The Unwritten Debates in Moroni1's Letter

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract: *Moroni₁'s letter in Alma 60 is not simply an angry and intemperate screed against the government; it also responds to arguments about just tactics (what modern readers would call ethics) taking place among Nephite leaders at this time. Moroni₁'s letter argues for his preferred strategies of active defense and ambush, while interpreting defeat as a failure of leaders. His rhetorical strategy is particularly noteworthy for associating his Nephite opponents' hopeful trust in the Lord with the passive resistance of the king-men, and shifting blame for defeat away from his strategies and onto his political opponents. Overall, Moroni₁'s arguments exemplify sophistication and debate within Nephite thought.*

[**Editor's Note:** *This paper is adapted from chapters 4–6 of Morgan Deane,* To Stop a Slaughter: The Book of Mormon and the Just War Tradition *(self-published, Venice Press, forthcoming, 2024).*]

Many scholars view Moroni₁'s behavior, particularly his letter to Pahoran in Alma 60, as angry and counterproductive. Grant Hardy said he was "hot blooded," exemplifying an "aggressive posture," a "quick temper," a "blunt manner," and "hasty suspicions."[1] *Book of Mormon Central* described Moroni₁ as "angrily" writing his letter.[2] Even in defending Moroni₁, Duane Boyce doesn't suggest there are

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1. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 31, 177.
2. Scripture Central Staff, "Why Was Moroni's Correspondence with Pahoran Significant?," KnoWhy 168, 18 August 2016, knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-was-moronis-correspondence-with-pahoran-significant.

alternative interpretations for the aggressive tone of the letter. He offers some mitigating reasons for the anger by stating that Moroni$_1$ was constantly surrounded by danger from "beginning to end" and was misunderstood and unfairly judged by modern readers who haven't seen constant warfare.[3]

There is another way to interpret Moroni$_1$'s letter, one that moves beyond his anger at the government for its perceived malfeasance to include the larger cultural context in which he wrote. Captain Moroni$_1$'s letter makes two arguments that reflect issues and debates during this period of Nephite history: (1) the previous Nephite practice of waiting on the Lord to deliver the people from imminent threats was dangerously passive; and (2) it was the sins of his Nephite rivals that resulted in battlefield defeat, not the sins of his soldiers who carried out his controversial strategy. A third issue may be at play as well, though it is not explicitly raised in Moroni$_1$'s letter: the argument that ambushes are not inherently sinful. The issue of justified ambushes, as this paper argues, is an expression of the active versus passive debate prominent within the letter.

Waiting On the Lord: A Historically Passive Approach

The Book of Mormon contains many sections where readers can examine or deduce Nephite thought and strategy:

- The Lord's reasoning that it is better that one man should perish than an entire nation dwindle in unbelief (1 Nephi 4:13) can be viewed as an authoritative and evocative example of military necessity and utilitarianism.
- Consistent with Augustine's reasoning when he wrote that "it is a higher glory still to stay war itself with a word, than to slay men with the sword,"[4] Alma$_2$ expresses his desire for the word of God and pure testimony to pull down and destroy all the pride and contention of the people (Alma 4:19).
- Jacob's comment that they were "as yet" conquerors (Jacob 7:25) suggests a weariness and futility over engaging in even

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3. Duane Boyce, "'Beloved by All the People': A Fresh Look at Captain Moroni," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 45 (2021): 198–202, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/beloved-by-all-the-people-a-fresh-look-at-captain-moroni/.

4. Augustine, "Letter 229," NewAdvent.org, newadvent.org/fathers/1102229.htm. Also quoted by Paul Ramsey, *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 151.

victorious warfare that recalls the description of warfare as a funeral from the Taoist thinker Laozi.[5]

- Alma$_2$'s discussion of love and hypocrisy, warning that prayer without caring for the needy makes one a hypocrite who denies the faith (Alma 34:28), places intriguing demands on those who profess a love of Christ.[6]

There are also numerous examples showing that the Nephites considered and sometimes used preemptive force.[7] The Nephites' strategy of preemptive war at the end of their history is generally condemned by modern readers, yet it is the Nephites' wicked oath and thirst for vengeance that is condemned by Mormon and the Lord (Mormon 3:9–15).[8] Mormon 3:9–10 lists the Nephite sins as boasting and swearing "by the heavens, and also by the throne of God" that they would seek vengeance. In their tormented and fallen spiritual state, absent any repentance, the Nephites were doomed no matter what military strategy they pursued. (The Nephites lost many times and were annihilated in purely defensive stances, too.) But modern readers often condemn the strategy of the Nephites instead of viewing sin as the root cause of their failure.[9]

The most extensive and nuanced discussion of Nephite thought naturally revolves around the war chapters. Moroni$_1$'s discussion of the first and second offense in Alma 48:14 is a variation of the command given to Latter-day Saints to renounce war and proclaim peace in Doctrine and Covenants 98. The Title of Liberty inspired this writer during boot camp and lists many righteous reasons to wield the sword.

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5. Lao Tzu (Laozi), *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Gia Fu Feng, Chapter 31, egreenway.com/taoism/ttclz31.htm

6. Morgan Deane, "Loving Neighbors By Standing Up to Their Slaughter," *Public Square Magazine*, 28 February 2022, publicsquaremag.org/politics-law/freedom/loving-neighbors-by-standing-up-to-their-slaughter/.

7. Among the examples are Ammon's aside that his missionary service rejected the notion from other Nephites to take up arms and "destroy" the Lamanites (Alma 26:25), Zeniff's active scouting mission in preparation for an attack (Mosiah 9:1), and Helaman$_1$'s servant killing Kishkumen on the way to the judgment seat (Helaman 2:6–9).

8. All of the above issues are discussed more fully in my upcoming book *To Stop a Slaughter: The Book of Mormon and the Just War Tradition* (self-published, Venice Press, forthcoming, 2024).

9. Morgan Deane, "Offensive Warfare in the Book of Mormon and a Defense of the Bush Doctrine," in *War and Peace in Our Time, Mormon Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 29–40.

Alma 48:21–24 is the best description of the reluctant, peaceful heart that a just warrior should have and when he should fight against the barbarous cruelty of their brethren. In Alma 60, Moroni$_1$'s letter is a detailed primary source providing clear and forceful language in favor of his strategy and illustrates how the Nephites had different attitudes about trusting in the Lord.

One version of waiting on the Lord that is more passive than Moroni$_1$'s actions is seen in explicit teachings and actions of the Nephites in earlier generations. They felt that trusting in the Lord meant preparing for battle, receiving Lamanite attacks, and then trusting in God to deliver them by aiding Nephite armies. Such aid included, for example, guiding Nephite armies to be in the right place for better success (Alma 43:23) or strengthening the Nephites in battle for better performance. This attitude could be summarized as "hopeful waiting."

The attitude resulted from what the Nephites called the "captivity of their fathers" (Alma 60:20), the non-martial and miraculous rescue of Limhi and Alma$_1$, perhaps the three failed assaults of Limhi's people to escape captivity, and the gross boasting of the soldiers of Noah. The latter two cases showed a reliance on martial prowess and proactive military action with disastrous consequences that implied a failure to trust in the Lord.

When the Nephites suffered heavy losses in the battles against the Amlicites and Lamanites (Alma 2), "they believed that it was the judgments of God sent upon them because of their wickedness and their abominations; therefore they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty" (Alma 4:3). In the same year Alma resigned his political position and sought to "stir" them to their duty (Alma 4:19).

These lessons seemed to have a direct influence on the course of the Amlicite war. Instead of seeking out battle like Moroni$_1$ did years later, the Nephites faithfully trusted in the Lord and waited to receive the Amlicite attack (Alma 2:12–13). Then the Nephite army had to quickly pivot and counter the Lamanite attack, where the Lamanites were in a stronger position of holding a key river crossing. Their counterattack resulted in a desperate battle to prevent the Lamanites from reaching Zarahemla (Alma 2:26–27).[10]

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10. See Morgan Deane, *From Sinners to Saints: Reassessing the Book of Mormon* (self-published, Venice Press, 2016), 48–53.

Changing to a Proactive Strategy

Even though the Nephites believed the Lord would direct them in battle, they still relied on spies for reconnaissance (Alma 2:21). This suggests that some Nephites already believed in more active measures. The Nephites won, but the battle was extremely difficult because Alma$_2$ and the army had to rush back and fight their way across a river in a disadvantageous position. Alma$_2$ needed miraculous strength to prevail (Alma 2:30), and was wounded at some point (Alma 3:22). Even after winning the battle, the Nephites had to deal with the destruction of their crops (Alma 3:2).

Moreover, the Nephites were too slow to raise an army and protect the people of Ammonihah and Noah (Alma 16:3). The text does not point to the failure of the Nephite government by noting the city's destruction was a fulfillment of God's judgment (Alma 16:9–11), but this is still an example of a passive and reactive defense. In the many following battles that involved trying to rescue the innocent captives from the land of Noah (Alma 16:3; 25:3), it may be that the Nephites were also reactive and fighting at a disadvantage as a consequence of waiting to receive an attack.

Moroni$_1$ witnessed these events and, judging by his later and much more proactive strategy as well as his hatred of passivity, he seems to have made a decisive change after these campaigns. That change is represented and defended in his letter.

For evidence of this change, we can trace his rejection of passivity in his words and actions. During a time of nominal peace, Moroni$_1$ expelled Lamanite settlers to improve the Nephite defensive situation (Alma 50:7).[11] The Lamanite refugees pouring into Lamanite lands during a time of peace would have made the arguments of Amalickiah's professional agitators even stronger (Alma 48:1). When Amalickiah used his words to influence or "flatter" the people (Alma 46:5,7), Moroni$_1$ responded with words only after he and his armored men went "among the people" (Alma 46:13, 19, 21).[12] Most of his more active trust in the Lord focused on battle, and he believed in a more active

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11. Morgan Deane, "Experiencing Battle in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Scripture and Scholarship* 23 (2017): 237–52, journal. interpreterfoundation.org/experiencing-battle-in-the-book-of-mormon/.
12. Perhaps the Nephites were not armed because the case of Nehor made it illegal to "enforce [their beliefs] with the sword" (Alma 1:12). While Moroni$_1$ and his men are not recorded with arms, their armor and mass of intensely motivated people would still seem militant.

version of trusting in the Lord that included stratagems, assigning the cause of defeat to negligent leaders, and repeatedly warning against passivity.

To argue against the passive version of trusting in the Lord and support his more active strategy, Moroni$_1$ sought to awaken the Nephites to their duty.[13] Instead of simply discussing spiritual support and duties to God, Moroni$_1$ argued that his Nephite opponents' passive trust in the Lord was a "stupor" where they "[sat] still" (Alma 60:7, 21, 23). Moroni$_1$'s letter argued that this stupor, which could be the passive version of trusting in the Lord, led to the government's neglect and even the death of its people (Alma 60:8). The transformation of the Nephite understanding of "awaken" and "remembrance," as well as associating the previous attitudes with a stupor, would have stung the Nephite conscience and spurred them to support Moroni$_1$'s new and more active policy. This seems to have happened in Alma 62:4–5 when Moroni$_1$ went from place to place rallying the people to join his army.

Moroni$_1$ might have been simply winning the people back from what Pahoran described as the "flattering" of the traitorous king-men (Alma 61:4). Flattery, to be successful, must have some component that is enjoyable to hear. While the wicked king-men were not above using arms, flattery in the Book of Mormon often denoted promises of money and power (Alma 46:7; 3 Nephi 7:12). But they still had powerful arguments to make. The king-men's flattery likely consisted of arguments that were familiar to the people and pulled their heart strings, starting with a return to a different but more venerable, passive, and comfortable trust in God. Moroni$_1$'s strategy, which required effort and bloodshed, probably seemed more onerous than welcome to the average Nephite. In contrast, the king-men could have argued that passive trust in God would end the war early and give the average soldier a better chance of survival. Further, their plan would offer many of the king-men of "high birth" more access to power and riches (Alma 51:8). All the people had to do was support the hereditary leaders, some of whom could trace their leadership back to Zedekiah (Helaman 6:10), and let them use their political skills to end the war and its associated burdens.

In time the king-men's insincere faith in God would become as obvious as the wickedness of king Noah and his priests (Mosiah 11),

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13. Cf. Alma 4:3 where the Nephites, facing heavy losses after a more passive strategy, "were awakened to a remembrance of their duty."

but by that point they would have already won the debate with Moroni₁ and Paharon. Like the Gadiantons that gained "sole management" of the government, the king-men would have been hard to remove by the remaining faithful (Helaman 6:39). With the support for their strategy almost fatally undermined, Pahoran and Moroni₁ argued that the king-men "flattered" the people with the easier path.

In contrast to the passive "hopeful waiting" strategy, Moroni₁ used active verbs like "stir" (Alma 60:10) to support his superior strategy. He continued his attacks on what he saw as the wrong lessons and passive culture with accusatory questions that show the lessons he learned from the Amlicite war about an active and even preemptive defense:

> Behold, could ye suppose that ye could sit upon your thrones, and because of the exceeding goodness of God ye could do nothing and he would deliver you? Behold, if ye have supposed this ye have supposed in vain . . . .
>
> Or do ye suppose that the Lord will still deliver us, while we sit upon our thrones and do not make use of the means which the Lord has provided for us? Yea, will ye sit in idleness while ye are surrounded with thousands of those, yea, and tens of thousands, who do also sit in idleness, while there are thousands round about in the borders of the land who are falling by the sword, yea, wounded and bleeding? Do ye suppose that God will look upon you as guiltless while ye sit still and behold these things? (Alma 60:11, 21–23)

Moroni₁ twice mentions both of the passive terms "sit" and "idleness." This contrast could simply show that he was angry at the government for their passivity, but given the support in the text and his use of repetition, it is likely a rhetorical strategy addressing hot button issues.

Moroni₁ might have also tapped into a Nephite cultural attitude against kings. Nephite society had moved to a system of judges a generation earlier. But Nephite culture retained persistent tension with at least one faction, likely the Mulekite descendants, that wanted to restore the monarchy. The name Mulek is linked to the Hebrew root mlk, meaning "king" or "to reign."[14] The arch nemesis of Moroni₁ in the war chapters, Amalickiah, could be a throne name derived from the

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14. *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*, s.v. "Mulek," onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php?title=MULEK.

Hebrew phrase "Yahweh made (me) King."[15] Alan Miner suggested that Mulekites and king-men referred to the same people.[16] The king-men were somewhat ascendent in Zarahemla during the war. Like most long-term rulers, those king-men could argue that they weren't swayed by the passions of the day (like the militance of Moroni₁ in the Title of Liberty incident in Alma 48 or his raising armies in Alma 62:4–5), and the king-men could argue that they had the ability to pursue a reasoned, long-term strategy that was less bloody than the direct style of Moroni₁. However, anti-monarchial sentiment remained strong, with the Nephites still only one generation into the reign of the judges, and with leaders like Moroni₁ old enough to remember the victims of wicked king Noah, such as Gideon. Moroni₁ uses this language about "thrones" to attach the passive lessons of the past to the wickedness of Noah in the minds of whoever read or heard it, stigmatizing opposing arguments that attacked his active strategy.

Moroni₁ defended his activity by linking the opposition to the hated kings and recasting the earlier version of trust alone as dangerously passive.

Who Did Sin? Soldiers or Leaders?

At this point in the war chapters (Alma 60), Moroni₁'s strategy produced only a stalemate. This phase of the war had dragged on for years. The Nephites had just lost Nephihah, a key city fortified by Moroni₁, that guarded both Zarahemla and the narrow neck of land. His strategy produced many intense battles with "so much loss" (Alma 60:28). Further, many Nephite cities were in Lamanite hands and were strongly fortified against attack. Many Nephites had been losing their homes, risking their lives, or even starving, and these setbacks likely seemed contrary to the promise that faithfulness would lead to prosperity and disobedience would result in destruction (see, for example, 1 Nephi 2:20–21; Ether 2:7–8; 2 Nephi 5:25).

This promise extended to the martial realm as well. Mormon very clearly felt that God's protection made the people powerful (when they

15. Ben Spackman, "Amalickiah the Usurper and the War Chapters" (working paper, 5 February 2005), f.cl.ly/items/3t1t3y0r0g2D1a3J2a2i/Amalickiah.pdf. There are challenges with proposals drawing upon the *mlk* root in Hebrew. See, for example, *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*, s.v. "Amalickiah," onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php?title=AMALICKIAH.

16. Alan Miner, "The Mulekite Connection," *Meridian Magazine*, 2 July 2008, latterdaysaintmag.com/article-1-1637/.

were seeking to follow God). The prophet Nephi₂ awaited his execution from his enemies, but the sign of Jesus's birth saved his life (3 Nephi 1). The precarious situation of the Nephites was widely recognized:

> And because of their iniquity the church had begun to dwindle; and they began to disbelieve in the spirit of prophecy and in the spirit of revelation; and the judgments of God did stare them in the face. And they saw that they had become weak, like unto their brethren, the Lamanites, and that the Spirit of the Lord did no more preserve them; yea, it had withdrawn from them because the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples—
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> Therefore the Lord did cease to preserve them by his miraculous and matchless power, for they had fallen into a state of unbelief and awful wickedness; and they saw that the Lamanites were exceedingly more numerous than they, and except they should cleave unto the Lord their God they must unavoidably perish.
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> For behold, they saw that the strength of the Lamanites was as great as their strength, even man for man. And thus had they fallen into this great transgression; yea, thus had they become weak, because of their transgression, in the space of not many years. (Helaman 4:23–26)

According to Mormon the Nephites lost not "because the walls were high and the moats deep," as one military theorist said when dismissing heavenly signs and aids,[17] but because the Lord's spirit had ceased to be with them; the Nephites were no longer preserved by his miraculous and matchless power. The Book of Mormon shows that while human effort, "like unto their brethren . . . man for man" (Helaman 4:23–26) is a part of a successful defense, true victory relies upon God's preserving power and Christ's saving grace.[18]

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17. Wei Liao-Tzu, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, trans. Ralph Sawyer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 242–43.

18. Also compare the wording used in Zeniff's narrative about going up "in the strength of the Lord" (Mosiah 9:17; 10:10) and Limhi's forces who "fought like lions for their prey" and "like dragons did they fight" (Mosiah 20:10, 11). Nathan J. Arp, "An Analysis of Mormon's Narrative Strategies Employed on the Zeniffite Narrative and Their Effect on Limhi," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 59 (2023): 159–90, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/an-analysis-of-mormons-narrative-strategies-employed-on-the-zeniffite-narrative-and-their-effect-on-limhi/.

Yet there was still room for various approaches in interpreting God's favor. The writings of the lesser-known Cao Mie suggested that there are ways to excuse or dismiss the spiritual implications of defeat.[19] He came from one of the smaller warring states in classical China and thus had many opportunities to explain away defeat that seemed like signs of heaven's disapproval. His argument's main importance was to offer elites and the people a reason to remain committed to a defeated ruler in the face of those signs. The Mandate of Heaven is different from the Nephites' trust in the Lord's central promise, but operated with a similar underlying principle that made victory and defeat a divine diagnostic on the Nephites' spirituality. The Book of Mormon's central promise could, when Nephite rulers faced defeat, be used by powerful internal opponents to justify and legitimize a change in allegiances, the withholding of support, and even open rebellion. Thus, when the Nephites encountered battlefield defeat, it weakened Moroni$_1$'s and the government's legitimacy and gave rivals, such as the king-men in Zarahemla, ideological ammunition to entice the people, overthrow Pahoran, and end the war with a premature ceasefire.

The arguments in Moroni$_1$'s letter were not the only disputed heavenly signs in the Book of Mormon. After "many great signs" pointed to Christ's birth (Helaman 16:13), some believed but many explained it away by pointing to, as Mormon said, "their own strength and upon their own wisdom," inventing many things "imagine[d] up in their hearts, which were foolish and vain" (Helaman 16:15, 22). Likewise, after Nephi$_2$ prophesized of the chief judge's death and identified the murderers, some of the people viewed him as a prophet while others said he was a god (Helaman 9:40–41).

In his letter, Moroni$_1$ seems to respond to a government that tried to disown their defeat and heaven's displeasure by blaming the unrighteousness of the soldiers, and, by extension, Moroni$_1$'s strategy. By diminishing Moroni$_1$'s strategy they could argue their strategy was superior and gain the people's support. Given the importance of one's heart in war (Alma 48:21–23), the intransigent government officials could have pointed away from their neglectful strategy and defended their own leadership by blaming Moroni$_1$ or the soldiers. Moroni$_1$ summarizes the argument and provides a response:

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19. Ernest Caldwell, "Promoting Action in Warring States Political Philosophy: A first Look at the Chu Manuscript Cao Mie's Battle Arrays," *Early China* 37, no. 1 (December 2014): 287.

> Do ye suppose that, because so many of your brethren have been killed it is because of their wickedness? I say unto you, if ye have supposed this ye have supposed in vain; for I say unto you, there are many who have fallen by the sword; and behold it is to your condemnation. (Alma 60:12)

Moroni1 countered with powerful reasons that explained why the righteous and those who do their duty can still lose. He placed the blame on the government for not providing sufficient supplies and failing to prosecute the war with vigor. Ironically, both Moroni1 and the government seemed to be using the soldiers to bolster their argument: the government by blaming unrighteous soldiers for Moroni1's failures as a leader, and Moroni1 by blaming the government for the soldiers' hunger, suffering, and defeat. Readers only have the letters of Moroni1 and Pahoran, as well as the narrative from Mormon that points to the lack of food and suffering of soldiers. But clearly, and consistent with other examples of interpreting heaven's favor, the suffering of soldiers was part of a larger argument about the merits of Moroni1's strategy.

Spies and Ambushes

The final complaint about Moroni1's strategy isn't directly mentioned in Moroni1's letter, but it is part of his active strategy—while it produced some amazing victories, it was also the most controversial. In the very beginning of the war chapters, the Book of Mormon describes the book's first detailed ambush.[20] The key statement arguing for its controversial nature comes when Mormon inserted a defensive aside, stating that Moroni1 believed it was "no sin" to win by stratagem (Alma 43:30). Mormon's statement about stratagem being no sin implies that at least some Nephites contrasted the patient and trusting strategy in the Amlicite war with Moroni1's new ambushes and believed that Moroni1's active self-defense showed that he trusted in the "arm of flesh" (2 Nephi 4:34).[21] After all, if everyone agreed that utilizing strata-

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20. It is possible that Nephite society used or encountered ambushes before. For example, Mosiah 20:8–9 mentions hiding in "waiting places" though it doesn't seem like an actual ambush. The statements by Zerahemnah and its defense in the text from Mormon suggest this was new.

21. There is some debate whether later Nephites had access to the small plates, but the concept of trusting your own arms instead of trusting in God is prevalent enough in the scriptures that the Nephites likely had some version of this concept that contrasted with Moroni1's preferred strategy. On the issue of the continuity of the small plates in Nephite society, see Matthew

gem was no sin, there would be no reason for Mormon to mention that Moroni$_1$ didn't view it as such.

This suggests that when Mormon edited his narrative, he was aware that some generals, leaders, or people did believe it was a sin then or at other times. Surrounded by Moroni$_1$'s stratagems, the dissenter Zerahemnah asserted that it wasn't God's blessings, but Nephite "cunning" that won the battle (Alma 44:9). As he was from the defeated army, his words could be viewed as the natural resentment of a sore loser. Critics of Moroni$_1$ may also have cited Isaiah's warning the Israelites against trusting in the abundance of Egyptian chariots (Isaiah 31:1). We don't have an account of those complaints in the text, but their existence seems plausible and may have motivated some aspects of Moroni$_1$'s response. Similar complaints resonate today in the debate between active vs. passive measures, with some arguing that members of the Church who support military spending and active foreign policy are worshiping "false gods."[22]

Today's debate is likely just as ferocious as those debates within Nephite society that are hinted at in Moroni$_1$'s letter with the added intensity of the difficulty in applying Moroni$_1$'s words in a modern setting. For example, those who support an active defense can also question the wisdom of weapons transferred to the Taliban during the '80s, object to interference of global agencies, or reject careless spending of aid in Ukraine. Though repeated criticisms of active policies that recognize a right to self-defense in principle but never find an acceptable example in practice recall what modern scholars call "contingent pacifism."[23] Modern debates are complicated, and many differing views may be held in good faith. The modern complaint that one's ideological opponents worship "false gods," or are a "warlike

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Scott Stenson, "'According to the Spirit of Revelation and Prophecy': Alma$_2$'s Prophetic Warning of Christ's Coming to the Lehites (and Others)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 107–68, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/according-to-the-spirit-of-revelation-and-prophecy-alma2s-prophetic-warning-of-christs-coming-to-the-lehites-and-others/.

22. Patrick Mason and David Pulsipher, *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to Conflict* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 193–96.

23. Ned Dobos, "Pacifism," in *Key Concepts in Military Ethics*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2015), 96–101, google.com/books/edition/Key_Concepts_in_Military_Ethics/PCOOCgAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PT97&printsec=frontcover. The whole chapter is an excellent introduction to this new and often neglected concept in the discussion of ethics.

people,"[24] for their interventionist positions, are likely similar to those faced by Captain Moroni[1] for his more hawkish and active strategy.[25]

This debate around activity is amplified when we consider that many Christians and Christian thinkers had significant problems trying to reconcile lofty moral principles while at the same time resorting to and justifying deceptive and what some might even view as treacherous tactics in war. The basic hurdle articulated by medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas as he built upon Augustinian thought is that ambushes and deceptive practices in warfare prevented a just and honorable peace.[26] Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant stated something similar where treachery undermined the trust necessary for future peace.[27] To put it plainly, just war theorists believed that people would find it impossible to live in peace with treacherous neighbors who resort to such despicable tactics.

A similar attitude is seen in the Book of Mormon. The Lamanites already believed they were wronged because Nephi[1] usurped power and stole the sacred records (Mosiah 10:15–16) and deception-based tactics would have only added to the impression that Nephites were underhanded and, therefore, Lamanites were unable to live in peace with them. Again, the settlers that Moroni[1] expelled ostensibly during a time of peace probably thought the Nephites were treacherous and that peace was a futile gesture (Alma 50:7). The victim of an ambush, Zerahemnah, attributed Nephite victory to their "cunning" ambushes and armor (Alma 44:9), not the Nephites' faith in God. And many of Zerahemnah's followers refused to surrender, perhaps because of that treachery, even when placed in a hopeless situation. The Nephites did manage to convince some Lamanites in various instances to put down their arms and join the people of Ammon, but as the twice-resumed

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24. McKay Coppins, "On Utah Billboard, A Mormon Challenge to Romney," *Buzzfeed News*, 28 March 2012, buzzfeednews.com/article/mckaycoppins/on-utah-billboard-a-mormon-challenge-to-romney.

25. Mason and Pulsipher, *Proclaim Peace*, 193–96.

26. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 40, Article III, NewAdvent.org, newadvent.org/summa/3040.htm#article3.

27. Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace, a Philosophical Sketch*, Section 1, part 6, EarlyModernTexts.com, earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/kant1795.pdf: "6. 'No state during a war is to permit acts of hostility that would make mutual confidence impossible after the war is over—e.g. the use of assassins and poisoners, greah of capitulation, incitement to treatson in the opposing state." While ambushes aren't explicitly mentioned, they would fall under the category of underhanded, treacherous behavior that prevent long-term peace.

battle in Alma 44 demonstrates, the ambushes of Moroni₁ may have made it more difficult.

Christian thinkers and Moroni₁ developed ways to justify certain kinds of deceit. Saint Augustine cited Joshua 8:2, where the Lord commanded the children of Israel to ambush their enemies. He stated that "Provided the war be just, it is no concern of justice whether it be carried on openly or by ambushes."[28] Citing the New Testament about Jesus asking his followers to conceal some miracles or remain silent about sacred teachings, Aquinas then argued "wherefore much more ought the plan of campaign to be hidden from the enemy."[29] Because some holy teachings were withheld, some concealment (not deception) was thus acceptable if it was for just war aims which naturally uphold the ultimate good.[30]

The idea of ambushes being unchristian deception that broke Nephite social norms might explain particular verses in Nephite scriptures where Moroni₁ responded to the king-men and opponents of his strategy. Mormon's summary of the events may have been quoted from primary sources where Moroni₁ justified his behavior to his critics. So instead of reading this statement as prophetic, we might view it as argumentative. After all, Alma 43:30 doesn't say that stratagems are divine, but only that they are no sin. Even though Moroni₁ is described as righteous, Alma 43:30 only summarized Moroni₁'s thought, and not any commands from the Lord. Like Christian thinkers, Moroni₁ goes to great lengths to argue that his ambushes were for the just causes of family, country and right to worship.

> And now, as Moroni knew the intention of the Lamanites, that it was their intention to destroy their brethren, or to subject them and bring them into bondage that they might establish a kingdom unto themselves over all the land;
>
> And he also knowing that it was the only desire of the Nephites to preserve their lands, and their liberty, and their church, therefore he thought it no sin that he should defend them by stratagem; therefore, he found by his spies which course the Lamanites were to take. (Alma 43:29–30)

If readers restated this as an expository argument against his

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28. St. Augustine, *Questions on Joshua*, 10, NewAdvent.org, sites.google.com/site/aquinasstudybible/home/joshua/augustine-of-hippo-questions-on-joshua.

29. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 40.

30. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 40.

critics, it would read: "The Lamanites intend to destroy our brethren and subject them to bondage to establish a kingdom. Our desire is to preserve our lands and liberty; therefore it is not a sin to ambush our opponents." His thought process described a just cause in a war that was thrust upon the Nephites. And since that war was fair or just, it was no sin in Moroni$_1$'s mind if he won it through ambush. He isn't simply a "military studmuffin," as Janet Riess has suggested,[31] and he wasn't responding in anger to his hasty suspicions. But he thought a great deal, under inspiration from the Lord, about how to defend his people against a hostile and aggressive enemy. He thought so much about righteous ways to defend his people that his defense of ambushes mimicked the reasoning of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas who grappled with similar issues.

Conclusions

In summary, Moroni$_1$'s letter was not simply an angry letter hastily driven by the exigencies of battle. The tone was strong, but it also contained clever arguments and a rhetorical strategy that responded to larger cultural debates within Nephite society. Moroni$_1$ assumed a much more active posture that didn't wait to receive attacks like the near total defeat in the Amlicite war, but instead initiated them using ambushes and direct battle. When the war dragged on and it seemed as though divine favor had turned against Moroni$_1$ and his armies, he offered a competing interpretation of Nephite defeat, not as indictments on the unrighteousness of Nephite soldiers, but as the bitter fruit of government failure and wickedness. He argued that his active ambushes were no sin, while the need to make this argument suggests that many people did. He reframed that controversial part of his strategy using arguments about the just causes of defending Nephite rights and liberties.

Nephite thought became more sophisticated to the point that they could debate the reasons for battlefield failure, while still holding a belief that God was on their side. Moroni$_1$'s reasoning shows similarities to Augustinian thought. Most importantly, the unwritten debates behind Moroni$_1$'s letter suggest that Nephite strategy was not settled in Moroni$_1$'s time. He was the strongest voice, quoted at length in the

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31. Jana Riess, "Dear Mormon Militia: Stop the Insanity," Flunking Sainthood, *Religion News Service*, 4 January 2016, religionnews.com/2016/01/04/dear-mormon-militiamen-stop-the-insanity/.

Book of Mormon and spoken of with approval by Mormon. The hearts of the people that seemed so fickle, based on Moroni$_1$'s unwritten arguments, might have simply been fonder for more purely defensive strategies that didn't try to outmaneuver enemies, constantly seek ferocious battle with dragons that cut off limbs and split apart their armor (Alma 43:44), or rely on costly assaults to retake fortified cities. Moroni$_1$ had to rely on strong letters to restate his arguments and convince the Nephites to stay the course. Moroni$_1$ was righteous and could shake the foundations of hell but wasn't perfect and certainly wasn't the final voice on military strategy.

The new active Nephite philosophy won the war due to its use in Moroni$_1$'s time and immediately after. It is one of the ironies in history that sometimes military victory can be the worst thing for a nation as lesser or even harmful habits, procedures, tactics, and methods are confirmed as valid or even brilliant,[32] and victory creates new problems. For example, while Moroni$_1$ may have won this battle against the Lamanites and among Nephite leaders and people, his active strategies were disastrous when applied to the Gadianton robbers, such as when they actively tried to "search out . . . and destroy" the robbers in their unassailable mountain hideouts (Helaman 11:28–29).[33]

The ultimate lesson of Mormon$_1$'s letter is that readers should carefully parse his words and examine his actions for military and spiritual insights.

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32. Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 20.
33. See Morgan Deane, "Undissected Victory: The Consequences of the Great War," in *From Sinners to Saints: Reassessing the Book of Mormon* (self-published, Venice Press, 2016), 106, 111.