



1-31-1996

The *Iliad* and the Book of Mormon

John A. Tvedtnes

Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Tvedtnes, John A. (1996) "The *Iliad* and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol5/iss1/6>

This Notes and Communications is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Notes and Communications: The *Iliad* and the Book of Mormon

Author(s) John A. Tvedtnes

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 147-49.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract The *Iliad* features some battle clothing, battle tactics, reasons for fighting, and smiting off arms of enemies similar to those in the Book of Mormon, thus strengthening the links to an Old World culture.

NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

The *Iliad* and the Book of Mormon

John A. Tvedtnes

The *Iliad*, an ancient Greek epic written by Homer, tells the story of the Trojan War. Though Homer probably lived about 800 B.C., the date of the war itself is generally acknowledged to be ca. 1200 B.C. Consequently, Homer's description of weapons and battle tactics can be said to be authentic for at least 800 B.C. and perhaps earlier.

One of the results of the Trojan War and other conflicts of the time was the influx of Anatolian peoples from the area around Troy into the southeastern Mediterranean—notably Egypt and Palestine. Known to the Egyptians collectively as the “sea peoples,” they included such groups as the Philistines, whose weaponry, armor, and chariots so impressed the Israelites (1 Samuel 13:5, 19–22; 17:5–7).

It is in this light that we note that some elements in the Book of Mormon have their parallels in the *Iliad*. For example, Laban's sword with its sheath, golden hilt, and precious steel blade (1 Nephi 4:9) is reminiscent of the swords of some of the military leaders in Homer's epic. Menelaus had a silver-studded sword (*Iliad* 2.45; 3.361; 13.610; 14.405; 23.807–8) or a gold-studded sword (*Iliad* 11.29–30), and Hector is said to have given Ajax a silver-studded sword with a sheath (*Iliad* 7.303–4). Achilles' sword was bronze with silver studs (*Iliad* 16.135–36) and had a silver hilt (*Iliad* 1.219–20). The god Apollo, who participated in the war, fought with a golden sword (*Iliad* 5.509). We can also

compare Nephi's steel bow (1 Nephi 16:18)¹ to the silver bow carried by Apollo (*Iliad* 1.451; 5.517, 760; 7.58; 10.515; 21.229; 24.56, 758–59).²

When describing the weaponry and armor of the Nephites, Alma notes that "also they were dressed with thick clothing" (Alma 43:19). In the *Iliad*, there are numerous descriptions of the bronze weapons and armor, including breastplates and greaves worn on the arms and legs, as in the Book of Mormon passage. Of special interest is that *Iliad* 2.830 draws our attention to the use of a linen breastplate, which might correspond to the "thick clothing" used by the Nephites.

Some of the battle tactics noted in the *Iliad* are also similar to those in the Book of Mormon, though there are notable differences that may be due to different terrain and the passage of time. The Achaeans, for example, built a stone fortification wall and surrounded it by a ditch, placing sharp stakes at the top of the ditch, to slow down any possible Trojan attack on their camp (*Iliad* 12.52–57). The Nephite general Moroni constructed similar fortifications (Alma 49:18; Alma 53:3–4).

In 1 Nephi 3:31–4:1, we read that Laban commanded a group of fifty men plus tens of thousands. Hugh Nibley has elicited evidence that there were, in the time of Lehi, military units comprising fifty men that were called "fifty" in Babylonian records and concludes that Laban was a military commander with a local garrison of fifty and a larger force in the field.³ He notes that this is borne out by the fact that, when Nephi came across him drunk in the streets, Laban was dressed in full armor and wearing the precious sword (1 Nephi 4:7–9, 19). Homer tells us that Achilles brought to the Trojan War fifty ships with fifty men each and had five battalion leaders among them (*Iliad* 16.168–71).

¹ The term is also found in the Bible in passages where the Hebrew reads "copper/bronze" (2 Samuel 22:35; Job 20:24; Psalm 18:34).

² Weapons made of precious metals are known from even earlier times. Tablets from the ancient Syrian city of Ebla (2600–2500 B.C.) speak of gold daggers, a silver-bladed dagger, and silver bows (TM.75.G.1599 obverse III.2–4, VI.3–7, VII.1–3; TM.75.G.2070 obverse VIII.17).

³ Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 97–98; Hugh W. Nibley *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 126–27.

The Nephites were wont to fight for their wives, their children, and their lands (Alma 35:14; 43:9; 44:5; 48:10; 58:12). Indeed, the Nephite general Moroni rallied his forces with the cry to defend their religion, their freedom, their peace, their wives, and their children, writing these values on a piece of cloth that he called “the title of liberty,” which, after girding on his armor, he carried about (Alma 46:12–13). In a similar manner, during the Trojan War, Nestor admonished the Achaean troops to remember their children, their wives, their property, and their parents, whether dead or alive (*Iliad* 15.659–66).

There are other similarities as well. For example, just as King Mosiah’s son Ammon smote off the arms of a number of men who attacked him with clubs (Alma 17:27–39; 18:16), during the Trojan War King Menelaus cut off the arm of Hippolochus at the shoulder with a single sword-stroke (*Iliad* 11.145–47).

Such parallels lend authenticity to the stories told in the Book of Mormon and lead me to believe that the Nephite record accurately reflects, to a certain extent, the Old World culture from which Lehi came. However, it would not surprise me to see the critics now adding the *Iliad* to the list of sources from which they believe Joseph Smith got ideas for the Book of Mormon. Just how many books can this untutored nineteenth-century farm lad have read?