manage metallic pages.

- The pattern for making historical entries that prevailed early in Nephite history, and presumably was carried on afterward, had the scribe write up his account years after events had taken place. Who can forget Chemish's frank description of Nephite scribal and historiographical practice?

I write, in the same book with my brother; for behold, I saw the last which he wrote, and that he wrote it with his own hand; and he wrote it in the day that he delivered them unto me. And after this manner we keep the records, for it is according to the commandments of our fathers. (Omni 1:9)

Further, John W. Welch's analysis of Helaman 6:7-13 (F.A.R.M.S. Update, May 1987) as an example of the use of chiasmus demonstrates that the entire annalistic report given on the 64th year of the judges was a unified composition which could only have been

produced after the end of the year. Of course delayed writing of entries invites errors in recollection.

It is evident, then, from what the record itself tells us that finding mistakes in its details need not surprise us. That we find a contradiction at this particular spot late in the book of Alma may be because this is one of the few parts of our present Book of Mormon where we can examine distinct, parallel records of the same events. (This is unlike the Old Testament, for which we have substantial duplication, as between the books of Kings and Chronicles, where many contradictions are evident.) Surely if we had additional parallel records for Book of Mormon happenings, more uncertainties would become apparent.

How the Contradiction Between Alma 53 and 56 Might Have Arisen

In the case of the record involving Helaman and his men, flaws might have arisen in the annal kept in Zarahemla, where information on that out-of-the-way corner of the land--from the point of view of the capital's functionaries--where Helaman and his men fought might have been limited. In any case, those events apparently seemed insignificant in the capital. Moroni knew the officials in Zarahemla well and he certainly had a poor opinion of their competence (Alma 60:1-7, 19, 24), which may well have extended to recordkeeping, as is hinted by Alma 58:4, 7-8. So the official Nephite record kept in Zarahemla may have noted only in a perfunctory or indeterminate way Helaman's arrival in Judea with his young men (he did not travel via the capital).

Or Helaman could have erred himself. He wrote his epistle from the field immediately after long, stressful fighting. Under those conditions he probably had to rely on his memory for all details. Besides, Helaman may by personality have been more a man of God and of action than a meticulous recordkeeper.

Mormon, too, could have been a source for confusion. In working up his edited version of this part of the record, he made at least two patent errors of fact (in Alma 53:6, "the land of Nephi" obviously should be "the land of Zarahemla," while at 51:26 the reference to Nephihah being captured is contradicted by 59:5, 7, and 11). While some have considered these sorts of errors to be mere "slips of the pen," like what we today call "typos," the matter is more complicated. The recordkeepers were impressed with the permanency of the record they were placing on metal and must have taken special care with the engraving, which was itself a slow and difficult task completely unlike our casual use of a pen. So when we discover that the two most obvious mistakes in Mormon's long record

come within six chapters of each other, it is reasonable to suggest that he could have been working under unusual stress at that time, stress that could have contributed to the problem we are considering. The military pressures on Mormon while he was doing his writing would alone have been unnerving. His advancing age could also have played a part (we do not know just when in his life he did his great editing work, but he could have been around 70 at the time he wrote up the account (compare Mormon 4:23-5:7) and he had been a soldier and commander in the field for most of his life. We should not be surprised if he suffered lapses in attention in the scribal work. Or a problem may have arisen, not from inattention or error, but due to lack of resources; he may have seen the conflict in dates between his main source and Helaman's epistle (which after all he specifically chose to include) but without having sufficient time, energy or documentary sources to resolve the problem any better than he did.

Another possible reason for the discrepancy could be the Nephites' terminological system for recording years. Their formal practice may have been like that of many other peoples, labelling each year by reference to a notable event (for example, 3 Nephi 1:1, "and it was in the [first?] year that Lachoneus was the chief judge and the governor over the land"). Possibly only Mormon provided us in retrospect the systematic overview through consecutive year numbers which he assigned and which looks to us straightforward. For example, if the term translated by Mormon as "twenty-eighth year" (Alma 53:22), actually was represented in the original record(s) by a "reformed Egyptian" character (glyph) combination which made no reference to an ordinal numeral, in Mormon's reckoning of the sequence of years he may have suffered a slip in placing that named year correctly into his numbered sequence. (Amulek's sermon, at Alma 10:6, uses a number for the year, and Helaman's epistle of course makes such references, yet they might only reflect colloquial usage, while the official Zarahemla account followed a different year-naming system as hinted in 3 Nephi 1:1, thus necessitating Mormon's reconciling hand. Of course we cannot know any of this for sure.)

A possibility remains that Joseph Smith in translating the record somehow introduced the set of chronological errors we are examining, but it is not apparent to me how that could have come about, hence I do not discuss it.

Analyzing the Problem

Given the conditions under which it was produced, Helaman's account seems to me more likely to be the source of the dating

problem than the official account. Let us examine in detail the problems it poses.

Helaman's account of the "twenty-eighth year" is immediately suspect. To see what is wrong, we must go back to Alma 56:42. There he dates the crucial battle near Antiparah, where his young soldiers were miraculously preserved from death, to the "seventh month" of the "twenty-seventh" year (verse 20). The chapter ends with verse 57 on the immediate aftermath of the victory. Security problems led to the Lamanite prisoners being packed off to Zarahemla while the Nephite soldiers headed back to their base at Judea. Chapter 57 then begins with Ammoron, the Lamanite ruler, asking Helaman for a prisoner release (the only prisoners at issue were those taken in the recent battle) in return for his giving up now-undermanned Antiparah. But the two leaders could not agree. As a result Helaman prepared to attack Antiparah, only to have the Lamanites abandon the city to him (verse 4). Verse 5 then immediately has Helaman's letter saying, "thus ended the twenty and eighth year." But, contrary to usual practice, nothing had been said of the end of the 27th or the beginning of the 28th year. The 28th year could only have been covered in verses 1-4. There only two things happened worth noting: Ammoron's offer to exchange prisoners and the Lamanite evacuation of Antiparah. Could they have covered 12 months? Hardly. In fact chapters 56 and 57 give every appearance of being a continuous and integral record.

To summarize, if we take Helaman's report of the order of events literally (but ignore his dates), we would have this sequence:

1. First, the battle in which the bulk of the Lamanite force at Antiparah is lured out of the city only to be destroyed or taken prisoner.
2. Within days the prisoners are sent off to Zarahemla because of the logistical and security problems they pose.
3. Ammoron offers a deal in order to get those prisoners back. He must have communicated this by an emissary sent before he became aware that his men had been shipped out, for he wrote to Helaman, the field commander not to Zarahemla. Thus his offer must have come within weeks if not days after the battle. (An implication is that while negotiating Helaman purposely kept Ammoron in the dark about the fact that the prisoners had been sent away, for Ammoron never tried negotiating with Zarahemla. Two messenger round-trips between the commanders would have been involved, plus time for drafting responses; depending on where Ammoron was located--at Nephi or at a field headquarters--this process could have consumed from two weeks to two months.)

D. As part of the offer, Ammoron is willing to give up Antiparah. It was, after all, the westernmost of the Nephite cities he held and was only marginal to his real aim (see Alma 52:13).

E. The deal is refused by Helaman, who instead makes preparations to go against Antiparah. The abandonment comes as soon as the Nephite force looks ready to attack. So as not to lose his advantage, Helaman would have acted as quickly as feasible, within months, before Ammoron could scrape up reinforcements for the place.

Now on Helaman's chronology, this sequence would have consumed about 16 or 17 months, B and C being approximately a year apart. That is incredible in terms of the military situation involved. Rather it seems clear that one full year of the attributed dating must be wrong; a four or five month course of events would fit the operational facts nicely.

Where did the one year mistake occur? Not near the end of the sequence, for Helaman wrote his epistle in "the latter end" of the 29th year (58:38) and, with complete consistency, it reached Moroni in the east sea area two days into the following 30th year. That calls for a wholly plausible transmission interval of around one month. Thus the lapse must have been earlier in Helaman's account, back in the battle-dimmed area of his memory.

I see no alternative to assuming that Helaman misremembered and should not have said that he and his young men went to Judea in the 26th year. He must have been off by at least one year. But the discrepancy between the mainline account and his epistle is two years. Could his memory have been two full years off within a four year span of events? That seems highly unlikely. Thus we have only discovered part of the reason for the discrepancy. We still have to examine the possibility that the official annal on which Mormon relied placed the date of Helaman's march to Judea late by a year.

The kind of glaring inconsistency we have discovered in Helaman's account is not apparent in the recounting in Alma 52-55 of events from the 26th to the 30th year. Yet a question does arise that was noted earlier. It concerns the reference to Moroni's reported involvement on the west sea/south, the very area where Helaman was fighting. Alma 52:11 and 15 have Moroni in that area in the 26th year establishing defenses against Ammoron's opening of a second front. Later, Alma 53:8 implies directly that Moroni was there again two years later (the verse attributes a Lamanite victory to "the absence of Moroni [from that area] on account of some intrigue amongst the Nephites [presumably in Zarahemla]"). Nothing is said elsewhere about a visit by Moroni to that front in the 28th

year nor about any "intrigue" at that time which supposedly drew him away. Instead, Helaman's epistle places himself and his men there in the "28th" year, the same time when Alma 53:8 puts Captain Moroni in that smallish zone.

Now, if Moroni really visited the area in the 28th year, it is inconceivable that Helaman's epistle would fail to mention the fact. Furthermore, Moroni's priorities would not have allowed him a second visit to the southwest. His primary concern all along was the east sea area, where the strategic problem was Bountiful's vulnerability, for it was considered by Moroni to be key to Nephite security by offering them an escape route to the land northward (Alma 52:9-11, 17-18; 53:3-7; Helaman 4:7). It is true that when Ammoron opened up the west front, Moroni moved decisively and "established armies to protect the south and the west borders of the land" (Alma 52:15), but the crucial problem remained Teancum and the Bountiful/Mulek front, to which he headed as soon as could (Alma 52:15). Thus the implication in Alma 53:8 that Moroni was on the west sea/south front in the 28th year is logically doubtful and historically almost impossible.

So we see that Moroni's account in Alma 52 and 53 almost certainly contains at least one major error in dating Moroni's activities, but we cannot tell textually just how the dating of events might be off. We do know that something is wrong with the record.

A Resolution

Clearly enough the record as we have it will not do; it is internally contradictory. Yet the text includes too few facts to settle the problem. All that can be done is to suggest the most plausible possible solution. That will be the one involving the fewest changes in dating and the simplest set of assumptions about acts by the historians.

I suggest that Mormon's account confuses matters by illogically separating into two parts what was, from the point of view of the instigator, Ammoron, one concerted plan of action on the west sea/south. Ammoron's aim was to "draw away part of their [the Nephites'] forces to that part of the land" (Alma 52:13) so as to weaken their defense of the narrow neck. The initial threat by Ammoron's army was met by Moroni's going to the scene where he established a defense strategy and mustered a small army under Antipus to man an Antiparah/Zeezrom/Cumoni defense line. Apparently before he got the job done to his full satisfaction, he had to return to Zarahemla on account of some "intrigue among the Nephites." All this actually took place in the 27th year, not the 26th

year as indicated in Alma 52. But Moroni's dominating task was to get on with reinforcing Teancum on the eastern front. Some reinforcements had been sent to him at Bountiful late in the 26th year (Alma 52:7-11), but not enough to break the stalemate which had left a huge Lamanite force in Mulek dangerously near the vital narrow pass. Further, Moroni's military genius was badly needed on that scene; apparently Teancum, though brave to the point of foolhardiness, was not a tactician who could get the job at Mulek done.

So Moroni never returned to the south/west front, perhaps assuring himself that the problem there was basically under control if not ideal. Instead, he had to spend his time getting a new (third) army together (Alma 52:11, 15, 17-18) then heading for Bountiful. That would have been in about the 11th month, probably as soon as the cessation of rains permitted travel (see my F.A.R.M.S. Paper on the seasonality of warfare).

At just about the time he was departing, Ammoron's army attacked Antipus' forces (the same drying weather that permitted Moroni's march also would favor the Lamanite attack). The invaders took four cities, Antiparah, Zeezrom, Cumeni and Manti. News of the attack could have got to Zarahemla just shortly after Moroni had departed for Bountiful, but seemingly nobody in the capital paid much attention to the strategic implications of the Lamanite victory. Helaman and his young men happened to arrive at the front in the nick of time, while Antipus was scrambling to establish a secondary defense based at Judea. Because there was no consistent Nephite message system, Moroni never learned what had happened with Antipus nor about the loss of the four cities until he got Helaman's epistle long afterward.

This formulation solves a logical problem about Ammoron and his strategy. We have seen that Alma 52:11 and 53:8 make it appear the Lamanites made two efforts on the west sea/south, first in the 26th year and again in the 28th. But that would not make sense in terms of Ammoron's thinking, which was to draw Nephite forces to that quarter in order to lighten Nephite pressure in the Bountiful/Mulek zone. He would have implemented his strategy as quickly as he could after returning to Nephi early in the 26th year and being made king in lieu of his slain brother Amalickiah. The exigencies of his taking over the rulership and then gaining political support among the Lamanites, already reluctant to fight (Alma 47:2) forced him at first simply to make threatening gestures (which called forth Moroni's visit to the area). He could have had to wait into the 27th year to get together the size of force necessary to capitalize

operationally on the initial threat and actually to capture the four cities. But a two year delay in launching a substantial offensive and showing results, into the 28th year as indicated by Alma 53:8, would make slight sense.

What makes most sense is that the Lamanite attack which captured the four south and west cities took place late in the 27th year. Helaman's memory led him to mis-speak the time and say that it was in the 26th year. The annal kept in Zarahemla may have recorded (how much later?) the Lamanite attack as in the 28th year for who knows what reason. When Mormon, centuries later, discovered the contradiction of one or two years between the official source(s) and Helaman's epistle, he may have tried to reconcile the reports by supposing that there had been two distinct campaigns by the Lamanites on the south/west two years apart and that Moroni was on that scene twice instead of once. If he was the one who did this, he introduced new difficulties in the account.

The following combined chronology seems to me to manage matters with maximum efficiency.

A Reconciled Chronology of the 26th to 30th Years

<u>References</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>Events</u>
Alma 52:2	26.I.1	Lamanites hole up in Mulek
v. 3,12	II.1-III.25	Ammoron travels to Nephi.
	III.25-VIII	Is seated on throne, consolidates power.
v. 11-12	IX-XI.15	Raises a limited army and threatens on the west sea borders.
v. 5	XI-XII	Moroni has instructed Teancum to attack Mulek if possible and has sent some reinforcements, but Teancum cannot. Keeps visibly preparing for attack while fortifying.
v. 11,15	26.XI-27.I	Moroni goes to the west sea front, organizes, recruits, establishes defenses.
	27.I-XII	Stalemate on eastern front (implied by silence in record).
53:8	II-	Moroni returns to Zarahemla to put down "intrigue."
52:17-18	V-X	Moroni recruits "large" army to aid Teancum.

v. 15-16	XI.1-XII.20	Moroni writes ahead to Teancum then leaves with army to join him.
52:19;	X.25-XI.15	Lam. capture Antiparah, Cumeni, Zeezrom,
56:14	("26")	Manti.
56:9	XI.15-30	Helaman's 2000 go from Melek to Judea.
v. 15-20	XII	They help Antipus fortify Judea.
52:18	XII.20	Moroni arrives in Bountiful in "latter end" of year.
56:20	27.XII.30(+5?)	By Helaman, thus ended the "twenty and sixth" year (actually 27th).
v. 20-21	28.I-III	In the "commencement of the twenty and ("27") seventh year" (actually 28th) Helaman had Judea defensible and wanted Lam. to attack, but they dare not.
52:19-20	28.I.8-30	Council of captains held at Bountiful, then send embassies to get Lam. to come fight.
v. 22-40	II.5-6	Stratagem near, recapture of, Mulek.
56:2	II.15	Food, reinforcements arrive at Judea.
53:4-7	III-XII	Neph. on the east fortify and farm.
56:29	III.1-VI.30	Lam., nervous about Helaman's increased strength, sally out to intercept support.
v. 30-54	VII.1-5	Stratagem carried out near Antiparah. Lam. defeated.
v. 56-57	VII.6	Prisoners sent off to Zarahemla.
57:1-3	VII.15-IX.15	Ammoron and Helaman negotiate about prisoners.
v. 3-4	IX.15-X.15	Failing an agreement, Helaman prepares to attack Antiparah. Lam. abandon it.
v. 5	28.XII.30(+5?)	By Helaman, thus ended the 28th year.
57:6	29.I	Supplies, 6000 more men reach Helaman.
55:24	II.14-15	Gid recaptured.
v. 25	II.16-III.15	Lam. prisoners labor fortifying Gid.
v. 27	III.1-IV.30	Lam. tricks and minor attacks to free prisoners.

57:8-12	II.15-III.30	Helaman's army besieges Cumeni. Lam. surrender.
v. 13-16	IV.15	Large number of prisoners a dilemma; they are sent toward Zarahemla.
v. 17	IV.16	New Lam. army attacks, but defeated, retreats to Manti.
58:1	V	Stalemate at Manti, but tactical tricks by both sides tried with no real battle Lam. will not come out to fight.
v. 3-7	V-X	Helaman waits for food and men.
v. 5-6	V-X	Lam. being reinforced and supplied.
v. 8	XI.1	Helaman receives a little food, a few men.
v. 10-29	XI.20-21	Operation at Manti captures the city.
v. 30		Lam. flee to the land of Nephi.
v. 38	XII.1	Helaman writes, sends his epistle.
55:33	XI-XII	Lam. fortify Morianton, bring in supplies, men.
v. 33	XII.15-30	Moroni prepares to attack Morianton.
v. 35	29.XII.30(+5?)	Thus ended the 29th year.
56:1	30.I.2	Moroni receives Helaman's epistle.

If the historical events occurred in the order shown in the table and at about the dates indicated, then the record as we have it in the present text can be accounted for by assuming just two scribal errors.

1. A fatigued Helaman erroneously recollected certain dates in writing his field dispatch or epistle to Moroni. His account actually began with the 27th year, not the 26th as he has it. Then what he began by calling the 27th year was actually the 28th, although he never mentions an end to his "twenty and seventh" year nor the commencement of the "twenty and eighth." He ends up correctly terming as the 28th the year he began calling the 27th, without realizing his dropping of 12 months.

2. When Mormon was dealing with the old records, he was puzzled by the conflict between the Zarahemla annal(s) he basically followed and the dates in Helaman's epistle. In trying to work out a reconciliation, he concluded that the Lamanites must have attacked at two distinct times on the west (Helaman's "26th" year and the Zarahemla record's "28th") when actually that two year separation,

as well as the assumption that Moroni visited there a second time, were erroneous interpretations.

The possibility remains that it was the original Zarahemla recordkeeper who made the interpretation suggested in item 2 to have been by Mormon. If this was the case, then Mormon either failed to notice the discrepancy, just as millions of readers since 1830 have failed to do, or he noticed it without being able to correct it.

There remains a question whether an additional error occurs in this section. In my paper on Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon (see note 1), I discuss the matter at some length. Helaman's recollection of the battle near Antiparah as taking place specifically on "the morning of the third day of the seventh month" (Alma 56:42) is anomalous in that all other important military actions that are clearly or plausibly datable are reported take place between the 10th and 3rd months of the Nephite year. Climatic considerations make it generally unlikely that the probable "wet season" 7th month would see much military action undertaken (however, Helaman's stratagem began as a small scale operation and only grew in scale opportunistically). Even if the 7th month date is correct, according to the geographical correlation that I follow the most plausible scene for Antiparah is a unique mountain zone where unusual meteorological conditions would probably not inhibit the sort of action Helaman undertook even in the nominal wet season. Meanwhile a case can be made from the text that the sequence of incidents leading up to and following the battle fits better in the 2nd, not the 7th month. On balance, it is impossible to determine whether or not the 7th month statement is accurate. The possibility exists that the epistle really meant to refer to some other month. Still the matter is not vital and cannot be settled in any case.

Some Lessons

Not surprisingly, Book of Mormon writers were subject to the same difficulties in preparing an accurate record as others who have kept annals or constructed histories. Studies of other ancient records such as the Old Testament demonstrate clearly that the same sorts of discrepancies seen in the book of Alma were common enough.

The fact that in this case we have partially parallel accounts for the same events and that they are not wholly consistent suggests that were we to have, say, "the book of Lehi" to compare with "the small plates of Nephi," similar differences might be seen.

The failure to write down historical accounts until some time after the reported events took place was a pattern which leads us to suspect that purely factual, contemporaneously kept annals were not

normal and perhaps did not exist. Moreover, general folk reliance on oral tradition and the likelihood that possession of literacy skills was not widespread (see 3 Nephi 6:12) also suggests that actual contemporary "notes" or such documents were rare or absent. (There is no hint anywhere of anyone keeping the equivalent of a "journal.")

Those who examine the Book of Mormon as an ancient text need to exercise special care not to be misled by assumptions which they may bring with them from having read it casually, traditionally or doctrinally--that is, other than as history per se.

Still, even apparent problems in the record may prove understandable and even consistent in terms of the human characteristics of the recordkeepers when we give them the careful scrutiny they invite.

Notes

1. As explained in my paper "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica," given at the F.A.R.M.S. Symposium on Warfare in the Book of Mormon, March 1989, I consider it likely that the Nephites during the period of the judges used a solar-based year of either 360 or 365 days divided into 12 months of 30 days.
2. This reference I owe to Randy P. Spackman (personal communication to J. W. Welch, Sept. 5, 1983).