

# The Lamanite View of Book of Mormon History

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History is one of the spoils of war. In great conflicts, the victors almost always write the history; the losers' story is forgotten. We remember the patriots' version of the American Revolution, not the loyalists'; the Northern account of the Civil War, not the Southern story of the War between the States. Ordinarily the winners' account of events commands our memories as completely as their armies controlled the battlefield. The reverse is true of the Book of Mormon. The Lamanites vanquished the Nephites and survived; yet by virtue of a record that went into the earth with them, the Nephites' version of the history is the one we now read. We think of the Nephites as the superior nation because they wrote the history, even though in the end the Lamanites won on the battlefield. How would the story go if the Lamanites had kept the records, and their view were in our hands today? We cannot say in any detail of course, but there are enough clues scattered through the Nephite record to offer a few conjectures about a Lamanite history of Lehi's descendants. Since the way we write history is tied closely to fundamental cultural values, in recovering the Lamanite perspective, we obtain a clearer view of the two cultures, and, as it turns out, a deeper understanding of Nephite religion.

One fact would surely figure as prominently in the Lamanite record as the Nephite: the frequent wars between the two peoples. Especially in their first six hundred years, the Lamanites or those leading them exerted relentless pressure on the Nephites, driving or causing them to move farther and farther north, to the lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful, and at last the land northward. That being true for both nations, in order to write a Lamanite account of these events, we must know why the Lamanites fought. Though the Lamanites ultimately triumphed (for other reasons), more often than not in the first six hundred years of their stormy relationship, they lost the wars with the Nephites. They sent vast armies into Nephite territory, won a battle or two, and then were defeated with a huge loss of life and driven back to their own lands. For hundreds of years these attacks and defeats succeeded one another with no apparent gain. What brought the Lamanites back during this time year after year to be outmaneuvered and outfought by the Nephites?

The Nephite record says little more than "they delighted in wars and bloodshed, and they had an eternal hatred against us, their brethren" (Jacob 7:24). Without questioning the essential truth of that judgment, as moderns we wish to know more. Were not the Lamanites seeking more substantive gains for themselves than mere vengeance? We could understand the wars if the Lamanites suffered from a land shortage and wished to capture new territory. While that was possibly the case, there is no mention of a land shortage, and there is evidence of a plentitude of land. The Lamanite king welcomed the people of Zeniff when they migrated into Lamanite territory as if there were enough land to go around. Why would a Lamanite king clear out his people from a broad valley to make room for Nephites if he lacked land? The king did benefit from Zeniff's presence in one respect: he exacted tribute. Traditionally that has been a powerful motive for imperial expansion, and whenever a Nephite people came under Lamanite control the Nephites paid heavy tribute. But the Lamanite armies failed so consistently for eight hundred years, never actually conquering a Nephite people for more than a few years at any one time so far as can be known, that it is difficult to believe that the expectation of tribute sustained the Lamanites through all their losses.

The Nephite record gives a further explanation for those wars, in words directly quoted from Lamanite documents. In 63 B.C., Ammoron the Lamanite king wrote to Moroni about a prisoner exchange and explained why they fought: "For behold, your fathers did wrong their brethren, insomuch that they did rob them of their right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them" (Alma 54:17). The war would stop, Ammoron said to Moroni,

if you “lay down your arms, and subject yourselves to be governed by those to whom the government doth rightly belong” (Alma 54:18). Ammoron referred, of course, to Laman’s complaint that Nephi “thinks to rule over us,” when Laman himself claimed the right of rulership. “We will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people” (2 Nephi 5:3). Ammoron represents the war as a continuation of an ancient feud between the two sets of brothers in Lehi’s family. That hardly makes sense to us. Would countless thousands of men hundreds of years later throw themselves into battle simply to reclaim an ancient right? It is all the more puzzling because after the landing in America, Nephi and his descendants made no claims that we know of to rule the Lamanites. Quite to the contrary, Nephi withdrew from the site of the first landing by command of the Lord, leaving the area to his brothers (2 Nephi 5:5-7). The first King Mosiah also withdrew by command of the Lord (cf. Omni 1:12-13), pulling back from the Lamanites and not forcing his rule on them. Until near the end, the Nephites never fought aggressive wars. The Lamanites were the ones to attack, not the Nephites. How could such an abstraction as this ancient hurt motivate people over so many centuries? We have to credit the Book of Mormon explanation for the wars, coming as it does from both sides, but the source of its power remains a puzzle. Why should Nephi’s one-time claim to rule arouse the wrath of the Lamanites generation after generation for hundreds of years?

In attacking this puzzle, we are best advised, I believe, to begin where the evidence points, with the story of the brothers in the opening pages. In summing up Lamanite animus against the Nephites, Ammoron attributed it to the original contest between Laman and Nephi, and that is probably reason enough for recognizing its primal importance to Lamanite culture. But there is another reason for taking these stories seriously. The Book of Mormon, like other ancient narratives, blends family history and national history. The story of a whole people grows out of the story of a single family, as the history of Israel begins with the family of Abraham. Israel thought of itself as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and what the patriarchs did to a large extent determined what Israel was for thousands of years. In our day, a revolution and the work of a convention in the Philadelphia state house determine our national identity. In ancient times, family events founded nations and determined their character ever after. That is why the story of the competing brothers requires close analysis.

The most powerful impression we get from the family story is of Laman’s and Lemuel’s complaining natures. They were forever raising objections to Lehi or Nephi, becoming first sullen, then angry, and finally violent. We have to allow for Nephi’s stern, exacting estimation of his brothers, but there is no reason to question the reality of their complaints. We too may have objected to the sacrifice of a comfortable life in Jerusalem for an arduous trek in the desert toward an unknown destination. Nor is there reason to question Laman’s and Lemuel’s resort to violence. At least five times they physically punished Nephi or threatened his life. After the second visit to Laban, when they left all their property behind as they fled, Laman and Lemuel took out their anger on their younger brothers, smiting them with a rod (1 Nephi 3:29). A little later, on the way back from Jerusalem with Ishmael’s family, Laman and Lemuel and a few of Ishmael’s children grew so angry with Nephi’s preaching that they bound him with cords and planned to kill him (1 Nephi 7:16). After the broken bow incident and Ishmael’s death, Laman and Lemuel planned to kill both Lehi and Nephi (1 Nephi 16:37). When they arrived at the sea and Nephi proposed to build a ship, his brothers’ patience wore thin again, and they tried to throw him “into the depths of the sea” (1 Nephi 17:48). Finally, aboard ship on the way to the promised land, Nephi reproached them for their merrymaking, and Laman and Lemuel bound him with cords and treated him with “much harshness” (1 Nephi 18:11). By that time, Nephi’s reproaches, the brothers’ murmuring, and the violence had fallen into a pattern that characterized their relationship, establishing the recurring subplot of First Nephi.

On the other hand, a frequent result of the brothers’ assaults on Nephi was a rebuke from the Lord. Once an angel appeared to chastise them, and on another occasion they heard the voice of the Lord. They gave way in the face of

these rebukes, but on one occasion they did more than relent. When Nephi was about to construct a ship and the brothers in anger tried to throw him into the sea, Nephi was given the power to shock them physically with a touch. This show of power so overwhelmed Laman and Lemuel that they swung to the opposite extreme. Nephi says they “fell down before me, and were about to worship me,” and he had to reassure them he was still only their brother (1 Nephi 17:53-55). This reaction, combined with the brothers’ repeated violent assaults on Nephi, suggests that force was their characteristic reaction to crisis, the only language they understood in such situations. It seemed to be a matter of smite or be smitten.

There is another element in the founding story along with the complaints and the violence, namely deprivation. That theme is most evident on the ship. Laman and Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and their wives made themselves merry—dancing, singing, and speaking with much rudeness. Nephi, ever fearing the Lord would be displeased, spoke to them soberly, and they grew angry. Immediately his brothers came forth with the classic complaint: “We will not that our younger brother shall be a ruler over us,” and bound him with cords (1 Nephi 18:9-10). In this case it seems that the denial of pleasure and the objections to Nephi’s rule are closely linked. The attempt to stop the merrymaking aroused the thought of his unfounded claims to govern. The connection is most clear on the ship, but it has a place throughout the narrative. The brothers’ complaint from the beginning is that Lehi and Nephi cause them needless physical suffering. Laman and Lemuel did not want to leave their home and leave behind “their gold, and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 2:11). That basic deprivation underlay their truculence throughout. Then it was the loss of their precious things to Laban that set off the first physical attack—they beat Nephi with a rod (1 Nephi 3:24-28). Once on their way in the desert, suffering and deprivation become their common lot. The loss of the steel bow brought the problem to a head when “they did suffer much for the want of food,” causing the brothers to “murmur exceedingly” (1 Nephi 16:19-20). The death of Ishmael made things worse, his daughters complaining that “we have suffered much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue; and after all these sufferings we must perish in the wilderness with hunger” (1 Nephi 16:35). Even amidst the abundance of Bountiful by the sea, the brothers held a grudge against Nephi for the eight years of wandering with their oft-times pregnant wives, suffering in the desert when all along they might “have enjoyed [their] possessions and the land of [their] inheritance” (1 Nephi 17:20-21). Nephi’s intervention to stop the shipboard merrymaking was the straw that broke the camel’s back. They had undergone untold afflictions in the wilderness—hunger, thirst, raw food—and now when they sought a little pleasure for themselves, he wanted to prevent them once more. To Laman and Lemuel, all the deprivations they suffered could be blamed on Nephi. It was not merely that he claimed rulership unjustly. His governance became unbearable when it was driven home that he used his power to cause them suffering. Nephi was the cause of their deprivation. Deep down they may have believed Nephi sought his own pleasure at their expense. They said once that they suspected him of leading them away to make himself king “that he may do with us according to his will and pleasure” (1 Nephi 16:38).

Combining these clues, then, we can reconstruct events as the Lamanites probably understood them. Initially they were living a pleasurable life amidst their treasures and precious things in the land of Jerusalem. Their father’s vision and subsequently Nephi’s God-given claim to rule and teach them, tore them away from these pleasures and subjected them to danger, affliction, and hunger. They grew angry time after time whenever events brought their fundamental grievance to the surface: that they were made to suffer deprivations because of Nephi’s attempts to rule them. It is noticeable in this reconstructed plot that force plays a large part. The brothers feel that Nephi and Lehi are compelling them; they use force to stop their intervention; and it is divine force that breaks their will and compels submission. The Freudians would say that Laman and Lemuel had archaic superegos—that is, the internal monitors that controlled their egos used terror rather than persuasion.

With this plot before us, we can begin to understand the dilemma of existence as Laman and Lemuel understood the world. They felt compelled to choose between two unfortunate alternatives. On the one hand, they could enjoy pleasure and comfort by refusing submission to their father and brother, and since these two spoke for the Lord, refusing submission to God, too. Or on the other hand, they could yield abjectly to the superior power of the two prophets and their God, giving up all claims to pleasure and even to honor. Judging from the stories, Laman and Lemuel felt driven by events to choose between rebellious pleasure and fearful self-denial and submission. They could not envision a middle ground where obedience was joined with love and pleasure, and where a flourishing of their egos was in a happy harmony with God's will.

Nephi tried to cope with Laman's and Lemuel's legitimate complaints. There is no reason to believe that he was dedicated to a puritanical repression of the desire for pleasure. He was the one, when the steel bow broke, to make another from a straight stick and slay game for the group. He came into the camp with the beasts, and "when they beheld that I had obtained food, how great was their joy!" That was an understandable reaction, of course, but Nephi goes on to say, "they did humble themselves before the Lord, and did give thanks unto him" (1 Nephi 16:32). One catches a brief, pitiful glimpse of boys deprived of simple pleasure and eager to be compliant when for the moment they felt provided for. But the humility did not last. At the next trouble, their hearts hardened again and they were plotting once more to slay Nephi. They acted as if force alone could be relied on. When Nephi said the party must leave Bountiful, the mysterious haven by the sea with its "much fruit and also wild honey" (1 Nephi 17:5), the brothers were at his throat immediately. With every call for a sacrifice they fell into the familiar pattern of murmuring and violence. Hovering in the distance was the promised land, enough to sustain Nephi and the faithful members of the party through the afflictions of the journey, but this was thin gruel for the suspicious and perhaps constitutionally deprived brothers.

Nephi's and Lehi's theology offered more enduring sustenance to Laman and Lemuel as a way to resolve the conflict between submission and pleasure. In the brothers' characteristic plot, submission meant deprivation, and pleasures came only through rebellion and violence. In their view of events, God's superior power forced them to submit and drove them into the sufferings of the wilderness. The family's theology and faith in Christ, by contrast, offered supreme pleasure and happiness, not through rebellion but through submission to God. Lehi's vision made the point most graphically with the tree "whose fruit was desirable to make one happy." When Lehi partook, he "beheld that it was most sweet, above all that I ever before tasted" (1 Nephi 8:10-11). Christ was presented as the resolution of the troubling conflict. The image of divine love in the form of luscious fruit should have appealed directly to Laman's and Lemuel's most fundamental need. But an understanding of Christ's love was beyond them. They were too firmly fixed in another pattern. Lehi regretfully reported that in the dream Laman and Lemuel did not take the fruit (1 Nephi 8:35).

In the ensuing centuries, the saga of the founding family formed the framework for the descendants of Laman and Lemuel to interpret events. Judging from the Lamanites' frequent references to the story, it remained as vivid in their national memory as the Revolution and Declaration of Independence do in ours. The relationship between the two peoples paralleled the relationship between Nephi and his brothers. Nephites were accused of unjust rule and suspected of schemes to deprive the Lamanites of their possessions just as Laman and Lemuel believed Nephi deprived them of their rightful pleasures. Zeniff's people, who came into bondage to the Lamanites around 160 B.C., learned that the Lamanites still taught their children that Nephi robbed their fathers, that all Lamanites should hate the Nephites, "and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them" (Mosiah 10:16-17). The immediate reaction of the father of Lamoni when he discovered his son fraternizing with Nephites was to suspect them of robbery. They are sons of a liar, he charged, who "robbed our fathers; and now his children are also come amongst us that they may, by their cunning and their lyings, deceive us, that they again may rob us of

our property” (Alma 20:13). The Lamanites seemed to believe that the old story of deprivation would be played out whenever Nephites appeared on the scene.

And by the same token, the Lamanite response followed the line of the ancient story. How were the Nephites to be stopped from their habitual robbery of their brethren? Bind them, smite them, kill them. The father of Lamoni turned on Ammon with a sword, and that was always the way. Nephi said his brothers’ hearts were like flint, and the most common Nephite characterization of the Lamanites described them as ferocious. They were a “wild and a hardened and a ferocious people; a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites, and robbing and plundering them” (Alma 17:14). It was nearly impossible for many of the Nephites to see anything gentle or loving in Lamanite life, because the boundary between the two peoples was defined by the founding saga as one of perpetual war. To his credit, Jacob recognized that national traditions distorted the Nephite view. He told the Nephites in his sermon on chastity that Lamanite “husbands love their wives, and their wives love their husbands; and their husbands and their wives love their children.” They were not implacably ferocious in every relationship. Lamanite violence toward the Nephites grew out of tradition, not innate viciousness. “Their hatred towards you is because of the iniquity of their fathers,” Jacob said (Jacob 3:7). And yet that hatred was so unrelenting, and the resulting violence so intense, that Jacob himself could only think that Lamanites “delighted in wars and bloodshed, and they had an eternal hatred against us, their brethren” (Jacob 7:24).

One of the most troubling occurrences in the Book of Mormon, for some modern readers, is the cursing of the Lamanites. It took place after the separation of the peoples when the cultural divide widened. Nephi apparently ruled over all the brothers when they first landed in America, but, chafing under his government, the Lamanites made an attempt on his life, forcing Nephi to flee with his people into the wilderness. The Lord explained that, in consequence of the brothers’ refusal to follow Nephi, they would be cut off. The curse of blackness came because the Lamanites “hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint” (2 Nephi 5:21). The purpose of the sign accompanying the curse, the dark skin, was to prevent the Nephites from mixing with the Lamanites; under the curse they would not be enticing. That idea troubles us because it makes skin color divisive in a way that we today dislike. But in a later incident, we learn more about the inner meaning of the curse. In the time of Alma a group of dissident Nephites called Amlicites joined the Lamanites in an attack on the Nephites. The Amlicites marked their foreheads with red paint to distinguish friends from enemies in battle. The marking led Mormon (presumably the editor of Alma’s records) to comment on the curse. Mormon explained the reason why the Lord did not wish the Lamanites and Nephites to mix. It was not because of their contrasting skin colors. The curse was pronounced “that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions which would prove their destruction” (Alma 3:8). At issue was the story of their founding, deeply embedded as it was in Lamanite culture. The danger was not a mixture of races or skin colors but a mixture of false traditions with true ones. Mormon said the very identity of the Nephites lay in their acceptance of the true history of origins.

Whosoever would not believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their fathers, which were correct, who believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites (Alma 3:11).

The two peoples were defined by their contrasting explanations of the enmity between Nephi and Laman, and the crucial issue was how to keep the true version intact. We may object to the selection of skin color as a means of separating the people and call these passages racist, but we should understand that in God’s mind, and in the minds of his people, correct traditions, not skins, were the issue. The people of God would have objected just as heartily to a Nephite marriage with an Amlicite as to one with a Lamanite, when the only Amlicite mark was a painted forehead. The important thing was the Amlicite false belief and enmity to the Nephites. By accepting the

false tradition, the curse fell on them as surely as upon the Lamanites. Mormon says the Amlicites fulfilled the wish of Providence in painting their foreheads, for in rebelling against God “it was expedient that the curse should fall upon them” (Alma 3:18). They were cursed, without receiving a dark skin, because they rebelled against God and embraced a false tradition. Presumably a dark skin on a person who embraced the true tradition would have no significance. Skin color was only skin deep; what mattered was the history one believed, and the hatred or love that went with each version.

It may be that the hatred against the Nephites polluted Lamanite society more than they desired themselves. The Nephites thought the Lamanites were idle. Instead of working for riches, “they sought to obtain these things by murdering and plundering, that they might not labor for them with their own hands” (Alma 17:14-15). The customary violence against the Nephites spilled over into the treatment of each other; they fought for goods rather than working for them. We have to treat the charge of indolence with a little skepticism, considering that the Nephites mainly saw the Lamanites from a distance or up close in a murdering and plundering mode. But it is also true that King Lamoni suffered from a band of rustlers who drove off the king’s herds from the watering place. These were not a hostile group of outsiders, but some of his own subjects. Rather than work to assemble their herds, they used force (Alma 17:26-27). The use of violence against the Nephites may have legitimized plundering within Lamanite society, just as veterans returning from wars in some instances settle personal quarrels with guns. National myths and practices can affect the limits of personal behavior, and, in Lamanite history, force was made a virtue.

However much the founding saga influenced individual Lamanites, there is no question that it definitively established Lamanite policy toward the Nephites. “Their hatred was fixed,” Enos said (Enos 1:20). Even when circumstances acted to moderate the hatred, it only subsided; it was never wholly extinguished. In a sense it was a great national resource, a source of energy and resolve that malicious rulers could call upon to serve their selfish interests. One of the common phrases in the Book of Mormon is “stir up to anger.” With mostly primitive governmental mechanisms at their disposal, Lamanite rulers commonly relied on oratory to govern. The people had to be aroused in order to mobilize them for the massive war efforts against the Nephites. In such instances, the tradition of the fathers was a resource like money or food. Zerahemnah, an especially vicious king, made a special effort among his people “to preserve their hatred towards the Nephites, that he might bring them into subjection to the accomplishment of his designs” (Alma 43:7). A national heritage, whether benign or malign, can fade from time to time, and must be revived if leaders are to use it to their advantage. After an especially disastrous defeat, a large group of Lamanites refused to go into battle again, exhausted and fearful for their lives (Alma 47:2). The response of the king was to undertake a campaign to “inspire the hearts of the Lamanites against the people of Nephi.” And how did he accomplish that? “He did appoint men to speak unto the Lamanites from their towers, against the Nephites” (Alma 48:1). We can easily guess at the message spoken from the towers, and the results were predictable. He “hardened the hearts of the Lamanites and blinded their minds, and stirred them up to anger” (Alma 48:3).

Lamanite resolve presented the Nephites with a nearly insoluble problem. There was seemingly no way to stop the Lamanite attacks permanently. If the problem had been a land shortage or the imbalance of wealth in the two societies, an agreement might have been worked out. But Lamanite hatred of the Nephites was far more profound than that. It was ingrained in their national identity. Their founding story depicted them as a people who had been robbed and therefore whose destiny it was to destroy those who had wronged them. Wars against the Nephites were to the Lamanites like fighting for freedom and equality is to us. Fighting wars maintained fundamental values of the society that were rooted in the mythic account of their national beginnings and were essential to their identity as a people. One could not expect them to stop the wars any more than we can be expected to renounce

the idea of equality enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. They would not be Lamanites, nor we Americans, if this occurred.<sup>1</sup>

Because war was part of the Lamanite identity, there was no resolution of the conflict—unless the Lamanites could be persuaded to forgo their own tradition. It seemed like a hopeless undertaking, like persuading the United States to return to monarchy and its attendant arbitrariness. But one valiant attempt was made. We think of the sons of Mosiah as giving up statecraft when they unitedly yielded their rights to the throne. Their abdication in advance of Mosiah's death compelled the king to introduce a major constitutional change in Nephite government, altering it from a monarchy to a rule by judges. We admire the young men for giving up the throne to preach the gospel, but we may question their judgment. Was it not irresponsible to refuse the duty that always falls on the sons of the king? Could not one of them have stayed behind to occupy the throne? But our doubts are quieted when we look closely at the reasons for the mission, for it appears that they went to the Lamanites for reasons of state as well as to right themselves with the Lord. The sons of Mosiah had been converted along with Alma and desired to “impart the word of God to their brethren, the Lamanites.” But besides bringing them to a knowledge of God, they wished to “convince them of the iniquity of their fathers.” It was not enough to teach Christ. They also had to attack the story of Laman and Lemuel as the Lamanites understood it—in other words, the tradition of their fathers. The reason for doing that was simple. The missionaries hoped that “perhaps they might cure them of their hatred towards the Nephites.” That would permit them all to rejoice in the Lord their God, that they too “might become friendly to one another, and that there should be no more contentions in all the land” (Mosiah 28:1-2). It was a long shot, but by 92 B.C., after five hundred years of warfare, it may have been apparent to the king's sons that Lamanite warfare could only be halted by attacking its foundation, the tradition of their fathers.

The marvel is that they succeeded as well as they did. Traveling in the wilderness toward Lamanite lands, the missionaries prepared themselves by much fasting and prayer, beseeching the Lord to enable them to bring the Lamanites “to the knowledge of the truth, to the knowledge of the baseness of the traditions of their fathers, which were not correct” (Alma 17:9). And their prayers were answered. The method by which they achieved their purpose is inspiring as well as interesting. They did it by simple acts of love and generosity. The ease with which the Lamanites gave way before the missionaries belies the Nephite images of flinty and ferocious Lamanites. Instead, some of the Lamanites appear remarkably vulnerable. Lamoni's men bound Ammon when he entered their land, as they always did with Nephite intruders, but when he announced his wish to live with them, perhaps until the day he died, Lamoni was so touched he offered Ammon a daughter for a wife (Alma 17:20-24). Lamoni's tender heart was deeply moved by Ammon's faithful service, which prepared the king to be converted soon there- after.

Lamoni's father reacted like Laman of old in drawing his sword against his son and then Ammon, and when Ammon overpowered him, the old king cowered before the missionary's greater power, again as Laman did before Nephi (Alma 16:20-24). But it was not Ammon's physical superiority that impressed the king; it was the love for the king's son that astonished him exceedingly (Alma 20:26). When another set of missionaries offered to serve Lamoni's father, he remembered this love and wanted to listen. Ammon's generosity, as well as his words, troubled the king, and he was ready to hear more (Alma 22:3). The willing service and acts of generosity and love, so contrary to the Lamanite stereotypes of the Nephites, got through the armor and touched the hearts of the two kings.

These stories remind us of the time when Laman and Lemuel pulled back from their plan to slay Nephi as they returned from Jerusalem with Ishmael and his family. Instead of a show of force halting the attempt, one of Ishmael's daughters, along with her mother and a son, pleaded for Nephi. We see in the incident the beginning of a romance, but what may be far more significant is that a womanly appeal, from a mother as well as a daughter, softened the flinty hearts of the brothers. They responded as fully to this appeal as to the later shock of power

from Nephi. The record says “they were sorrowful, because of their wickedness, insomuch that they did bow down before me, and did plead with me that I would forgive them of the thing that they had done against me” (1 Nephi 7:19-20). At the outset, gentleness succeeded where harsh rebukes failed, and in later history kindness and love again exercised influence where the Nephites’ militant resistance bred only more warfare. Force may not have been the only language some of the Lamanites understood.

The conversions fulfilled the missionaries’ hopes far more completely than they had any reason to expect. The two kings and many of the people believed. And it was not just the gospel they accepted. They were convinced that “the traditions of [their] wicked fathers” were wrong (Alma 24:7). That meant Laman and Lemuel were wrong and Nephi was right, a deep and profound reversal of their whole identity as a people that required an upending of old values. Their acceptance of this new tradition went hand in hand with their acceptance of the gospel. When the old king conferred the kingdom on his son, he gave him a new name, Anti-Nephi-Lehi, as if to recognize that a new set of founding fathers had to be embraced. The word sounds to us like opposition to Nephi and Lehi, but Hugh Nibley has told us it probably means the opposite, which the story itself of course strongly suggests. Anti-Nephi-Lehi and his brother Lamoni seemed to understand that some heroic effort would be required to root out the old tradition and set their people on a new course. They accomplished this reorientation by asking of their people an incredible sacrifice that directly attacked the besetting sin of Lamanite culture. The kings asked the people to give up violence. They agreed to bury their swords in the belief that Christ had removed the blood of many killings; for to fight again might leave a stain that could not be cleansed. That was the only way, they believed, to repent sincerely of their “many sins and murders.” When the king had offered this covenant to the people, “they took their swords, and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood, and they did bury them up deep in the earth” (Alma 24:9-17). An attack of their unbelieving brethren did not cause them to waver. They knelt before the oncoming warriors and submitted to the slaughter. The reversal of old values was sealed with the converts’ blood.

The missionary effort thus accomplished all that the sons of Mosiah had hoped for. Lamanites were converted to Christ, they gave up the tradition of their fathers, the spirit softened their hearts, and they “opened a correspondence with [their] brethren, the Nephites” (Alma 24:8). Having relinquished violence and plundering as the way to riches, the converts changed their living habits. “Rather than spend their days in idleness they would labor abundantly with their hands” (Alma 24:18). Peace with this transformed people was now perfectly natural. The Nephites welcomed the converts into their midst and gave them a land of their own.

These conversions did not permanently end the Lamanite wars by any means. The unconverted, still enmeshed in the tradition of their fathers, came up against the Nephites year after year bent on their destruction. But the sons of Mosiah showed how peace was to be achieved—by conversion to Christ and to the *correct* story of the nation’s founding (see Alma 25:6). Their work set the pattern for later conversions by Nephi and Lehi, the sons of Helaman. The converts from this later proselyting effort also “did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the tradition of their fathers” (Helaman 5:51). With the false tradition out of the way, once more peace came to the two nations, commerce opened between them, and they enjoyed greater prosperity than at any time in their history to that point. This second missionary episode strengthens the implication that conversion to the gospel and repudiation of false traditions was the only workable basis for permanent peace.

Having reviewed this evidence, are we now in a position to rewrite the Book of Mormon from the Lamanite perspective? Perhaps we could sketch in some basic themes and a bare outline. But even in skeletal form, the history we might piece together would not be all we would like it to be. Our first impulse would be, perhaps, to vindicate the Lamanites, to lift them up and justify them. We may think that Nephi in all his grandeur is so hard on his brothers, so pitiless in his reproaches, and so sure of his mission that we should right the balance and find good

in his rebellious brothers and their descendants, making a place for weaker souls in the annals of God's people. We cannot go as far in that direction as we would like. Lamanite history would be a bitter story, of a people obsessed with a perpetual sense of deprivation, wronged at the beginning, so they thought, and wronged ever after, living for vengeance, with blood on their swords. Lamanite history would honor valor and resolution in the face of repeated defeats but in a cause we can hardly admire.

On the other hand, we would gravely err to consider the Lamanites hopelessly benighted and persistently ferocious, hardened, and indolent in nature. Jacob warned against that error when he told his own people, speaking of the Lamanites, to "revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins; neither shall ye revile against them because of their filthiness" (Jacob 3:9). The Lamanites who turned to Christ are among the most faithful and self-sacrificing in the Book of Mormon, giving themselves to be slaughtered rather than return to their sins. Even before conversion, they were faithful to each other in their families, at a time when the Nephites had taken up concubinage. Building on that foundation, the first Lamanite converts raised a generation of righteous offspring unmatched in the Book of Mormon. The source of Lamanite failings was not their natures but their tradition. Alma said it was "the traditions of their fathers that caused them to remain in their state of ignorance" (Alma 9:16). The Lamanites understood their national past erroneously, and so misconstrued their national purpose. Their history taught them that they had been wronged and that it was their destiny to right that wrong through relentless war on the Nephites. The incorrect tradition of their fathers was the cause of the misspent effort, the untold suffering, and the rivers of blood. The moral of the Lamanite story has nothing to do with their depravity but with the terrible consequences of misunderstanding the past.

There may be a moral for later generations of Book of Mormon readers, too. The story speaks to all who face implacable enemies, ones who are committed to aggressive incursions on peaceful peoples. The Book of Mormon tells us we may indeed have to defend ourselves with force in the face of an enemy onslaught, but it just as clearly states that militant defense will not ultimately end wars. Aggressive people, when meeting resistance, will come back generation after generation, century after century, even though soundly defeated time after time. Force, however benevolently intended, will not stop force permanently. As Christ said, he who lives by the sword dies by the sword; violence begets violence. In national as in personal affairs, kindness, truth, and service are the only avenues to lasting peace.

### Notes

1. For a similar perspective on Lamanite traditions, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimensions in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27 (1984): 15-37.