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Buried Swords: The Shifting Interpretive Ground of a Beloved Book of Mormon Narrative

J. David Pulsipher

IN NOVEMBER 2014 LATTER-DAY SAINT CHILDREN around the world participated in a ritual that would probably seem odd to outsiders—they buried some swords. These weren't actual weapons, of course, only sketches of swords upon which the children were instructed to “write a wrong choice . . . such as ‘fighting with my brother’ or ‘telling a lie.’” They then “buried” these swords by “crumpling their papers or throwing them away.”¹ Similarly, in February 2010 a small group of teenagers stood with their own paper swords around a freshly dug hole on their church's property. “I had my class write down a behavior of theirs, if they had one, which might be considered an act of ‘rebellion to God,’” recalled their teacher. “Their challenge was to pick one thing they were serious about stopping. I asked them to pick something they felt they could put aside . . . forever.” Standing at the edge of this modest excavation, the students quietly laid

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1. *Families Are Forever: 2014 Outline for Sharing Time* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 23.

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their paper swords in the ground and covered them with dirt, burying individual sins and making “a promise *together* to work on letting go.”²

The essential symbolism of these rituals is immediately apparent to other Latter-day Saints. The children and teenagers were reenacting a poignant scene from the Book of Mormon, when the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (also known as the people of Ammon or Ammonites) turned their backs on bloodshed and buried their weapons deep in the earth.³ The incident is rich with allegorical possibility. Indeed, Mormon himself employed metaphorical language to describe the conversion of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies as the moment when “they did lay down the *weapons of their rebellion*, that they did not fight against God any more” (Alma 23:7). Such allegorical power is easily applied to modern life and personal spiritual struggle. Any unrighteous habit, inclination, or behavior—any inclination to fight against God—might be considered a weapon of rebellion. Thus this beloved story is both emotionally evocative and spiritually resonant for twenty-first-century Latter-day Saints, and it is through a metaphorical lens that they most often interpret the narrative.

Nevertheless, the story has always been open to additional interpretations. The physical weapons and tangible pit can also imply a potentially compelling—even radical—social and political ethic. A group of dedicated Christian converts choose disarmed faith over justified self-defense, abandoning and burying not only rebellious attitudes, but also concrete tools “used for the shedding of man’s blood” (Alma 24:17). Should modern disciples of Jesus follow suit? Furthermore, the second part of the story—in which the Anti-Nephi-Lehies confront their enemies on the battlefield, accept and absorb their brutality, and consequently convert many of them into fellow believers—might imply a similarly radical method of resisting and overcoming violence, both individually and collectively. Should Latter-day Saints embrace and promote that ethic?

2. Lori Wright, “‘Down’ with the old, ‘Up’ with the new,” <http://siswrightsseminaryjourney.blogspot.com/2010/02/down-with-old-up-with-new.html> (accessed on 1 September 2016), emphasis in the original.

3. The core elements of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story are related in Alma 23–27.

Serious consideration of these questions is generally absent from contemporary interpretations of the narrative. Yet there was a time, during the decades between the two World Wars, when such questions were central to Latter-day Saint analysis. In the wake of a futile “war to end all wars,” and at a time when nonviolent strategies were beginning to gain international attention, prominent LDS scholars and official church curriculum writers explored the story’s social and political implications. Given the disappointments of the postwar “peace,” these interpretive frameworks effectively addressed common concerns regarding modern warfare and offered practical hope for a better future. Such questions and concerns persisted, to a degree, through the Second World War and then receded during the Cold War era as a new generation of LDS teachers, writers, and artists—many of whom had participated in or were sympathetic to conventional military strategies—began to question the story’s political practicality and social relevance. Consequently, within a few decades, most political and ethical considerations were superseded with an allegorical approach.

Recovering the process by which this interpretive ground shifted away from political and toward metaphorical approaches serves as a reminder that scriptural analysis is never static. Inspired truth is necessarily conveyed through what Joseph Smith called “crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language,”⁴ and each generation must necessarily read scripture in light of its unique spiritual resources, community needs, and predispositions, striving as best it can to discern and implement divine truth. So it is not surprising that different scriptural interpretations rise in prominence during some eras while others dwindle. This constantly shifting ground also reminds us that interpretive paths are not necessarily inevitable. Choices matter. Following one path means abandoning other viable alternatives, and the experience and preference of key individuals can transform the trajectory of a group and solidify certain approaches. But echoes of abandoned paths, or what C. Vann Woodward famously referred to as “forgotten

4. “Letterbook 1,” p. 2, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-1/14>.

alternatives,” can linger in the background of a community’s cultural consciousness.⁵ For Latter-day Saints, a brief but substantial interest in the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ potential political ethic is an alternative that merits some acknowledgement—a path ultimately not taken by the community as a whole, yet one that continues to remain accessible within Mormonism’s rich scriptural, cultural, and theological resources.

Political parallels and possibilities

Before exploring the history of this shifting interpretive ground, it is important to note how elements of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story can resonate with a variety of political and ethical principles, rendering the text open to multiple interpretations. This plurality is complicated by the fact that the broader scriptural narrative provides no explicit framework for extrapolating consistent political or ethical implications, especially in regard to violence. As even a casual reader becomes quickly aware, the Book of Mormon contains frequent references to warfare and other forms of violence, but it is often difficult to distinguish between behavior that is clearly *prescriptive* as opposed to merely *descriptive*. Moreover, the book’s explicit and implicit instructions cover a range of responses to violence. Most of the key prophet-narrators, for example, personally engage in war, and other prominent figures are lauded for their righteousness and military prowess.⁶ Consequently, while the text does not celebrate warfare nor “delight in bloodshed,” it does at times excuse or justify violence.⁷ But it also offers a rather compelling set of alternative ethics, especially during Christ’s sublime visit, when he teaches that “old things are done away” and counsels them to “not resist evil” but rather to love their enemies (3 Nephi 12:38–48). As a result of Christ’s “new” law, his listeners eschew all bloodshed and erase the religious, cultural, and economic distinctions that often fuel friction. Their

5. C. Vann Woodward, “Forgotten Alternatives,” in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), ch. 2.

6. See 1 Nephi 5:14–34; Omni 1:24–25; Alma 48:11–18; Mormon 2:1–2; 6:10–12.

7. See Alma 48:14–16 and 23–25; see also Alma 43:45–47.

peaceful society endures for over a century until later generations allow divisions and violence to return, eventually plunging their society into internecine conflict. This tragic descent further complicates the text's political and ethical message because, even during the Nephite's moral nadir, God's prophets at times lead armies—even armies of morally compromised soldiers—in defensive warfare. Thus the book's tension between war and peace has led one scholar to observe, "If one word might be used to describe the attitude of the Book of Mormon toward war, *ambivalent* would be a good place to start."⁸

Nowhere is this ambivalence more evident than in the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, which contains intriguing parallels to three political and ethical frameworks that are not easily reconciled—absolute pacifism, active nonviolence, and just warfare. To be clear, the story does not explicitly reference, let alone endorse, any of these frameworks, but it does contain elements that are clearly parallel. To fully comprehend these parallels, it is helpful to divide the Anti-Nephi-Lehi narrative into three parts, each with a different political and ethical emphasis.

Part 1 exudes what political theorists might label a *pacifist* sensibility, as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies take a vow "that they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man's blood" (Alma 24:18). While an aversion to war and vows to abstain from it are as old as human history, the term *pacifism* was coined in the early twentieth century to provide a specific label for such sentiments. It originally embraced a spectrum of approaches ranging from conditional pacifism (opposed to war but reluctantly accepting it as a last resort) to absolute pacifism (rejecting violence in any circumstance), but the term eventually came to be associated with an absolutist orientation.⁹ As a whole, the Book of Mormon can be read as a conditional pacifist text—it never glorifies war and consistently expresses a longing for peace—but the particular vow of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies is closer to absolute pacifism. Noting

8. Patrick Q. Mason, "The Possibilities of Mormon Peacebuilding," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37/1 (2004): 15.

9. David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8–11.

that their formerly blood-stained swords had “become bright” again through their repentance, the king tells his people, “Let us hide them away that they may be kept bright, as a testimony to our God . . . that we have not stained our swords in the blood of our brethren since he imparted his word unto us and has made us clean” (Alma 24:15). The people follow his lead, taking “all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood” and burying them “deep in the earth . . . , vouching and covenanting with God, that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives” (Alma 24:17–18). While this extraordinary vow becomes quite trying at times, “they never could be prevailed upon to take up arms against their brethren” and “would suffer death in the most aggravating and distressing manner” (Alma 27:28–29). Thus they hold true to a form of absolute pacifism.

Part 2 of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story follows immediately on the heels of the first. Having buried their weapons, the people go “out to meet” their attackers, prostrate themselves to the earth, call upon God, and absorb the violence of their enemies (Alma 24:21). At first glance their behavior might seem a natural extension of their pacifist stance, but it actually parallels another concept known as *active nonviolence*. As historian David Cortright has noted, “Pacifism and nonviolence are often considered synonymous, but they are conceptually and politically distinct.”¹⁰ Unlike pacifism, active nonviolence does not necessarily involve a vow to avoid war, and many nonviolent practitioners are not pacifist (though many are). The easiest way to understand the distinction is to note that pacifism is largely a commitment or attitude, while nonviolence is a method or strategy. More specifically, active nonviolence is “a means of struggling against oppression and injustice” and constitutes activities—including demonstrations, boycotts, and civil disobedience, among others—that seek to defeat oppression and aggression without employing violence (although they often provoke or receive it).¹¹ Similar to those who advocate pacifism, proponents of active nonviolence represent a range of approaches, from pragmatic

10. Cortright, *Peace*, 211.

11. Cortright, *Peace*, 211.

nonviolence (which focuses on political practicality and effectiveness) to principled nonviolence (which emphasizes suitability with high moral standards).¹² Two of the most famous practitioners of active nonviolence—Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.—embraced it for both pragmatic and principled reasons.

In its most effective form, nonviolence overcomes violence through conversion, whereby an aggressor “comes around to a new point of view”; one of the most important catalysts for creating a context for conversion is “self-suffering.”¹³ Gandhi described this weapon as “infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason.”¹⁴ Michael Nagler notes that self-suffering bridges the emotional gulf that exists between people who are in conflict with one another: “One party has to ‘give when it hurts’ and reawaken the now seriously alienated opponent by voluntarily taking on that hurt . . . not trying to avoid it.”¹⁵ The suffering then works as “a kind of deep persuasion that moves people below the conscious level,” transforming an enemy into a friend.¹⁶ But this dynamic applies only to suffering that is “borne voluntarily and without hatred against the opponent.”¹⁷

The actions of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies parallel these principles. They actively confront their attackers—whom they call “brethren”—and insist on absorbing their blows. At first their attackers slaughter “a thousand and five,” but then they are touched by the sacrifice. Their hearts become “swollen,” they feel “stung for the murders which they

12. The most influential advocate for a purely practical approach to nonviolence is Gene Sharp in *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 2005).

13. George Lakey, “The Sociological Mechanisms of Nonviolent Struggle,” *Peace Reviews* 2/6 (December 1968): 12.

14. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Young India*, May 11, 1931.

15. Michael Nagler, *The Search for a Nonviolent Future: A Promise of Peace for Ourselves, Our Family, and Our World*, 2nd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2004), 109.

16. Nagler, *Search for a Nonviolent Future*, 52.

17. “Law of Suffering,” Metta Center for Nonviolence, <http://mettacenter.org/definitions/gloss-concepts/law-of-suffering/> (accessed September 1, 2016).

had committed,” and they “[repent] of the things which they had done,” throwing down their weapons and prostrating themselves “even as their brethren, relying upon the mercies of those whose arms were lifted to slay them.” The text notes that “the people of God were joined that day by more than the number who had been slain” (Alma 24:23–26). So the nonviolent strategy proved effective in two ways. Not only did it spiritually save many of their enemies, it also saved and protected their own community as the remaining (unrepentant) attackers ultimately abandoned their assault and withdrew to their own lands—all this with fewer casualties than the typical Book of Mormon battle.¹⁸

If the Anti-Nephi-Lehi narrative ended with part 2, a reader might easily construe the story as a relatively clear endorsement of both absolute pacifism and active nonviolence. But subsequent events complicate this interpretation. Facing renewed violence from their enemies, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (soon to be called the people of Ammon or Ammonites) seek refuge in Nephite lands and put themselves under the protection of the Nephite army, which they financially support (see Alma 27:22–27).¹⁹ Moreover, almost two decades later, during another time of intense warfare, the people of Ammon send their sons to fight on behalf of the Nephite people. These actions, which constitute part 3 of the story, seem to parallel yet another political conceptual framework—just warfare.

The just war tradition acknowledges war as tragic and destructive but also maintains it may at times be a “necessary evil.”²⁰ Because war is so calamitous, the tradition seeks to establish strict standards for

18. As a narrator, Mormon is sometimes quite precise in his death tallies, noting that in one battle the Nephites lost “six thousand five hundred sixty and two souls” (Alma 2:19), and in another they killed “three thousand and forty-three” Lamanites (Mosiah 9:18). Most of the time he utilizes round numbers, such as “thousands” or “tens of thousands.” While Mormon occasionally records lower casualties in more traditional battles, the loss of 1,005 Anti-Nephi-Lehies seems to represent one of the lowest death tallies in the Book of Mormon.

19. Their new names were given them by the Nephites to honor their spiritual leader, Ammon, a missionary who played the principal role in converting them.

20. For a good overview of the history of the just war tradition, see Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Reevaluation* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960).

engagement—both in terms of whether a society engages war (*jus ad bellum*) and how it fights (*jus in bello*).²¹ For example, *jus ad bellum* standards require a “just” war to be strictly defensive and a last resort, while *jus in bello* standards require all subsequent violence to be morally restrained, maintaining scrupulous distinctions between combatants and noncombatants, and treating prisoners humanely. These standards, some of which were first proposed by Augustine in the fourth century, inform most mainstream Christian approaches to war. Similar to the different strains of pacifism and nonviolence, just war advocates also fall along a broad spectrum, from those who see the standards as highly (and necessarily) restrictive to those who approach the standards with enormous flexibility.

Many passages in the Book of Mormon exude what might be characterized as a just war sensibility.²² Nephite battles are often defensive and reluctantly engaged. Soldiers at times express great sorrow for being “the means of sending so many of their brethren out of this world into an eternal world, unprepared to meet their God” (Alma 48:23). Some commanders, such as Moroni, look for early opportunity to halt their violence and treat prisoners with generosity.²³ Likewise, the young sons of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (more popularly known as the stripling warriors) are reluctant combatants who enter the war only after watching “the danger, and the many afflictions and tribulations” of their fellow countrymen (Alma 53:13). As they openly admit to their commander, Helaman, “we would not slay our brethren if they would let us alone,” but they feel compelled to fight “to defend their country” (Alma 56:46; 53:18). They go on to become perhaps the most celebrated warriors in the Book of Mormon. Known for their strength, obedience, and valor, as well as for their deep faith in the religious instruction of their mothers, they are miraculously preserved in battle (see fig. 1). All of

21. For a thorough exploration of just war theory, see Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

22. Kyle McKay Brown, “‘Whatsoever Evil We Cannot Resist with Our Words’: An Exploration of Mormon Just War Theory” (master’s thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2007).

23. See, for example, Alma 43:54 and 62:27–29.



(B) Francis R. Magleby (1928–2013), *Helaman Did March at the Head* (*Helaman Triptych #2*), c.1960, oil on masonite, 95½ x 95¾ inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.



(A) Francis R. Magleby (1928–2013), *Ammon Met All His Brethren* (*Helaman Triptych #1*), c.1960, oil on masonite, 95½ x 95¾ inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.



(C) Francis R. Magleby (1928–2013), *Sons of Ammon (Helaman Triptych #3)*, c. 1960, oil on masonite, 95½ x 95½ inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art.

Figure 1. Magleby’s triptych is one of the few major artistic treatments to consciously connect the Anti-Nephi-Lehi parents with their stripling warrior sons. The three panels—which hung together for several decades in the commons area of the Helaman Halls men’s dormitory at Brigham Young University—depict (A) the parents burying their swords, (B) their sons in fierce battle, and (C) the young men’s miraculous preservation.

them fight “most desperately” and receive “many wounds,” but “not one soul of them . . . did perish” (Alma 57:19, 25).

Thus the pacifism and nonviolence of the parents as well as the just warfare of the sons both produce remarkable results. One group converts a large number of its enemies. The other is miraculously preserved. Both successfully defend their communities. Which, then, provides the best ethical model for the modern reader negotiating a world of violence? Over the course of the twentieth century, Latter-day Saints explored the three-part story in terms of all three potential ethics—absolute pacifism, active nonviolence, and just warfare—emphasizing

one or another according to changing social and political circumstances. Nevertheless, the overall trajectory reflects an increased emphasis on just war principles, and in contemporary Mormon culture the story of the stripling warriors has achieved significant prominence. The young soldiers have become iconic—highly celebrated in Mormon art, music, literature, and pageantry—in ways the parents have never achieved.²⁴ This fondness is due in large part to the emotional power of the stripling warrior story and the myriad moral lessons that can be and have been extrapolated from it. Their experiences are often employed to highlight courage, integrity, faithfulness, honor, mother-son relationships, and divine protection. Yet it is also true that iconic representations of the stripling warriors fit comfortably with—or at least do not significantly challenge—aspects of modern popular culture that emphasize youth, physicality, and even violence. Likewise, a just war ethic dovetails fairly well with the current political climate, especially in the United States. In contrast, any pacifist or active nonviolence ethic implied by Anti-Nephi-Lehi parents has proven increasingly incompatible with broad cultural trends both in and out of the Latter-day Saint community. The remainder of this essay will trace how the parents’ pacifism and active nonviolence was at one time celebrated and extolled but then came to be perceived as incompatible with and irrelevant to Latter-day Saint ethics, and how their story was made meaningful and relevant again by shifting to a metaphorical interpretation.

Initial interpretations and commendations

For a half century after the Book of Mormon was first published, the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies seems to have hardly scratched Latter-day Saint consciousness, for it was rarely if ever mentioned in official

24. Notable examples include a painting by Arnold Friberg, “Two Thousand Stripling Warriors” (1953); a children’s hymn by Janice Kapp Perry, “We’ll Bring the World His Truth (Army of Helaman),” *Children’s Songbook* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 172; and a full-scale re-creation of the “stripling warriors” for a heritage parade in Bountiful, Utah (July 20, 2012).

discourse or cultural expressions. The first serious and extended interpretation of the narrative occurred in the 1880s at a time when Latter-day Saints were engaged in a struggle with the United States government over the practice of polygamy. Pursuing a strategy of civil disobedience—or what George Q. Cannon, a prominent architect of the strategy, referred to as “passive resistance”—the Mormon community continued to perform plural marriages in open defiance of national law.²⁵ Near the height of this conflict, George Reynolds—an English immigrant and secretary to church leaders who had also been the first “prisoner for conscience’ sake” in the plural marriage struggle—published several retellings and analyses of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story that were later adopted as lesson materials for both the Sunday School and Church Educational System.²⁶

Referring to the Anti-Nephi-Lehi strategy as a form of “passive non-resistance,” Reynolds repeatedly highlighted the singular nature of the story, noting that “history often repeats itself, but we have no recollection of any parallel to [these] events.” He noted that when the unarmed defenders “came forth” to “quietly, peacefully, joyously lay down their lives,” the attackers felt compelled “to emulate so noble an example.” Echoing the early Christian scholar Tertullian, Reynolds offered a pithy interpretation: “The blood of the martyrs was indeed the seed of the church.”²⁷ Endorsing the Anti-Nephi-Lehi strategy as both moral and effective, Reynolds’s language seems to obliquely connect it to the larger Mormon struggle. Similar to how the self-sacrifice of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies had pricked

25. George Q. Cannon, April 6, 1891, in *Collected Discourses Delivered by Wilford Woodruff, His Two Counselors, the Twelve Apostles, and Others, 1886–1889*, comp. and ed. Brian H. Stuy (Burbank, CA: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987–92), 2:212–13. See J. David Pulsipher, “‘Prepared to Abide the Penalty’: Latter-day Saints and Civil Disobedience,” *Journal of Mormon History* 39/3 (2013): 161.

26. George Reynolds, “History of the Book of Mormon: Contents of the Records, II,” *Contributor* 5/3 (December 1883); *The Story of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Jos. Hyrum Parry, 1888); and *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Jos. Hyrum Parry, 1891). See also Bruce A. Van Orden, *Prisoner for Conscience’ Sake: The Life of George Reynolds* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

27. Reynolds, “History of the Book of Mormon”; *Story of the Book of Mormon*, 111–12; and *Dictionary of the Book of Mormon*, 6.

the consciences of their attackers, church leaders hoped their “passive resistance” and “sacrifices” regarding the antipolygamy laws would “have the effect of calling the attention of the nation to those wrongs under which we were suffering” and subsequently “arrest the progress of this crusade against our religious liberty.”²⁸

Ultimately, the Latter-day Saints’ active nonviolence strategies failed to move political and cultural sentiments, and the protracted conflict over plural marriage was resolved only when the church announced (and then conclusively demonstrated) its intention to comply with the nation’s monogamy standards. This began a slow, fitful, strained, yet significant transformation in the relationship between the Mormon community and the larger American nation. Stung by decades of incriminating barbs concerning their character, their loyalty, and even their racial identity, Latter-day Saints were anxious to demonstrate their patriotic bona fides and gain greater acceptance within the national mainstream.²⁹ Many enthusiastically volunteered for military service in the Spanish-American War, effectively ending what one historian has characterized as a Mormon tradition of “selective pacifism” in previous conflicts.³⁰ Such enlistments did not immediately dispel suspicions (as the subsequent controversy over Apostle Reed Smoot’s election to the Senate made painfully clear just a few years later), but they did signal a willingness by many Latter-day Saints to embrace the logic and goals of the nation-state.³¹

Still, such participation in America’s imperial adventure did not necessarily signal a full embrace of warfare by the Latter-day Saint

28. George Q. Cannon, April 6, 1891, in Stuy, *Collected Discourses*, 2:212–13.

29. For the Mormon struggle over racial identity, see W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2015).

30. D. Michael Quinn, “The Mormon Church and the Spanish-American War: An End to Selective Pacifism,” *Pacific Historical Review* 43/3 (1974): 342–66. Mormons participated only nominally in the Mexican War, recruiting a battalion that did not see battle, and were decidedly detached and pacifist during the Civil War. See Ron Walker, “Sheaves, Bucklers, and the State: Mormon Leaders Respond to the Dilemmas of War,” *Sunstone*, July/August 1982, 43–56.

31. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

community. There remained significant strands of Mormon pacifist sentiment, most notably a tradition of annual “peace meetings” sponsored by the Relief Society during the first decade of the twentieth century.³² But even this advocacy can be seen in part as an effort to more fully integrate into the national culture. The meetings were formally initiated under the auspices of the National Council of Women, and their subsequent resolutions (in favor of international arbitration as a viable alternative to war) correlated well with both national and international sentiments.³³ In keeping with this mood, the first standard lesson plans for the Sunday School, developed during this same time period, advanced a celebratory interpretation of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ political ethics. But rather than focusing on the power of their active nonviolence, as George Reynolds had done, these lessons emphasized their pacifist vow, suggesting it represented a form of “godliness.”³⁴

So long as these nascent Mormon pacifist sentiments corresponded with at least some broad national constituency (even if it wasn’t a majority), they created no conflict with a simultaneous desire by most Latter-day Saints to be better acknowledged and respected as part of the national citizenry. The challenge came when nationalist pressures, such as those generated by the First World War, put patriotism and pacifism at odds with each other.³⁵ At first, when the initial conflict was

32. Leonard J. Arrington, “Modern Lysistratas: Mormon Women in the International Peace Movement, 1899–1939,” *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989): 89–104. See also Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 169.

33. Cortright, *Peace*, 45–52.

34. Reynolds was a key member of the LDS Sunday School board, which began to publish standard lesson plans for the Book of Mormon in 1903. These brief lesson outlines encapsulated the meaning of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ story with a single principle (“Repentance leads to Godliness”) and several supporting “facts” (the people covenanted “not to shed blood,” buried their weapons of war, refused to defend themselves, and many were killed). Deseret Sunday School Union, *Sunday School Outline* (Salt Lake City, 1903), 10.

35. J. David Pulsipher, “‘We do not love war, but . . .’: Mormons, the Great War, and the Crucible of Nationalism,” in *American Churches and the First World War*, ed. Gordon L. Heath (Eugene, OR: McMaster Divinity College Press, 2016), 129–48.

confined to other countries, Mormons could safely express significant sorrow for the war's victims and distaste for its brutality. Latter-day Saint periodicals consistently decried the devastation and resisted calls for US military preparedness. The April 1916 *Improvement Era* even cited the actions of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies as proof that "some at least of the ancient inhabitants of this continent were averse to the continuous and increased use of weapons of war, and of engaging in mortal combat with their brethren, as a means of settling disputes."³⁶ However, once the United States joined the Allies, any Latter-day Saint pacifist sentiment, no matter how embryonic, had to be subsumed for the larger interests of the community. As B. H. Roberts, an ardent war supporter, later acknowledged, Mormon-dominated Utah was in a "unique position" when the war began. Had it "acted reluctantly" or "failed in any respect to proceed as the other states of the Union and as the whole nation did, the reluctance and failure would have been chargeable to the Latter-day Saints," while any "promptness in action . . . would reflect the patriotism, the intensity of the Americanism of the same people."³⁷ Given their tenuous relationship with the larger culture, many Latter-day Saints, including their highest church leaders, felt an obligation to support the US war effort, and most embraced the martial duties of national citizenship, demonstrating their enthusiasm through high military enlistments and war bond subscriptions.³⁸

Predictably, interest in the Anti-Nephi-Lehies waned during this era of intense patriotic militarism. Official LDS Church curriculum materials tended to either gloss over the story or skip it altogether in favor of an emphasis on the personalities and missionary efforts of the sons of Mosiah. When the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story was addressed, it was either narrated without comment or interpreted without clear conclusions or applications to modern life.³⁹ Nevertheless, after the war, as

36. John Cuthers, "The Book of Mormon Aspect of Preparedness," *Improvement Era*, April 1916, 516.

37. B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6:454–55.

38. Walker, "Sheaves, Bucklers and the State," 49–50.

39. During this era, the Book of Mormon curriculum for the Church Educational System included an eclectic collection of "essential" principles encompassing thirteen

the national militaristic wave subsided into a disappointing peace, and as Mormon soldiers and missionaries returned from Europe with first-hand experience concerning the human devastation of modern warfare, many Latter-day Saints became skeptical of the efficacy of violence; some began to turn again to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies for ethical instruction and inspiration.

The most prominent exploration of such ethics was articulated by Janne Sjö Dahl, a Swedish convert, immigrant, and a former Baptist minister.⁴⁰ During the war, Sjö Dahl had worked in Liverpool as an editor for the *Millennial Star*, the LDS Church's official European magazine, and had become well informed regarding the horrors and injustices of war.⁴¹ After returning to the United States, Sjö Dahl worked for the *Improvement Era* and became a widely recognized scholar of Mormon scripture. In his groundbreaking 1927 work, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon*, Sjö Dahl referred to the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies as one of the "outstanding features that deserve special study," especially as a model of active nonviolence. Quoting the narrative at length—by far his longest excerpt from the sacred text—he concluded that its "evident lesson" was that "the doctrine of non-resistance . . . when carried out in practice, even in the face of death, is a conquering, regenerating, irresistible force."⁴²

chapters and proposing twenty-seven general "essentials to emphasize," leaving the reader confused as to which "essential" principles related to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies: *Outlines in Theology for Use in the Church Schools of High School Grade: The Nephite Dispensation* (Salt Lake City, 1916). A few years later, the next major revision of the curriculum simply glossed over the Anti-Nephi-Lehies' story, briefly noting their decision to bury their weapons but skipping the effect of their nonviolence on their attackers: Amos N. Merrill, *Lesson Book for the Religion Classes in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh Grade* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1924).

40. Bernt G. Lundgren, "Janne Mattson Sjö Dahl: Baptist Minister, Convert to Mormonism, Editor, Author and Missionary" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1971).

41. Janne M. Sjö Dahl to Carl A. Carlquist, December 7, 1916, Liverpool, England, [MS 6767], Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

42. Janne M. Sjö Dahl, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1927), 268–70.

Writing at a time when activists such as Mohandas Gandhi were exploring the moral and strategic power of nonviolent resistance, Sjödahl was deeply interested in how the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story exhibited active nonviolence principles. Clearly interested in pacifist parallels with the ancient Iroquois peace league, he also considered the story's active nonviolence elements as convincing evidence of the Book of Mormon's divine origins.⁴³ "It is all the more remarkable to find this distinctively Christian doctrine set forth so forcibly and clearly in the Book of Mormon," Sjödahl argued, because when Joseph Smith first published the book "there were very few advocates of the cause of the Prince of Peace in the world." Speculating that the young and uneducated Mormon prophet had probably never "even heard of such a thing as disarmed patriotism"—let alone the philosophies of Erasmus, Grotius, and Kant—Sjödahl concluded that the whole incident was so remarkably anomalous that "Joseph could not have invented that story. Nor could anybody else."⁴⁴ Moreover, he concluded that the story was central to the book's mission, declaring, "The Book of Mormon would not have contained 'the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,' if this part of it had been absent." Ultimately, Sjödahl suggested, the pacifist and active non-violent ethics of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were central to Mormonism's restored Christian message because they offered a "solution" to the

43. In support of these pacifist parallels, Sjödahl quoted at length a 1918 scholarly account of the formation of the Iroquois "league of peace." J. N. B. Hewitt, "A Constitutional League of Peace in the Stone Age of America," *Annual Report, Smithsonian Institution* (1918): 527–45.

44. Sjödahl, *Introduction*, 270. In fairness to Joseph Smith, the young man may have been at least partially exposed to any or all of these ideas. Moreover, some versions of the league's origins (although not in the Hewitt version Sjödahl quoted) describe a moment in which the league's tribes bury their weapons in the earth. See, for example, an earlier article by J. N. B. Hewitt, "Legend of the Founding of the Iroquois League," *American Anthropologist* 5/2 (April 1892): 14. A description of buried weapons was included in enough versions of the founding story that it may have circulated in upstate New York (the heart of Iroquois territory) during Joseph Smith's time there. For an overview of the core elements of the founding stories, see Christopher Vecsey, "The Story and Structure of the Iroquois Confederacy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54/1 (1986): 79–106.

problem of societal violence, which was “inseparably connected with the salvation of the world.”⁴⁵

A few years after Sjö Dahl’s analysis was published, another prominent Mormon author, John Henry Evans, further explored the ethical implications of active nonviolence. In his 1929 centennial celebration of the sacred volume *Messages and Characters of the Book of Mormon*, Evans dedicated an entire chapter to the “Story of the Buried Swords,” beginning with a provocative thought experiment regarding the First World War:

Suppose the French soldiers, and the French people back of the French soldiers, when they saw the helmeted hosts pouring in upon them from the north-east, had suddenly laid down their arms, or, to put the matter with strict accuracy, had never taken them up in the first place, but instead had gone out to them and said, “Men, kill us, if you will, one and all, for we will not fight; it is against our principles!”

That *would* have been a thrill indeed. It would have astonished us beyond measure—like the coming up of the sun in the west, or the flowing of water uphill on its own accord. Human nature does not work that way under the circumstances. At once we should look back of the act for the motive that inspired it. For that alone would enable us to tell whether the people who did such a thing were wiser than the rest of mankind or just plain crazy.⁴⁶

Relating the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story with glowing admiration, Evans consistently highlighted the counterintuitive yet indispensably “Christian” nature of their active nonviolent response. He observed that when the Lamanite armies were preparing for war, even the Nephite princes who worked among them expected the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to fight back: “Surely there could be no doubt that they would fly to arms in their own defense and the defense of their wives and children. For even the

45. Sjö Dahl, *Introduction*, 270–71.

46. John Henry Evans, *Messages and Characters of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: printed by author, 1929), 207–8.

Nephites did that, and the Nephites professed to be good Christians.” However, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies did not choose this common path of so-called Christian warfare. Rather, he noted, the “spirit of the new faith” led them to bury their weapons. Observing that these converts “would neither fight nor flee,” Evans stressed the confrontational nature of their behavior: “And out went the men of the Anti-Nephi-Lehites [*sic*], weaponless and without fear of man in their hearts—out to meet the foe with prayer instead of sword! On the ground they fell, before the enemy, to utter a prayer that God would save their souls. Real Christian soldiers, these men!” Noting that the attackers threw down their weapons, Evans triumphantly labeled such active nonviolent resistance as “a power greater than any sword,” because “good had come out of what was intended for evil.”⁴⁷

A burgeoning ethic

Sjödahl’s and Evans’s celebratory interpretations built on the foundational work of George Reynolds, which lauded the story’s model of “passive resistance.” But the context in which they were writing had significantly changed from the 1880s. Reynolds was writing at a time in which church practices were in open conflict with the broader American culture, while the era of Sjödahl and Evans was a time of increasing acceptance and integration between the church and its host nation. Having demonstrated sufficient patriotism during the First World War, Latter-day Saints were no longer eyed with immediate suspicion; and by the late 1920s and early 1930s some had achieved positions of trust in national halls of power. Apostle Reed Smoot, now well past the controversy surrounding his first Senate appointment, was at the apogee of a distinguished career. Likewise, attorney J. Reuben Clark was rising to prominence in a variety of government positions that included under secretary of state (1928–29) and ambassador to Mexico (1930–33).

47. Evans, *Messages*, 211–16.

Moreover, within Mormonism's increasingly hospitable home country, Sjö Dahl's and Evans's pacifist and active nonviolence interpretations were a relatively smooth fit because antiwar sentiments were on the rise. "From the ashes of World War I new forms of peace activism emerged," David Cortright has observed. "Disillusionment with war spread throughout society. In literature, film, and the graphic arts the horrors of the recent bloodletting were graphically depicted and decried. Revelations of government deceit and incompetence fed the antimilitarist wave. Leading intellectuals, religious leaders, and scientists united in rejecting war."⁴⁸ These sentiments expressed themselves in both internationalist and isolationist forms. Those advocating both for and against the League of Nations, for example, tended to see their efforts as the best insurance against future wars. The career of J. Reuben Clark is representative of both sentiments. He strongly advocated *against* some internationalized peace efforts, such as the League of Nations, but he also pushed *for* (and even participated in negotiations regarding) other internationally binding agreements, such as the Washington Naval Treaty (which limited the size of the US fleet) and the Kellogg-Briand Pact (which sought to outlaw war). Reflecting the intricate and ambivalent relationship between Latter-day Saints and the nation as a whole, Clark's attitudes toward war were complex and changed dramatically several times. He initially rejected and even denounced pacifism as "impractical and illusionary," but he also served at various times as a director of the American Peace Society. Throughout his last three decades his speeches became increasingly critical of war, during which time he became, as one biographer has characterized, "an unmistakable pacifist."⁴⁹

These decades coincided with Clark's tenure in the church's First Presidency, to which he was sustained in 1933. Given his public career

48. Cortright, *Peace*, 69.

49. D. Michael Quinn, *Elder Statesman: A Biography of J. Reuben Clark* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 279–81. As Quinn demonstrates, Clark's pacifism was colored in part by pro-German and anti-Semitic sentiments, which sometimes led him to decry what he perceived as Allied aggression while ignoring similar or worse aggression by the Axis powers.

(in which his fellow Latter-day Saints had taken understandable pride) and his well-known positions, Clark's new position in the First Presidency served to further open up a cultural, spiritual, and intellectual space that was already burgeoning in regard to potential LDS pacifist and active nonviolence ethics. Unsurprisingly, shortly after Clark assumed his new position, official LDS curriculum, which over the last decade had become increasingly professional and innovative, began to explore such ethics as they related to the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story. In 1935, for example, as tensions increased over rising fascism in Europe, the official Sunday School curriculum included a message that openly approved of a movement among US college students to "organize against war and to take a vow not to go to war," calling it a form of "good works."⁵⁰ That same manual included another lesson that consulted the Book of Mormon to answer a fundamentally ethical question: "What attitude should one take toward war?" Recognizing that the sacred text generally "takes the ground that a defensive war may be a righteous war," the lesson nonetheless appealed to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies as evidence of "a large body of people" who "would not engage even in a defensive war" and observed that thus "there is a suggestion in the Record that it is better to take a pacific stand in time of war." In fact, despite the lesson's emphasis on just war, a significant portion of it focused on avoiding war, noting that "when you stop to think of the trenches, the cooties, and the hazard of death or being maimed for life, the spirit of war would not be so strong in you." Returning to the initial question, the lesson concluded: "Our attitude, then, toward war should be to avoid it when and if we can."⁵¹

At the very least such interpretations suggest a growing Mormon consciousness regarding pacifist and active nonviolence theories, and they demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated engagement with the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story. This heightened engagement is best represented by a Sunday School lesson from early 1939, as another European war loomed on the horizon. In a lesson dedicated specifically to the story

50. Quinn, *Elder Statesman*, 71.

51. Deseret Sunday School Union, *Book of Mormon Sunday School Lessons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1935), 88–89.

of the buried swords, the manual unequivocally stated that “there is no place in a Christian life for war” and attributed the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ decision to bury their weapons to the fact that they had been taught “Thou shalt not kill” along with the “brotherly philosophy of the Master.”⁵² In this regard, the lesson took a purely moral approach to questions of violence, highlighting principles of “love and righteousness” and commending a similar ethic to the reader:

If one should question the wisdom of the decision of the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi made on the occasion of this lesson, let him remember that they did as a nation what Jesus did as an individual when he gave his life for mankind. He who was the son of God, could have called legions of Angels from Heaven to protect him from the injustices of his enemies. Instead he, who had taught that his followers should love their enemies, yielded rather than destroy. He gave his mortal life rather than to violate the principles he had taught or defeat the great purposes of his mission on earth. It would have been “human” for him to have saved his life and for the Lamanites to have resisted the attempts of their brethren to destroy them, but there was something “godlike” in the decision of both Jesus and the Lamanites to sacrifice their mortal existence that the standards of righteousness might be preserved.⁵³

Having endorsed the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ pacifist vow as morally superior, even divine, the lesson pivoted to the practical effectiveness of their active nonviolence, demonstrating a subtle grasp of the dynamics of conflict: “Had the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi resisted the attacks of their brethren with the sword, no doubt many more of them would have been destroyed even if they had been victorious. In addition, the Lamanite nation would have been divided against itself. As it was, fewer were killed, many were converted, and much better conditions prevailed. All this is convincing evidence that obedience to the commandments

52. Deseret Sunday School Union, *The Quorum Bulletin and Gospel Doctrine Sunday School Quarterly* 6/1 (January–March 1939): 11–13.

53. *Quorum Bulletin*, 12–13.

of the Lord pays the best dividends even under circumstances which seem most hopeless to the human mind.”⁵⁴

Despite this growing analytical sophistication, such pacifist and active nonviolence ethics did not achieve paramount focus in the Latter-day Saint community, in part because historical forces, cultural dynamics, and the preferences of other influential leaders were simultaneously pulling the community in the direction of the ethics of just warfare. Having enthusiastically participated in two previous American wars, and given the community’s improving but still tenuous relationship with the nation, most Latter-day Saints could hardly be expected to make an about-face and fully embrace pacifist and active nonviolence principles. Thus, just war ethics retained significant purchase in the LDS community despite the inclinations of a few Mormon thought leaders. The 1939 Sunday School manual, for example, also contained a lesson on Nephite warfare and accordingly acknowledged a potential diversity in ethical approaches to armed conflict:

In these lessons we have righteous peoples responding in two different ways to warfare. The people of Ammon would rather be slaughtered than to take the life of another in their own defense. The Nephites on the other hand justified their defense of their families and liberties on the ground that it was the will of God that these things be preserved. However the readers of these lessons might feel on this subject, it seems clear that if war has any justification at all in the eyes of God, it must be a war of defense, not aggression—a war where the right to worship, and to live in family units, and in safety are being fought for.⁵⁵

This ethical diversity was reflected again a few years later in the First Presidency response to US involvement in the Second World War. As first counselor to President Heber J. Grant, Clark helped draft an official statement that was presented at general conference in April 1942. Noting that “the Church is and must be against war” and “cannot regard

54. *Quorum Bulletin*, 13, punctuation standardized from the original.

55. *Quorum Bulletin*, 24.

war as a righteous means of settling international disputes,” the statement nonetheless made provision for submission to national authorities, counseling young Mormon men to submit to national conscription and promising them that if they killed someone in the line of duty, they would not be considered murderers in the sight of God: “For it would be a cruel God that would punish His children as moral sinners for acts done by them as the innocent instrumentalities of a sovereign whom He had told them to obey and whose will they were powerless to resist.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, the following October conference displayed diverse First Presidency responses to the conflict. Clark helped draft and read another official position statement from the First Presidency referring to “hate-driven militarists” and “fiendishly inspired slaughter,” presenting a categorical condemnation of violence, and declaring that “war is of Satan and this Church is the Church of Christ, who taught peace and righteousness and brotherhood of man.” Yet the next day of the same conference, second counselor David O. McKay stood and offered support for the American war effort, calling it “a war against wickedness,” noting “that peace cannot come until the mad gangsters . . . are defeated and branded as murderers, and their false aims repudiated,” and expressing hope to “our soldier boys” that God would “bless and guide you as you defend the divinely-given principles of freedom.”⁵⁷

Ultimately about 100,000 Latter-day Saints, representing roughly ten percent of the total Mormon population, answered the call of the nation.⁵⁸ As might be expected, interest in any explicit pacifist or active nonviolence ethic waned somewhat during this time. A 1944 Sunday School lesson on the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, for example, focused primarily on the missionaries who converted them and only briefly summarized their choices and behavior.⁵⁹ Leland H. Monson’s *Life in Ancient America*:

56. Conference Report, April 1942, 94–95.

57. Conference Report, October 1942, 15–16 and 68.

58. *Church History in the Fulness of Times* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 531.

59. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Sunday School Lessons: Second Intermediate Department* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1944), 95–97.

A Study of the Book of Mormon, which became a standard young adult Sunday School manual for the next twenty years, drew no explicit ethical lessons from the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, although Monson did highly commend them for being willing to “obey a law of ‘suffering wrong’” and “display[ing] great faith and courage in refusing to fight their brethren.”⁶⁰ Sidney B. Sperry’s adult manual for 1948 took Monson’s commendation one step further, albeit briefly, recommending a more thorough study of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story to “all who are interested in peace and abolishment of war,” noting that the “world today desperately needs such peacemakers.”⁶¹

Clashing interpretations

Thus, despite the Latter-day Saint community’s enthusiastic participation in three major US wars, as the nation entered the Cold War era, some form of an LDS pacifist or active nonviolence ethic based on the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story remained a nascent yet viable option. This was the approach taken by J. Karl Wood, one of two central supervisors over LDS seminaries and institutes, who had sent two sons to fight in the recent war.⁶² His 1950 curriculum outline for seminary and institute instructors focused on what he called the “strategy” of “non-resistance” and drew connections between the behavior of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies and the Sermon on the Mount. Quoting the Savior’s admonition to “turn the other cheek,” Wood observed that “this is one of the most difficult teachings Jesus gave. Many have said it cannot be lived, but

60. Leland H. Monson, *Life in Ancient America: A Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1946), 53–55.

61. Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1947), 74–75. Sperry’s Sunday School text did not achieve the longevity of *Life in Ancient America*—it was the Gospel Doctrine manual for only one year—but portions of it were reprinted in subsequent trade publications over the next several decades—more specifically, in *Book of Mormon Testifies* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952) and *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968).

62. Patricia Wood Nielson, *J. Karl Wood: His Story* (Salt Lake City: printed by author, 1993).

here in the Book of Mormon it is put into life by a large mass of people.” While the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were originally “brought up to kill,” he noted, “when embued [*sic*] with the spirit of the gospel of the coming Redeemer [they] were able to throw off practices born and bred in them and adopt these new and inspiring principles.” He then made an unusually explicit connection to modern American culture: “Truly these people are an inspiration to us today, who are brought up on revenge and retaliation.”⁶³ Most twentieth-century Mormons, especially those in the United States, tended to see their community as analogous to the prosperous and peaceful (if sometimes prideful) Nephite culture. To instead compare them—and their modern American culture—to “wild,” “ferocious,” and “blood-thirsty” Lamanites was an unusually bold assertion.⁶⁴

But 1950 proved to be a crucial year for this burgeoning ethic (written on a typewriter and mimeographed for CES instructors), because the official Sunday School manual for that same year (typeset, hard-bound, and for sale in Deseret Book) signaled that just war principles might be strongly ascendant, to the exclusion of any pacifist or active nonviolence alternative. Written by William E. Berrett, a lawyer and professor of church history, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon* took a thematic approach, “designed to strike directly at the problems of religion and life.”⁶⁵ Accordingly, it not only extrapolated and endorsed a just war ethic—drawn from the text’s descriptions of Captain Moroni and the stripling warriors—it also, for the first time, articulated an explicit critique of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ pacifism and active nonviolence.

Berrett had long maintained an enthusiasm for the military. Too young to enlist during the First World War, he remembered how his brother had been “bitterly disappointed” to be turned away for medical

63. J. Karl Wood, *Outline Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, [1950?]), 142–43.

64. This description of the Lamanites occurs twice in the Book of Mormon (Enos 1:20 and Mosiah 10:12), and similar sentiments can be found repeatedly throughout the text.

65. William E. Berrett, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1950).

reasons. Too old to serve directly in the military during the Second World War, he instead found a way to contribute as a prosecuting attorney for the Office of Price Administration. Eventually he found an even more satisfying outlet for his aspirations through a successful effort to establish the first ROTC program at Brigham Young University.⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, he considered the actions of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies—which he referred to as “an interesting experiment in non-resistance”—as ineffectual and nonprescriptive. Laying a foundation for his critique, Berrett asserted, “There is a greater purpose in life than merely remaining peaceful. . . . The right to a world in which the individual is recognized, the right to protect our loved ones, our liberties and our religion is more important than keeping the peace.” Noting that “the proposal to create peace by casting away armaments among nations has always found many advocates,” he argued that the recent global conflicts “showed how futile disarmament and non-resistance may be to protect either lives or liberties.” The manifest lesson from the Book of Mormon, Berrett maintained, is that “the Nephite peoples opposed disarmament, and generally were successful in warding off the attacks of the enemy because they possessed superior weapons and were entrenched behind superior fortifications.”⁶⁷

Accordingly, as he related the actual details of this “experiment,” Berrett took pains to point out its failures. He noted that only some of the aggressive Lamanites “could not continue the slaughter,” that “not all the Lamanites were so affected,” and that “the greater part of the Lamanites, although refraining for a time from the slaughter of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, seemed roused to even greater fury and vented that fury in raids of wanton destruction upon nearby Nephite cities.” Moreover, “although the Anti-Nephi-Lehies received a short respite it was not long before it became apparent that to save their lives they must

66. William E. Berrett, *My Story* (Salt Lake City: [n.p.], 1974).

67. Berrett, *Teachings*, 92–98. The topic of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies was not new to Berrett. He had written curriculum materials for both the Sunday School and the Church Educational System, and he had helped author a 1938 study guide that also labeled the Anti-Nephi-Lehi strategy as an “experiment,” this time “in pacifism.”

flee to the land of the Nephites and be protected by Nephite arms.” Berrett also observed that while the first generation of Anti-Nephi-Lehies continued their “policy of non-resistance,” their strategy “seemed short-lived” because the next generation, the beloved stripling warriors, took up arms. Likewise, Berrett characterized this younger generation as “ashamed” that other people had to protect their community. Thus the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ experiment was an obvious failure and was quite possibly viewed by their brethren with disdain: “Whether such results caused the Nephites to believe that God desired them to fight when necessary for their liberties, we cannot tell, but this is certain, the doctrine of non-resistance found little place among them thereafter.”⁶⁸ He was even more blunt in the teacher’s supplement, identifying the lesson’s key objective as follows: “To bring class members to a realization that to disarm does not guarantee the preservation and liberty of the righteous, and is not required of God.”⁶⁹

At first glance, Berrett’s unusually public and direct criticism of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies seems anomalous. No previous scholarly study or lesson manual had openly questioned the ethical or practical value of their choices and behavior. Wood’s praise and commendation of pacifism and active nonviolence were more consistent with the existing interpretive tradition. It is possible then, that Wood’s analysis might have served to reassert the old tradition, overriding Berrett’s more disparaging view. Alternatively, Berrett’s interpretation might have gained some traction, with these two incompatible arguments achieving equal influence over the subsequent decades, existing in a state of perpetual and creative tension with each other. As it happened, several factors, including political and cultural dynamics already underway in the Latter-day Saint community, combined to give greater weight and durability to Berrett’s approach, to the point that it not only helped displace but also effectively discredited the previous tradition.

68. Berrett, *Teachings*, 99.

69. William E. Berrett, *Teacher’s Supplement: Teachings of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1950), 34.

First, Berrett's manual was published at precisely the moment in which Mormonism was emerging "out of obscurity," achieving significant national, even international, acceptance. Having now proved their patriotic bona fides in three major American wars, Mormons were increasingly perceived as trusted members of the body politic. This perception was further reinforced by the subsequent appointment and national visibility of Apostle Ezra Taft Benson as Secretary of Agriculture in the Eisenhower administration. Both Benson's church and public careers reflected and reinforced another significant cultural development—the rise of an increasingly conservative and hawkish Mormon political culture that was buttressed by interpretations of Mormon scripture, particularly of the Book of Mormon, that emphasized the United States as a divinely blessed land, the necessity of staunchly defending principles of agency and freedom, and the dangers of secret combinations.⁷⁰ Such interpretations were widely perceived by many Latter-day Saints as supporting America's robust military policies against communism, which also correlated with the views of David O. McKay, who became president of the church in 1951. McKay considered communism to be "anti-Christ" and an expression of "Satan himself," and in his first newspaper interview as president, he declared, "Communism yields to nothing but force."⁷¹

Second, coming as it did within a year of Berrett's lesson manual, McKay's elevation from second counselor to president of the church served to personally buttress Berrett's interpretations. Having had a long-standing interest in and responsibility for Sunday School curriculum, McKay likely oversaw the book's publication before he became president.⁷² Institutional support for the text was also on display throughout his presidency. Both *Teachings of the Book of Mormon* and

70. Patrick Q. Mason, "Ezra Taft Benson and Modern (Book of) Mormon Conservatism," in *Out of Obscurity: Mormonism since 1945*, ed. Patrick Q. Mason and John G. Turner (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63–80.

71. As quoted in Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 281–82.

72. Also, given Berrett's enthusiastic support for armaments and armies, it is difficult to imagine J. Reuben Clark signing off on it.

its teacher's supplement were eventually translated into French (1951), Danish (1956), German (1962), Spanish (1962), and Dutch (1964) to service the needs of an increasingly international church.⁷³ The book was also reissued by the Council of Twelve Apostles as the Melchizedek Priesthood manual in 1962.⁷⁴ Moreover, McKay's rise (and Benson's increasing political influence) corresponded with a reduced role for J. Reuben Clark, who graciously accepted a reassignment as second counselor in McKay's new First Presidency. While Clark would continue to work behind the scenes to support Latter-day Saints with pacifist sensibilities, nothing akin to his robust denunciations of war would officially emerge again from the First Presidency for over twenty-five years.⁷⁵

Finally, Berrett's own career trajectory ultimately placed him in a position from which he could influence future interpretations. Within three years of the book's publication, he was appointed vice president of Brigham Young University, with responsibility for all religious education in a newly created United Church School System, giving him direct oversight over high school and college-level curriculum for over a decade. One of his first actions was to replace J. Karl Wood and his fellow supervisor of seminaries with two younger men—Theodore Tuttle and Boyd K. Packer—both military veterans.⁷⁶ Given Wood's departure and Berrett's analytical inclinations—as well as his subsequent and significant influence on the next generation of seminary, institute, and university

73. *Des Enseignements du Livre de Mormon* (1951), *Mormons Bogs Lærdomme* (1956), *Lehren des Buches Mormon* (1962), *Enseñanzas del Libro de Mormón* (1962), and *Leringen uit het Boek van Mormon* (1964) (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).

74. William E. Berrett, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1962).

75. The next was Spencer W. Kimball's American bicentennial message, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign*, June 1976, 3–6.

76. Berrett, *My Story*, 76–77. Berrett was proud of the subsequent careers of Tuttle and Packer and of his role in first elevating them to some degree of prominence. Tuttle, who served as a marine in the Pacific Theater and participated in the battle of Iwo Jima, was called as a member of the Seventy in 1958, where he served for almost three decades. Packer, who served as a bomber pilot in the Pacific Theater, was called as Assistant to the Twelve in 1961 and then as an Apostle in 1970.

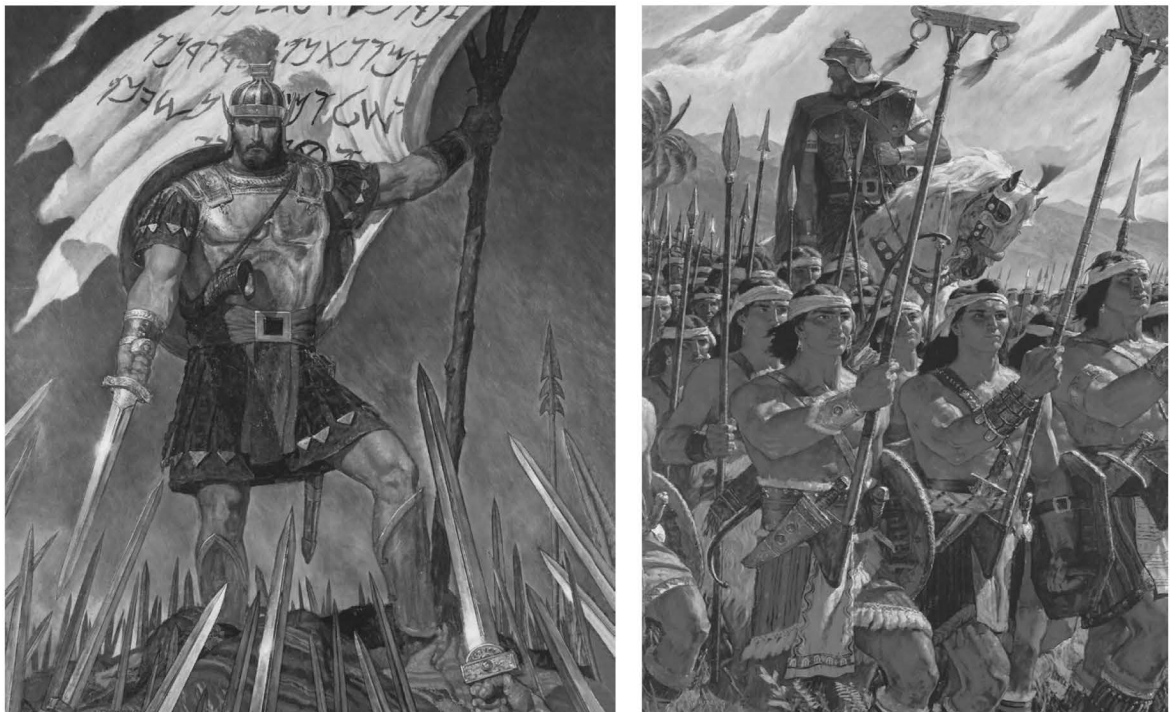


Figure 2. (A) *Captain Moroni Raises the Standard of Liberty* and (B) *Two Thousand Young Warriors*, by Arnold Friberg, circa 1951. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

teachers and curriculum writers—it is not surprising that the CES curriculum never again embraced a pacifist or active nonviolence ethic.

Furthermore, Berrett’s analysis of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies simply corresponded better than Wood’s with some of the broader cultural and political trends within the Latter-day Saint community. As mentioned, these included the rise of a robust Latter-day Saint conservative and hawkish ideology, especially in relation to communism. It also included an increasing tendency toward “muscular” interpretations of the Book of Mormon, a trend exemplified by Ezra Taft Benson’s reading of the text, but one that can also be seen by comparing the divergent trajectories of two prominent Mormon painters, Arnold Friberg and Minerva Teichert (see figs. 2 and 3). As it happened, both artists were painting a series of scenes from the Book of Mormon at almost exactly the same time that Berrett’s and Wood’s clashing interpretations were published and disseminated, and each artist’s distinct interpretative choices highlight again a set of clashing ethical possibilities.



Figure 3A. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *The Title of Liberty*, 1949–1951, oil on masonite, 35¹⁵/₁₆ x 48 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1969.

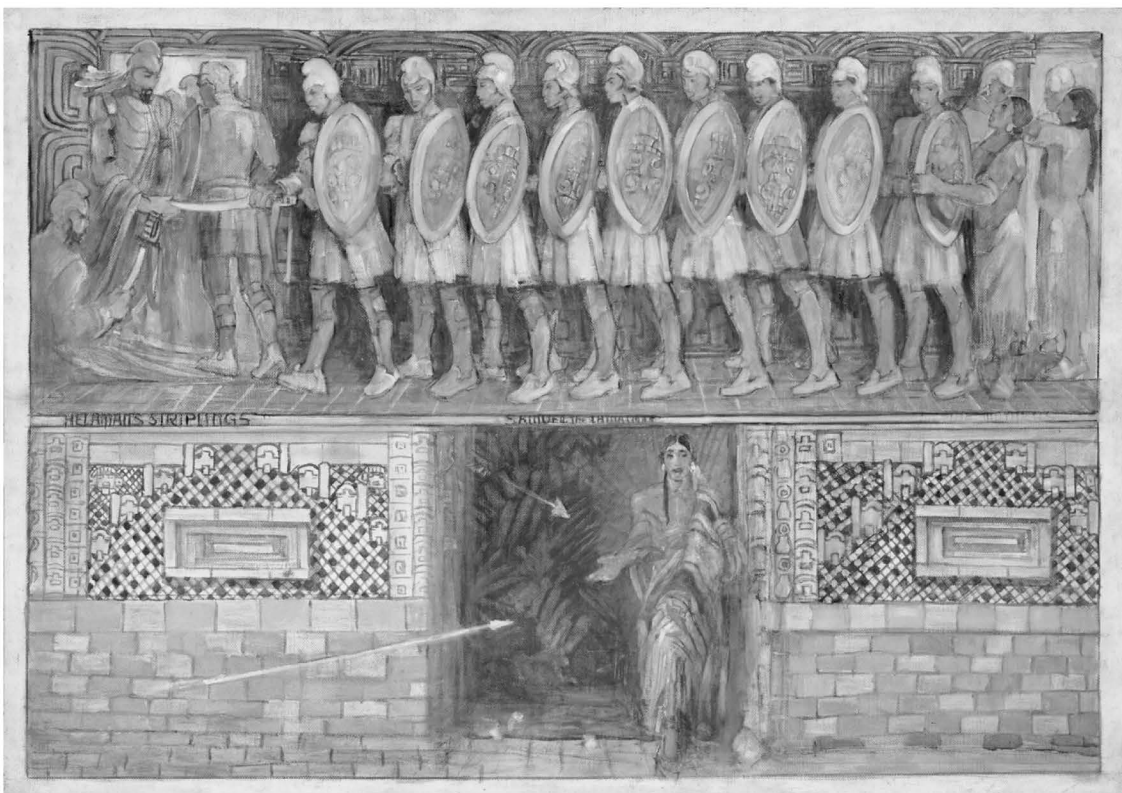


Figure 3B. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *Helaman's Striplings/Samuel the Lamanite*, 1949–1951, oil on masonite, 36 x 48 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1969.

Friberg, who served in the infantry in both Europe and the Pacific, was commissioned in 1950 to paint a series of twelve canvases to “inspire the young with heroic views of the great religious leaders in the Nephite scripture.” The project was the brainchild of Adele Cannon Howells, general president of the LDS Primary, who personally financed the project when church funds were denied. Among the twelve scenes selected by Friberg and Howells—chosen for their capacity to “capture moments of the greatest doctrinal and historical importance”—were several with military themes, including the title of liberty and the stripling warriors, but not the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. With their representations of muscle-bound men and energetic action, Friberg’s paintings became enormously popular and in the process “tended to sweep aside alternative artistic concepts.”⁷⁷ Although church leaders initially rejected Howells’s request to officially commission the paintings, they eventually embraced Friberg’s interpretations and highlighted them in a way that made them nearly canonical—publishing them as part of the official editions of Book of Mormon itself. Even in the twenty-first century, they remain the most iconic images of the sacred narrative, having significantly shaped demographic, geographic, and cultural interpretations of the Book of Mormon for over half a century.

One set of alternative interpretations that was “swept away” was that of Minerva Teichert. In contrast to Friberg, Teichert’s artistic journey through the Book of Mormon—a project that ultimately included more than forty paintings—was a self-appointed endeavor that offered a decidedly less martial interpretation of the text. While depicting some of the same military stories as Friberg, including the title of liberty and the stripling warriors, Teichert’s representations were considerably less brawny. Moreover, her other scene selections included many moments when bloodshed was avoided, either through dramatic and divinely assisted escapes or through cleverly executed nonviolent schemes.⁷⁸

77. Vern G. Swanson, “The Book of Mormon Art of Arnold Friberg, ‘Painter of Scripture,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/1 (2001): 26–35.

78. John W. Welch and Doris R. Dant, *The Book of Mormon Paintings of Minerva Teichert* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997). These other scenes include “Flight,” “Nephi



Figure 4. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *Christian Converts*, 1949–1951, oil on board, 36 x 48 inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1969.

Furthermore, unlike Friberg, Teichert chose to depict the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. In a mural-style painting entitled “Christian Converts,” she included both the (pacifist) burial of their weapons and the (active nonviolent) moment when they confront their enemies (see fig. 4). Her dramatic imagining of the scene shows the Anti-Nephi-Lehies lined up in ranks to absorb the fatal blows of hatchet-wielding attackers, similar to contemporary accounts of Gandhi’s nonviolent activists willingly receiving brutal skull-cracks from lathi-wielding guards at the Dharasana Salt Works in 1930.⁷⁹ Likewise, with a vivid brush of red in

Leads His Followers into the Wilderness,” “Escape of King Limhi and His People,” “Escape of Alma’s People,” “The City of Gid,” and “The Answer of Lachoneus.” Teichert was also much more likely to depict scenes that highlighted women’s roles.

79. American journalist Webb Miller described the attack on the Dharasana Salt Works: “Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins. From where I stood I heard the sickening whacks of the clubs on unprotected skulls. . . . The survivors without breaking ranks silently and doggedly

the palm of one of the awaiting “converts,” Teichert subtly connected the nonviolence of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to the crucifixion of Christ.

Teichert intended her Book of Mormon paintings to “bring that book to life” and to serve as a missionary tool for the church. However, repeated efforts to convince the church to purchase her collection came to naught, and she eventually donated all the paintings to Brigham Young University. In due course a few of the images found their way into edges of Mormon consciousness, but never to the same level as Friberg’s interpretations.⁸⁰ While many twenty-first-century Mormons are familiar with other Teichert paintings—including her portrait of Esther and her depiction of the lost lamb—most are unaware of her Book of Mormon series. Her depiction of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies is even more obscure, remaining virtually unknown even among admirers—another “forgotten alternative” in Mormon ethical and cultural development.

Irrelevant ethic, inspiring metaphor

Even as Friberg’s paintings and Berrett’s critical interpretation of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story dominated official church curriculum during the 1950s and 1960s, the impulse to extrapolate a pacifist or active nonviolence ethic never completely died out. An influential 1958 commentary on the Book of Mormon, for example, explicitly compared the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ “passive resistance” to Gandhi’s movement for India’s independence and to ancient peace traditions among Native Americans: “In Asia or America, now or in the remote past, the idea is the same. It connotes, not weakness, but strength. It cannot be defeated. Men’s unbridled passions succumb to its powers. It means, briefly, *receiving or enduring harm without resistance or emotional reaction.*”⁸¹

marched on until struck down. . . . Group after group walked forward, sat down, and submitted to being beaten into insensibility without raising an arm to fend off the blows.” *I Found No Peace* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1936), 446.

80. Welch and Dant, *Minerva Teichert*, 11, 24–27. The most well-known and reproduced image from the series is “Christ in a Red Robe,” a depiction of the second coming.

81. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjödahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*,

But such sentiments were increasingly overshadowed by interpretations that expanded on Berrett's assertion that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies' strategy of disarmament and active nonviolence was "not required of God."

The essential challenge of accepting Berrett's assertion was how best to explain *why* similar behavior was "not required" of other Christians. Berrett argued that disarmament carried no divine mandate because it was ineffective, even dangerously irresponsible. Other Mormon writers—perhaps taking a cue from Berrett that military defense was the divine and dutiful response—began to interrogate the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story as ethically irrelevant. In 1955, Eldin Ricks, a veteran army chaplain and professor of religion at Brigham Young University, articulated a set of key questions in his widely distributed *Book of Mormon Study Guide*: "Only once in the entire course of Nephite-Lamanite history is it recorded that Church members refused to defend themselves when attacked. What accounts for this unusual behavior on the part of the converted Lamanites?" The answer, as implied by the scriptural verses Ricks provided for students to consult, was that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies had previously led grossly wicked and violent lives, and further violence would have jeopardized their hard-won forgiveness. The next question addressed the question of relevance to other Christians: "The Prophet Mormon, who relates this great story of wartime non-resistance, was himself active in the defense of the Nephite nation in his generation. Why do you suppose he didn't try to persuade his people to follow the non-resistance policy of the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi?" The implied answer, again from the accompanying scriptural references, was that God expected his people to defend their families, "even unto bloodshed." Ricks later returned to the theme: "Does the Lord expect His people to use passive or active resistance against aggressors?" The implied answer was "active" or, more specifically from the scriptural verses, "with swords."⁸²

Vol. 3: The Book of Alma, ed. Philip C. Reynolds and David S. King (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 345, emphasis in the original.

82. Eldin Ricks, *Book of Mormon Study Guide* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1955). The scripture verses to which students were referred to answer these three questions were respectively Alma 24:11–16; 43:46–47; and 61:10–14. The *Study Guide* was

Such questions and answers rendered the pacifism and active non-violence of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies inapplicable to Christianity in general and to modern Mormonism in particular, and official church curriculum materials noted that irrelevance with relative, although not complete, silence. Between 1947 and 1965, the Sunday School continued to use Monson's *Life in Ancient America* for youth classes during years when the Book of Mormon was the focus of study, and the text did praise the Anti-Nephi-Lehies because they "would suffer death rather than take up the sword" and "were proud of their scars of battle for the cross."⁸³ Nevertheless, the manual stopped short of explicit ethical conclusions, and its material was not updated for twenty years. Furthermore, during that same era, the Church Educational System usually omitted these elements of the narrative from its teacher's guides and student manuals, typically focusing instead on the missionary part of the story.⁸⁴

printed by an LDS Church-owned press, commended to all adult church members, and reprinted four times between 1957 and 1966, including a "junior edition" in 1961. For a description of Ricks's service as a chaplain, see Richard E. Cowan, "From the Battlefield to the Vatican to the Classroom: The Story of Eldin Ricks," *BYU Religious Education Review* (Fall 2008): 8–11.

83. Monson, *Life in Ancient America*, 53–55. After Monson's text was replaced in 1967 with a new manual, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies almost disappeared altogether. With one exception, Sunday School lessons from 1967 to 1983 contained no references to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. The Gospel Doctrine manual for 1967, *Messages for Exaltation: Eternal Insights from the Book of Mormon*, also contained no insights from the Ammonite story. The same was true for *Living Truths from the Book of Mormon* (1971 and 1973) and *Book of Mormon Supplement* (1972). The only exception was the Gospel Doctrine manual for 1975, which did highlight the nonviolence to some degree, but not its ethical implications.

84. The first seminary manual approved for general use during Berrett's administration completely omitted the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story. *Resource Units for Book of Mormon Course of Study* (Los Angeles: Southern California District Seminaries, 1955). A later revision of the same manual included the story but used it to "show the effect of true conversion on others." *Lessons from the Book of Mormon: A Teacher Outline* (Provo, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Department of Education, 1961). The first institute manual of the Berrett administration also mentioned the story but referred to it as an "experiment in disarmament." *Book of Mormon Theology: College Juniors and Seniors* (Salt Lake City: Department of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 1956). Subsequent manuals from this era simply skipped the story altogether. See

A general absence of ethical attention to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies is all the more noteworthy because it coincided with increasingly conspicuous implementations of active nonviolent tactics by the civil rights and antiwar movements. Newspaper and television reports often described or relayed scenes of African Americans and students confronting and absorbing brutal violence in ways that could easily have evoked comparisons to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies—but Latter-day Saint leaders did not note (or perhaps even notice) such comparisons. Rather, some of the most prominent leaders viewed the activism of that era with growing suspicion and alarm. Ezra Taft Benson, whose sermons throughout the 1960s employed increasingly political readings of the Book of Mormon as a warning against modern-day “secret combinations,” considered the civil rights movement to be “fomented almost entirely by the communists,” who were using it “to promote revolution and eventual takeover of this country.”⁸⁵ What’s more, many of the active nonviolence tactics employed by these movements, particularly strategies of civil disobedience, were regarded by church leaders, including President McKay, as “insidious forces” designed to “induce contention and confusion.”⁸⁶ Given such high-level concerns regarding these activist movements,

Lowell L. Bennion, *An Introduction to the Book of Mormon and Its Teachings* (Salt Lake City: Department of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, 1961); *Seminary Courses of Study: Book of Mormon: Teacher Manual* (Provo, UT: Department of Education, 1963); Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Guide to the Reading of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Division of Continuing Education, 1964); and *Faculty Handbook: Institutes of Religion* (Provo, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1967).

85. See Mason, “Ezra Taft Benson,” 74. The first quotation is from a speech at a public meeting in Logan, as reported in the *Deseret News*, December 14, 1963. The second quotation comes from a general conference talk, as reported in the *Washington Post*, April 13, 1965. This controversial section of the talk was deleted from the official conference report.

86. Conference Report, October 1967, 10. For analysis on church leadership’s attitude toward civil disobedience during this era, see Pulsipher, “Prepared to Abide the Penalty,” 155–59.

it is not surprising that official curriculum materials drew no parallels with the Book of Mormon story.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, there remained an undercurrent of interest in the Latter-day Saint community concerning the relevance of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies regarding antiwar positions. One of the most prominent Mormon scholars of that era, Hugh Nibley, himself an army veteran of the Second World War, became increasingly vocal in his opposition to all forms of war and frequently referred to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies as exemplary “pacifists” and “conscientious objectors.”⁸⁸ Likewise, in 1971 a collection of essays entitled *War, Conscription, Conscience and Mormonism* referred to the buried swords as scriptural support for a Mormon ethic of conscientious objection.⁸⁹ Such views entailed social costs for Mormons who espoused them because by the 1970s, after more than a decade of an ascendant Mormon political conservatism, and in the wake of another LDS-supported US war, pacifism was clearly beginning to run against the general grain of Mormon cultural consciousness.⁹⁰ Prominent writers such as Cleon Skousen—a former FBI agent, vocal anticommunist,

87. The one exception to this came over a decade later, when the 1982 seminary student manual introduced the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story with an oblique observation—“Their vow of nonviolence is as fresh as tonight’s news”—a phrase that was taken out of subsequent editions. *Book of Mormon Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982). See the 1989 edition, page 143, for the expunged version.

88. See Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 295–96; see also “Freemen and King-men in the Book of Mormon,” in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 356; and “Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 499.

89. Gordon Conrad Thomasson, *War, Conscription, Conscience and Mormonism* (Santa Barbara: Mormon Heritage, 1971). Two essays in the booklet specifically reference the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to support pacifism, conscientious objection, unilateral disarmament, and nonviolence. See Robert B. Keeler, “A Plea for Tolerance,” 12–13; and Gordon Thomasson, “In Good Conscience,” 88–89.

90. Gordon Thomasson describes some of his experiences in “‘Renounce War and Proclaim Peace’: Personal Reflections on Mormon Attempts at Peacemaking,” 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), 203–18.

and popular religion instructor at Brigham Young University—explicitly warned against extrapolating an antiwar ethic: “There is a confusion in the minds of some members of the Church as to their duty in the time of war. Some have taken the example of the Anti-Nephi-Lehites [*sic*] as the basis for their refusing to serve in defense of their country.” Declaring that church leaders had labeled this interpretation a “misunderstanding” and noting the Anti-Nephi-Lehi situation was “unique” and “would not be typical of the ordinary member of the Church today,” Skousen asserted that the “Lord’s position” was to require Christians “to defend their liberties and the lives of the innocent,” so that no Mormon could “say that he is a conscientious objector, and cite the teachings of the Church as the basis for his belief.”⁹¹

Thus by the early 1980s, a pattern of interpretation that had been initiated by Berrett and refined by others such as Ricks and Skousen, became the most prominent approach to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies—highlighting the anomalous nature of their sinful past, qualifying their pacifist vow and active nonviolence as particular to their circumstances, then pointing to other scriptural passages to justify armed resistance. This pattern was officially institutionalized in church manuals over the next two decades and by the 1990s was relatively standard both inside and outside official curriculum channels.⁹² As summarized by Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead—professors of religion at BYU and veterans of the Second World War—the essential ethical lesson of the

91. Cleon Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: printed by author, 1974).

92. In a 1979 college-level student manual for the Book of Mormon, a section entitled “Insights on the Gospel and War from the Anti-Nephi-Lehies” noted that they “did not categorically condemn war” and that “in other cases, the Lord has directed his people to go to war.” *Book of Mormon Student Manual Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 257. The 1988 Gospel Doctrine manual likewise noted that the Book of Mormon held the people of Ammon in “extremely high regard” because they “refused to kill again—even in what might normally be considered justifiable self-defense,” but immediately added that the sacred text “also teaches that military action in self-defense is justifiable” and provided scriptural citations to back this claim. *The Book of Mormon: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Supplement* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1988), 103.

narrative was that there were “rare conditions under which a Christian would be justified in being a conscientious objector.” These conditions included ones in which a person “had fought and killed so much—and loved it—before his conversion, that any further killing would jeopardize his eternal salvation.” But such circumstances were extremely unusual. “Normally,” they noted, “people are expected to defend their lives, families, liberty, and property.”⁹³

The primary difficulty with emphasizing the anomalous nature of the story, however, was that it had the potential of rendering the Anti-Nephi-Lehies completely irrelevant to modern life. If a decision to bury weapons represented no useable ethic regarding violence, did it contain any practical value? To fill this void, a parallel and complementary approach developed during these same decades. Drawing on a general admiration for the sincere repentance and stalwart faithfulness of the Lamanite converts, this approach emphasized the story’s rich metaphorical value. While modern readers of the Book of Mormon may not share the brutal and violent sins of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, everyone has habits that are difficult to shake. Thus the story might serve as an inspiring example of abandoning any “rebellion against God” and surrendering to truth and righteousness. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies are thus

93. Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, *Building Faith with the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986). Such interpretations have been bolstered by scholars such as John W. Welch, who noted that Book of Mormon societies seemed to require a “duty to fight,” but may have allowed an exemption, according to the law of Moses, for someone who was “fearful and fainthearted,” including “one who is afraid *because of the transgressions he had committed*.” See “Law and War in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 62–65, emphasis in the original. Nevertheless, there have been some notable variations on this standard theme. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, for example, articulate the standard logic, but also conclude with a call to peace: “Eventually, men and women must learn the lesson of the ages, a lesson stressed by Mormon just prior to his death, a message he could offer with over a thousand years of Nephite perspective before him: ‘Know ye,’ he said to the future remnants of Israel, ‘that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood, and take them not again, save it be that God shall command you.’” See *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 170.

examples of “profound, full conversion” who “demonstrate the complete abandonment of sin following sincere repentance,” because “abandonment of sin often requires a change in our lifestyle.”⁹⁴ As one of the earliest expressions of the metaphorical approach, the 1982 *Seminary Teacher Outline* encouraged instructors to ask their students to identify “what weapons of rebellion today’s youth need to lay down.” Noting that teenagers “may mention such things as conflicts with parents, rivalry among friends, anger, disobedience, immorality, drug abuse,” the lesson suggested teachers should lead a discussion regarding how such “weapons” might be permanently “buried.”⁹⁵ Over the next decades, subsequent lesson manuals for both youth and adults asked similar questions: “What can we learn from the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to help us keep the covenants we make with God?” or “Is there anything in your life that you need to ‘bury’?”⁹⁶ This metaphorical interpretation was part of a broader trend—facilitated by an institutional effort to systematically correlate doctrine and curriculum—to depoliticize scriptural interpretation and emphasize the devotional implications of sacred narratives, an emphasis that has proved to be both spiritually resonant and pedagogically enduring.⁹⁷ As a result, Latter-day Saints in essence

94. *Book of Mormon Student Manual, Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2009), 207. Richard G. Scott expanded this metaphor when he taught that “sometimes our poor choices leave us with long-term consequences” and suggested that the previous “rebellious actions” of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies “prevented them from protecting their wives and children” because their pacifist vows represented “fortifications between their faithful lives and the unrighteous behavior of their past.” Conference Report, October 2013, 79–82.

95. *Book of Mormon Seminary Teacher Outline* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 161.

96. The first question is from *The Book of Mormon Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1991), 24. The second is from *Book of Mormon Teacher Manual, Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 98. See also *Book of Mormon Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999, 2003), 117.

97. As part of this trend, recent curriculum materials from the LDS Church have increasingly taken metaphorical approaches to narratives involving violence, including those that were previously employed to endorse warfare. For example, the treatment of

“rediscovered” the Anti-Nephi-Lehies as meaningful role models, not of a pacifist or active nonviolence ethic, but of earnest repentance and resolute faith in the face of adversity.

During the early years of this shift from ethics to metaphor, prominent Mormon artist Del Parson was commissioned to paint the Anti-Nephi-Lehies for the church’s official magazine, the *Ensign*.⁹⁸ Parson’s painting depicted the moment of burial, with an unidentified Anti-Nephi-Lehi kneeling before the light of God, his face upturned, and the gift of his sword—his sin—outstretched in a gesture of offering (see fig. 5). The composition emphasized contrition, conversion, and submission, with a young boy looking on in the background. This boy represented the next generation of believers—not guilty of the same sins as their fathers—who will eventually take up the sword in defense of their families and future adopted nation.⁹⁹ Unlike Teichert’s painting of the same scene, Parson’s artistic representation contained no hint of the nonviolent confrontation and slaughter to come. Officially embraced, reproduced, and disseminated in church curriculum materials, Parson’s image became the only representation of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to gain wide distribution.

Shifted and (mostly) settled

Once this interpretive shift had been fully articulated—qualifying the Anti-Nephi-Lehies as anomalous and reading their behavior metaphorically—it effectively tamped down considerations that the story contained any pacifist or active nonviolent ethic. Into the twenty-first

Alma’s war chapters in the 2012 seminary teacher’s manual for the Book of Mormon notes that “as we study the accounts of physical battles in the Book of Mormon, we can liken them to spiritual battles we face,” and asks, “What can we learn from the examples of Moroni and his army to help us in our battles against the adversary?” *Book of Mormon Seminary Teacher Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 345–46.

98. The painting was first published on the inside of the back cover of the *Ensign*, June 1983.

99. Interview with Lynette Parson, wife of Del Parson, August 19, 2014.

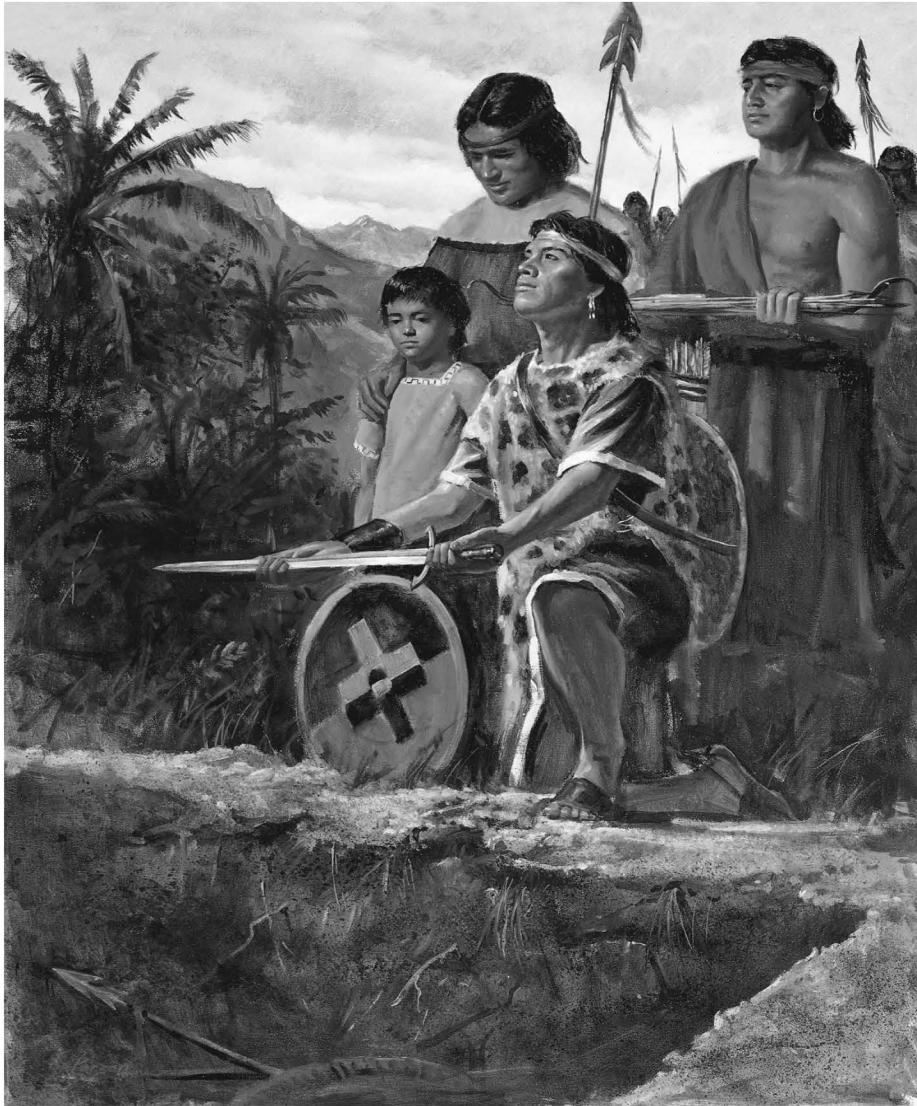


Figure 5. *The Anti-Nephi-Lehies Bury Their Swords*, by Del Parson, 1982. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

century, as Latter-day Saints have become well represented in the national security establishment, this interpretive approach has allowed Latter-day Saints to embrace the spiritual power of the story while keeping potential political implications at arm's length.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless,

100. Regarding Latter-day Saint involvement in the national security establishment, see Mark Henshaw et al., "War and the Gospel: Perspectives from Latter-day Saint National Security Professionals," *SquareTwo* 2/2 (Summer 2009), <http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleHenshawNatSec.html>.

despite the obvious strength and appeal of the metaphorical approach, the political reverberations have never completely settled.¹⁰¹ The narrative power of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story means that its pacifist and active nonviolence tones are consistently being rediscovered, explored, and debated—if not in Sunday School, seminary, or institute classrooms, then at least in some corners of the Internet.¹⁰²

Thus ethics of pacifism and active nonviolence keep reemerging in Mormon consciousness, even as metaphorical interpretations keep the story's radical implications generally subdued. A 1996 interpretation of the story by L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles exemplifies this tension. Perry repeated the dominant rhetorical pattern, reminding his readers that “the message of the story is not that all members of the Church should conscientiously object to war,” citing scriptural examples of justified armed defense and noting that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ “unique history caused them to make a unique covenant.” However, Elder Perry’s use of *all* subtly suggested that *some* members of the church might in good conscience adopt a pacifist ethic. Moreover, while holding carefully to his previous qualifications, he nonetheless noted the powerful effect of an active nonviolence strategy: “While the message of the story is not to insist on universal pacifism, we do learn that by not returning aggressions from others we can have a profound effect on them. Literally, we can change their hearts when we follow Christ’s example and turn the other cheek. Our examples as peaceable followers of Christ inspire others to follow him.”¹⁰³ Thus as Perry’s inter-

101. One of the evidences of such persistence is the frequency with which commenters continue to try to tamp down any interpretation of a nonviolent ethic. See, for example, Duane Boyce, “Were the Ammonites Pacifists?” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18/1 (2009): 32–47.

102. See, for example, James Olsen, “The Question of Pacifism,” at <http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2009/07/the-question-of-pacifism/>; Nate Oman, “The Anti-Nephi-Lehite Puzzle,” at <http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2004/06/the-anti-nephi-lehite-puzzle/>; and Patrick Mason, “The Politics of Jesus,” at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peculiarpeople/2012/10/the-politics-of-jesus/> (all accessed on September 1, 2016).

103. L. Tom Perry, *Living with Enthusiasm* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 128.

pretation suggests, although Mormons will continue to be inspired by the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to make difficult and life-changing covenants and to bury their sins deep in the earth, there will continue to be those who, standing at the edge of the pit, will perceive more in their hands than merely metaphorical swords.

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The last quotation from Perry was employed as part of the lesson on the Anti-Nephi-Lehies in *Student Manual, Religion 121–122* (2009), 208.