

Why Is So Much of the Book of Mormon Given Over to Military Accounts?

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When Mormon set about making his abridgment of the entire course of Nephite history, as contained in the large plates of Nephi, he was (as he repeatedly observed) faced with a mass of materials and sources of every type, both “secular” and “sacred,” and a major problem seems to have been deciding what to include in his history and what to leave out (see Helaman 3:13-15; 3 Nephi 5:8-19; 26:6).

If we today feel that Mormon’s inclusion of lengthy military accounts is somehow not in keeping with the sacred and religious purpose of the Book of Mormon, then we must remind ourselves that he, unlike most modern historians, had a peculiarly theological or religious concept of history according to which war was not a purely secular phenomenon but an instrument of divine purpose. In his view, war was not to be explained merely in terms of political, economic, or racial causes and effects, but was rooted in moral, spiritual, and social problems and unrighteousness (see Alma 50:21).

Above all, he saw the wars in Nephite history as a verification (to use his own word) of the prophecies of Lehi regarding the terms and conditions for occupying the promised land (see Alma 50:19-20). These wars were often viewed as occasions of divine punishment and retribution on the one hand and of divine deliverance on the other:

Their abominations ... brought upon them their wars and their destructions. And those who were faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord were delivered at all times, whilst thousands of their wicked brethren have been consigned to bondage, or to perish by the sword, or to dwindle in unbelief, and mingle with the Lamanites. (Alma 50:21-22.)

Mormon was also acutely aware that the final Lamanite wars of A.D. 322-85, in which he himself played a leading military role, were the fulfillment of the prophecies of Samuel the Lamanite and a testimony that the principle of divine retribution was in full operation (see Helaman 13:511; Mormon 1:19; 2:10-15).

“Behold, the judgments of God will overtake the wicked; and it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed” (Mormon 4:5). Such an outlook was due in no small part, of course, to Mormon’s personal experience as a military leader. Like the Greek historian Thucydides, he was not only a general, but he was also destined to be the historian who had to account for his nation’s defeat in a terrible war. War was a major element in his life, which virtually coincided with the long period of the final Nephite-Lamanite conflict. He saw as one of the main purposes of his life the tragic task of writing the “record concerning the destruction of [his] people, the Nephites” (Mormon 6:1).

But we must be careful not to overstate Mormon’s preoccupation with war. Although he frequently mentions its occurrence in the various periods of Nephite history, he judiciously limits himself to recounting in detail only a few of the many accounts that were at his disposal. Except for his rehearsal of the sixty-three years of war in his own lifetime – with the full account of the causes of war, preparations, battles, retreats, and further battles, including the final one at Cumorah with its losses – Mormon devotes most of his interest in military accounts and wars to

the period 75 B.C.–A.D. 25, and in particular to the fourteen years of Lamanite wars at the time of Moroni. His account of that one period fills some seventy pages in the book of Alma.

Inevitably, Mormon should have been attracted to Moroni — the brilliant, energetic, selfless, patriotic, and God-fearing hero who had been instrumental in preserving the Nephite nation. So great was Mormon's admiration for him that he named his son after him. In Mormon's eyes, the peaceful days under Moroni were a golden age in Nephite history (see Alma 50:23). But the military exploits of Moroni seem to have interested Mormon particularly. With great care, he recounted Moroni's courage and patriotism in the desperate military and political state of affairs arising from Lamanite invasion from without and sedition from within, his efforts in mobilization and defense, his own and his lieutenants' brilliant tactics, their sharply fought battles with frightful losses, and their miraculous victories. But throughout his account, we perceive the hand of God making use of devout and just military leaders and statesmen to preserve the righteous and punish the wicked (see Alma 48:11-13, Mormon's eulogy of Moroni).

If, in his account of Moroni, Mormon saw war as a means of divine deliverance for the Nephites, he shows us that the final war fulfilled prophecies of destruction of the nation. With terrifying clarity, we witness with Mormon the tragedy of a people who had passed the point of no return spiritually, who were bent irreversibly on their own destruction.

The implications of Mormon's accounts of war are clear: the people who occupy those lands today are under the same conditions as the earlier inhabitants; they are subject to the same principles of divine retribution, either deliverance or destruction by war. But his son Moroni is the one who, even before he had placed in his father's record the grim account of the Jaredite destruction (following his father's example of selecting and reinforcing his theme of war as a manifestation of God's governance in the affairs of men), warned the inhabitants of America today against placing themselves in the precarious position of the ancient Nephites (see Ether 2:11-12) and warned them to accept with gratitude the lessons of an earlier destruction: "Give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been" (Mormon 9:31).