

"Holy War" in the Book of Mormon and the Ancient Near East

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Alma 46:22 "We covenant with our God, that we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies."

In a sense, every conflict in the ancient Near East—as reflected in Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian, Hittite, Persian, and Syro-Palestinian texts—was considered to be prosecuted under the divine direction of the gods or of God. War was begun at the command of, or with the approval and aid of, the gods or God. It was generally accompanied by sacrifices, fought by men who were in a state of ritual readiness for conflict, and ended by the victors with thanksgiving and offerings to deity.¹

Like other nations of the ancient Near East, Israel's ideology of war centered on God. The Lord himself is described as a "warrior" and "the Lord strong and mighty . . . in battle" (Psalm 24:8). "The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is his name" (Exodus 15:3; see also Isaiah 42:14). The wars that Israel fought were "the Lord's battles" (1 Samuel 18:17); indeed, among the lost books of ancient Israel is "the Book of the Wars of the Lord" (Numbers 21:14). The enemies of Israel were the enemies of the Lord (see Judges 5:31; 1 Samuel 30:26), who assists Israel in battle (see Joshua 10:11, 24:12; 1 Samuel 17:45). The Lord was consulted (see Judges 20:18, 28; 1 Samuel 14:37) and sacrifice was offered (see 1 Samuel 7:9; 13:9, 12) before hostilities were initiated. When Israel went to war, its army was called "the people of the Lord" (Judges 5:11), "the people of God" (Judges 20:2), or "the armies of the living God" (1 Samuel 17:26).

Combatants in the Israelite armies were expected to be ritually clean at the time they went out to battle. Thus, Joshua tells the camp of Israel, "Sanctify yourselves: for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you" (Joshua 3:5). In particular, members of "the armies of the living God" were expected to keep away from women before battle (2 Samuel 11:11). Further, "when the host goeth forth against [Israel's] enemies," every member of the camp had to "keep . . . from every wicked thing" (Deuteronomy 23:9; see further 23:10-15).

God insisted on strict observance of his commands when Israel was going to war. The consequences for violations could be devastating. They could suffer defeat in battle that could only be rectified by the punishment of the wrongdoer (see Joshua 7), or they could be wholly rejected by the Lord (see 1 Samuel 15). Just as the Lord would direct the righteous Israelites in their battles against their enemies, he would also punish a straying Israel through war (see Isaiah 5:26-28; Jeremiah 5:15-17; Ezekiel 21:1-32; 23:22-28). Indeed, the language of war is used to depict the judgment of God (see Joel 2:1-11).

The Book of Mormon reflects a similar pattern. The great captain Moroni, in fighting the Lamanites, "knowing of the prophecies of Alma, sent certain men unto him, desiring him that he should inquire of the Lord whither the armies of the Nephites should go to defend themselves against the Lamanites. And it came to pass that the word of the Lord came unto Alma, and Alma informed the messengers of Moroni, that the armies of the Lamanites were marching round about in the wilderness, that they might come over into the land of Manti, that they might commence an attack upon the weaker part of the people. And those messengers went and delivered the message unto Moroni" (Alma 43:23-24; see also 18:5-6, 8; 48:16; compare 1 Kings 22:1-28).

The story of the Ammonite stripling soldiers is also striking for its religious content: the young men who entered a covenant with God (see Alma 53:17) not only were “exceedingly valiant for courage, and also for strength and activity,” but their lives also reflected outstanding purity. “They were men who were true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted. Yea, they were men of truth and soberness, for they had been taught to keep the commandments of God and to walk uprightly before him” (Alma 53:20-21). Their protection in war was attributed directly to their righteousness.

While the Nephites inquired of the Lord before entering battle, sought his aid in battle, and purified themselves ethically (and perhaps also ritually) for combat, on the contrary his departure from the midst of their armies was thought to portend disaster. Mormon 2 through 6—surely some of the most heartrending chapters in all of scripture—provide ample proof of these things.

Hopeful that God would aid the Nephites in their struggle against the Lamanites, Mormon assumed command over their armies. Soon, however, he realized that his hope was “vain, for their sorrowing was not unto repentance, because of the goodness of God; but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin” (Mormon 2:13). He took an oath to lead them no longer, but he finally “did repent of the oath” (Mormon 5:1) and returned to command the army once again, though with no expectation of victory, since God was no longer with the Nephite people. The final battle at Cumorah validated the principle given already to the ancient Israelites: through war, and by means of the wicked, God will punish his people when they have turned from righteousness (see Mormon 4:5).

Based on research by Stephen D. Ricks, March 1989, and dealt with more extensively in his chapter, “Holy War: The Sacral Ideology of War in the Book of Mormon and in the Ancient Near East,” in Stephen Ricks and William Hamblin, eds., Warfare in the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 103-17.

Footnotes

1. See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 1:258-59; Dino Merli, “Le ‘Guerre di sterminio’ nell’antichità orientale e biblica,” *Bibbia e Oriente* 9 (1967): 57-66.