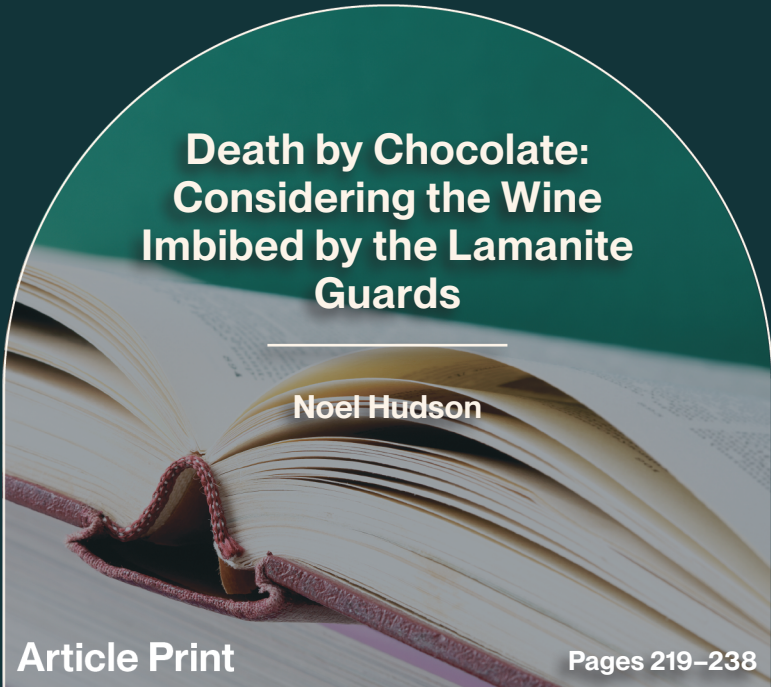


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Noel Hudson

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Death by Chocolate: Considering the Wine Imbibed by the Lamanite Guards

Noel Hudson

Abstract: *This article examines two instances in the Book of Mormon in which captives escape through the negligence of drunken and sleeping guards. It suggests that details about the wine used to intoxicate the Lamanite guards in the city of Gid provide support for a candidate consumable, which, despite the impression the title may give, is not a piece of triple-chocolate cake, but is in fact an alcoholic drink brewed using cacao. The article briefly reviews the history of chocolate/cacao as it touches upon liberating captives from bondage and the use of deceptive practices in times of warfare. It briefly discusses the possibility of a Lamanite intelligence network driving some of the political events during the Lamanite wars narrated in the book of Alma.*

Stories of jailbreaks tend to capture the imagination. Such accounts have become, for example, part of the lore of the American Wild West. The stereotype of the sleeping and drunk guard is only slightly more commonplace in film and literature than the even less likely tale in which a dog, monkey, or other animal companion steals the keys from the unwary and sleeping jailer. In such cases, as many as ten men escape at one time. However, absconding with hundreds or even thousands of men, women, and children, to say nothing of their flocks and herds, such as we find described in the Book of Mormon, would require a level of planning and execution much higher than the opportunistic snatching of keys from a sleeping jailer, even if the animals in question had been trained in such tactics.

This article will focus on two different stories in the Book of Mormon involving the escape of large groups of Nephite captives by way of

their Lamanite guards falling asleep. There is also a third episode of the freeing of captives while the guards sleep: the story of Alma and his small flock of converts (Mosiah 24:18–21). The focus of this story is on the faith of the people and the miraculous nature of their release. Though the other two stories also recount the actions of faithful people, and though divine inspiration may well have been involved in the development of the plans that resulted in the freedom of the captives, this article will focus on natural explanations rather than inexplicable miraculous interventions. As the story of Alma and the people of Helam gives almost no detail on the circumstances surrounding the release of the people and the failure of the Lamanites to be able to follow the trail of the hundreds of escapees and their flocks, it is not examined in this paper.

The two main accounts of Nephites escaping from their Lamanite guards record the Nephites getting their Lamanite guards drunk enough to all fall asleep—apparently every single guard—after indulging in an excess of Nephite wine. However, some details are difficult to understand with these accounts, and these details present challenging questions that beg for explanation. To do so, this paper will necessarily indulge in speculation: a proposal that the wine imbibed by the Lamanite guards of the city of Gid was a cacao-based drink and not a fruit-based wine, *per se*. This proposal, if correct, solves several of the difficulties of the narrative, including the volume of liquor required to incapacitate an entire garrison, the fact that the Lamanites were given wine as part of their military rations, and the indication that the wine used was usually intended to prepare the Lamanites for battle.

Sweet Deception

Perhaps the most dramatic of the two narratives discussed in this paper—narratives in which captives are delivered from the clutches of their sleeping guards—is the one that takes place in the city of Gid. In this story, found in Alma 55, while negotiating a prisoner exchange, Captain Moroni grew angry and broke off diplomatic negotiations with Ammoron, the king of the Lamanites. He then devised a risky plan to free the Nephite prisoners. His plan, perhaps divinely inspired, was to release the captured soldiers by getting the Lamanite guards in the city of Gid so drunk that they were incapacitated and could no longer contain their prisoners.

He [Moroni] caused that a search should be made among his men, that perhaps he might find a man who was a descendant of Laman among them. . . . [W]hen it was evening Laman went to the guards who were over the Nephites, and behold, they saw him coming and they hailed him; but he saith unto them: Fear not; behold, I am a Lamanite. Behold, we have escaped from the Nephites, and they sleep; and behold we have taken of their wine and brought with us. (Alma 55:4, 8)

As Hugh Nibley describes the account:

The trick exploited the well-known psychology of troops on permanent guard duty. Such troops must always be on the alert for what they never expect to happen and what, if they do their duty, never *will* happen. Their way of life becomes a stultifying bore, with the same dull routines from day to day and from week to week. Nothing offers a more welcome release to such misery than a little nip now and then, or, better still, a party. . . . It was a typical "G.I." binge with everybody getting happily drunk at the guard house.¹

Predictably:

And it came to pass that they did take of the wine freely; and it was pleasant to their taste, therefore they took of it more freely; and it was strong, having been *prepared in its strength*. And it came to pass they did drink and were merry, and by and by they were all drunken. (Alma 55:13–14)

Moroni and his men then entered the city "in profound silence" (v. 17). They armed the prisoners, and could have killed the sleeping guards but, instead, took them prisoners and later engaged them in labor to fortify the Nephites' new tactical position in Gid (v. 25).

Several points in this account seem to require an explanation. The narrative itself provides the answer to the most basic concerns, such as how the wine used in the plan was to be delivered to the guards without raising their suspicions. This problem was addressed by making a search throughout the army to find native Lamanites who would pose as fugitive prisoners (Alma 55:5).

The fortuitous presence in the Nephite army of a former servant of the Lamanite king, a man named Laman, and other Lamanites who

1. Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 316.

followed him, is explained as a result of Amalickiah's lying and murderous plots against Laman's patron, the former Lamanite king. Laman, the key player in Moroni's plan, and his fellow Lamanites, became available to Captain Moroni because of Amalickiah's attempt to frame them for the murder of the king (Alma 55:5).

The first step in Captain Moroni's inspired plan was executed successfully as Laman put the fears of the soldiers of Gid to rest, telling them, "Fear not; behold, I am a Lamanite." But no sooner was that issue resolved than another difficulty arose. Laman says, "Behold, we have escaped from the Nephites, and they sleep; and behold we have taken of their wine and brought with us" (Alma 55:8). Since Laman had only "a small number of men with him" (v. 7), we may well wonder: How could they have brought enough wine to carry out the next phase of the plan: getting an entire garrison drunk?

To answer this question, let us start by establishing the parameters of the problem. How many men could Laman have credibly brought with him? A "small number" could be as few as two on the low end. On the high end, it would need to be few enough that the Lamanite guards would admit them into the city. That number in turn depends on the credibility of the escapees and how many guards were holding the city. Can the number of guards be guessed at?

In Helaman's report to Captain Moroni in Alma 57, the maximum number of Nephite soldiers involved in any given battle is 10,000, and the number of prisoners captured in a series of battles seems to be on the order of a few thousand. The captain of the men sent to guard the prisoners taken by Helaman had enough men under his command that he turned the tide of one important battle when he and his men returned in the nick of time (Alma 57:22). Additionally, Helaman notes that captured Lamanite soldiers would break out in great numbers and fight with clubs or stones so that two thousand prisoners were killed after their surrender (Alma 57:14). Thus, we may estimate that the Nephite captain would have needed to command at the very least several hundred men to guard the Lamanite prisoners.

The circumstances were somewhat different with the Nephites held by the Lamanites because there were many women and children who were prisoners as well. In this case, the Nephite men may have been less inclined to riot or escape. Nonetheless, if Captain Moroni's plan for the exchange of prisoners (Alma 54:11) that he counted on to relieve him of the burden of Lamanite prisoners was to be effective, the Lamanites had to have held thousands of Nephites in the city of

Gid. This supposition is based on the fact that Helaman and Moroni both took many prisoners on multiple occasions (Alma 56:56; 57:13; 62:15–17, 25), sometimes taking several thousand in a single action. The Lamanites, on the other hand, captured entire cities full of people (Alma 51:26–27), which explains why there were so many women and children among the captives. If the Lamanites did not put the majority of these captives to death, they likely held many times more prisoners than the Nephites did.

Supposing that a single Lamanite guard could keep fifty Nephite men, women, and children in line, at a minimum there must have been forty guards to watch over two thousand prisoners. Likely, the number of guards would have been much greater, because if the number was only forty, then Moroni and his thousands of soldiers could easily have taken the city without resorting to stratagem, despite the fortifications. For purposes of my analysis, I will double the lowest number of guards to eighty. The number was likely even greater, but using the conservative lower bound allows for a starting point.

Supposing eighty guards held the city, if Laman had more than a handful of men with him, the guards would likely have been uneasy in admitting people they didn't know into the city, so Laman's party couldn't have contained more than five to ten men. For the purpose of these calculations eight men will be used. With these bounds in place, a calculation can be made to guess how much wine each man would be required to carry.

Archaeology in Peru shows that pottery jars that held about two gallons of wine were in common use in the sixteenth century.² Though jars in Mesoamerica may have been larger or smaller, two gallons seems to set a reasonable upper limit for a man to carry while escaping, since anything much larger would be unwieldy. As the current state of archaeology suggests that wheeled conveyances such as wagons were not in common use in ancient Mesoamerica,³ and no conveyances are mentioned in the account, the wine brought by Laman and his men would have been carried by hand.

It seems reasonable that Laman and his men could have carried a couple of gallons of wine each. With eight men each carrying two

2. James Wiseman, "Insight: In Vino Veritas," *Archaeology* 50, no. 5 (September/October 1997): 12, 14, 16–17, 98, [jstor.org/stable/41771295](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41771295).

3. Scripture Central Staff, "What is the Nature and Use of Chariots in the Book of Mormon?" *KnoWhy* 126, 20 August 2020, scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/what-is-the-nature-and-use-of-chariots-in-the-book-of-mormon.

gallons, sixteen gallons of wine would be available for consumption by the guards. Would this be enough to get eighty guards drunk? With 128 fluid ounces in a gallon, sixteen gallons would provide just under twenty-six ounces per man. This amount is very close to the size of a bottle of table wine, which contains five “standard drinks,” an amount that the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines as “heavy drinking.”⁴ Whether or not this is enough to get a man drunk depends heavily on the alcohol content of the wine and the individual level of response. If the men involved had a high tolerance to alcohol, or if the alcohol content was low, this amount would be insufficient to get them drunk. It would be even less likely to cause them to fall into a “deep sleep” (Alma 57:15) *en masse*.

Various types of alcoholic drinks were known in ancient Mesoamerica. These drinks are assumed to be relevant here, as most Book of Mormon scholars have converged upon ancient Mesoamerica as the most likely setting for the Book of Mormon.⁵ Allen Christenson describes a few of these: *ki’y* is a word that may refer to things as diverse as an alcoholic beverage, snake venom, and insect venom. The usage indicates that both drunkenness and poisoning in the Mayan usage is like the English word intoxication, which has similar shades of meaning. *Ki’y* includes the concepts of both poison and medicine, suggesting that, for the Maya, the two were closely related.⁶ Regarding toxicity, Christian Lasso García et al. note that careful preparation is a major concern when brewing traditional Latin American alcoholic beverages. While proper preparation can result in medicinal properties, improper preparation can result in toxic effects.⁷ This fine

4. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, “The Basics: Defining How Much Alcohol is Too Much,” National Institutes of Health, 2025, niaaa.nih.gov/health-professionals-communities/core-resource-on-alcohol/basics-defining-how-much-alcohol-too-much#:~:text=Heavy%20drinking%20includes%20binge%20drinking,15%20or%20more%20per%20week.

5. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1996), 28–38.

6. Allen J. Christenson, *Popol Vuh: Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya People* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 90, mesoweb.com/publications/Christenson/PopolVuh.pdf

7. Christian Lasso García et al., “Fermented Beverages among Indigenous Latin American Societies,” *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 8 (June 2024), doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2024.1390162.

line in the results due to preparation is a key attribute of the cacao wine proposed here, as explored in greater detail below.⁸

Pulque is a type of *ki'y* that is viscous, milky-white, and slightly foamy. Pulque is made from the fermented sap of the agave plant.⁹ It ferments very quickly and has an alcohol content of 6 percent.¹⁰ Chicha is a general term for a fermented drink popular in the Guatemalan highlands made from various fruits, berries, cane, or maize with an alcohol content of 1–3 percent.¹¹ Balche is made from fermented honey and the bark of the balche tree and has an alcohol content of 1–5 percent by volume.¹² To these, Garcia et al. add the fermented drinks tepache, atole agrio, and tuba, all of which have low alcohol content. Though the documentation of these drinks comes from a time period much later than the setting in question, it is assumed that these drinks have historical roots going back much further than the documented time period. Therefore, they may be used as an analog for alcoholic drinks that were available during the time period and location in question. Garcia et al. note that "the production of chicha by indigenous societies in Latin America is of utmost importance due to its central role in preserving cultural identity, community cohesion, and expressing ancestral traditions."¹³ The cultural role of these types of beverages reinforces the idea that documented usages from a later period may be safely projected to earlier periods.

None of the traditional fermented drinks mentioned above has an alcohol content approaching the 12 percent of table wine used as a metric for the "standard drink" (discussed above), and 26 ounces of pulque, chicha, or balche would not have been sufficient to make the guards very drunk. The upper limit for alcohol content of fermented fruit products is 15 percent. To achieve greater alcohol content, distillation is required. Though there is some evidence that distillation

8. Garcia et al., "Fermented Beverages."

9. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 187–88.

10. Allen J. Christenson, *Popol Vuh: Sacred Book of the Quiché Maya People*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 90, mesoweb.com/publications/Christenson/PopolVuh.pdf.

11. Nicholas Gill, "A Guide to Chichas & Other Fermented Beverages in the Americas," *New Worlder*, 15 July 2025, newworlder.substack.com/p/a-guide-to-chichas-and-other-fermented.

12. F. J. Carod-Artal, "Hallucinogenic Drugs in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican Cultures," *Neurología* (English Edition) 30, no. 1 (January–February 2015): 42–49.

13. Garcia et al., "Fermented Beverages," 11.

may have been used in specific locations of ancient Mesoamerica, the location and time periods involved do not match up with the likely locations and dates for Nephite culture.¹⁴ With distillation unlikely and purely fermented drinks too weak to get an entire garrison drunk, how might the drunkenness be explained?

Before presenting a possible candidate for the wine used, additional considerations presented in the narrative should be taken into account. Recall that Laman, making use of a bit of reverse psychology, “said unto them: Let us keep of our wine till we go against the Nephites to battle. But this saying only made them more desirous to drink of the wine” (Alma 55:10). Then, as now, drinking while on duty would likely have been a serious offense that any dutiful soldier would avoid. Doing so today carries serious consequences,¹⁵ and even more stringent penalties, such as execution, were often enacted for such conduct anciently.¹⁶ Even if these soldiers, tasked with prison duty, were among the least reliable men in the army, it is unlikely that Laman and his men could have convinced all of them to get drunk in clear dereliction of their duty.

There is yet another detail that complicates the narrative. The guards of the city of Gid said to Laman, “We are weary, therefore let us take of the wine, and by and by we shall receive wine for our rations, which will *strengthen us* to go against the Nephites” (Alma 55:11). This is an odd and easily missed detail that might strike the modern reader as incongruous. If this were wine of the sort common in nineteenth-century Europe or America, it might properly be used to celebrate a military victory. Perhaps that wine would be drunk by a few unreliable soldiers willing to indulge in what they might consider an unexpected windfall. It certainly would not be regarded as a cure for weariness. Similarly, it would not be regarded as something that would strengthen them for battle. Yet, they said it would “strengthen them” (v. 11). This statement seems to preclude the possibility of common fruit wine, and especially a distilled spirit of any sort, since none of these could be considered as strengthening a soldier for battle.

No military commander would ever have been pleased to go to

14. Daniel Zizumbo-Villarreal et al., “Distillation in Western Mesoamerica before European Contact,” *Economic Botany* 63, no. 4 (2009): 414, doi.org/10.1007/s12231-009-9103-6.

15. Military Law Center, Article 112, “Drunkenness and Other Incapacity Offenses,” militarylawcenter.com/article-112-defense-attorneys/.

16. Charles Goldberg, “Decimation in the Roman Republic,” *The Classical Journal* 111, no. 2 (2016): 141–64, doi.org/10.5184/classicalj.111.2.0141.

battle with drunken soldiers. Modern wines of the sort readers are familiar with, like the vast majority of alcoholic drinks, are *depressants* and not *stimulants*.¹⁷ It is likely that whenever the word *wine* is encountered in the Book of Mormon, something like the grape-based Madeira wine, which was the preferred drink of the upper classes in colonial America, comes to mind.¹⁸ While it is possible that some form of grape-based wine was known in the Americas during Book of Mormon times,¹⁹ it is unlikely to be the beverage the Lamanites imbibe here. Their "wine" sounds much more like an *energy* drink than like a modern wine. The problems with something like a Madeira grape-based wine include issues of portability, strength, desirability, and effect. All of these issues may be resolved by a cacao beverage used commonly in ancient Mesoamerica.

Bittersweet Rations

As seen above, there are clearly several different types of alcoholic drinks that might reasonably be rendered *wine* in translation. However, none of those wines fit the scenario well. But one drink may fit all contextual details found here: an alcoholic beverage made from the cacao fruit.

Each of the following sources supports a different aspect of the plausibility of a cacao-based drink, including the fact that it was a fermented rather than a distilled beverage, that it was culturally desirable, and that various preparations and admixtures were possible. Note that much of what is known about cacao drinks in Mesoamerica comes from the colonial period, a time much later than the period for the Book of Mormon. The assumption made here is that these insights apply equally well to a much earlier time period. John Henderson et al. say that "the earliest use of cacao in Mesoamerica is likely to have been for a fermented drink made from the pulp surrounding the seeds."²⁰

17. Andrea C. King et al., "Rewarding, Stimulant, and Sedative Alcohol Responses and Relationship to Future Binge Drinking," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 68, no. 4 (2011): 389–99, doi.org/10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2011.26.

18. Mary V. Thompson, "Madeira," *The Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington*, mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/madeira.

19. Scripture Central Staff, "Why Does the Book of Mormon Mention Wine, Vineyards, and Wine-Presses?" *KnoWhy* 88, 20 April 2017, scripturecentral.org/knowhy/why-does-the-book-of-mormon-mention-wine-vineyards-and-wine-presses.

20. John S. Henderson et al., "Chemical and Archaeological Evidence for

Cameron McNeil notes that in later Mesoamerican history, it was “probable that the Aztecs were mixing cacao with alcoholic substances.”²¹ Marcy Norton reports, “When the Spanish and Portuguese arrived in the Americas, the inhabitants there made a cacao liquor which was diluted in hot water seasoned with pepper and other spices” such as vanilla. This could be the drink that “was pleasant to their taste, therefore they took of it more freely” (Alma 55:13).

Cacao is a fruit native to the Americas that is the primary ingredient in chocolate. The cacao bean can be fermented, dried, roasted, and ground to create a cocoa liquor, which is then processed into a chocolate-based drink.²² Norton says that “chemical and neurophysiological studies that have isolated and identified powerful psychoactive compounds that provide support for chocolate’s inherent attractiveness . . . [demonstrate that] one cannot ignore the powerful psychoactive properties of cacao and its role in human history.”²³

The Book of Mormon states that the drink given to the Lamanite guards “was strong, having been prepared in its strength.” This suggests that a small amount of this “wine” might induce drunkenness (Alma 55:13). As the analysis above shows, it seems unlikely that a quantity of other common “wines” produced in Mesoamerica at the time would be sufficiently portable and sufficiently likely to be consumed by the guards for Laman and a handful of men to use it to incapacitate an entire garrison.

An interesting property of alcoholic cacao could account for the apparent discrepancy. Normally, the effect of the cacao drink is described by its imbibers as “very substantial, very cooling, tasty, and agreeable.”²⁴ What is more, the low alcohol content meant that it was not intoxicating. However, this same cacao drink prepared among the Aztecs could have its properties altered in such a way as to change

the Earliest Cacao Beverages,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 104, no. 48 (2007): 18939, [jstor.org/stable/25450535](https://www.jstor.org/stable/25450535).

21. Cameron L. McNeil, ed., *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 275.
22. Elizabeth Chin et al., “Comparison of Antioxidant Activity and Flavanol Content of Cacao Beans Processed by Modern and Traditional Mesoamerican Methods,” *Heritage Science* 1, no. 9 (2013): 1–7, doi.org/10.1186/2050-7445-1-9.
23. Marcy Norton, “Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics,” *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (2006): 667–68, doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.3.660.
24. McNeil, *Chocolate in Mesoamerica*, 275.

it from a pleasant stimulant to a powerful intoxicant. McNeil, citing Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun, notes that a particular formulation of the cacao drink could render it close to toxic:

This cacao, when much is drunk, when much is consumed, especially that which is green, which is tender, makes one drunk, takes effect on one, makes one dizzy, confuses one, makes one sick, deranges one.²⁵

Unlike the invigorating and stimulating drink made from *mature* cacao, the drink made from *green* cacao tended to "intoxicate, derange, and disturb."²⁶ That may be why this drink, though not a depressant, nonetheless put them into a deep sleep (Alma 55:15). The different potencies of the mature versus the green cacao drinks make cacao an ideal candidate for the "wine" used to inebriate the guards at Gid. The Nephites could have prepared green cacao with the specific goal of incapacitating the guards, accounting for the comment that it was "prepared in its strength" (Alma 55:13). Garcia et al. point out the toxic effects of certain biogenic amines that are produced as part of the cacao fermentation process. These biogenic amines can cause a host of unpleasant effects, such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain, each of which could contribute to the incapacitation of a garrison.²⁷ Extant, more modern accounts of the effects of the cacao drink made from green fruit do not mention a soporific (sleep-inducing) effect per se, but it may be supposed that, after drinking a sufficient amount to leave them reeling, sick, and suffering from dizziness and confusion, the Lamanite guards may have resorted to sleeping off these negative effects.

An additional property of mature or green cacao, as it was used in Mesoamerica in ancient times, makes the story that Laman and his men presented to the guards at Gid even more credible. Sophie and Michael Coe explain that cacao was included among the war rations of the Aztec army. He cites Juan de Torquemada, who reports that a cacao-based drink left him "blazing with spirit and courage."²⁸

If the Nephites used cacao similarly to the Aztecs, then it would be natural for Nephite soldiers to have cacao on hand as part of their war

25. McNeil, *Chocolate in Mesoamerica*, 275.

26. McNeil, *Chocolate in Mesoamerica*, 275.

27. Garcia et al., "Fermented Beverages," 5.

28. Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate*, 3rd ed., (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013): 104.

rations. This usage would also explain to the suspicious guards why Laman and his men might have been willing to ostensibly risk whatever additional time and effort would be required to steal the cacao beverage when fleeing from their putative Nephite captors, since it could have been used as a stimulant to aid them in their flight. The statement of the Lamanite guards at Gid—that “by and by we shall receive wine for our rations” (Alma 55:11)—fits well with the possibility that they may have been referring to a ration of a cacao-based drink such as that used by Aztec warriors as a stimulant to prepare them to fight. Such a possibility seems to fit the statement that the wine would “strengthen [them] to go against the Nephites” (v. 11). A cacao-based stimulant seems to fit the situation much better than a purely recreational alcoholic beverage such as *chicha*.

McNeil says that numerous sources indicate that the drinking of chocolate was a privilege restricted to the Aztec elite, such as the warriors. “The only commoners who were privileged to consume this luxurious commodity were soldiers in battle, because cacao was considered to be a stimulant.”²⁹ If cacao was available to commoners only as part of their war rations, and assuming that the taste, effects, and cultural usage of cacao among the Nephites and Lamanites was similar to its usage among the Aztecs, then the cacao wine brought by Laman would have been viewed as very desirable, indeed. Therefore, an unexpected windfall of cacao wine would have been seen as very desirable by the Lamanite guards. Even the most dutiful soldier would likely not have been afraid to partake since the usual effect was one of pleasant refreshment, and they would expect to feel energized by the drink.

It would be natural to expect that Lamanite quartermasters would likewise maintain tight control of a beverage that was highly regarded and difficult to obtain under normal circumstances. A sudden unexpected supply of a highly desirable wine would have meant that the guards could indulge freely without facing any penalty from their superiors for misusing their rations. All members of the garrison could partake without fear of impairing their abilities. Partaking would, these verses suggest, enhance their abilities. This would, then, be a more plausible scenario than one in which all the soldiers of the garrison drank a strong, soporific alcohol.

That the wine given to the Lamanites may have been a cacao-based

29. McNeil, *Chocolate in Mesoamerica*, 274.

drink is speculation, of course, but it is speculation that appears to fit very well the facts reported in the text. The appeal of this proposal is that it resolves the conundrum of an otherwise difficult-to-explain scenario in which Lamanite fugitives fleeing military captivity pause in their flight to acquire, then transport a large quantity of merely celebratory wine. The eagerness of the soldiers of Gid to consume the unexpected windfall of a normally upper-class product and their receipt of wine as a ration to be consumed before battle make sense if this is cacao wine. The deep sleep experienced by the guards after indulging in the specially prepared wine makes sense if the wine was made from green cacao. Added spices such as vanilla and pepper could disguise the fact that it had been prepared from green cacao.

The strongest aspects of this proposal include the use of a cacao-based drink for wartime rations in ancient Mesoamerica, the stimulatory effect of cacao, the cultural desirability of cacao, and the variations in preparation and admixtures that allow for the sort of flexibility that the narrative seems to suggest. Somewhat more speculative are the notions that near-toxic green cacao would have been used and that the guards would be likely to sleep off the negative effects of the drink.

Buying Liberty with Chocolate

The second Book of Mormon story that involves drunken guards who slumber while their captives are freed is found earlier—in the book of Mosiah. There are some possible interesting associations with cacao in this narrative as well. In this case, the people of Limhi are kept as captives while the Lamanites have been glutting themselves on the economic output of the prisoners. As with the prisoners in the city of Gid, a plan is formulated to get the guards drunk and then for the people to flee and take their flocks and herds with them. To be successful, the guards needed to be made drunk enough to incapacitate them for quite a long time. The plan was simple:

King Limhi began to consult with the people how they should deliver themselves out of bondage. . . . And Gideon said unto him: . . . The guards of the Lamanites by night are drunken; therefore let us send a proclamation among all this people that they gather together their flocks and herds, that they may drive them into the wilderness by night. And I will go according to thy command and pay the last tribute of wine to the Lamanites, and they will be drunken; . . . Thus we will

depart with our women and our children, our flocks, and our herds into the wilderness. . . . And king Limhi caused that his people should gather their flocks together; and he sent the tribute of wine to the Lamanites; and he also sent more wine, as a present unto them; and they did drink freely of the wine which king Limhi did send unto them. And it came to pass that the people of king Limhi did depart by night into the wilderness with their flocks and their herds. (Mosiah 22:1, 5–8, 10–11)

The narrative does not contain any specific details that limit the quantity of wine used nor suggest a specifically military milieu. In this story, there is no issue with the carrying capacity or number of conspirators because proximity to the city allows for any quantity of wine to be delivered to the guards.

Despite these significant differences, there is another correlation with later usages of cacao in ancient Mesoamerica. This association relates to a completely different documented usage of cacao. In Aztec times, throughout Mesoamerica, cacao beans were widely used to pay both taxes and tribute.³⁰ Cacao was used, specifically, to buy one's way out of forced labor.³¹

After the disastrous battle with the Lamanites in which king Noah led a hasty retreat and was put to death for inducing his men to abandon their wives and children and ordering them not to return (Mosiah 19:20), Noah's son, Limhi, became king. Limhi "made an oath unto the king of the Lamanites that his people should pay tribute unto him, even one half of all they possessed" (Mosiah 19:26). In addition to imposing this onerous tribute, the Lamanites "would smite them on their cheeks, and exercise authority over them; and began to put heavy burdens upon their backs and drive them as they would a dumb ass" (Mosiah 21:3). Unsurprisingly, Limhi and his people considered themselves to be slaves. All of their efforts became focused on discovering a way to deliver themselves out of bondage (Mosiah 21:36).

Once Ammon arrived and could lead them back to Zarahemla, the people of Limhi decided to implement a plan proposed by Gideon to get the Lamanites drunk and flee with their flocks and herds to the land of Zarahemla. To this end, they "sent the tribute of wine to the Lamanites; and he also sent more wine, as a present unto them; and

30. McNeil, *Chocolate in Mesoamerica*, 23.

31. McNeil, *Chocolate in Mesoamerica*, 220.

they did drink freely of the wine which king Limhi did send unto them" (Mosiah 22:10).

As with the story of freedom through chocolate in the city of Gid, the story of the escape of the people of Limhi may strike some as difficult to explain. In fact, Grant Hardy, who has written the highly influential treatise *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*, finds the account at least surprising. He writes, "Somewhat amazingly, this strategy proved successful."³² In both accounts, the specific formulation of the wine used by Limhi and his people is unstated and, thus, unknown. However, it is possible that the same considerations that applied in the case of the city of Gid apply here: convincing every soldier of a garrison to partake of a drink designed to incapacitate them could be problematic, but the use of green cacao could potentially overcome that difficulty.

The wine Limhi and his people delivered to the soldiers was specifically paid as tribute, which fits the usage of cacao in Mesoamerica centuries later. Of course, the Lamanites did not intend that the tribute delivered to them by Limhi and his people would buy their freedom from bondage. However, perhaps Limhi and his people set the precedent for cacao being used to pay tribute and, thereby, purchase limited freedom, a practice that later became widespread throughout Mesoamerica.

Sweet Dreams

The Nephite's successful use of wine in freeing their people swiftly led the Lamanites to attempt to emulate the approach and turn the tables on the Nephites. With amazing gall and chutzpa, "many times did they attempt to administer of their wine *to the Nephites*, that they might destroy them with poison or with drunkenness" (Alma 55:30). This use of *poison* and *drunkenness* is interesting in that both words in Mayan are related to the term *ki'y* (as mentioned above). The effect of the drinks formulated by the Lamanites, whether poison or drunkenness, could be merely a question of the strength of the wine, since green cacao wine has effects that are nearly toxic. The fine distinctions of *ki'y* would be much appreciated by the poor Lamanite prisoners selected

32. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 167.

to serve as the “canaries in the coal mine”³³ to try out any suspicious liquors before they were given to a Nephite to drink:

They could not be taken in their snares; yea, they would not partake of their wine, save they had first given to some of the Lamanite prisoners. And they were thus cautious that no poison should be administered among them; for if their wine would poison a Lamanite it would also poison a Nephite; and thus they did try all their liquors. (Alma 55:31–32)

The rapid adoption of the tactical use of liquors by the Lamanites so soon after Moroni used it to good effect suggests that the Lamanites must have become aware of how Moroni took Gid, despite the fact that the entire garrison of Gid was captured (Alma 55:23).

How did the Lamanites learn how Gid was taken? Certainly, at some point Captain Moroni must have publicized the strategy throughout his forces. Though the effect of making this strategy widely known would certainly have meant that it could not be used effectively again, he must have chosen to do so in order to warn his own men to avoid the Lamanites’ use of the tactic (Alma 55:31). If Moroni had been certain that his strategy would remain a secret, he likely would have chosen not to publicize it so that he could employ it again to take another Lamanite stronghold. That he chose to reveal the strategy may indicate the effectiveness of the Lamanite intelligence network. The Book of Mormon discusses spies only in terms of performing reconnaissance (for example, Alma 43:28). However, there are hints that the Lamanite intelligence service was sophisticated and had more resources than just a few army scouts.

The first hint we have of the extent of the Lamanite intelligence service is a brief comment related to the fall of the western cities while Moroni was engaged in a campaign in the east:

And now it came to pass that the armies of the Lamanites, on the west sea, south, while in the absence of Moroni on account of some intrigue amongst the Nephites, which caused dissensions amongst them, had gained some ground over the Nephites, yea, insomuch that they had obtained possession of a number of their cities in that part of the land. (Alma 53:8)

33. Amelie Bonney, “Canaries in the Coal Mine,” *The Gale Review* (blog), 8 September 2020, review.gale.com/2020/09/08/canaries-in-the-coal-mine/.

There are no details about the intrigues among the Nephites, but the fact that these intrigues led directly to the fall of several different cities at the same time that Ammoron was there to take advantage of the situation is noteworthy. It strongly hints that the intrigues were provoked by agents employed by Ammoron. The fact that Ammoron's brother had inspired the loyalty of a large portion of the Nephite polity only a few years earlier suggests that Ammoron would have found it relatively easy to recruit agents among the Nephite populace. Those agents could have been employed to provide intelligence, sabotage Nephite war efforts, coordinate with the Lamanite army, sap Nephite morale, and perform many other activities that would prove useful to Ammoron.

A second hint that suggests an extensive and active Lamanite intelligence service is the agreement between Pachus and Ammoron, mentioned by Pahoran:

They have got possession of the land, or the city, of Zarahemla; they have appointed a king over them, and he hath written unto the king of the Lamanites, in the which he hath joined an alliance with him; in the which alliance he hath agreed to maintain the city of Zarahemla, which maintenance he supposeth will enable the Lamanites to conquer the remainder of the land, and he shall be placed king over this people when they shall be conquered under the Lamanites. (Alma 61:8)

The fact that Ammoron was in communication with the insurgents in Zarahemla strongly suggests that Ammoron's agents were instrumental in planning and carrying out the coup that resulted in the successful overthrow of the Nephite government, especially in light of the fact that two previous rebellions were unsuccessful (Alma 2, 46). Indeed, the appearance of a Lamanite army shortly after the battle with Amlicites at the hill Amnihu in the earlier rebellion hints at a history of collaboration between the Mulekite dissidents and the Lamanites. This may reflect a longer-standing pattern. The poor coordination between the Amlicites and Lamanites indicates that the two communities were not well-integrated, a shortcoming that Ammoron seems to have remedied by the time that intrigues were being provoked in the cities of the coast.

Whether the Lamanites had developed an effective intelligence service, they certainly had hit upon a strategy that closely mirrored

that of Captain Moroni. If the Lamanites had a highly functional intelligence gathering service, Moroni probably was aware of that fact. He might have decided that it was more worthwhile to warn his people of possible intrigues than it was to try his ploy a second time, hoping that the Lamanites had not yet discovered how Gid was taken. Therefore, he put the Nephites on their guard against both enemy infiltration and the possibility that their food and drink would be drugged or poisoned. Tellingly, and according to the record, the very best method for countering Lamanite intrigue was “remember[ing] the Lord their God” (Alma 55:31). This statement supports the philosophy that permeates the Book of Mormon: God will protect his people as long as they are faithful to him (see, for example, Alma 48:15).

Summary and Conclusions

This article focuses on two stories about how large groups of captives were liberated by putting their guards to sleep. It speculates about what wine was used to induce sleep. It attempts to provide a logical foundation for events that are in some respects unexplained. The cacao wine discussed in this article has several characteristics that make it a viable candidate for the wine used in freeing the captives in the city of Gid. Cacao is not a depressant like fruit-based wine. It is a stimulant, a chocolate drink likely used by soldiers preparing for battle. But it can be prepared in such a way that it becomes a nearly toxic inebriant.

Cacao was used to pay tribute and to buy the freedom of slaves, usages that correspond with the way in which Limhi and his people obtained their freedom. The possibility of the involvement of a Lamanite intelligence network in a few of the political developments during the Lamanite wars was also briefly examined. This article reasserts the literary value of reading Book of Mormon war narratives with attention to cultural and material possibilities, as a comparison with ancient Mesoamerican artifacts and behaviors can bring both richness and insight to the reading experience.

The possibility that the Lamanites made use of stimulants to prepare their soldiers for battle as suggested in Alma 55:11 fits the putative Mesoamerican context for the Book of Mormon nicely. It dovetails well with the constant search for any substance that can provide soldiers with a military edge. The use of chocolate, specifically, as a wartime stimulant is particularly interesting. Its use was not restricted to the Aztecs. German troops in World War II were issued chocolate

bars laced with methamphetamines.³⁴ American troops were issued D-rations, chocolate bars that were an emergency substitute for daily meals.³⁵ British secret service agents were given chocolate impregnated with garlic so that they would smell more like the French civilians they were impersonating. The Nazis attempted to assassinate Winston Churchill with a thin explosive encased in chocolate.³⁶

The lengths to which enemy combatants were willing to go, and the ingenuity employed in the constant deadly contests where success meant life and failure death, is also clearly visible in the accounts in Alma. Captain Moroni's need to constantly innovate during a long, destructive war is one more point of verisimilitude for the Book of Mormon account. It matches closely what happened in more recent wars.

Perhaps the most important message of the war chapters in the Book of Mormon is the philosophy that drove so many of the decisions of Captain Moroni and his generals: As long as they and their people were diligent in their faith, the Lord would protect them. This truth is illustrated many times in the Book of Mormon. It is the reason why Moroni and his people were able to avoid becoming ensnared by the intrigues of the Lamanites (Alma 55:30). Similar diligent faith will no doubt protect us today just as it did the Nephites two millennia ago.

As so many scholars and General Conference speakers have stressed, the Book of Mormon was written for our time. In McConkie and Millet's words,

Given that the Book of Mormon has been written for our day, that Mormon and the other prophet-writers saw our day and prepared this sacred volume in a way that would help us address the problems and challenges of the last days, what lessons do we learn from the twenty chapters on warfare?³⁷

They suggest five excellent lessons, acknowledging that their list "is by no means exhaustive."³⁸ To their list, I might add one more important

34. Lukasz Kamienski, *Shooting Up: A History of Drugs in Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

35. Judith Sumner, *Plants Go to War: A Botanical History of World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2019), 119.

36. Sumner, *Plants Go to War*, 120.

37. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 3, *Alma through Helaman* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 321.

38. McConkie and Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary*, 3:321.

takeaway message of the war chapters in the Book of Mormon. The philosophy that drove so many of the decisions of Captain Moroni and his generals was this: As long as they and their people were diligent in their faith, the Lord would protect them. This trust is illustrated many times throughout numerous accounts within the Book of Mormon. It is given as the reason why Moroni and his people were able to avoid becoming ensnared in the intrigues of the Lamanites (Alma 55:30). The development of a similar faith in those who follow Christ in the current day will no doubt serve to protect and guide them, just as it did the Nephites of two millennia ago.

That is something to ponder the next time you sit down to read the Book of Mormon while you enjoy your favorite chocolate beverage. I suggest that a Guatemalan hot chocolate, known as *Xocolatl*, with a bit of cinnamon, pepper, and vanilla might be particularly appropriate.



Noel Hudson was born in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and raised in Provo, Utah. He earned a BS in Zoology from BYU, an MS in Engineering Technology from BYU, and an MBA in marketing from BYU. While working as an electrical engineer for a company that manufactures communications equipment, he published eight books of historical and science fiction and has written articles on the Book of Mormon. He and his wife, Luciana, are the parents of three children.

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