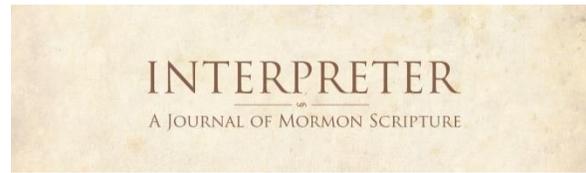




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The Scalp of Your Head: Polysemy in Alma 44:14–18

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THE SCALP OF YOUR HEAD: POLYSEMY IN ALMA 44:14–18

Matthew L. Bowen

Abstract: The fear that Moroni's soldier's speech (Alma 44:14) aroused in the Lamanite soldiers and the intensity of Zerahemnah's subsequently redoubled anger are best explained by the polysemy (i.e., multiple meanings within a lexeme's range of meaning) of a single word translated "chief" in Alma 44:14 and "heads" in Alma 44:18. As editor of a sacred history, Mormon was interested in showing the fulfilment of prophecy when such fulfilment occurred. Mormon's description of the Lamanites "fall[ing] exceedingly fast" because of the exposure of the Lamanites' "bare heads" to the Nephites' swords and their being "smitten" in Alma 44:18 — just as "the scalp of their chief" was smitten and thus fell (Alma 44:12–14) — pointedly demonstrates the fulfilment of the soldier's prophecy. In particular, the phrase "bare heads" constitutes a polysemic wordplay on "chief," since words translated "head" can alternatively be translated "chief," as in Alma 44:14. A similar wordplay on "top" and "leader" in 3 Nephi 4:28–29, probably again represented by a single word, also partly explains the force of the simile curse described there.

Alma 44:12–14 recounts a prophetic threat uttered by "one of Moroni's soldiers" to the defeated Lamanite leader Zerahemnah and his soldiers after Moroni's soldier had taken off a part of Zerahemnah's scalp with his sword. His soldier's prophecy and its reported fulfilment verses later in Alma 44:18 turn on the words "chief" and "head." Both "head" in the anatomical sense and "head"/"chief" in a sociological leadership

sense are represented by a single word in Hebrew (*rōʾš*)¹ and Egyptian (*tp*),² both languages that the Nephites themselves said they used.³

In this brief note, I propose that the intensity of the fear aroused in the Lamanite soldiers and the intensity of Zerahemnah's redoubled anger are best explained by the polysemy (i.e., the range of meaning) of a single word translated "chief" in Alma 44:14 and "heads" in Alma 44:18. Mormon's use of the latter term in Alma 44:18 completes the fulfilment of the soldier's prophecy, a polysemic wordplay initiated with his use of a term translated "chief" in Alma 44:14.

"This Scalp, Which Is the Scalp of Your Chief"

Mormon records that the Nephite armies under Moroni's leadership had defeated the armies of the Lamanites under the leadership of the Zoramite⁴ Zerahemnah in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 43:3–44:20). In particular, Alma 44:1–11 details an exchange between Moroni and Zerahemnah in which the former dictated terms of peace (an "oath" that the Lamanites lay down their weapons and not come again to battle) and the latter rejected those terms. In verse 11, Moroni issues an ultimatum: surrender or be destroyed. What follows is one of the more dramatic and intriguing episodes in the Book of Mormon. Zerahemnah, angry at Moroni's ultimatum, attempts to assassinate Moroni:

And now when Moroni had said these words, Zerahemnah retained his sword, and he was angry with Moroni, and he rushed forward that he might slay Moroni; but as he raised his sword, behold, one of Moroni's soldiers smote it even to the earth, and it broke by the hilt; and he also smote Zerahemnah that **he took off his scalp and it fell to the earth**. And Zerahemnah withdrew from before them into the midst of

1 See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1164–1167. On p. 1168, Koehler and Baumgartner cite numerous examples of *rōʾš* ("head") as "leader, chief." See, e.g., Exodus 18:25; Numbers 25:24; Deuteronomy 1:13, 15; 5:23; 33:5; Joshua 23:2; 24:1; Isaiah 7:8; Judges 10:18; 1 Samuel 11:8–11; 1 Kings 8:1; Isaiah 7:8–9, 20; Ezekiel 38:2–3; 39:1; Psalm 18:44; Job 29:25; 2 Chronicles 20:27. As a military commander *rōʾš* is further attested in 2 Samuel 28:8, 18, 23; 1 Chronicles 11:11, 15; 12:19.

2 Raymond O. Faulkner (*A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* [Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999], 246) glosses *tp*, which is written with "head"-glyph, as "head" (i.e., anatomical); "head(man), chief," etc.

3 See 1 Nephi 1:2 and Mormon 9:32–33.

4 See Alma 43:5.

his soldiers. And it came to pass that the soldier who stood by, who smote off the scalp of Zerahemnah, took up the scalp from off the ground by the hair, and laid it upon the point of his sword, and stretched it forth unto them, saying unto them with a loud voice: **Even as this scalp has fallen to the earth, which is the scalp of your chief, so shall ye fall to the earth** except ye will deliver up your weapons of war and depart with a covenant of peace. (Alma 44:12-14)

Mark Morrise cites the speech of Moroni's soldier in Alma 44:14 as an example of a "simile curse" or a "treaty curse,"⁵ in which the symbolic action enacted on the scalp becomes the penalty for violating the terms of the treaty (in this case by not accepting them). The treaty comparison here is appropriate because the Lamanites are being offered a "covenant of peace" or "peace treaty" (cf. Hebrew *bērît šālôm*)⁶ and on very generous terms. The only apparent requirements are to hand over their weaponry and to never come to battle against the Nephites again.

In the soldier's "prophetic curse," as Donald W. Parry describes it,⁷ we also hear cultic echoes and the divine-warrior language of the Psalms: "But God shall wound **the head** [*rō'š*] of his enemies, and the hairy scalp [*qodqōd šē'îr*] of such an one as goeth on still in his trespasses [*ba'āšāmāw* — i.e., "his guilt"]" (Psalm 68:21 [MT Psalm 68:22]);⁸ "He shall judge among the heathen, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; **he shall wound the heads** [lit. singular the head, *rō'š*] over many countries ... therefore shall he lift up **the head** [*rō'š*]" (Psalm 110:6-7).⁹ These two Psalms — hymns of the Jerusalem temple having particular pertinence to Davidic kingship and leadership — promise or prophesy

5 See Mark J. Morrise, "Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament, and Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 124-38.

6 See Numbers 25:12; Isaiah 54:10; Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26.

7 On the soldier's actions as a prophetic curse and other such examples, see Donald W. Parry, "Symbolic Action as Prophetic Curse," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (ed. John W. Welch; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 206-208.

8 Cf. Isaiah 3:7: "therefore the Lord will smite with a scab **the crown** [*qodqōd*, or scalp] of the head of the daughters of Zion."

9 Compare the positive and negative polysemics of the Hebrew expression "lift up [the] head" (*nāšā' et rō'š*) in Genesis 40:13, 19: "Yet within three days shall Pharaoh **lift up thine head**, and restore thee unto thy place: and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler" (v. 13); "Yet within three days shall Pharaoh **lift up thy head from off thee**, and shall hang thee on a tree; and the birds shall eat thy flesh from off thee."

that the Lord will wound the “heads” of his enemies, especially the enemies of the Davidic king. The polysemy of the term *rōʾš* (“head”) is evident: the Lord will wound the “head[s]” (body parts) of his enemies, but he will also wound their *heads* (chiefs or leaders), just as he will uphold Judah’s *head* — i.e., the Davidic king (cf. the title of Jesus as “our great and eternal head,” Helaman 13:38).

“They Were Struck With Fear”

Mormon reports that the soldier’s visually-enhanced prophetic rhetoric struck many of the Lamanites with abject fear:

Now there were many, **when they heard these words and saw the scalp which was upon the sword, that were struck with fear**; and many came forth and **threw down** their weapons of war at the feet of Moroni, and entered into a covenant of peace. And as many as entered into a covenant they suffered to depart into the wilderness. (Alma 44:15)

Parry states that soldier’s “symbolic actions ... were so effective that ... the audience reacted immediately and positively.”¹⁰ I would further argue that the great fear that the Lamanite soldiers exhibited was due to how they heard the word “chief” used by Moroni’s soldier. If “chief”/“head” (sociological) and “head” (anthropological) were represented by the same term in their own language, they would have not only heard “this is the scalp of your chief,” but “this is the scalp of your head” — i.e., your own “heads.” The scalp, of course, was the extension of Zerahemnah’s anatomical “head,” just as they were extensions of him as their sociological “head” or “chief.” Not wanting their own “heads” to become like their “head”/“chief” Zerahemnah and his fallen scalp, these warriors “threw down their weapons” (i.e., caused them to “fall”) at the feet of Moroni. Their “thrown down,” or “fallen,” weapons, in a sense serve as substitutes for themselves (who would have otherwise “fallen”). It is further noteworthy that the image of the “weapons ... at the feet of Moroni” provides a vivid contrast to the Zerahemnah’s “scalp ... upon the point of [Moroni’s soldier’s] sword,” or “the scalp which was upon the sword.”

“Zerahemnah Was Exceedingly Wroth”

The soldier’s “simile” or “treaty” curse has the opposite effect on Zerahemnah himself, who does not react positively: “Now it came to

¹⁰ Parry, “Symbolic Action as Prophetic Curse,” 208.

pass that Zerahemnah was exceedingly wroth, and he did stir up the remainder of his soldiers to anger, to contend more powerfully against the Nephites” (Alma 44:16). Of course, Zerahemnah’s wounding coupled with the speech by one of Moroni’s subordinates laying out a set of demands would have been enough to make Zerahemnah angry. However, Zerahemnah apparently also heard the *double entendre* of the word rendered “chief”/“head,” referring to himself both as “chief” of the Lamanites but also to his own wounded “head,” which the soldier made into a metonym for the “heads” of the individual Lamanite soldiers. Additionally, the “scalp” of Lamanite “chief”/“head” Zerahemnah becomes a metonym for their soldiers’ own persons or bodies, which are both extensions of the “head” (see below).

Thus, the soldier’s prophetic speech with its polysemic pun on “chief”/“head” redoubles Zerahemnah’s anger. He then stubbornly and foolishly incites some of his more loyal soldiers to continue waging an unwinnable battle. The results of this stubbornness, in terms of additional and unnecessary loss of human life, are tragic.

“Their Bare Heads ... Were ... Smitten”

Mormon indicates that Zerahemnah’s being “exceedingly wroth” coupled with the “anger” of Zerahemnah’s more loyal soldiers, in turn redoubles Moroni’s own anger:

And now Moroni was angry, because of the stubbornness of the Lamanites; therefore he commanded his people that they should **fall** upon them and slay them. And it came to pass that they began to slay them; yea, and the Lamanites did contend with their swords and their might. But behold, **their naked skins¹¹ and their bare heads were exposed to the sharp swords of the Nephites; yea, behold they were pierced and smitten, yea, and did fall exceedingly fast before the swords of the Nephites;** and they began to be swept down, even as the soldier of Moroni had prophesied. (Alma 44:16–18)

The “heads” of the Lamanites who refuse the “covenant of peace” become like their *head*, Zerahemnah and his scalp: “pierced and smitten” (cf. “smote,” vv. 12–13), and they “fall [to the earth] exceedingly fast.” The correspondence between Mormon’s use of the term translated as “heads” here and “chief” (Alma 44:14) becomes clearest when we consider that both are most likely represented by the same word in the underlying text.

11 Cf. Alma 43:20, 37.

Mormon's statement that the Lamanites who continued to fight "did fall exceedingly fast" recalls the image of the "scalp [that] fell to the earth" and the soldier's prophetic declaration, "Even as this scalp has fallen to the earth, which is the scalp of your chief, so shall ye fall to the earth" (44:14). In fact, the words "did fall exceedingly fast" confirm the fulfillment of the soldier's prophetic simile curse that regarded not merely the fate of their "chief" but also the fate of their own bare "heads," which were "smitten"¹² like Zerahemnah's scalp because of their "expo[sure] to the sharp swords of the Nephites."

It is additionally possible that Mormon incorporates a similar simile¹³ involving a polysemic play on "head" in 3 Nephi 4:28–29, when the righteous Nephites and Lamanites make a public example of Zemnarihah, the leader of the Gadianton robbers:

And their **leader** [head, *rō'š*], Zemnarihah, was taken and hanged upon a tree, yea, even upon the **top** [*rō'š*]¹⁴ thereof until he was dead. And when they had hanged him until he was dead they did fell the tree to the earth, and did cry with a loud voice, saying: May the Lord preserve his people in righteousness and in holiness of heart, that they may cause to be felled to the earth all who shall seek to slay them because of power and secret combinations, even as this man hath been felled to the earth. (3 Nephi 4:28–29)

At least part of the simile here seems to consist in the "top" or "head" of the tree upon which the "leader" or "head" of the Gadianton robbers had been executed being "felled" (i.e., caused to "fall") to the earth, much like the scalp of Zerahemnah's "head" and the Lamanite "heads" falling in Alma 44. Both episodes serve as object lessons on the consequences that wicked leaders or "heads" bring upon their people.

12 Since "heads" are not usually "pierced," this statement assumes that Mormon's phraseology intended a matching of terms — i.e., the Lamanites' "naked skins" were "pierced" whereas their "bare heads" were "smitten."

13 Morrise ("Simile Curses," 135) also briefly mentions 3 Nephi 4:28–29 as an example of this phenomenon, as does Parry ("Symbolic Action as Prophetic Curse," 207). Morrise and Parry focus on the felling of the tree. I am suggesting here that what happens on and to the "top" or "head" of the tree, in particular, is important in terms of the simile of what happens to the "leader"/"head."

14 Hebrew *rō'š* has the sense of "top" (or "tops") of trees in Isaiah 17:6; 2 Samuel 5:24 (1 Chronicles 14:15); Ezekiel 17:4, 22; it has the sense of "top" (or "tops") of mountains in Genesis 8:5; Numbers 14:40, 44; Deuteronomy 34:1; Judges 9:7, 25, 36; Joshua 15:8–9; (famously) Isaiah 2:2 (Micah 4:1); 30:17; 42:11; Hosea 4:13; Joel 2:5; Psalm 72:16; Song of Solomon 4:8; Ezekiel 6:13; 43:12, etc.

Conclusion

Identifying the polysemic play involving “chief” and “heads” in Alma 44:14, 18 as reflecting a single underlying term helps us further appreciate the richness of the Book of Mormon as an ancient text reflecting an ancient Israelite background and set within an ancient milieu. This pericope, moreover, offers a vivid didactic example of the collective corporate toll that faulty leadership can incur: the wound inflicted upon the unrighteous *head* (leader) is liable to be inflicted figuratively (if not literally) upon the *heads* of that leader’s followers who “go on still in [their] trespasses” (Psalm 68:22), rather than submitting themselves to their “great and eternal head,” the Lord Jesus Christ (Helaman 13:38).

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