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Just War and Mormon Ethics

Benjamin R. Hertzberg


WAR AND PEACE IN OUR TIME is the result of a 2011 conference that Patrick Mason and Richard Bushman held at Claremont Graduate University. Mason and company have two different purposes for the book. The first is analytical: they wish to begin thinking about the “historical, spiritual, and cultural resources” within Mormonism that can guide reflection about the ethics of peace and war (p. xiii). The second is engaged: believing that most American Latter-day Saints assume that war is morally permissible, they wish to publicize the work of Mormons who understand their own tradition differently (pp. xiv–xv). It is no surprise, then, that several of the contributors to the volume write for The Mormon Worker, a web-based newsletter that takes its name and orientation from the pacifist Catholic Worker Movement’s namesake publication. Mason, Pulsipher, and Bushman succeed admirably at their second goal: War and Peace in Our Time contains original and powerful readings of the pacifist teachings of Mormon scripture, illuminating short biographies of well-known Mormon pacifists (J. Reuben Clark, Hugh Nibley, and Eugene England), and the autobiographical reflections of Mormon peace activist Gordon Conrad Thomasson. The quality of the essays in the volume is not always consistent (many of the contributors are not professional...
scholars), but there is no more synoptic work currently available on Mormon pacifism than this one.

Unfortunately, *War and Peace in Our Time* does not accomplish its analytic purpose quite as well. The volume debates an ethical question: given Mormon scripture, teaching, and tradition, how should Mormons approach war? If war is permissible within certain moral constraints, then Mormonism leads to some account of just war. If war is not permissible, then Mormonism leads to some version of pacifism. And yet none of the essays reflect on the terms of this debate. There is no attempt to specify what Mormonism might contribute to ethical debate about war, and correspondingly there is little analysis of the considerations that might justify or condemn war under certain circumstances. Most of the contributors ignore the rich and ongoing discussion on these questions in both religious and secular contexts.

This is in part a product of Mormon studies. As a discipline it began with the study of Mormon history rather than philosophy or theology, and it focuses (justifiably, to a degree) on the study of Mormonism rather than ethics more broadly. It is also a product of Mormon culture: whether or not Mormonism is “atheological,” as many believe, Mormons generally are not theologically educated and are somewhat predisposed to dismiss theological questions and traditions. *War and Peace in Our Time* displays the considerable limits these tendencies impose on ethical reflection about Mormonism. I share Mason’s belief that Mormonism has “historical, spiritual, and cultural resources” (p. xiii) that can contribute to the ethics of peace and war, but Mormons will not clarify those resources or effectively communicate them until they read their scripture in conversation with contemporary ethical debate and the great traditions of religious ethics. *War and Peace in Our Time* shows how much more serious intellectual work remains to be done before Mormonism’s resources can be brought to bear on questions of war and peace and other ethical issues.

Interpretatively, the two most interesting essays in the volume are by the father-son duo Ron and Joshua Madson. Both are contributors to *The Mormon Worker* and are currently coauthoring a book that develops a pacifist interpretation of Mormon scripture. If their contributions to *War
and Peace in Our Time are representative, the book will join those by Grant Hardy and Terryl Givens in considerably enriching the way that Mormons approach their sacred texts.

Ron Madson interprets a revelation to Joseph Smith, section 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants, through the early Latter-day Saints’ responses to persecution in Missouri. The revelation calls the early Saints to forgive their enemies the first three times they wrong them, permitting the Saints to take action only after the fourth wrong. Even then, the Saints are merely to bring the wrong to God, who will himself take action against the Saints’ enemies. Madson interprets section 98 as a covenant between God and the early Saints. During the Jackson County persecutions in 1833, the Missouri Saints did not respond violently; they peacefully relocated to northern Missouri. In response, many Americans felt the Mormons’ neighbors had mistreated them. Five years later, however, during the controversy preceding the 1838 election, the Mormons armed themselves and took preemptive action against their neighbors. This time public opinion swung against the Mormons, and many of their non-Mormon allies from the 1833 persecutions left them. Missouri governor Lilburn Boggs issued his extermination order, drove the Mormons into Illinois, and imprisoned Joseph Smith and his companions in Liberty Jail. Madson sees these events as a direct consequence of the Saints’ failure to follow section 98. This context makes for a stirring interpretation of one of Joseph Smith’s epistolary texts, canonized in section 121, which Smith wrote while imprisoned: “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering . . .” (v. 41). Madson suggests that these verses ought to be understood as a rebuke to the Saints who responded to the threat of persecution with violence in northern Missouri. Not only is the priesthood itself insufficient to maintain power or influence, so too is the force of arms.

Joshua Madson argues that the Book of Mormon’s pacifist message comes to the fore when one considers the teachings of the story as a whole, rather than taking the actions of one individual or another within it as exemplary. He takes his approach from the biblical hermeneutics of N. T. Wright and the similar counsel of Grant Hardy to read scripture as narrative. For Madson, the narrative of the Book of Mormon is a contest
between different founding stories: first, that of the Lamanites, who see their identity as constituted by Nephi’s treachery and hate the Nephites as the descendants of a liar; and second, that of the Nephites, who base their identity on Nephi’s decision to kill Laban so that his nation could have the scriptures. They become a people who consistently return to such “ends justify the means” sacrificial violence. The interplay between these two founding stories results in the genocidal extermination of the Nephites. The message of the Book of Mormon, however, rises out of the contrasting examples of those who overcame the Lamanites’ and the Nephites’ dueling mythologies and relied instead on the power of God and his word, those whose actions and societies demonstrated the possibility of living together on the basis of mutual love and acceptance, who chose to sacrifice themselves for others rather than others for themselves (Alma the Younger, the sons of Mosiah, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, and the society described in 4 Nephi). On this basis, Madson concludes that the Book of Mormon as a whole enjoins pacifism.

As original and powerful as the Madsons’ essays are, they and the other pacifist contributions do not adequately address the deep ethical dilemmas that questions of peace and war raise. They do not adequately discuss the two central issues surrounding just war: whether and under what conditions self-defense is justified and whether and under what conditions defending an innocent third party is justified. This neglect is partly due to the absolutism of pacifism: war is wrong, period. But avoiding these questions weakens the Madsons’ position. This is because the strongest defenses of pacifism necessarily include accounts of why using violence in self-defense or to defend innocent third parties is wrong, or (somewhat more moderately) accounts of what sorts of actions people may take to intervene in such cases short of war itself and the conditions under which those actions are appropriate.

The weaknesses in the pacifist contributions in *War and Peace in Our Time* provide an opening for those defending just war, but they do not exploit it. In general, the just war essays are not as persuasive or informed as the pacifist essays. The volume is lopsided as a consequence. This is unfortunate since it seems clear that Mormonism has potential to contribute meaningfully to the just war tradition as well.
The most interesting just war essays are those by Eric Eliason and Mark Henshaw et al. Eliason argues that US soldiers in Afghanistan, who spend most of their time doing precisely the sort of peacemaking that many pacifists laud, have the opportunity to do so because they are prosecuting a just war against the Taliban (pp. 191–201). His essay is moving, but this is partly because he has chosen an easy example. Just war theorists generally hold that wars fought in response to aggression or to prevent serious human rights violations are just; both conditions clearly apply in the Afghanistan case. Eliason wants to preserve the possibility that war can be about defending the innocent instead of being about murder, rape, and plunder. His own experience in Afghanistan illustrates that possibility well, but Eliason ignores the ethically troubling aspects of US action in Afghanistan and Pakistan—the way that increased reliance on drone attacks has ignored the just war criterion requiring militaries to scrupulously avoid inflicting civilian casualties. Indeed, the US problematically defines all arms-bearing males in an endemically violent, anarchic part of the world as legitimate military targets.¹ As a consequence, Eliason’s contribution is not as persuasive as it might be. As a personal account of his service in Afghanistan, his essay is moving, but it is not a conclusive argument that Mormonism enjoins some theory of just war.

Mark Henshaw et al.’s essay was not presented at the 2011 Claremont conference; it was originally published in *SquareTwo*² and included after the fact in *War and Peace in Our Time*. The essay relates the considered opinions of LDS national security professionals on the relationship between their religious commitments and their participation in the US national security apparatus. As such, it is mainly an empirical investigation


of the opinions of a community of professional warriors and their support staff. Henshaw et al’s essay is illuminating for the consistency between its opinions and many of those in War and Peace in Our Time that defend just war. Many LDS national security professionals justify US wars by reference to the war in heaven (e.g., pp. 241–42), a view that shows up in Robert Hellebrand’s and Eric Eliason’s essays as well (pp. 133–34, 195–97). And Henshaw et al. also believe that LDS theology can support either pacifism or just war, agreeing in this case with David Pulsipher (pp. 1–12), though they do not do the analysis to show why this is the case, let alone adjudicate the issues that would lead one to support one view or the other (pp. 262–63). Though Henshaw et al. demonstrate more ethical awareness than the other just war contributors, they are not engaged in an ethical project here.

What is most notable about the just war essays, however, is how consistently they make the same two mistakes. This is not because the only arguments they adduce to support just war are mistaken and these arguments are all that is available. Rather, these repeated mistakes speak to the general lack of ethical education in Mormon culture. First, the “just warriors” consistently mistake the theory of just war as a justification for some specific war. Robert Hellebrand, for example, suggests that any opposition to the Second Iraq War must rely on a “radically pacifist” position (pp. 137–38). But this is clearly not the case; the point of doing just war theory is to determine the conditions wars must meet to be just. A theory of just war distinguishes between just and unjust wars, which implies that one can consistently believe that the Second Iraq War was not just while also believing that other wars that meet the relevant criteria are just.

Second, several authors appeal to the Cold War Mormon argument that anti-Communist (and other) wars are just because they are a continuation of the “war in heaven,” a metaphorical phrase Mormons use to describe an argument in the Book of Moses between Jesus and Satan about the method by which salvation would be offered (see Hellebrand, pp. 133–34; Eliason, pp. 195–97; Henshaw et al., pp. 241–42). This view makes the same mistake as in the first case: just because under certain circumstances war may be just does not mean that some specific war (Korea, Vietnam, etc.) was just. That requires further argument. But this view adds more
severe errors as well. For one thing, appealing to the war in heaven as an argument for just war ignores the yawning gap between the metaphorical “war in heaven” and actual, violent wars in which people kill others, destroy homes, and so on. The bare theological claim that there was a “war” between Jesus and Satan does not license people to judge that one or another side in a current conflict represents either Jesus or Satan. That move inevitably escalates conflict by making it theological in addition to whatever it was otherwise about. It is a simple way to turn a war into a crusade. Moreover, even if one could confidently divide the world up between those on Jesus’s or Satan’s side in some conflict (an unlikely proposition), it does not follow that violent means are the proper way to adjudicate such conflicts. After all, the Book of Moses gives no indication that God resolved the war in heaven violently, and so there is no reason to take that story as a justification for violent war.

So the reader of War and Peace in Our Time is left in a perplexing position. The volume addresses an ethically vexing issue with the highest possible stakes: the ethics of peace and war, a question that has divided philosophers, theologians, and lay people for centuries. It aims to analyze Mormonism’s resources for thinking through this question. And yet it contains little ethical reflection on the topic. The Madsons’ essays build an interesting case for interpreting LDS scripture as requiring pacifism, but those essays do not (yet) develop an LDS pacifist ethic that can provide answers to the difficulties (about self-defense and third-party intervention) to which pacifist positions are prone. Eliason’s essay attempts to answer an ethical question but does so too quickly. The others avoid ethical reflection by appealing to the authority of LDS Church leaders (as Hellebrand does), relating the opinions of famous Mormons (the short biographies of J. Reuben Clark, Hugh Nibley, and Eugene England) without critically assessing their arguments, or empirically describing the opinions of LDS national security professionals (Henshaw et al.). Only the Madsons’ work seriously engages broader ethical thinking about these questions. Thus, War and Peace in Our Time shows its readers just how much serious intellectual work remains to be done before Mormons can bring the resources of their religious tradition to bear on ethical questions.
There are several hurdles to ethical reasoning in contemporary American Mormon culture that prevent this sort of intellectual work. Richard Sherlock has already pointed out how Mormons’ relationship to priesthood authority can forestall careful thinking about ethics: Mormons, he argues, are prone to believe that if the LDS Church as a body does not recommend or condemn a practice, then there is nothing more to say about it (see Hellebrand, p.139, for an example). This ignores the likely possibility that such silences are opportunities for Mormons to apply their religion to their own lives in new and creative ways, to discuss together and even to disagree about what Mormonism demands of them (see D&C 58:26–29). Mormons are also prone to a peculiar sort of intuitionism that sees feelings of inspiration as a substitute for careful ethical reflection. Any young woman who has dealt with a man convinced that “God” has given him a revelation that they are to be married can see the dangers in this approach.

Mark Ashurst-McGee’s essay, the most historically illuminating in the volume, suggests another hurdle. Mormonism, he explains, is foundationally shaped by Joseph Smith’s utopianism, millennialism, and evangelism. The early Mormons believed that their God-given purpose was to create a holy Zion society apart from the politics and wars of the Gentiles in preparation for Jesus’s return. They sent missionaries to the world to preach and convert others and bring them to Zion. Otherwise, they tried (and flagrantly failed, as it turned out) to avoid the world. Ashurst-McGee feels that this foundational self-understanding makes it difficult to draw a pacifist ethic out of Mormonism (pp. 83–91), but it would be more complete to claim that it makes it difficult to draw any sort of worldly ethics out of Mormonism, whether it be a pacifist or just war ethic or otherwise. If the purpose of the Mormon community is to create a pure and holy society in preparation for the apocalypse, then Mormons have no need to consider the ethics or politics of war and peace, or, indeed, any other ethical issue involving those outside their set-apart community.

That said, Mormons today are no longer so millennial in their outlook, as the essays in *Peace and War in Our Time* show. Not one contributor dismissed questions of war and peace as irrelevant because the apocalypse is imminent and “wars and rumors of wars” are simply a “sign of the times.” And Mormons today are no longer so isolated either, at least not in their professional lives. Even so, the essays in this volume (the Madsons’ excepted to a degree) show tension between the lived experience of contemporary Mormons and the way they intellectually relate that experience to their religious commitments. Although Mormons today live and work far outside the Intermountain West, if the essays in *War and Peace in Our Time* are representative, the ethical portion of Mormon intellectual life remains as restricted to the (metaphorical) mountain valleys as Mormon communities once were. I believe this intellectual isolation is the most serious hurdle to the development of Mormon ethics.

Good ethical thinking happens only when people carefully examine the categories, definitions, and assumptions they bring to the process of addressing a vexing question. Careful examination of this sort cannot occur without knowledge of the philosophical debates surrounding such questions. And this knowledge is precisely what is most lacking in the essays in *War and Peace in Our Time*. Indeed, Henshaw et al. go so far as to dismiss the entire just war tradition as unrelated to Mormon theology (pp. 236, 262). While this may be the case historically (although I suspect that even here a good intellectual historian could map out the relationships between ideas of war and peace expressed in Mormon scripture and those of Joseph Smith’s day and in the broader Western tradition), it cannot be the case ethically, because broader societal ideas about peace and war inevitably influence the way Mormons approach their own texts and tradition. Without such knowledge and the sort of broad, critical examination it enables, ethical argument inevitably devolves into self-righteous name-calling as people focus on their differences rather than examining the assumptions that lead to them.

What is most missing from *War and Peace in Our Time* are contributions that consider some ethical view (pacifism or just war), outline
the arguments and assumptions on which that view is based and the problems to which it is prone, and then start working to see what, if anything, Mormonism might add to the question. Such an approach would not only considerably improve the clarity and persuasiveness of Mormon thinking on ethical questions, it would also stand a chance at communicating to others what the Latter-day Saints’ unique theology and tradition might contribute to broader religious and ethical debates.

With this in mind, consider the Book of Mormon case with the most obvious implications for just war theory: the perplexing textual juxtaposition of the pacifistic Anti-Nephi-Lehies and their sons, the just warrior sons of Helaman. Pulsipher uses this case to argue that the Book of Mormon should be interpreted as permitting both just war and pacifism (pp. 1–12), but he does not do any of the analysis that this thesis—and the text itself—clearly calls for: how ought one determine which approach is appropriate when one is faced with a decision to go to war or adopt a strategy of peaceful resistance? Yet the Book of Mormon offers rich resources to address just this question, particularly if one approaches the text with just war theory in mind. The Book of Mormon demands that its readers ask whether there is any consistent ethical position that would allow the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to nonviolently sacrifice themselves yet also allow their children to take up arms in self-defense. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies saw their pacifism as a product of their own guilt over the violent lives they previously led—violent lives their sons mercifully did not know.

Perhaps this story offers insight into a traditional just war criterion: right intention. Just war theories hold that, in addition to being fought by legal representatives and for a just cause, just wars must be prosecuted with proper intention: to defend the innocent instead of to grab territory or get revenge. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies seemed to believe that their past violence corrupted them sufficiently that they could no longer wage war justly even when external conditions otherwise suggested they could do so. Perhaps they feared violence would stir old passions and convert their justifiable intention of self-defense into unjust aggression or revenge. This position opens the possibility that their children could justly fight in war while also suggesting the deep moral hazard continuous warfare
poses. Given this interpretation, the Book of Mormon contributes to just war theory a moving account of the importance of right intention in the waging of war, as well as right intention’s incredible fragility: too much war-making can itself corrupt that intention, making otherwise just conflict unjust.

The important conclusion from the above interpretive sketch is not that the Book of Mormon supports some conception of just war. I have not argued for that; to do so I would need to address Joshua Madson’s work and provide some argument for taking both the Anti-Nephi-Lehies and the sons of Helaman as exemplary. Mormon clearly thinks of them both as exemplary, but the text’s authors are nothing if not upfront about their own weaknesses, the ways in which they are not exemplary: the purpose of the text is, after all, to teach us to be “more wise” than they were (Moroni 9:31). Rather, the important conclusion from the above sketch is to show the richness that awareness of ethical debate gives to the reading of scripture, to show how that awareness enables Mormon texts to speak to broader questions. It was this sort of reading for which Mason and Bushman were clearly aiming in organizing their conference, but it is also this sort of reading that, with some notable exceptions, is in short supply in War and Peace in Our Time.

These weaknesses notwithstanding, War and Peace in Our Time is a significant accomplishment. Mason, Pulsipher, and Bushman deserve considerable praise for prodding Mormons to think more carefully about the implications of their religion for issues of peace and war, for creating a space in which Mormons can begin to think ethically about their religious commitments. War and Peace in Our Time is admittedly only a start, but an important start nonetheless.

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