

Purpose of the War Chapters in the Book of Mormon

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“We are as the army of Helaman ... “

Why does the Book of Mormon, especially the book of Alma, contain so many accounts of war, and what use are they for us? An initial response to this is that what we sometimes call the “war chapters” have much less to do with war than with deliverance from war or with destruction. Indeed, if we think of the Book of Mormon as containing military history, it is the strangest military history ever written: The largest battle in the first 570 years is covered in a couple of sentences, while conflicts in which no Nephites lost their lives are given pages (see, for example, the sentence-length account in Helaman 4:5 of the Lamanites obtaining possession of all the Nephite lands up to the land Bountiful; see also Alma 62:38, which dismisses a great battle in one sentence).

If we understand that the Book of Mormon was written for our day, then we realize that the material in it regarding war is also for our day. From this perspective, we understand why certain things are emphasized and why some are not (such as the extensive battles mentioned above). Knowing that the book was designed for us, we are challenged to see why the Lord inspired Mormon to include the “war chapters” as essential to our survival in the world today.

Looking through time to our day, the prophet Nephi wrote concerning a war, possibly physical but even more so spiritual, facing saints in the latter days: “I beheld the church of the Lamb of God, and its numbers were *few*; ... [and] the great mother of abominations did gather together *multitudes* upon the face of all the earth, among all the nations of the Gentiles, to fight against the Lamb of God.... And [the saints] were *armed with righteousness and with the power of God* in great glory” (1 Nephi 14:12-14).¹ He also quotes Isaiah: “All the nations that fight against Zion, and that distress her, shall be as a dream of a night vision” (2 Nephi 27:3).

Speaking recently about this same war, President Benson declared:

I testify that as the forces of evil increase under Lucifer’s leadership and as the forces of good increase under the leadership of Jesus Christ, there will be growing battles between the two until the final confrontation. As the issues become clearer and more obvious, all mankind will eventually be required to align themselves either for the kingdom of God or for the kingdom of the devil. As these conflicts rage, either secretly or openly, the righteous will be tested. God’s wrath will soon shake the nations of the earth and will be poured out on the wicked without measure.... But God will provide strength for the righteous and the means of escape; and eventually and finally truth will triumph.²

If the Book of Mormon is a guide to help us in this conflict, what does it tell us?

While it does not tell us much about matters such as kinds of warriors and battle lines, it does give us, in considerable detail, accounts of the exercise of faith — with the story of the sons of Helaman being a primary example of this. It shows inspired stratagems, the Lord’s protection, and the great warrior-prophets’ direction. At least on three occasions, the Nephites won when someone (or a whole army) went over the wall of a Lamanite-held city. Each time, it is understood, as in Alma 62:50, that “the Lord had delivered them out of the hands of their enemies.” It demonstrates how the Lord protected or helped the few in the face of the enemy’s much greater numbers. In the conflict in which the Amlicites joined the Lamanites, emphasis is on them “being as numerous

almost, as it were, as the sands of the sea.” Nevertheless, we are told “*the Nephites being strengthened by the hand of the Lord, having prayed mightily to him that he would deliver them out of the hands of their enemies, therefore the Lord did hear their cries, and did strengthen them, and the Lamanites and the Amlicites did fall before them*” (Alma 2:27-28). This pattern of a small group of Nephites overcoming or escaping from an innumerable host is found throughout the book.

For the Lamanites especially, it shows the folly of war and even more the need to leave behind wicked leaders. The pattern is found in Alma 62:29: “All the prisoners of the Lamanites did join the people of Ammon, and did begin to labor exceedingly, tilling the ground, raising all manner of grain, and flocks and herds of every kind.”

On the other hand, Alma sees iniquity bringing on the destruction of the people (see, e.g., Alma 4:11). Shown time and again is the relationship between the degree of spiritual righteousness and the vulnerability of the people to warfare. Indeed, in several places success or failure in battle is directly attributed to righteousness or wickedness. In this respect, the promise/curse of the Book of Mormon, which every major prophet in the book repeats, is given special relevance to the audience Moroni is addressing: “This is a land which is choice above all other lands; wherefore he that doth possess it shall serve God or shall be swept off; for it is the everlasting decree of God. And it is not until the fulness of iniquity among the children of the land, that they are swept off” (Ether 2:10).

In an imperiled world, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is designed to prepare God’s people for the second coming of the Savior and to warn the rest of the world to repent and to come unto Christ. The Book of Mormon is a distinctive witness to this. So what is the nature of the circumstances prior to the Second Coming? At that day Satan will “rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good” (2 Nephi 28:20). The Lord God shall cause a great division among the people comparable to the later division between the Nephites and the Lamanites in which “the true worshipers of Christ ... were called Nephites ... [and] they who rejected the gospel were called Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:37-38). “The wicked will he destroy; and he will spare his people, yea, even if it so be that he must destroy the wicked by fire” (2 Nephi 30:10).

Who will fight the battles for the “true worshipers of Christ”? Ultimately, God: “I will show unto them that fight against my word *and against my people*, who are of the house of Israel, that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever” (2 Nephi 29:14).

What, then, does the Book of Mormon do concerning this latter-day warfare? It shows the fundamental nature of the battle and gives hope to the Lord’s people. With accounts of the victories of small minorities against overwhelming odds (often with no lives of the righteous being lost) or of escapes from their enemies (as with the people of Lehi, Nephi, Mosiah, Alma the elder, and Limhi), it confirms the truth of President Benson’s words to us, “God will provide strength for the righteous and the means of escape.”

Notes

1. **Italics have been added to scriptures quoted in this chapter.**

2. Ezra Taft Benson, “I Testify,” *Ensign* (November 1988): 87.