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Kurt Weiland

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (1990), edited by Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin.

**Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds.,** *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990. x + 534 pp., with passage and subject indexes. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Kurt Weiland

Years ago, I knew a grizzled Army Sergeant-Major. He'd spent decades as a combat soldier, leading troops in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. When I knew him, he was stationed in Germany, and his hobby was travelling with his wife to archaeological sites across Europe. One afternoon, they went looking for an ancient Roman army camp. When they arrived at the spot where the guidebook indicated the camp would be, nothing was there. Nothing. No remains, no ruins, no evidence. Frustrated with the inaccurate guidebook, he and his wife walked the woods and fields for an hour, looking for the lost site.

Finally, exasperated, he paused and realized he was approaching the problem from the wrong direction. He looked at the terrain around him and asked, "If I were an infantry commander, where would I establish my camp?" He pointed to a nearby hilltop and told his wife, "There. That's where I'd set up. The camp's there. It's got to be there." When they climbed the hilltop, they found the camp.

Two thousand years of history telescoped on that hilltop. The same principles that prompted the twentieth-century soldier to select the hilltop position had prompted the Roman centurion to do the same.

The point of this story is that the principles don't change. In the libraries of military science, the only new texts are on the *means* of warfare, not the principles. So, if a modern student of warfare were to look at the Book of Mormon, that student would be able to recognize the principles, the tactics, and the strategies that the Nephites used.

And this is why *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* is such a worthwhile book. It examines the principles, the tactics, and the strategies that the Nephites used. The book is a collection of papers presented at the Symposium on Warfare in the Book of Mormon, held in March of 1989 at Brigham Young University.

Some of the papers are brilliant, some are interesting, and a few, unfortunately, are disappointing. But the book is well

worth the read. The brilliant and interesting parts clearly outweigh the disappointing parts.

I learned much here. The authors—the ones who have done it well—have made the connections. As I read the book, there were crystal-clear moments when the little light bulb would go on over my head, the little voice at the back of my brain would shout “A-HA!,” and I would pull out my yellow marker to highlight a sentence or paragraph.

For example, I’d never realized that there were one hundred separate instances of armed conflict in the Book of Mormon, nor did I understand that the conflicts fell into recognizable groups or campaigns. Yet John Welch, by the sixth page of the book, organizes them with such names as “The War of the Kings,” “The War of Ammonite Secession,” “The War of Nephite Retreat,” and others.

I had never realized the connection between apparently simple events and their historical context. William Hamblin and Brent Merrill explain, almost in passing, how “Nephi’s method of beheading Laban by grasping his hair to pull up the head and expose the neck is a common technique. Grasping the hair of the victim also insures that the head remains a stable target for the swordsman” (p. 335). And, if there were any doubt, Hamblin and Merrill include copies of ancient Egyptian reliefs that show Rameses III grasping the hair of his enemies to behead them. While this may seem to be a small or distant connection, it places one of the familiar episodes of the Book of Mormon—Nephi slaying Laban—in a historical and cultural context. Much of the book works that way.

I had never realized the effect that Mormon’s role as warrior had on his role as abridger and compiler. Douglas Phillips points out the kinship that Mormon felt with Captain Moroni:

Inevitably, Mormon should have been attracted to Moroni—the brilliant, energetic, selfless, patriotic, and God-fearing hero who had been instrumental in preserving the Nephite nation. So great was Mormon’s admiration for him that he named his son after him. (p. 27)

Phillips argues that Mormon’s respect for Moroni led him to spend a large portion of the abridgment on the Nephite captain. I had always been aware that Captain Moroni shared his name

with Mormon's son, but I'd never realized the reason why. All of a sudden, the connections become apparent.

I stand in awe of the authors' research. The authors—again, the ones who have done it well—have done their homework. On page after page, I would find myself wondering, “How did they find all this stuff? Where did they get this information?”

Daniel Peterson, for example, cites an incredible array of references—from Che Guevara, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Karl von Clausewitz to Baroness Orczy (the author of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*), Truman Madsen, and Minucius Felix (who wrote *Octavius 9: Occultis se notis et insignibus noscunt*—but you probably already knew that, right?).

The “Index of Passages” at the end of the book cites not only all four Latter-day Saint standard works, but also—among other references—the Code of Hammurabi (not once but seven times), the Mishnah, Josephus, the Qur'an, and Julius Caesar. An incredible array.

I began this review with a short account of my friend, the Sergeant-Major. I explained how he and the Roman centurion followed the same principles when they selected a site for a base camp. *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* looks at some of the elements of war, both ancient and modern, and says, “This makes sense. This is why it was this way.”

William Hamblin, for example, writes an intriguing essay on “Armor in the Book of Mormon.” He points out that the book's description of armor is consistent with itself, with tactics, with technology, and with evidence from ancient America. I enjoyed the comparison with tactics.

First, some background. The armor of a specific time changes according to the tactics of the specific time. For example, the flat, “fried-egg” helmet of World War I changed to the more protective steel pot of World War II because the new war wasn't going to be fought in trenches. The soldiers of 1941 needed protection from the sides as well as from above. Using this principle of adaptation, Hamblin points out that Nephite armor was perfectly suited to Nephite warfare.

The battles in the Book of Mormon were battles of movement. Consider this battle of the Zoramite War:

And it came to pass that the Lamanites became frightened, because of the great destruction among

them, even until they began to flee towards the river Sidon.

And they were pursued by Lehi and his men; and they were driven by Lehi into the waters of Sidon, and they crossed the waters of Sidon. And Lehi retained his armies upon the bank of the river Sidon that they should not cross.

And it came to pass that Moroni and his army met the Lamanites in the valley, on the other side of the river Sidon, and began to fall upon them and to slay them.

And the Lamanites did flee again before them, towards the land of Manti; and they were met again by the armies of Moroni. (Alma 49:39-42)

Consider the *movement* involved here:

- from the land into the river Sidon,
- from the river to the far bank,
- from the far bank to the valley, and
- from the valley to the land of Manti.

The ancient combatants had no use for armor that might restrict their mobility. They had to *move* to *survive*. Hamblin points out that the Nephites wore little or no leg armor. The Book of Mormon describes head-plates and breastplates, arm shields and bucklers, *but no leg armor*. In fact, in one battle, the Nephite soldiers were wounded almost solely on their—exposed—legs (Alma 49:24). The Nephite battles were battles of movement, and leg armor would restrict movement. Nephite armor was perfectly suited to Nephite warfare.

Despite all the good passages, there are disappointing elements. Some of the papers must have been written for a far more sophisticated audience. I never finished Matthew Hilton and Neil Flinders' essay on "The Impact of Shifting Cultural Assumptions on the Military Policies Directing Armed Conflict Reported in the Book of Alma." I couldn't understand what they were saying:

Many contemporary scholars are writing books analyzing historical and present cultural manifestations of the fundamental conflict between Korihor's argument and its antithesis. The underlying issue that makes the debate possible is the axial tension between

what the Greeks perceived as the *mantic* versus the *sophic* view, what has been identified in ancient Judaism as the *vertical* versus the *horizontal* tradition. (p. 238)

I've understood that an author should write for the audience, and I have a hard time believing that the same audience that appreciates the discussions on tactics, warfare, and weaponry will immediately understand the discussion on *mantic* and *sophic* views.

I also had a problem with a specific writer imposing his own agenda. Hugh Nibley is entitled to his own views on soldiers and soldiering, but in "Warfare and the Book of Mormon," he lets his biases interfere with his discussion:

Amalickiah has to get the Lamanites to hate so they can go to war, so he has his people preach from towers—gets the propaganda machine going. Such hatred is artificial. It has to be stirred up, but once the killing starts, there follows the idea of vengeance—the *Green Beret syndrome*. (p. 143, italics mine)

What? Pardon me? *What* Green Beret syndrome? Could someone please explain the connection here? Nibley neither explains his comment nor ties it to the discussion. It's a cheap shot.

Earlier, he nails Maxwell Taylor (in an article about Clausewitz and the Book of Mormon?):

I remember very well the day General Taylor, just glowing, discovered brush-fire wars; he explained how we could have little wars going on, so the military could get their promotions and always have opportunity for practice—send the officers out to get practice. (p. 134)

No references, no documentation. Just a cheap shot at a well-known (and generally well-regarded) soldier.

My last concern deals with leaps of faith. In many of the articles, we're asked to *assume* a lot. John Tvedtnes does a lot of leaping:

The other warrior caste comprised men such as the earlier Moroni and Moronihah and probably Mormon and his father Mormon, as well as his son

Moroni and another Moronihah. *It may not be out of line to suggest that this caste descended from the ancient kings.* (p. 321, emphasis added)

But he gives no support for this suggested lineage. Moments later, Tvedtnes argues that “it is not impossible” the sword Ammon used to defend Lamoni’s flocks was the sword of Laban—the one Nephi used to behead Laban and kept as a model for other swords (p. 321). While it’s not impossible, the proof and the connections aren’t there.

William Hamblin makes a similar leap in discussing Limhi’s expedition into Jaredite country:

Limhi’s expedition chose to return with only three items: the twenty-four gold plates of Ether, brass and copper breastplates, and some rusted pieces of swords, *implying that they were scavenging for metal and that metal was therefore something unusual and rare*—even a piece of rusting metal was worth recovering. (p. 406, emphasis added)

I don’t see the implication that metal was unusual and rare, especially for a people who kept their records on metal plates.

But my complaints are small compared with what I’ve gained from the book. When I learned that the Gadianton robbers practiced the same guerrilla warfare as the Viet Cong, I marvelled at the similarities. When I learned that no Lamanite leader was ever executed (just as the ancient Hebrews generally did not kill prisoners of war), I appreciated the connections. And when I learned that the annihilation of the city of Ammonihah, a city “consecrated to destruction” (p. 110), reflected similar patterns of the Israelites, the pre-Islamic Arabs, and the Greeks, Romans, Celts, and Germans (p. 111), my understanding of the Book of Mormon grew.

On my bookshelf, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* stands next to John Sorenson’s *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. They complement one another.