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Were the Ammonites Pacifists?

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One of the most moving accounts in the Book of Mormon is of the people of Ammon, their covenant to bury and never use again their weapons of war, their faith to sacrifice themselves instead of fighting back against their Lamanite brethren, and their sacrifice to send their children to war to aid the Nephites. Some interpret the stance that the Ammonites took against war to be pacifist. Some indications point toward this conclusion: their burying their weapons, covenanted never to fight again, allowing themselves to be slaughtered twice, and being motivated in these actions out of love for their Lamanite kin. However, when the text is read more carefully, it can easily be seen that further actions would not necessarily have reflected a pacifist view toward war: not objecting to the Nephite war in their defense, providing Nephite soldiers with food and supplies, and sending their own sons into battle would surely indicate that their personal opposition to war stemmed from the covenants they made during repentance.
The people of Ammon have long been a source of fascination for readers of the Book of Mormon. With admiration we read of their repentance, of their literal burial of their weapons of destruction in the earth, and of their willingness, on two separate occasions, to suffer death rather than to take up arms in defense of their lives. These are a people whose story stands out: they refuse to take up arms in a book where taking up arms is virtually routine.¹

In light of the Ammonites’ actions, it is natural to wonder if they were pacifists. As generally understood, pacifism is the opposition to all war, including war of self-defense, on moral grounds. On this view, “participation in and support for war is always impermissible.”² The Ammonites’ well-known actions—their repentance, their burying of weapons, their sacrifice of their own lives—all appear to embody this attitude, and for that reason it is easy to see them as pacifists.³
But is this a sound view? Are there any features of the Ammonites’ behavior that might alter this conclusion? Are there any features that might strengthen it? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the full account recorded in the Book of Mormon; I will do this by addressing five matters that I believe are central to any understanding of the Ammonites’ attitudes toward war. In question form, these issues are (1) Who exactly were the Ammonites? (2) What were the Ammonites like before their conversion? (3) What did the Ammonites repent of after their conversion? (4) How did the Ammonites repent? (5) How did the Ammonites behave after entering their covenant? Once we have explored these issues we will be able to judge to what degree we can apply the term pacifist to this singular and inspiring group of people.

Who Were the Ammonites?

To begin, it’s important to understand exactly who the Ammonites were. We know that they were Lamanites, and we also know that, unlike other groups who also carried the designation “Lamanite,” they were actual descendants of Laman and Lemuel (Alma 24:29). We also know that they were the Lamanites who were converted by the sons of Mosiah in the period stretching approximately from 91 BC to 77 BC (Alma 17:4, 6).

Although we have a clue or two, we know less about how sizeable a group the Ammonites were or how large a fraction they were of the total Lamanite population. Lamanite society...
appears to have been organized into various lands and cities, with each land apparently presided over by a territorial king, who in turn was superintended by the king of the entire Lamanite population. For example, we know that Lamoni and Antiomno were kings of separate Lamanite lands (Alma 17:21 and 20:4), while king Lamoni’s father was king “over all the land” (Alma 20:8; 22:1) and had power to restrict or expand, at least to some degree, the rights of the other kings (Alma 20:24, 26; 21:21). Indeed, Lamoni’s father had sufficient authority that, following his conversion, he was able to grant the sons of Mosiah protection from Lamanite persecution “in whatsoever place they should be, in any part of their land” (Alma 23:1), so that the word of God “might go forth throughout all the land” (Alma 23:3).5

In this context we are told that “thousands” of Lamanites were converted to the Lord in the lands of Ishmael, Middoni, Shilom, and Shemlon, as well as in the cities of Nephi, Lemuel, and Shimnilom (Alma 23:5, 8–13).6 The king of the whole land, Lamoni’s father, was among these converts (Alma 22). Those who were not converted included the Amalekites’ and the Amulonites, both groups of Nephite dissenters, as well as all of the Lamanites “in that part of the land wheresoever [the Amalekites and Amulonites] dwelt . . . in all their villages and all their cities” (Alma 23:14); these included the lands of Amulon, Helam, and Jerusalem (Alma 24:1; see map).

So a quick count tells us that four “lands” and three “cities” of the Lamanites were converted to the Lord, while three “lands” (including all the villages and cities associated with them) remained unconverted. Although Mormon doesn’t say that this is an exhaustive list of all the Lamanite groups—and I think it likely that there were others—this comparison suggests that the converts were at least a significant portion of the total Lamanite population.7

The other clues we have regarding the Ammonite numbers are the “thousand and five” who were slain the first time the Ammonites refused to defend themselves from attack (Alma 24:22), and their “two thousand and sixty” sons who were of military age some years later (Alma 57:19). We can try to extrapolate population sizes based on such figures, but the calculations are complex and rest on several assumptions; as a result, any conclusions reached in this way would be inexact and necessarily tentative. And in any case they wouldn’t give us much in the way of comparison to total Lamanite figures since we have even less to go on there. For all of these reasons we can make no more than plausible guesses about the relative sizes of the Ammonite and Lamanite populations.8

All things considered, I think it unlikely that the Ammonites approached close to half of the Lamanite population, although their numbers were far from insignificant. After all, they numbered in the “thousands”; they included the one king who had authority “over all the land”; and they were a sufficient offense to the Lamanites that the Lamanites sent an army to destroy them and the king so that they could “place another in his stead” (Alma 24:20). Based on all this, it seems plausible to conclude that while the Ammonites were not dominant in numbers, they formed at least a significant portion of the total Lamanite population, both in size and in status.

Finally, the record tells us that the Lamanites who had been converted to the Lord desired to distinguish themselves from those who had not been
converted, and that they did so by adopting the name, Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 23:17). Later, when the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were given the Nephite land of Jershon for their protection, they were called by the Nephites “the people of Ammon” and “were distinguished by that name ever after” (Alma 27:26; 43:11)—thus the origin of the common term Ammonites to refer to these people.

What Were the Ammonites Like before Their Conversion?

In understanding the Ammonites’ conversion and repentance, it is important to examine what they were like (at least in ways relevant to matters of repentance) before their change of heart. The record tells us some things about the Ammonites as a group as well as about the Lamanites in general. Both are useful. Since the Ammonites were at least a significant portion of the Lamanite population—again, both in size and in status—it is plausible to suppose that what the account reveals about the Lamanites in general applies, at least roughly, to the Ammonites themselves. Certainly there is nothing in the record to indicate otherwise. So what does the Book of Mormon tell us?

Lamanite Wars

First, we know that from the beginning the Lamanites were prone to attack and to wage war against the Nephites. Jacob tells us that Nephi himself had to fight to defend his people from Lamanite attack (Jacob 1:10; also 2 Nephi 5:14); aggressive wars are also reported by Jacob (Jacob 7:24), Jarom (Jarom 1:6), Abinadom (Omni 1:10), Amaleki (Omni 1:24), Zeniff (Mosiah 9, 10, 19–21), and Mormon (Words of Mormon 1:13–14)—each of whom reports regarding a different period of time over the first four hundred and sixty years or so of Book of Mormon history.10

We also know that the Lamanites waged four aggressive wars against the Nephites during the time that the sons of Mosiah were performing their missionary labors among them. The first such war, reported in Alma 2, occurred about 87 BC, in the fifth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 2:1).11 (It was in this war that Alma personally slew Amlici, the Nephite dissenter [Alma 2:31], and fought against the guards of the king of the Lamanites [Alma 2:32–33].)12 The second war occurred “not many days after,” when “another army of the Lamanites came in upon the people of Nephi, in the same place” (Alma 3:20).13 In the third, Lamanite armies attacked about six years later, in the eleventh year of the reign of the judges (Alma 16:1), and, among other things, destroyed the city of Ammonihah (Alma 16:8; 25:1–2). Finally, we are told in Alma 16:12 that the Lamanites did not attack again “until the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges,” and this too would have been during the time that the sons of Mosiah were still performing their missionary labors (which began in the first year of the reign of the judges and continued for fourteen years—Alma 17:4, 6).14 It was during this latter period that many of the Lamanites “began to be stirred up in remembrance of the words which Aaron and his brethren had preached to them” and became converted (Alma 25:6).

So Lamanite aggression was not only long-standing, but it also occurred simultaneously with the missionary efforts of the sons of Mosiah. That those who later became converted were integrally involved in these attacks is certain (see again Alma 25:6 for an explicit mention of this), especially in light of the preeminent position that king Lamoni’s
father held among the Lamanites during at least part of the time that the Lamanites were launching these wars.

We also know that before their conversion the Ammonites were allied with such Nephite dissenters as the Amlicites and Amulonites. In most, if not all, of the four wars waged by the Lamanites during the missionary labors of the sons of Mosiah, these Nephite dissenters played a major role. There is no mention of Nephite dissenters aiding or provoking the Lamanite aggressions that occurred in the first few centuries of Nephite/Lamanite conflict (this may have been due to lack of space on the small plates, not to mention the explicit purpose of the small plates as opposed to the large plates—see 1 Nephi 9:2–4; 19:3–4), but from the time of Alma and the sons of Mosiah forward, such dissenters or their descendants played a central role in Lamanite aggression.

Lamanite Attitudes

We know that Nephite dissenters who became Lamanites were more hardened in their hatred for the Nephites than were other Lamanites (see Alma 24:29–30; 43:6; 47:36). But this doesn’t mean that these other Lamanites didn’t also hate the Nephites. They did; and they had a long history of doing so.

Jacob, for example, speaks in the earliest days of Lamanite “hatred” for the Nephites—and he does so while praising them for their superiority to the Nephites (Jacob 3:7). He also reports that the Lamanites “delighted in wars and bloodshed” and that they “had an eternal hatred against us,” and sought “by the power of their arms to destroy us continually” (Jacob 7:24). King Benjamin also speaks of the Lamanites’ early “hatred” toward the Nephites (Mosiah 1:14). Later, Enos speaks of the Lamanites’ “wrath” and of their desire to “destroy our records and us” (Enos 1:14); he reports that “their hatred was fixed” and, again, that they “were continually seeking to destroy us” (Enos 1:20).

A hundred years later Jarom reports that the Lamanites “loved murder” (Jarom 1:6), and a hundred and twenty years after that, Zeniff describes the Lamanites as having an “eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi,” and reports that they “taught their children that they should hate” the Nephites, and “do all they could to destroy them” (Mosiah 10:17). Mormon corroborates the account, reporting that “the Lamanites were taught to hate the children of Nephi from the beginning” (4 Nephi 1:39).

By the time we get to the sons of Mosiah, nothing has changed. The account tells us that one of these missionaries’ explicit purposes in laboring among the Lamanites was “to cure them of their hatred toward the Nephites” (Mosiah 28:2). And Ammon himself tells us that the Lamanites, prior to their conversion, were “racked with hatred against us,” and also that they were “in the darkest abyss,” and in “the pains of hell” (Alma 26:9, 3, 13). And note that Ammon tells us this about the Lamanites...
after he had lived with them for fourteen years and had come to know and love them in a personal way. This is not a report he made in advance of his mission, in ignorance and prejudice, and without first-hand experience of the Lamanites.

In addition, Mormon includes a description of the Lamanites at this time as:

a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people;
a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites, and robbing and plundering them;
and their hearts were set upon riches, or upon gold and silver, and precious stones; yet they sought to obtain these things by murdering and plundering, that they might not labor for them with their own hands. (Alma 17:14)

So about the time of the missionary labors of the sons of Mosiah, in addition to waging large-scale war against the Nephites from time to time, the Lamanites also engaged in a violent form of banditry—“robbing and plundering” the Nephites, and actually taking delight in murdering them.16 It’s also relevant in this context to remember that Ammon was threatened with death twice while among the Lamanites, and that he was spared only through the power of the Lord (see Alma 17:34–37; 19:14–20; Mosiah 28:7).

In sum, prior to their conversion, the Lamanites were a people who for centuries had: (1) hated the Nephites; (2) waged aggressive war from time to time to destroy them; (3) sought to murder the Nephites and actually “delighted in” and “loved” murdering them; and (4) sought to plunder and rob the Nephites to gain gold and silver without labor.17 These are not the only characteristics, of course, that the Lamanites displayed over the centuries and during the time immediately prior to the mission of the sons of Mosiah. For example, the Lamanites don’t appear to have waged war annually, and Jacob in his day explicitly recommended the chaste family conduct of the Lamanites to his Nephite brethren (Jacob 3:5–7). But such accounts of Lamanite attitudes and aggression—even if they do not capture the totality of Lamanite life—are nevertheless accurate in the conduct they do describe.18

What Did the Ammonites Repent of after Their Conversion?

Eventually, many of the Lamanites became converted to the Lord and repented. But it is important to be specific about their repentance. Exactly what did they think they had done wrong? Fortunately, the record tells us. As king Lamoni’s father approached death, he passed the kingdom to his son, whom he now named Anti-Nephi-Lehi. Here are the new king’s words:

And behold, I also thank my God, that by opening this correspondence we have been convinced of our sins, and of the many murders which we have committed. And I also thank my God, yea, my great God, that he hath granted unto us that we might repent of these things, and also that he hath forgiven us of our many sins and murders which we have committed, and taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son. And now behold, my brethren . . . it has been all that we could do, (as we were the most lost of all man-

The Ammonites’ repentance was for acts that had been motivated by hatred and by a desire for Nephite blood, and that they explicitly describe as “murder.”
Later, when Ammon tries to persuade the Ammonites to flee Lamanite danger by moving into Nephite lands, the king says further:

Behold, the Nephites will destroy us, because of the many murders and sins we have committed against them . . . we will go down unto our brethren, and we will be their slaves until we repair unto them the many murders and sins which we have committed against them. (Alma 27:6, 8)

In both cases, the king emphasizes the “murders” and even “the many murders” they had committed against the Nephites. This does not seem to be a metaphorical usage of the term. Again, the record tells us more than once that the Lamanites delighted in shedding Nephite blood. Think, for example, of Ammon’s encounter with Lamoni’s father, the king over all the Lamanite land. Seeing his son with “this Nephite, who is one of the sons of a liar,” he “commanded [his son, Lamoni] that he should slay Ammon with the sword,” and then, when Lamoni refused, attempted the slaying himself (Alma 20:10–20). That life was extremely cheap among the Lamanites (and not just for Nephites) is further evidenced by Lamoni’s own history of punishing with death any of his servants who allowed his flocks to be scattered (Alma 17:28–29).

So reference to the term murder in Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s speech is not surprising. Life was indeed cheap, and both in large-scale aggressive wars and in smaller-scale marauding and banditry, the Ammonites’ killings—far from being reluctant—apparently had been wanton, and they had delighted in them. In their repentance, then, the Ammonites were not repenting of acts of killing that had occurred in conventional war as we normally think of it (for example, among conscripted soldiers fighting out of a sense of duty to their homeland over a complicated and legitimate dispute with their neighbors, and that involved aggression on both sides). No, the Ammonites’ repentance was for acts that had been motivated by hatred and by a desire for Nephite blood, and that they explicitly describe as “murder.”

Note too that the Ammonite king is speaking of the murders that they themselves had committed, not that the body of Lamanites as a whole had committed—which would have included the Amlicites and Amulonites, for example. The king is speaking only of those who had repented and, since the Amlicites and Amulonites (and certainly other Lamanites) had not repented, they obviously were not included in his reference. So the new king here is speaking specifically of the murders that they, the repentant Lamanites, had committed against the Nephites.

And also note Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s fear of going to the land of the Nephites to find safety. He fears that the Nephites will destroy them “because of the many murders and sins we have committed against them,” and finally proposes becoming slaves to the Nephites until those “many murders and sins” can be repaired (Alma 27:6, 8). Would the Ammonites have had such reason to fear retaliation if they had not in fact committed the murders that they speak of?

The Nephites understood the matter of the Lamanites’ killings in exactly the same way. It is how Mormon describes their behavior, for example (Alma 17:14). And when the Nephites subsequently gave the land of Jershon to the Ammonites for their safety, they said, “this we do for our brethren, on account of their fear to take up arms against their brethren lest they should commit sin; and this their great fear came because of their sore repentance which they had, on account of their many murders and their awful wickedness” (Alma 27:23). They, too, described the Lamanites’ killings as murder, and knew that they were committed by the very people who were now repentant and seeking their mercy.

All of this may be the reason that Anti-Nephi-Lehi never mentions the word war in his inspiring speech of thanksgiving for the Ammonites’ forgiveness and in which he declares his people’s intention to permanently bury their swords in the earth (Alma 24:7–16). Mormon, in his account, refers to the weapons they buried as “weapons of war” (Alma 23:13, 19, 25; 25:14; 26:32), and it’s true that they certainly were that: they were swords used in the aggressive wars waged by the Lamanites as well as in their smaller-scale acts of spoliation. But it’s interesting that Mormon also refers to these weapons twice as weapons of “rebellion” (Alma 23:7, 13) and, as I said, that Anti-Nephi-Lehi himself never uses the word war even once. This may not be accidental. Given the plunder and banditry they had engaged in, not to mention the hatred that had driven their large-scale wars against the Nephites, perhaps the king did not find the word war, in its conventional sense, to be the best descriptor of
Lamanite conduct. Thus, while he never uses the word *war* even once in his speech of thanksgiving and commitment, he uses the word *murder* five times.

In short, given the specific character of the killings they had committed in both war and plunder, the Ammonites identify their past conduct explicitly as murder. That was the reason for their sure repentance.

**How Did the Ammonites Repent?**

As part of their repentance the Ammonites buried their weapons and entered a covenant that they would “give up their own lives” rather than use them again to shed blood.

The king, Anti-Nephi-Lehi, says in part:

> Since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright [i.e., no longer stained with blood, but clean], then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren . . . for perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins . . . . And now behold, since it has been as much as we could do to get our stains taken away from us, and our swords are made bright, let us hide them away that they may be kept bright, as a testimony to our God at the last day . . . that we have not stained our swords in the blood of our brethren since he imparted his word unto us and has made us clean thereby . . . yea, we will bury them deep in the earth, that they may be kept bright, as a testimony that we have never used them, at the last day. (Alma 24:12–13, 15–16)

Mormon adds that 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. And this they did, it being in their view a testimony to God, and also to men, that they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man’s blood; and this they did, vouching and covenanting with God, that rather than shed the blood of their brethren, they would give up their own lives. (Alma 24:17–18; see also Alma 53:11)

Finally, as an outgrowth of their repentance, the Ammonites became “distinguished for their zeal towards God, and also towards men”; they were “perfectly honest and upright in all things”; and they were “firm in the faith of Christ, even until the end” (Alma 27:27).

**How Did the Ammonites Behave after Entering Their Covenant?**

The Ammonites’ behavior after entering this covenant tells us much about them and about how they understood the covenant they had made. The account identifies five separate events.

First, soon after their conversion, the Ammonites allowed themselves to be slain by the Lamanites rather than take up arms against them. We are told that “they went out to meet [the Lamanites], and prostrated themselves before them to the earth, and began to call on the name of the Lord” (Alma 24:21), whereupon the Lamanites slew more than a thousand of them.

Second, on a later occasion, the Amalekites [Amlicites] stirred up the Lamanites’ anger against the Ammonites and they “began again to destroy them” (Alma 27:2). Mormon tells us that the Ammonites “again refused to take their arms,
and they suffered themselves to be slain according to the desires of their enemies” (Alma 27:2–3). Ammon attributes the Ammonites’ behavior on these occasions to “their love toward their brethren . . . for behold, they had rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of their enemy” (Alma 26:31–32). It was following these slaughters that the Nephites gave the land of Jershon to the Ammonites as a means of protecting them from further attack by the Lamanites (Alma 27:22).

Third, the Ammonites immediately began materially supporting the Nephite armies in their battles against the Lamanites and supported them throughout the lengthy war (Alma 27:24; 43:13).

Fourth, when the war became particularly dangerous, and the Ammonites saw the suffering and afflictions born by the Nephites for them, “they were moved with compassion and were desirous to take up arms in the defence of their country” (Alma 53:13). Indeed, they were “about to take their weapons of war” (Alma 53:14), and only the devoted efforts of Helaman and his brethren could persuade them otherwise. In light of the oath they had taken, Helaman “feared lest by so doing they should lose their souls”; the Ammonites relented and abstained from entering the war, as they had originally planned (Alma 53:14; Helaman retells this story in an epistle to Moroni in Alma 56:6–8).

Finally, the Ammonite sons—those who had not been party to the original covenant of their fathers—entered a covenant of their own: “a covenant to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, yea, to protect the land unto the laying down of their lives; yea, even they covenanted that they never would give up their liberty, but they would fight in all cases to protect the Nephites and themselves from bondage” (Alma 53:17). These sons, of course, were the celebrated 2,000 stripling soldiers of Helaman, recounted in Alma 56–58.19

So: Were the Ammonites Pacifists?

With this background in mind, we can consider anew the question of the Ammonites’ pacifism. Again, pacifism is opposition, on moral grounds, to all war of any kind. It is not failure to fight based on fear, fatigue, or inconvenience, for example. Nor is it the rejection of any particular war that one considers to be unjust. Pacifism is a stance of opposition to any and all war; it is a rejection of war itself. Did the Ammonites themselves embrace such a view?

Some features of the account seem to suggest this possibility. After all, the Ammonites (1) sorely repented of the killings they had committed prior to their conversion; (2) permanently buried their weapons following their conversion; (3) entered a covenant that they would never stain their swords with blood again, under any circumstances; (4) allowed themselves to be slaughtered on two separate occasions rather than violate this covenant; and (5) were motivated in this self-sacrifice, Ammon tells us, by the love that they had for their Lamanite brethren.

Based on this set of features, we might conclude that the Ammonites did indeed embrace a pacifist view. We might read them as believing that all killing in warfare, no matter how conventional its nature, is equivalent to murder, and that that’s why they repented and eschewed any further conflict—even defensive conflict—in the aftermath of their conversion.20
therefore are cause for repentance, it follows that all war must be wrong. If we see the Ammonites as reasoning in this way, we will naturally see them as having adopted a position of pacifism as part of their conversion and repentance.

But it must be clear by now that this conclusion is based on too thin a reading of the account. When we complete the picture, this pacifist conclusion is untenable. Consider these six points.

- First, we have seen that the acts of killing that the Ammonites repented of were acts conducted either in aggressive, large-scale attacks against the Nephites, or in smaller-scale but equally aggressive acts of banditry and plunder. The Lamanites were emphatically not reluctant warriors, forced to fight from time to time, in conventional war, over territorial or other complicated disputes with their Nephite neighbors who were equally aggressive in return. On the contrary, in every case of conflict to that time the Lamanites were the aggressive instigators; motivated by hatred and by delight in Nephite blood, they sought at times not only to rob the Nephites, but also to destroy them. Note, for instance, that every battle between the Nephites and Lamanites occurred on Nephite, not Lamanite, land, and that both the Ammonites themselves and the Nephites explicitly refer to the Lamanites’ prior actions as “murder.” Moreover, the Lamanites more than once are described as “hardened,” “racked with hatred,” and as delighting in taking Nephite lives.

This is why, as we have already seen, the Ammonites’ repentance was not actually for “deeds of valor on the battlefield”—for normal, non-bloodthirsty acts of killing that had occurred in conventional (i.e., nonaggressive) war. The repentance really was for aggressive acts of killing that the Nephites, and the Lamanites themselves, both described as “murder.”

- Second, notice that though the Ammonites eschewed war, they never expressed a pacifist explanation as the reason for doing so. The Ammonite king voiced his worry that “perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God” (Alma 24:13). This was a reasonable fear. The Ammonites were a people who had been motivated by hatred and who had committed murder in both aggressive, large-scale wars and in attempts to plunder gold and silver from the Nephites. Yet despite this history of violence, they had won forgiveness (Alma 24:10–13). Given the harsh reality of their past, and given the difficulty of receiving forgiveness for such sins (“it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain,” Alma 24:11), it is not surprising that they felt the need to maintain this forgiveness by repudiating not only murder, but also anything even resembling it. Thus their repudiation of shedding any blood whatsoever, under any conceivable circumstances. John Welch relates the Ammonite situation to Deuteronomy 20:8, where the “fearful and fainthearted” are exempted from military service; he points out that the Talmud explains this verse as alluding “to one who is afraid because of the transgressions he had committed” in the past. Welch adds, “because of their ‘many murders,’ the Ammonites deeply feared that any further shedding of blood might take them beyond the scope of forgiveness.”

I think this is exactly right. So while it’s no doubt true that the Ammonites were motivated by love of their brethren in refusing to take up arms against them, as Ammon reports (Alma 26:31–32), it is also true that they were motivated by the risk of losing the forgiveness they had obtained and that they had good reason to fear losing.

So even when the Ammonites permitted themselves to be slaughtered, this self-sacrifice was not based on an abstract rejection of war in principle. It was, at least in significant measure, based on the desire to maintain their condition of forgiveness before the Lord. It was a testament to their repentance.

- Third, notice that the Ammonites did not object to the Nephites waging war against their Lamanite attackers, or to the Nephites using military means to protect them from Lamanite attack. Throughout the lengthy war, the Lamanites willingly provided substantial material support to the Nephite armies. This makes it evident that the Ammonites entered their covenant of non-bloodshed not because of a general repudiation of war per se, or out of a conviction that others ought to do the same, but for reasons that they clearly believed to be particular to
themselves. As repentant murderers, such a covenant made perfect sense for them, but nowhere in the record do they generalize its application to others. Indeed, in supporting the Nephites in their wartime activities, they did just the opposite.

- Fourth, recall that in this same long war the Ammonites reached a point where they actually wanted to take up arms and assist the Nephites in active defense of their liberty and their lives. It was the concerted efforts of Helaman and his brethren—not the self-reflection of the Ammonites themselves—that prevented them from fulfilling this desire. Again, while the Ammonites certainly loved their Lamanite brethren, this did not prevent them from wanting to take up arms against them when the situation seemed to warrant it.

- Fifth, it is instructive to note that when the Ammonites were finally persuaded not to enter the war (that, again, they actually wanted to enter), it was not on the basis of the idea that all killing, even in warfare, is sinful. This is instructive because that would have been the most compelling argument for Helaman to use to persuade the Ammonites if the Ammonites had truly been pacifists. But instead, Helaman appealed to the Ammonites explicitly and solely on the basis of their need to honor the idiosyncratic covenant they had made—the covenant that “they never would shed blood more” (Alma 53:11). As the record says, the Ammonites were “overpowered by the persuasions of Helaman and his brethren, for they were about to break the oath which they had made. And Helaman feared lest by so doing they should lose their souls” (Alma 53:14–15). Obviously, had the Ammonites never made such a covenant in the first place, they would gladly have taken up arms and Helaman would gladly have embraced their military contribution. It was only this covenant, not an attitude of pacifism, that prevented the Ammonites from entering the war.

- Sixth, notice that the Ammonites did not object to their sons entering the war that was then being waged. Unbound by the covenant of their fathers, these sons entered a covenant of their own that actually committed them to taking up the sword and shedding blood in defense of a righteous cause. They were as zealous in righteousness as were their fathers (Alma 56:46–48; 58:40), but they did not enter the same covenant because they did not share the same history—unlike their fathers, they were not repentant murderers—and therefore did not share the same fear of jeopardizing their salvation.

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such acts of murder themselves. And they would have thought the same of the Nephites who were also waging war at the time (see the third point above), partly to protect them.

In light of these six points I think it turns out to be impossible to see the Ammonites as pacifists in any reasonable sense of the term. Any one of these points would be sufficient to raise doubt about the matter, but taken as a whole they remove it altogether. Not only did the Ammonites never express a pacifist attitude toward war, and not only did they behave in ways that explicitly contradict such a pacifist attitude, but even in the two instances where they appear to have behaved as pacifists, the resemblance turns out to be superficial because in both cases they were acting from other than pacifist motivations.

Conclusion

Here’s what we can say in summary, then, about the Ammonites and pacifism. It’s true that the Ammonites deliberately made themselves noncombatants, and even suffered themselves to be slaughtered in consequence of that decision. And it’s true that they supply what must certainly be among the most inspiring examples of repentance, contrition, humility, and sustained devotion to the Lord that can be found anywhere in scripture. In every way we feel on holy ground as we think of these devoted and sanctified people.

But it’s also true that the Ammonites are not examples of pacifism. They were opposed to war only for themselves and for reasons particular to themselves. They were not opposed, in principle, to war itself. Although they no doubt shared the general abhorrence for war that characterizes all genuine followers of Christ, this was not an abhorrence that resulted in pacifism.
It does not follow from this, of course, that pacifism is wrong, or that it is not a legitimate—or, perhaps, a higher—option for those who face conflict to one degree or another. That’s a different question altogether and requires a separate treatment. It does follow, however, that the Ammonites themselves cannot be used as an example of those who chose this option. A careful reading of the account demonstrates that they didn’t. In response to the question, “Were the Ammonites pacifists?” the record makes it clear that the answer must be no.

Notes
1. For example, even during that rarest of times—a period when the Lamanites became one with the Nephites and were numbered among them, so much so that even “their curse was taken from them”—this combined people still took up arms against the Gadianon robbers who were spreading “death and carnage throughout the land” (see 3 Nephi 2:11–17). Indeed, the only reference to anything similar to the Ammonites’ story is the brief mention, about seventy-five years after the Ammonites’ conversion, of a later generation of Lamanites who also buried their weapons of war and suffered death rather than defend themselves (Helaman 15:9). These were probably the same Lamanites who were converted in large numbers in Helaman 5 and who “did lay down their weapons of war” at that time (Helaman 5:51). This brief mention gives us nothing like the details we have regarding the Ammonites, however.


4. The designations Lamanite and Nephite are frequently used in the Book of Mormon more to signify one’s loyalty than one’s genealogy (e.g., see Jacob 1:14; Mosiah 25:12–13; Alma 3:10–11, 17; 45:13–14; 47:35; Helaman 11:24; 3 Nephi 2:14, 16; 4 Nephi 1:36–38). Nephite dissenters, for example, fell under the general category of “Lamanites” once they were thus allied, and no doubt other, non-Nephite populations, did so as well. And the same is true for groups that allied themselves with the Nephites; they took on the designation “Nephites” even though genetically unrelated to any in Lehi’s party; see, for example, John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” JBMS 1/1 (1992): 1–34. This assumption of peoples into one general category or another is not surprising. It is not uncommon, for example, for the Lord to designate a particular “seed” with whom someone will be “numbered,” regardless of actual ancestral relationships (e.g., see 2 Nephi 4:11; 10:19). Indeed, the most sweeping example of this is membership in the house of Israel—which in the end was defined to do with ancestry at all and everything to do with spiritual choice (e.g., see 1 Nephi 14:2; 2 Nephi 10:18; 30:2; Helaman 15:13; 3 Nephi 16:13: 21:6; 30:2; Romans 9:6–7; Galatians 2:7–9; 3:29).


6. This does not mean that Laman’s father was king the whole time that the sons of Mosiah labored among the Lamanites, but it does mean that he was king for at least part of the time. Also, throughout this paper, whenever emphasis appears in scriptural passages, the emphasis is mine.

7. After referring to some of these entities as “lands” and to some of them as “cities,” the record summarizes by saying that “these are the names of the cities of the Lamanites which were converted unto the Lord” (Alma 23:13). The listing itself suggests that “city” and “land” were different geographical categories, but the summary suggests that they were either identical or closely related. The relationship appears to be similar to the land/city designation that Nibley first identified forty-five years ago. See Hugh Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 100–102 (first edition, 1964).

8. These could well have been the Amlicites: the Nephite dissenters who waged war against the Nephites in the fifth year of the reign of the judges (ca. 87 BC), were defeated by Alma’s army, and then, while retreating, joined forces with an attacking Lamanite army (see Alma 2). They appear in the record again, beginning in Alma 21, in Mormon’s recounting of Aaron’s missionary labors among the Lamanites and where the record refers to them as “Amalekites.” Christopher Conkling draws attention to Royal Skousen’s meticulous work, which shows how the change in spelling likely occurred during the transcribing and printing of the Book of Mormon. See J. Christopher Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites,” JBMS 14/1 (2005): 108–17.

9. Based on this information alone the Ammonites appear to have been a very large portion of the total Lamanite population, and perhaps even a majority. But again, it’s not clear that Mormon’s comparison is exhaustive. He lists those who were converted, and then merely tells us that the Nephite dissenters were not converted—and further, that no Lamanites who even lived near the Nephite dissenters were converted. Mormon may have singled the Nephite dissenters out for particular mention because of the major role they played in the wars around this time (and stretching forward) and also to underscore the unrighteous influence they wielded generally. I think that is plausible. In any case, the record isn’t definite enough to conclude from Mormon’s mention of this particular group that there were not other groups whom he didn’t mention. In addition, we must wonder just how large was the land of Jershon that the Ammonites later occupied as a gift from the Nephites. Did the Nephites have to relocate a group of people as large as half the total Lamanite population in order to accommodate them? Or were the Nephites just not using that land to its full potential for some reason? Further, if the Lamanites had just been halved in population by the conversion and subsequent departure of the Ammonites—and yet still came close to capturing all the Nephite lands in the ensuing wars (Alma 43–62)—then why hadn’t the Lamanites had more success in their previous attempts to destroy the Nephites (see the section “What Were the Ammonites Like before Their Conversion?”) when, if the...
Ammonites were truly half or more of the Lamanite population, the Lamanites’ numbers at the time would obviously have been twice as large? Were subsequent Nephite dissenters of sufficient numbers to make up this difference (e.g., see Alma 43:4, 13)? These considerations suggest that the Ammonites were unlikely to have been anything like a majority, or even half, of the total Lamanite population.


10. We also know of one occasion during this period when a group of Nephites made plans to attack and destroy the Lamanites in the land of Nephi. Internal dissension disrupted the plan, however, and the attack never materialized (see Mosiah 9:1–2).

11. The dissenting Amlicites, who had just been defeated and driven out by Alma’s army, joined “a numerous host of the Lamanites” who had entered Nephite land (Alma 2:24). As Alma’s army rushed to defend Zarahemla against the attackers, the combined Lamanite and Amlicite forces “came upon them to destroy them” (Alma 2:27) at the river Sidon. Finally, Alma’s army prevailed and their attackers fled (Alma 2:35–38).

12. Although this could have been one of the territorial kings, or even a king over all the land that we know nothing else about, it could also, ironically, have been Laman’s father, who was “king over all the land” of the Lamanites during at least part of the time that the sons of Mosiah were among them (Alma 20:8; 22:1).

13. Wounded at the time, Alma did not personally lead the Nephite defense on this occasion, but sent an army that drove the Lamanite army out of the land (Alma 3:23). This war also occurred in the fifth year of the reign of the judges, or about 87 B.C. (Alma 3:25).

14. Although we are given no description of the war that occurred in this year, we are told that the Lamanites, after the destruction of Ammonihah, had many battles with the Nephites, in the which they were driven and slain” (Alma 25:3). It is reasonable to assume that these are the battles referred to as occurring in the fourteenth year, because the next large war against the Nephites did not occur until the fifteenth year of the reign of the judges—which was after the Ammonites’ conversion and after they had already been attacked twice by the Lamanites and had subsequently been established in the land of Jershon (see Alma 24:20–25; 27:2–3; 28:1–3, 7).

15. Conkling questions Zeniff’s objectivity in at least some aspects of his description of the Lamanites (see Conkling, “Alma’s Enemies,” 131n21), but Zeniff’s report of Lamanite hatred per se is so thoroughly corroborated by other Book of Mormon figures (indeed, by such spiritually significant figures as Jacob, king Benjamin, Enos, and Mormon) that I think that much, at least, must be accepted at face value. Others support what Zeniff also says about the traditions of the Lamanites (e.g., see Jacob 3:7; Mosiah 1:5; Helaman 15:4, 7), including the king of the Lamanites himself—who once not only recited the tradition (Alma 20:10, 13), but who also later praised the Lamanite missionaries precisely in order that the gospel could be preached and that “his people might be convinced concerning the wicked traditions of their fathers” (Alma 23:3). John Sorenson attributes prejudice to some Nephite descriptions of the Lamanites on the grounds that the Book of Mormon recorders were not firsthand witnesses of what they describe; “When Lehi’s Party Arrived,” 26; see also his An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 90–91. But Sorenson can’t mean to extend that explanation to account for reports of Lamanite hatred or of their efforts to destroy the Nephites over the years: these are matters with which the Nephites in the New Testament did, in fact, have to face.

16. It is worth noting that at least some of the time, the Nephites made efforts to “restore the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth,” as Jacob reports (Jacob 7:24). Enos describes his own “many long strugglings” in prayer for the Lamanites and of his desire that “they might be brought unto salvation” (Enos 1:11–13). He also speaks of “our strugglings” to restore them “to the true faith” (Enos 1:14), indicating that he was not alone in his efforts to reach them. In addition, the Nephi-record keepers knew they were keeping the plates precisely in order to benefit “our brethren the Lamanites” (Jarom 1:2), and one group of Nephites found themselves “filled with pain and anguish” for the welfare of the Lamanites’ souls (Mosiah 25:11). Although the Nephites were riddled with their own brand of wickedness from the beginning, they were not without periods, or leaders, characterized by compassion and concern for their Lamanite brethren. In this they mirrored the efforts of later Lamanites to reach out and reclaim Nephite groups that had fallen into error and wickedness (e.g., see Helaman 6:1–6; 13–15).

17. One wonders if the Lamanites at this time were not, like the Gadianton robbers who first appeared fewer than forty years later (Helaman 2:1–4) and who ultimately proved the destruction of the Nephites (Helaman 2:13–14). An interesting study of the Gadianton robbers is found in Daniel C. Peterson, “The Gadianton Robbers as Guerrilla Warriors,” in Warfare in the Book of Mormon, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 146–73. The seriousness of the threat posed by robbers of this sort is reflected in the severe penalties they received, both in the ancient Near East and in the Book of Mormon. See John W. Welch, “Law and War in the Book of Mormon,” in Warfare, 46–102, esp. 86–91.

18. It does not follow from this, of course, that the Nephites were an impressive contrast to the Lamanites in righteousness and that they had no wickedness of their own. The record testifies abundantly that they did. But in this paper I am examining only the behavior of the Lamanites, not of the Nephites.

19. John Welch dates the Ammonite conversion to about 80 B.C., and their sons entered the war about sixteen years later at approximately twenty years of age (“Law and War,” 66), and thus they would have been young children at the time of their fathers’ covenant. Stephen Ricks points out that the word striping in Alma 53:22 and 56:57 is roughly parallel to the Hebrew word used in the Old Testament to refer to young men of military age (“Holy War: The Sacral Ideology of War in the Book of Mormon and in the Ancient Near East,” in Warfare, 109).

20. This is how Nibley phrases the matter. He believes that the Ammonites are referring to “deeds of valor on the battlefield” when they refer to their past murders, and that they “wonder whether God will ever forgive them” for such deeds of war. “The Prophetic Book of Mormon,” in Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 466; see also “Last Call: An Apocalyptic Warning from the Book of Mormon,” in Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 517. Nibley finds it significant that these people equate normal acts of war with murder and that they repent of them. See Nibley, “Free-men and King-men,” 356, and “Scriptural Perspectives on How to Survive the Calamities of the Last Days,” in Nibley, Prophetic Book of Mormon, 487.

21. Contrast this with the behavior of Captain Moroni who, on one occasion during war, failed to have slain a number of Lamanites who “were drunken,” and yet refused to do so because “this was not the desire of Moroni; he did not delight in murder or bloodshed, but he delighted in the saving of his people from destruction” and therefore he “would not fall upon the Lamanites and destroy them in their drunkenness” (Alma 55:18–19). It is not clear whether the same could be said of all the Nephites as a group, but it was clearly characteristic of many of the leaders of Nephite armies through the centuries. Consider that Nephri, king Benjamin, Alma, Gidgiddoni, Mormon, and Moroni all led armies of one size or another and that all were prophets.
22. Note the declaration of the Lord, in speaking to “the church,” that “thou shalt not kill; and he that kills shall not have forgiveness in this world, nor in the world to come” (Doctrine and Covenants 42:18). It seems likely that the Ammonites were able to escape this fate because their accountability was at least somewhat attenuated by “the wicked traditions” that they had inherited from their fathers (see Alma 23:3; 24:7). Recall, for example, Zeniff’s report of the Lamanite tradition that Laman and Lemuel had been repeatedly mistreated by Nephi (Mosiah 10:12–16), that the Lamanites therefore explicitly “taught their children that they should hate them [the Nephites], and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them; therefore they have an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi” (Mosiah 10:17). Captain Moroni also explains the Lamanites’ hatred as due to the “tradition of their fathers” (Alma 60:32) and Samuel the Lamanite attributes the Lamanites’ evil in his day to “the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers” as well (Helaman 15:4). More than two hundred years after the appearance of Christ, Mormon tells us that the people now called Lamanites “were taught to hate the children of God, even as the Lamanites were taught to hate the children of Nephi from the beginning” (4 Nephi 1:39). On the matter of accountability in general, recall Lehi’s blessing to the children of Laman that “if ye are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you, that the cursing may be taken from you and be answered upon the heads of your parents” (2 Nephi 4:6)—a blessing which he extended to the children of Lemuel as well (2 Nephi 4:9). And note Jacob’s reminder to the Nephites that the Lamanites’ filthiness at that time “came because of their fathers” (Jacob 3:7, 9) and also his warning to the Nephites that “ye may, because of your filthiness, bring your children unto destruction, and their sins be heaped upon your heads at the last day” (Jacob 3:10). Also recall the Lord’s pronouncement that, though the people at the time of the flood were the most wicked of all his creations, “their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers” (Moses 7:36–37) and his declaration in our day that if parents are not diligent in teaching their children, “the sin be upon the heads of the parents” (D&C 68:25). Obviously, accountability for sins is a complicated rather than a straightforward matter, and that’s why only God is able to make such judgments. Surely this accounts in some measure for the Ammonites’ ability to obtain forgiveness for their murders, despite scriptural statements regarding the fate of those who are guilty of such acts.