

Warfare in the Book of Mormon

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The wars and battles described in the Book of Mormon include some of the most detailed narratives of the book. Those accounts provide us with an excellent chance to examine how consistent and complex the text is. Joseph Smith lived in an age of warfare with guns, yet the Book of Mormon displays patterns of warfare that made sense only before gunpowder was used. This can be seen in both the general patterns and in the tiny details of the text. Descriptions of weapons and tactics in the Book of Mormon are definitely ancient. Furthermore, the warfare in the Book of Mormon differs from what we read about in the Bible. It differs in the same way that war in ancient Mesoamerica (Mexico and northern Central America) differed from biblical warfare.

Warfare has long played a basic role in history. The threat of war helped to develop central governments and civilization. Conquest often resulted in the movement of culture and religion from one area to another. The spread of the world's great religions, especially Christianity and Islam, was in part based on conquest. Much of the great writing of the past was on military themes. The transport of diseases, plants, and animals to new regions, as well as human migrations, were closely connected with military activity. The expansion and control of trade routes was as much a military as an economic matter.

Thus warfare has always been a major concern of leaders. In ancient times, they considered wars inevitable, so the way they prepared to fight helped determine how their societies were organized. Often, rulers could maintain their power only by using force against their own subjects. Reliance on armies led to huge empires policed mainly through the use of soldiers. Among them were the most famous nations of the past: the Assyrians, Persians, Mauryans of India, Ch'in and Han dynasties of China, the domain of Alexander the Great, and Rome.

Most economic surplus was used by ancient rulers to maintain the military. The values of many ancient peoples glorified military action and heroism, creating a widespread martial mentality. The spoils of war were a major source of prosperity for a victorious state. What we see today as the great cultural achievements of ancient civilizations were, for the most part, built on plunder, blood, and ruins.

The warfare described in the Book of Mormon fits this general pattern. Apart from a remarkable period following Christ's visit to the Nephites, warfare was nearly constant in the records of the Nephites and Jaredites. The writers of the Book of Mormon took war and its results seriously, and finally the Nephite civilization was destroyed by war. Mormon devoted about one-third of his abridgment and all of his own book directly or indirectly to military matters. In its emphasis on warfare, the Book of Mormon accurately reflects the grim reality of early history.

Of course, many features of premodern warfare were still present in Joseph Smith's day. But there were vital differences. A basic change in the nature of war occurred when gunpowder weapons became effective beginning in the fourteenth century. Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon after the rise of gunpowder weapons and after the war tactics devised by Napoleon. Joseph Smith thus lived in an age when the practice of warfare differed from that in pre-gunpowder times. If he had written the Book of Mormon himself, what he would have said about battles would be quite different than what was the practice centuries earlier. I will examine six subjects having to do with war where the Book of Mormon reports warfare in ways typical of the ancient Near East and, in many cases, Mesoamerica.

Agriculture and Ecology

Ancient warfare was limited by agriculture. Men were needed to plant and harvest, yet the same men also had to serve as soldiers. So mass armies could be maintained only a few months a year when farming permitted it. Neither were armies equipped to operate in all weather conditions. Only certain months of the year permitted them to move, camp, and fight in the field.

When we come to the time of Napoleon, however, production had improved to the point that warfare was no longer dependent on harvest times. Many men could be used as soldiers, and armies could be maintained through all seasons. John Sorenson has shown that the old-style environmental limits are reflected in the descriptions of warfare in the Book of Mormon, and that they also match the seasonal conditions that existed in Mesoamerica (see, for example, his article in this volume). The Book of Mormon parallels ancient warfare in the areas of ecology and agriculture. It talks of battles limited by farming and harvests and war operations affected by weather.

Weapons and Military Technology

Another important element in premodern warfare was technology. Despite vast differences in detail, all premodern soldiers fought with roughly similar weapons. Face-to-face, personal combat was standard. Hence swords and other hand-held weapons were key, and armor was common. Missiles like arrows, javelins, and spears were all propelled by muscle power in some way. Since improvements in materials for weapons and armor always made a great impact on combat, leaders were constantly searching for new developments. But with the rise of long-range gunpowder weapons, guns replaced swords, spears, and arrows, and armor too was discarded.

The weapons, tactics, and military operations in the Book of Mormon fit this ancient pattern. The Book of Mormon provides a great deal of detail on military technology. As I have explored this area in several articles, I have found weapons and armor in the Book of Mormon to be consistent with patterns in the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica. Nothing in the Nephite record suggests that Joseph Smith could have invented such war stories, based on how fighting was done in his time.

Instead, warfare in the Book of Mormon consistently sounds like that in Mesoamerica before the European conquerors arrived. It differs from the ancient Near East in those features where Mesoamerican warfare differs from the ancient Near East. Coats of mail, helmets, battle chariots, cavalry, and siege engines—elements prominent in Bible lands—are all absent from both the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica. If Joseph Smith were copying from information in books available to him, like the Bible, Josephus's histories, or books about the Romans, that described ancient wars, he would have included those features. Instead, the Book of Mormon leaves out those features of armament frequently mentioned in biblical and classical sources but absent from ancient Mesoamerica.

Logistics

Warfare, of course, did not involve only combat. In order for armies to compete, ancient societies needed basic resources. They had to obtain food to support the soldiers, cloth and leather for uniforms and armor, stone or metals to make weapons and armor, stone and lumber to build fortifications, and timber and other products to construct ships. They needed gold, silver, and other forms of wealth to purchase these supplies and to ensure officer and troop loyalty. Recruiting, equipping, training, supplying, and moving large groups of soldiers, servants and animals were major undertakings anciently. As the story of Moroni and Pahoran illustrates, the costs of war

put terrible social and economic pressure on Nephite society (see Alma 58-61). Plundering was used to supply many ancient armies, and the Book of Mormon mentions it often.

Warriors were generally organized into kinship or community units. The soldiers served under leaders who fought in battle and whom they knew personally. Units tended to be organized by tens, hundreds, and thousands, a fact reflected throughout the Book of Mormon. Premodern warfare also tended to rely on aristocratic officers. When gunpowder enabled commoners with only limited training to kill the most highly trained aristocrat, leadership shifted from the royalty. On the other hand, governments in Joseph Smith's time (1820s) drafted all men. Soldiers were organized into large administrative units, not just into communal or local formations. Unit size varied greatly and was not based on multiples of a basic number. Noblemen as officers had also become outdated.

The Book of Mormon armies follow the ancient pattern of armies organized along kinship, tribal, and community lines and with its hereditary leadership. The following features in the book also parallel ancient logistics: loyalty based on community, social and economic problems affecting warfare, problems of supply, the importance of plunder, and the lack of use of animals for movement and supply.

Descriptions of Battles

Preparations for battle anciently were complex. Soldiers had to be trained, equipped, and organized into units for marching and fighting. Then they were mobilized at central points to begin operations. Leaders commonly used distinctive banners to summon and identify their troops (like Moroni's title of liberty; see Alma 46:12-22). A wide range of camp followers were usually required to supply the troops with food and equipment. Barracks, arsenals, fortifications, and other base facilities needed to be prepared and maintained. Also, some type of standing army, usually royal guardsmen, was needed in peacetime. When war threatened, getting troops and supplies to key spots could involve extensive marching and maneuvering. Any reader of the Book of Mormon will recall the seemingly endless accounts of marches and countermarches. They may be boring to many, but they reflect the realities of maintaining ancient armies.

Not all conflict involved formal set battles. Much of it was closer to what in modern times we call guerilla war. This style of fighting is clearly described in the Book of Mormon, especially in the account of the Gadianton robbers. Actual battles took only a small part of the time of a campaign, but the battle was of course the most important moment. Battle plans were generally made shortly before meeting the enemy. Frequently a council of officers and veterans would discuss the situation and offer suggestions, which is what Moroni does to prepare for battle (see Alma 52:19). Information from spies was crucial to forming battle plans. Knowledge of the enemy sometimes depended solely upon reports from spies. The Book of Mormon too shows how crucial spying was in its battles.

Battles often began with an exchange of missiles (stones, arrows, spears) to wound and demoralize the enemy. Only when the missiles were spent did the two sides close in for hand-to-hand combat. The battle described in Alma 49 describes such an archery duel preceding a hand-to-hand melee. If panic began to spread in the ranks, a complete and sudden collapse could result. The death of the king or commander could lead to such a collapse, as happened in Alma 49:25. Most casualties occurred during the flight and pursuit, after the main units had broken up. Battles in the Book of Mormon often end with just such a rout, flight, and destruction of an army (see Alma 52:28; 62:31).

Laws of War

Laws and customs in ancient societies often controlled international relations and diplomacy. Perhaps the custom that strikes modern readers as strangest is the use of personal oaths. The Book of Mormon's emphasis on oaths of loyalty from troops and oaths of surrender from prisoners shows ancient concepts at work. Once an oath had been made, it had all the power (and more) that a written contract would have among us today. The Book of Mormon also presents a complex pattern of international relations, treaties, and diplomacy consistent with ancient Near Eastern practices.

Most ancient societies also treated robbers as brigands, not thieves. Whereas thieves would be imprisoned or punished short of death, robbers usually were tried as traitors or murderers and executed. So the treatment of robbers in the Book of Mormon reflects ancient law. Another parallel pattern involves prisoners. The taking of prisoners posed problems for ancient armies. Their maintenance depleted the already strained resources needed to support the army. So prisoners were frequently either killed or traded. The Lamanite practice of killing prisoners and the Nephite practice of exchanging them were consistent with the ancient milieu.

The burial of the dead in the Book of Mormon also shows the problems and practices of past societies. One case in particular—the dead from Ammonihah were buried in shallow graves, which caused the area to become desolate—mirrors what happened elsewhere in the past. Another ancient practice mentioned in the Book of Mormon concerns the capture and imprisonment of kings in Jaredite history. The treatment of captive kings is similar to that in Mesoamerican societies as old as the Jaredites.

There is also the parallel of human sacrifice, which nations around Israel and in Mesoamerica practiced. Though strictly forbidden by the Mosaic law, Israelites still fell into that practice several times during their history. The occasions of human sacrifice in the Book of Mormon echo an all too distressing pattern in the Near East and Mesoamerica. In the above-mentioned ways, the Book of Mormon faithfully reflects the ancient laws and customs that dictated what should or should not be done during war.

Religion and Warfare

Nearly all ancient war was connected with religion and was carried out through a complex series of religious rituals, law, and beliefs. Although there were also other motives, premodern warfare was basically a sacred matter. By Joseph Smith's day, war had become mainly secular, arising from political, nationalist, racial, and economic factors. The close connection between religious ideology and warfare is one of the most obvious ancient elements in the Book of Mormon. In numerous details the Book of Mormon unintentionally reveals the close tie between war and religion. Activities such as consulting prophets before battle are mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Likewise, a strict purity code for warriors can be seen in the story of Helaman and the stripling warriors.

Many details of the Mosaic law concerning war are also apparent in the Book of Mormon. For instance, an example of the ritual destruction of apostate cities appears in the Book of Mormon (see Alma 16). The ideology of holy war among the Nephites parallels that of the Israelites. The Nephites also seem to have observed the principles of camp purity and certain ritual behavior before, during, and after battle. For the Nephites and the Lamanites (to a lesser but still crucial extent), warfare was a thoroughly religious matter.

The Book of Mormon manifests clear parallels to ancient patterns of military behavior. I have not mentioned all of them in this review due to space limits. There were also the martial implications of shifting populations, the exchange of written or oral challenges between leaders, and the centrality of war to the elite class of society, to name a few more areas. In so many ways, the Book of Mormon uniquely reflects its dual heritage of the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica.