Defend Your Families *and* Love Your Enemies

A New Look at the Book of Mormon's Patterns of Protection

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A primary purpose of the Book of Mormon, as described on its title page, is to show "what great things the Lord hath done."[1] The whole narrative serves that goal, being saturated with frequent examples of divine goodness and guidance. Then, in the book's stunning climax, God's presence is made most explicit through the personal appearance of the resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ, during which he displays the physical emblems of his compassion and redemption, heals broken bodies and souls, and invites everyone to become "even as I am" (3 Ne. 27:27). The power of divine love is clearly a central message of the text. Interlaced with that divine love, however, are regular episodes of human violence.[2] The Book of Mormon narrative opens with lethal threats and a desperate flight into the wilderness, quickly introduces a gory death, morphs into multigenerational warfare, and ends with a catastrophic genocide. The ubiquity of the violence and the ways God frequently intervenes and assists some of the combatants cry out for interpretation. What exactly is the text trying to illustrate about principles of human violence and patterns of divine protection? And how are such principles and patterns illuminated by Christ's invitation to imitate his selfless love?

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1. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), title page.

2. The narrative also includes instances of divine violence (see Jacob 7:13–20; Alma 30:40–50; 14:24–28; and, especially, 3 Ne. 8:9–14; 9:3–12). Such episodes deserve extended analysis. This study, however, is focused solely on the Book of Mormon's treatment of human violence, especially depictions of large-scale conflict.

Unfortunately, good illumination is hard to come by. The narrative's elaborate tapestry defies easy interpretation, and no aspect of that tapestry is more polarizing than its violence. Some earnest students of the text read the Book of Mormon's accounts of warfare as cautionary tales about the futility of violence, with some suggesting the text is decidedly antiwar, even a pacifist manifesto.[3] Joshua Madson, for example, notes that the text is "a narrative by design" and is thus "meant to be read as a whole." "When read in this manner," Madson argues, "the Book of Mormon presents a strong critique of violence as a solution to conflict."[4] But other readers, equally earnest—and studying exactly the same text—interpret the narrative as an endorsement of just warfare, with some suggesting that the text actually *requires* individuals to employ defensive violence.[5] For example, Duane Boyce believes the Book of Mormon narrative supports just warfare because "in its pages we observe the actions of God, his prophets, and other men of God in concrete circumstances" of warfare. Boyce argues that these concrete actions allow readers to "draw inferences" about just-war principles that are "safer" than those drawn from "abstract declarations" and "broad statements" in other scriptural texts.[6]

One narrative with multiple, even contradictory, interpretations. Such variety demonstrates that reasonable people of goodwill can disagree about exactly what to infer from the book's violent stories. The character and actions of the Nephite warrior Teancum provide an excellent case in point. The narrative extols Teancum as someone who "fought valiantly for his country, yea, a true friend to liberty" (Alma 62:37), yet it renders no judgment on other aspects of his personality. How are readers to assess his full character? Was he as spiritually grounded as his commander, Moroni, whom the text describes as "firm in the faith of Christ" (Alma 48:13), or as his compatriot Lehi, whom the text declares

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3. See, for example, Joshua Madson, "A Nonviolent Reading of the Book of Mormon," and Rick Duran, "Pax Sanctorum," both in *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives,* ed. Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 13–28, 57–79, respectively.

4. Madson, "Nonviolent Reading," 15–16.

5. See, for example, W. Cleon Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1974), 2369; Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, *Building Faith with the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 112; Duane Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 1.

6. Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed,* 254–55.

to be "like unto Moroni" (Alma 53:2)? Or was Teancum more akin to Omni, a man who "fought much with the sword to preserve [his] people" but was, by his own admission, "a wicked man" who had "not kept the statutes and the commandments of the Lord as [he] ought to have done" (Omni 1:2)? Unfortunately, there is no way to know for certain, at least from the narrative, which relates only Teancum's battle exploits. Likewise, when the text describes his covert assassinations of two sleeping and defenseless (albeit reprehensible) enemies, what is it trying to suggest? Does God approve of such tactics? Again, the narrative is frustratingly silent. It offers no divine comment on the assassinations. But then this is a general pattern throughout the text. More often than not, explicit narrative interpretation is sparse when it comes to violence. Readers are generally left to fill in the blanks, to determine for themselves whether each instance of violence is *prescriptive* (an example to follow) or merely *descriptive* (a simple account of what happened).

Filling in those blanks requires readers to make assumptions about what is permissible, or even desirable, when it comes to violence. More often than not, those assumptions spring unconsciously from our cultural conditioning. Years of family, community, and political conversations; decades of visual, verbal, and ideological representations; lifetimes of popular songs, films, and games—these elements all subtly shape our ethical sensibilities. Such incessant training ultimately hones our sensibilities into what we regard as "common sense," or "intuition," which in turn constrains the narrative's interpretive possibilities.[7] If our "common sense" sharpens around a particular interpretation—whether it be antiwar or just-war—we may find it difficult to understand how a different interpretation could be even possible, let alone legitimate. Meanwhile, readers who are less sure of their interpretive intuitions can be left bewildered, struggling to make sense of the book's maze of warfare and complex range of rationales, motivations, and methods.

Dichotomous Directives?

A clearly divine declaration—the unambiguous voice of God speaking directly about the nature of violence—might clear up a reader's

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7. Duane Boyce, for example, builds his just-war interpretation of the Book of Mormon on assumptions about what constitutes "common sense," "intuition," and how "most people" would interpret a particular text or ethical choice. See Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed,* 1–3, 7–15.

interpretive confusion by confirming or correcting certain types of cultural conditioning. Focused and extended instruction occurs in the Book of Mormon for several knotty problems, including infant baptism and apostasy. But while the text does include a few brief and isolated examples of divine declarations on human violence, it contains no comprehensive treatment of the subject. In the absence of extended instruction, the two broad camps of interpretation—antiwar and just-war—generally gravitate to statements in the text that seem to support their respective views.

Those who favor a just-war interpretation tend to gravitate to an instance of divine instruction in the book of Alma. In the middle of a description of a major Nephite-Lamanite battle, the narrator, Mormon, engages in a comparison of each side's motives, noting that "the Nephites were inspired by a better cause" because they were "fighting for their homes and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all, yea, for their rites of worship and their church" (Alma 43:45). He then takes this one step further, observing that the Nephites were defending faith and family not simply because they wished to, but rather because "they were doing that which they felt was the duty which they owed to their God." To support this, Mormon inserts two divine statements: first, "Inasmuch as ye are not guilty of the first offense, neither the second, ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies," and second, "Ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed" (Alma 43:46–47). Given the strong prescriptive nature of *shall* (a divine injunction about what God's children *should* do), it is easy to assume that these two statements, taken together, represent a straightforward *requirement* to engage in defensive violence, even warfare.[8] Case closed.

Well, not quite. Those inclined to an antiwar interpretation tend to gravitate to another divine statement from later in the narrative. When the resurrected Christ visits the surviving inhabitants of the promised land, he delivers an extended sermon in which he declares that his disciples should avoid not only killing but also anger. What's more, he commands them to "not resist evil" but instead "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you and persecute you" (3 Ne. 12:39, 44). Assuming

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8. There may be a case for interpreting this divine "shall" as *descriptive* (a prediction about which course the Nephites will choose), but within the context of the full passage, Mormon seems to be using it in a *prescriptive* way.

Christ's injunctions apply not only to interpersonal relationships but also to social arrangements, these statements can be interpreted as a straightforward *prohibition* against engaging in defensive violence.[9]

Given what appears to be a vast gulf between two explicitly divine commands—"defend your families" and "love your enemies"—how might they be reconciled? Each of the interpretive camps has its favored strategies. Those who favor just-war tend to follow the lead of the ancient theologian Augustine of Hippo, who suggested that, under the right circumstances and with the right inward convictions, killing an enemy might constitute a form of love: "What is here required is not a bodily action, but an inward disposition."[10] Duane Boyce employs this approach when he notes, "If circumstances demand that we answer provocation or even enter conflict, even then we must seek the spiritual state of a peaceable heart—entering with love in our hearts for all of God's children, even for those who are on the opposing side."[11] In contrast, those who are antiwar tend to emphasize the idea that Christ's teachings supersede, even correct, the old "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" law (Ex. 21:24), replacing it with a higher standard that all subsequent disciples should follow. Eugene England describes this premise when he notes, "God is working with a people whose understanding of God is incomplete, even wrong, and *developing*. Though they have claimed or received some kind of revelation, and have understood it violently, God is trying to lead them beyond that."[12] In this spirit, Joshua Madson emphasizes the way that Christ's miraculous visit and ministry offer "corrective teachings" that denounce "all sacrificial violence, including war," and elevate the "abandonment of war as the quintessential Christian act."[13]

Both of these reconciliation approaches have merit and offer meaningful insights. Still, there may be yet another lens through which we might reconcile the divine commands to "defend your families" and

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9. There may be a case for interpreting these requirements as only interpersonal in nature, but the text itself provides no explicit instructions to limit the scope of loving one's enemies to individuals while excluding whole communities.

10. Augustine of Hippo, *Reply to Faustus the Manichæan*, 22.76, in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo,* ed. Marcus Dods, vol. 5, *Writings in Connection with the Manichæan Heresy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1872), 465.

11. Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed,* 240.

12. Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 232, emphasis in the original.

13. Madson, "Nonviolent Reading," 15, 24–26.

"love your enemies" as well as interpret the narrative's frequent violence. This approach requires us to resist our cultural conditioning, abandon our dichotomous interpretive stances, and shift our perspective, letting other significant but often overlooked patterns emerge from the Book of Mormon's complex narrative.

The Law God Gave

A key interpretive lens is provided by a revelation given to Joseph Smith in summer 1833, now known as section 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Unlike the Book of Mormon's sparse and isolated statements, the 1833 revelation contains the most extended discussion on standards of human violence in all of Restoration scripture. Laying out the essential "rules of engagement," as it were, this revelation justifies the use of lethal force in certain carefully defined circumstances, broadly defined as patient and restrained self-defense. Disciples are instructed to first endure multiple attacks with nonviolent responses, for which they will be rewarded with greater and greater blessing as the attacks increase (see D&C 98:23–26). Then, if the enemy does not repent and somehow escapes God's "vengeance," disciples are instructed to issue a clear notice to withdraw. The full text is instructive:

> See to it that ye warn him in my name, that he come no more upon you, neither upon your family, even your children's children unto the third and fourth generation. And then, if he shall come upon you or your children, or your children's children unto the third and fourth generation, I have delivered thine enemy into thine hands; and then if thou wilt spare him, thou shalt be rewarded for thy righteousness; and also thy children and thy children's children unto the third and fourth generation. Nevertheless, thine enemy is in thine hands; and if thou rewardest him according to his works thou art justified; if he has sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, thine enemy is in thine hands and thou art justified. (D&C 98:28–31)

In accordance with these instructions, violent self-defense is clearly *justified*—a word that is emphasized twice—and decidedly not *forbidden*. But neither is it *required.* No "thou shalt" language here. Rather, the revelation takes pains to emphasize that alternatives to violence still exist, even in moments of extremity. Aggrieved or threatened people might "reward" their attackers with violence, but they might also "spare" those attackers, eschewing retaliation in favor of forgiveness or other loving forms of nonviolent resistance. This, then, is the first great interpretive

key—defensive violence is a *choice*. A justified choice, to be sure, but only one of several divinely sanctioned options.

What's more, the revelation strongly implies that these options carry different outcomes. Notice how God's parallel promises of multigenerational engagement highlight important differences between the two options and suggest the gravity of the decision. God promises to *fight* with those choosing violent self-defense, even to the third and fourth generation. But he will *bless* those who choose nonviolent responses, even to the third and fourth generation. These are not necessarily of equal value. The first suggests that choosing violence might set in motion cycles of recrimination, committing one's children and grandchildren to paths of conflict that may require divine help. The promise of assistance in battle is thus both a blessing and a warning that even justified violence may perpetuate multigenerational warfare. On the other hand, choosing a nonviolent response, such as forbearance or forgiveness, has the potential to initiate cycles of virtue and blessing that edify and elevate that same posterity and possibly even one's enemies. One option may represent a *justified* conflict, but the other may achieve a *redemptive* peace. One may be "blessed," but the other is "more blessed," to borrow a common Book of Mormon comparison.[14] The choice, according to the revelation, is ours.

This 1833 revelation can be read—maybe even *should* be read—as a commentary on the Book of Mormon because it explicitly connects these precepts to that narrative. "Behold," God declares, "this is the law I gave unto my servant Nephi" (D&C 98:32), thereby suggesting these principles were known or at least accessible to that ancient prophet and, by extension, his descendants. Consequently, the revelation's emphasis on choice and consequence provides an invaluable lens for interpreting Book of Mormon violence, particularly large-scale conflict.[15] Do we see God assisting justified violence or blessing nonviolent responses according to the principles outlined? Viewed through this lens, interesting narrative patterns begin to emerge. True to his promises, God often

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14. See, for example, Alma 32:12–16; 3 Nephi 12:1–2; 28:1–11.

15. The principles outlined in Doctrine and Covenants 98—especially in its language and the way it singles out Nephi in what is otherwise a relatively standard list of the ancient Hebrew patriarchs—suggest that the revelation might be read as an intriguing comment on Nephi's account of his well-known encounter with Laban. As intriguing and relevant as that might be, this study is concerned primarily with the Book of Mormon's patterns of large-scale conflict rather than with its incidents of interpersonal violence.

assists violent combatants in moments of justified self-defense, extending to the third and fourth generations—sometimes even beyond—and this represents a remarkable blessing and form of protection for those involved. But another pattern also begins to come into focus. Violence is not the only option. Despite what can seem like the narrative's preference for justified violence—a perception that is perhaps fueled by popular artistic renderings that emphasize these stories over other elements—influential individuals and whole communities often pursue alternative paths. In the face of menacing threats, they at times flee the scene, pacify their enemies, or lovingly confront them. And these strategies (again, true to God's promises) induce divine blessings that extend down through the generations. As we shall see, such nonviolent alternatives, and their attendant blessings, assert themselves time and again throughout the narrative.

Whither They Should Go

Before examining these nonviolent alternatives, let us first look at some interesting questions raised by the narrative's incidents of fight, flight, and loving confrontation. Who are the primary agents behind these strategies? Are leaders and nations *choosing* whether their communities will fight, flee, or pacify? Or are they being divinely *commanded* to take certain paths? Here, the Book of Mormon provides yet another interpretive lens—another brief but intriguing comment, this time inserted in the midst of Mormon's ringing endorsement of Captain Moroni. The passage begins with another digression about Nephite motivations. Mormon notes that "the Nephites were taught to defend themselves against their enemies, even to the shedding of blood if it were necessary; yea, and they were also taught never to give an offense, yea, and never to raise the sword except it were against an enemy, except it were to preserve their lives" (Alma 48:14). So far, this is simply another articulation of justified self-defense, similar to the one outlined in the Doctrine and Covenants. But then Mormon goes one step further, observing that the Nephites had faith that God would "warn them to flee, or to prepare for war, according to their danger; and also, that God would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies, and by so doing, the Lord would deliver them" (Alma 48:15–16).

This suggests that, at least when they were their best selves, the Nephites had a tradition of relying on divine inspiration for guidance

on how to respond to threats and aggression. Note that both types of divine warnings—to flee or to prepare to fight—would "deliver" them from danger. So the next logical step would be to examine the narrative for moments when God explicitly issued such warnings and try to discern what patterns these instructions might reveal. Given the frequency of violent conflict in the text, along with the number of instances in which God is credited with assisting armies after a violent defense has been engaged, we might expect to find frequent warnings to prepare for those conflicts. But a careful reading yields a surprising result—before a conflict has started, direct warnings to flee are relatively common, but explicit warnings to prepare for war are nonexistent.

Consider the textual evidence. The narrative contains several examples of God warning people to protect their lives and their communities by abandoning their homes and seeking refuge in other lands. This pattern is established in the first pages, when the voice of the Lord warns Lehi to "take his family and depart into the wilderness" to escape those who "seek to take away [his] life" (1 Ne. 2:1–2). Years later, when Nephi's brothers plot a bloody coup, Nephi relates that "the Lord did warn me, that I, Nephi, should depart from them and flee into the wilderness, and all those who would go with me" (2 Ne. 5:5). Hundreds of years after that, the first Mosiah is "warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi, and as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord should also depart out of the land with him, into the wilderness" (Omni 1:12). Alma the Elder receives two warnings to flee: first near the waters of Mormon and again in the land of Helam (see Mosiah 23:1–2; 24:16–17). To these examples from the Nephite record we might add one from the Jaredites when "the Lord warned Omer in a dream that he should depart out of the land" to escape a mortal threat (Ether 9:3).[16] Such divine instructions to flee become less frequent as the narrative progresses. This might be due to the growth of Book of Mormon populations and the logistical difficulties that flight would eventually create. Then again, the decline may also reflect that as time went on, and their populations grew, and they became more dependent on the protection

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16. This list deliberately omits one significant Book of Mormon narrative example. When the Anti-Nephi-Lehies become targets of renewed aggression by their former attackers, God tells Ammon, "Get this people out of this land, . . . for I will preserve them" (Alma 27:12). Since they had previously renounced violence—thus self-constricting their range of possible strategies—God's instructions to them are not included in this analysis of narrative patterns.

of Laban's sword, the Nephites also became less capable of imagining alternatives to war (a point we will return to later). Nevertheless, even a cursory review of the Book of Mormon reveals a God who often warns his children to flee.

Now consider the other option—warning his children to prepare for war. Aside from the Spirit "constraining" Nephi to kill Laban (an example of interpersonal violence rather than warfare), the Book of Mormon narrative is surprisingly spare when it comes to instances in which God explicitly commands anyone to engage in defensive violence (see 1 Ne. 4:10). There are, as noted, numerous descriptions of divine assistance in wars that have already commenced, including two instances in which God instructs Alma about *where* the Nephite armies might locate enemy forces.[17] But the most striking element in all of the text's examples of divine assistance is that they involve assistance *after* a decision to go to war has already been made or a battle has already been engaged. In other words, God consistently fulfills his promise to help under circumstances of justified defense—in accordance with the law he gave to Nephi—but he never seems to directly tell anyone in the Book of Mormon to *prepare* for war. As far as we can tell from the narrative itself, every war is instigated through human agency rather than divine instruction. This is surprising, especially if we consider that as populations increase and options to flee become more logistically problematic, we might expect explicit divine instructions to prepare for war to also increase. But while a close reading of the text yields a total of *five* instances of divine warnings (for family groups as well as whole communities) to flee to another land, we find *zero* instances of divine instructions (for social groups of any scale) to prepare to violently repel an impending attack. Although the Nephites believed that God would tell them when they ought to prepare for war, the Book of Mormon suggests that God never actually did. Thus, when it comes to strategies for preserving his children, the narrative describes an Eternal Father (of *all* sides in any given conflict) who explicitly directs only nonviolent options, such as flight, at least when given a chance to weigh in beforehand.

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17. See Alma 16:4–6; 43:23–24. The voice of the Lord is not explicitly quoted in either instance, but Alma emerges from both prayerful meditations with military intelligence that proves both correct and useful, and in the second instance this information is prefaced with the observation that "the word of the Lord came unto Alma."

Ye Shall Defend

With these patterns in mind, let us return to the two divine injunctions in Alma that seem to require violent self-defense: "Inasmuch as ye are not guilty of the first offense, neither the second, ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies," and "Ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed" (Alma 43:46–47). In light of the principles of agency contained in the 1833 revelation, and given the Book of Mormon's frequent examples of divinely inspired flight, these statements now seem less absolute. Consider the first injunction to "not suffer yourselves to be slain." The general success of flight in the narrative clearly demonstrates that this standard can be achieved without shedding blood. But does the second injunction suggest that bloodshed—or any form of violence—is required? Not if, as we might reasonably conclude, the word *defend* means "to prevent from being injured, or destroyed."[18] Such protection might be achieved through nonviolent means, including flight, making violence only the most drastic of several options to protect self and family. This is borne out by the construction of the command itself: The relationship between *defend* and *bloodshed* is not direct (as in, "Ye shall defend your families *with* bloodshed") but rather is relative ("Ye shall defend your families *even* unto bloodshed"). The adverb *even* in this context compares a general principle with an extreme case. Thus, the heart of the divine command becomes simply, "Ye shall defend your families," full stop. The exact method for defense, on the other hand, is left to the discretion of individuals and communities. It might involve bloodshed. Then again, it might not.

So even the Book of Mormon's most straightforward command regarding self-defense characterizes violence (again) as a choice rather than a command. Our modern culture often shapes our assumptions—that defending families requires violent methods—and these assumptions in turn color the way readers interpret the text. But when we gain a measure of objective distance from our culture and let the subtle and ancient patterns of the Book of Mormon speak for themselves, the intricate narrative tapestry increasingly resolves into focus. What at first appeared to be a bold element of the overall message and design—*God requires us to use defensive violence*—begins to dissolve, and another pattern—*we must choose from a range of moral responses*—emerges as

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18. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828 edition), s.v. "defend," accessed April 1, 2021, http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/defend.

more significant and more frequently repeated. This should come as no surprise. Choice, it turns out, is inextricably woven through the whole narrative cloth of this text. The Book of Mormon's large-scale conflicts are thus best characterized as wars of human *decision* rather than wars of divine *requirement*. And, as we shall see, the text suggests that even when flight is logistically impractical—as it would be with an extensive and settled population—there are other nonviolent strategies for self-preservation that effectively draw upon the powers of heaven. In other words, although the option of violent self-defense is definitely considered "blessed" within the text, the narrative also illustrates that there are "more blessed" options to consider.

More Excellent Ways

What are some of the "more blessed" options? The narrative highlights several and even compares them with their violent counterparts. As Grant Hardy has noted, the Book of Mormon often includes parallel narrative elements that provide subtle but clear comparisons between different "modes of action." Each path may be "virtuous and acceptable to God," but some may be better than others; such differences demonstrate "a distinction between faithful, ordinary competence and miraculous, blessed achievement."[19] This dynamic seems at play with several parallel descriptions regarding violent and nonviolent attempts to protect and preserve. Consider, for example, some of the parallel elements in the story of King Limhi and his people. When the Lamanite armies initially attack, they are successfully repulsed with force, and the Lamanite king (who is nameless in the narrative) is captured. But Limhi recognizes that this success cannot be sustained, so he seeks to win the trust of the captured king, which he does by being honest and forthright with his prisoner. Once the Lamanite king is pacified, he asks the people of Limhi to trust him in return—to essentially experiment with unarmed confrontation by proceeding with him "without arms to meet the Lamanites" (Mosiah 20:25). It is a remarkable moment—the king of the Lamanites pleading with his own army on behalf of his former enemies—and the narrative relates that "when the Lamanites saw the people of Limhi, that they were without arms, they had compassion on them and were pacified towards them, and returned with their king in peace to their own land" (Mosiah 20:26). The first strategy of armed

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19. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 166.

resistance is temporarily effective in protecting Limhi's community (blessed), while the second strategy of unarmed resistance is even more effective in preserving their community in the long run (more blessed).

Indeed, one of the narrative's most repeated, successful, and creative alternatives to violent resistance is unarmed confrontation. The people of Alma employ this strategy when a Lamanite army invades their secluded community in Helam, a strategy that allows them to preserve and protect their fledgling community without bloodshed (see Mosiah 23:25–29). Even apostate groups effectively use unarmed confrontation. Consider the former priests of King Noah, now under the leadership of Amulon, who put their Lamanite wives forward to plead their case (albeit in a much more disturbing way to modern readers, considering the abductor-victim relationship with these women), and the Lamanite relatives of these wives "had compassion on Amulon and his brethren, and did not destroy them, because of their wives" (Mosiah 23:33–34).

The most detailed, successful, and honorably motivated example of unarmed confrontation is the well-known and beloved story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. Facing a brutal attack, they go out to meet the advancing aggressors, prostrate themselves on the ground, prick the consciences of their attackers, and ultimately fend off the assault on their community (see Alma 24:21–22). When this story is placed in parallel with other narrative examples of violent self-defense, the effectiveness of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi strategy becomes even more starkly evident. At first glance, the loss of a thousand and five lives seems catastrophic, until we consider that the casualties of other battles are usually significantly higher. Thus, in placing their bodies between their enraged enemies and their community, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies defend their families more efficiently than they would with violent alternatives. As a 1939 Sunday School manual observed, "Had the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi resisted the attacks of their brethren with the sword, no doubt many more of them would have been destroyed even if they had been victorious. . . . As it was, fewer were killed, many were converted, and much better conditions prevailed."[20] This last observation hints at how the narrative itself commends this strategy of loving, nonviolent confrontation for its redemptive potential. The unarmed confrontation not only redeems (saves) the Anti-Nephi-Lehi families, it also redeems (saves) many of their enemies. What's more, as the narrator Mormon observes, "those

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20. Deseret Sunday School Union, *The Quorum Bulletin and Gospel Doctrine Sunday School Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (January–March 1939), 13, in *Sunday School Lessons,* vol. 12, 1939.

who had been slain were righteous people, therefore we have no reason to doubt but what they were saved" (Alma 24:26). Enthralled by this dramatic story of noble sacrifice and conversion, a casual reader might easily overlook another salient point—the nonviolent confrontation worked even with the *unconverted* aggressors. In other words, a group of weaponless defenders effectively protected their community by convincing even the hard-hearted Amalekites and Amulonites to abandon their deadly designs.[21] This was no small accomplishment.

The Book of Mormon also juxtaposes the long-term, structural consequences of violent and nonviolent strategies. Consistent with the promises of the Lord, defensive warfare often protected the Nephite community and created conditions for periodic armistices. But it rarely, if ever, achieved lasting peace. Even the valiant and talented Captain Moroni only managed to achieve a peace that lasted a mere five years. Compare such "blessed" successes with the "more blessed" and ultimately enduring achievements of nonviolent, loving advances into enemy territory. The best-known incursion is accomplished by a small and compassionate "special forces unit," as it were, led by the sons of Mosiah, princes (and therefore likely military commanders) in the Nephite kingdom. Employing assertive yet loving strategies, they win the trust of their traditional enemies through consecrated service and self-sacrifice. As a result, these nonviolent intruders effect a permanent cultural and political reconciliation with a significant portion of the Lamanite community—a literal burying of the hatchet combined with an intertwining of the two communities as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (later called the people of Ammon) enter into a political, economic, and religious alliance with the Nephites.[22]

Another later incursion yields even more remarkable results. Over fifty years after the nonviolent advance of the sons of Mosiah, the narrative relates how a still-antagonistic group of Lamanites, with the help of Nephite dissenters, successfully conquers nearly all Nephite cities and territory. Moronihah, the son of Moroni, is able to forcibly claw back only half the lost ground, even while employing the full political and economic resources of the Nephite state and military. The struggle takes several years, with "great loss" and "great slaughter," but is ultimately discontinued because "it became impossible for the Nephites to obtain

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21. See Alma 25:1–2. Unfortunately, the unconverted attackers simply redirected their rage, blaming the Nephites and destroying the people of Ammonihah.

22. See Alma 17:12–25; 23:17–18; 27:21–22, 26.

more power." Even in their reconquered lands, the Nephites feel vulnerable, living "in great fear, lest they should be overpowered, and trodden down, and slain, and destroyed" (Hel. 4:11, 19–20). Violence succeeds, but only in part, achieving a "blessed" yet limited and precarious peace.

In the midst of this uncertainty and anxiety, another set of unarmed invaders, this time the brothers Nephi and Lehi, march into the occupied territory; convert eight thousand Lamanites in the land of Zarahemla, the previous Nephite capital; and then drive even deeper into more traditional Lamanite lands, allowing themselves to be captured and abused. Miracles ensue, with heavenly pillars of fire, a trembling earth, and a divine voice "of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper" (Hel. 5:30). These gentle, loving, yet assertive efforts initiate a miraculous and even "more blessed" outcome—a mass conversion of Lamanites who then *voluntarily* return all the conquered lands, effectively ending generations of warfare (see Hel. 5:52). And a state of permanent peace, commerce, and intermingling between these former enemy communities endures for centuries (as subsequent conflicts shift almost exclusively to struggles with the Gadianton robbers). What years, even decades, of armed conflict could only partially achieve, confrontational compassion fully achieves (and more) in relatively short order.

Likewise, consider the effects of various strategies to remove the threat of the Gadianton robbers. Military forays are generally and notoriously ineffective.[23] On the other hand, compassionate efforts to convert the robbers, employed at different times by both Lamanites and Nephites, manage to "utterly destroy"—or rather "put an end to"—the Gadianton robbers by transforming them from enemies into friends (see Hel. 6:37; 3 Ne. 5:4–6). Thus, as it does in several other respects, the Book of Mormon's narrative tapestry displays a good/better sensibility when it comes to conflict. It consistently characterizes defensive violence as acceptable, justified, even divinely assisted, and effective in achieving short-term armistices. Nonviolent strategies, on the other hand, are depicted as more efficacious, redemptive, accompanied by even greater miracles, and effective in achieving enduring peace.

The efficacy of this higher law is punctuated in the narrative's beautiful climax, when the Savior of the world descends in a cloud of light.[24] As

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23. See, for example, Helaman 11:27–32 and 3 Nephi 2:11–19.

24. Even examples of divine violence fit the standards outlined in Doctrine and Covenants 98, such as the natural catastrophes that wipe out a significant portion of the population prior to Christ's visit. The violence is clearly justified—but not necessarily

promised by previous prophets, Jesus enhances and supersedes the old "blessed" code of ethics with higher and even "more blessed" standards, particularly the injunction to "love your enemies" (3 Ne. 12:38–48). The narrative goes on to illustrate the fruits of this higher law after the Savior departs. As his eager disciples embrace and implement principles of active compassion, they create a remarkably elevated society, in which "every man [and woman] did deal justly one with another" and there is no violence in the land—not even justified violence—"because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people" (4 Ne. 1:2–17). Thus, at the apex of the narrative, the disciples of Jesus Christ eliminate all human violence by taking the Savior's words to heart—loving rather than fighting their enemies. What's more, their peaceful and just society lasts for more than 160 years, an astonishing achievement that is explained not simply by the divine being who initiates it but also by the principles of loving engagement upon which it is based.

The transformative power of assertive and confrontational love is one of the most significant patterns hidden in plain sight within the Book of Mormon's intricate narrative tapestry. This pattern does not denigrate the noble efforts of those who choose to defend themselves and their families with justified violence. A recognition that the Melchizedek Priesthood is higher than the Aaronic Priesthood does not denigrate the lesser authority. Extolling the higher worship of the temple does not denigrate the lesser worship of meetinghouses. Thus, the Book of Mormon narrative praises the courage and righteousness of those who engage in just warfare. For example, it lauds Captain Moroni for being "firm in the faith of Christ" and celebrates the periodic times of peace that his and other such efforts achieve (Alma 48:13; see also Alma 50:23). But the narrative also suggests that assertive love represents an even higher law, not simply for its personal sanctifying effects, but also for its capacity to protect families and communities in the long term. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies, for example, are also lauded for being "firm in the faith of Christ" (the only other time this specific accolade is used), and the narrative extols the long-term peace that assertive love achieves (Alma 27:27; see also 4 Ne. 1:16). God's people thus demonstrate a range of approved options with a range of efficacious and redemptive outcomes.

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required or redemptive—and is characterized as a choice for which God takes complete responsibility. See 3 Nephi 9:3–12, where the voice of God openly acknowledges this decision and fully accepts its consequences.

According to Their Desires

If strategies of assertive love are more redemptive and more efficacious, and if that pattern is central to the narrative tapestry, why does the text not highlight them more often and more explicitly? Even a cursory review of the Book of Mormon reveals that the narrative is dominated by regular examples and long descriptions of violent self-defense, many of which are actively aided by God. So, why doesn't God seem to more actively direct his people to "more blessed" strategies? Here, we might employ yet another interpretive lens, this time inspired by a brief line from Alma the Younger's stirring soliloquy in which he wishes to be an angel. After expressing his longing to employ "the trump of God" and "a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people," Alma notes, "But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me. I ought not to harrow up in my desires the firm decree of a just God, for I know that he granteth unto men according to their desire, whether it be unto death or unto life" (Alma 29:1, 3–4). This last line is haunting, because it suggests an old adage—be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it. Jacob makes a similar observation earlier in the narrative when he notes that the ancient Jews "sought for things that they could not understand," and so God "delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it" (Jacob 4:14).

Assuming this principle holds when we apply it to the overall narrative—that God grants unto men and women according to their desires, even when the outcomes are not optimal—it suggests that the prevalence of "blessed" defensive warfare, and God's frequent assistance with it, are due (again) to human decision rather than divine directive. Which raises another question: Why do some of the text's best individuals and societies not choose the "more blessed" nonviolent protective options more often? While, as we have seen, individuals and societies in the Book of Mormon do choose such strategies, many of the narrative's most prominent and exemplary heroes participate in, even lead, justified violent conflict. These include Nephi, King Benjamin, Alma the Younger, Captain Moroni, and the principal narrator himself, Mormon. If nonviolent confrontational love is really more effective and more redemptive, why do these notable figures seem to not choose it?

It's a fair question, with several possible answers. First, we should note that such figures choose "more blessed" options more often than readers might recognize. Consider how Alma, after leading or directing battles early in his public career, concludes that "the preaching of the

word . . . had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword" (Alma 31:3). For the remainder of his life, he never again personally picks up the sword, dedicating himself instead to an increasingly strenuous, fearless, and nonviolent ministry, even while his fellow countrymen courageously engage and receive divine assistance in subsequent battles. Similar trajectories—from "blessed" to "more blessed" choices—might be traced in the lives of Nephi, King Benjamin, and Mormon.

Even so, the text is clearly saturated with justified violent self-defense by many of its major figures. This may reflect the experience of the principal narrator, Mormon, himself a prophet-general who led armies into battle from a very young age. But the best explanation may be that nonviolent, loving, yet assertive defensive strategies are extraordinarily difficult to conceive, let alone pull off, particularly in societies that encourage violent self-defense. John Paul Lederach refers to an ability to stretch beyond our culturally conditioned responses as *moral imagination*, which he defines as "the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist."[25] In a world conditioned to respond to violence with violence—a reflex cultivated not only by traditions in the ancient world but also by our modern media and entertainment—it is relatively easy to imagine oneself or one's community picking up the sword against an enemy in order to "destroy them and their iniquity out of the land, lest they overrun us and destroy us" (Alma 26:25). Imagining loving resistance strategies is much more difficult—and, frankly, implementing them requires a significantly higher degree of faith and fearlessness. Individuals and communities are not generally conditioned to submit to and serve historically mortal enemies (as did Ammon), or preach in enemy territory in the middle of a prolonged violent conflict (as did Nephi and Lehi), or lovingly and prayerfully confront a crazed and attacking enemy (as did the Anti-Nephi-Lehies). What makes such unusual behavior and rich moral imagination possible is what Lederach calls "the capacity of individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a web of relationship even with their enemies."[26]

Such daring and countercultural imagination is difficult to develop, even for the best individuals and communities. And we should celebrate

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25. John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ix.

26. Lederach, *Moral Imagination,* 34.

"blessed" choices even when "more blessed" choices leave us awestruck. Consider the respective desires and choices of Christ's twelve New World disciples when he asks them, "What is it that ye desire of me?" (3 Ne. 28:1). Nine of these disciples—presumably some of the best souls of their generation—choose what Jesus declares to be a "blessed" option of a predictable death and ascension to heaven after their earthly work is completed. Only three of his disciples are able to conceive of and choose a "more blessed"—and, admittedly, excruciatingly more difficult—option of remaining on the earth to continue to labor (and weep) for God's children, of whom many (if not most) will be their enemies. The second response requires a significantly higher degree of moral imagination than the first, which is why only a few even conceive of it. So it should be no surprise that throughout the Book of Mormon narrative, most of God's servants—again, the best of souls—often opt for the "blessed" option of justified self-defense, while individuals and communities rarely rise to the "more blessed"—and more imaginatively challenging—option of meeting aggression with loving, nonviolent responses. But to emphasize the point yet again, even if these respective choices don't hold the same degree of immediate efficacy and long-term redemptive power, both are characterized throughout the narrative as righteous responses.

Accepting that both justified warfare and assertive love are "blessed"—albeit with different outcomes and redemptive potential—helps reconcile the command to "defend your families" with the command to "love your enemies." It also moves us beyond dichotomous thinking regarding whether the narrative is fundamentally "antiwar" or "just-war" in character. The interpretive strategies of both camps have merit. The Book of Mormon suggests that Christ's teachings *do* supersede the old law of Moses, that some responses to aggression are higher and holier than others, and that "after the law is fulfilled [or superseded] in Christ, that [we] need not harden [our] hearts" against the higher law (2 Ne. 25:27). Likewise, the Book of Mormon also suggests—in the spirit of Augustine and according to *True to the Faith*, the modern Church's official gospel reference book—that it *is* possible for warriors to go into battle "with love in their hearts for all God's children, including those on the opposing side," so that "if they are required to shed another's blood, their action will not be counted as a sin."[27] The Nephites, for example, achieved this when they were "sorry to be the means of sending so many

of their brethren out of this world into an eternal world, unprepared to meet their God" (Alma 48:23). But the Book of Mormon also suggests that such interpretive strategies are not the only ways to reconcile the two commands. Rather, as we have seen, the text itself suggests a simpler but far more challenging form of reconciliation—to creatively defend and protect our families *through* assertive and nonviolent love for our enemies. That path may seem exceptional, counterintuitive, even unfeasible. Only a small percentage of the human family has ever exhibited such imagination, action, and ways of being. But acknowledging such difficulties is different than saying that disciples of Christ should therefore hold only to the lesser law or that we *can't* or *shouldn't* aspire to the higher ground our Master has charted.

Whither Should We Go?

Near the end of the Book of Mormon, after surveying and abridging the entire span of Nephite history, Mormon seems to conclude that although justified violence may be "blessed" and even at times divinely assisted, it cannot ultimately satisfy the human soul or save human communities. Security and salvation are found only in the compassionate and violence-absorbing sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Speaking to his distantly future readers, Mormon implores, "Know ye that ye must lay down your weapons of war, and delight no more in the shedding of blood, and take them not again, save it be that God shall command you. Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers, and repent of all your sins and iniquities, and believe in Jesus Christ, that he is the Son of God, and that he was slain by the Jews, and by the power of the Father he hath risen again, whereby he hath gained the victory over the grave; and also in him is the sting of death swallowed up" (Morm. 7:4–5).

Mormon's words touch on the essence of a key narrative pattern— *violence may be a justified choice for self-defense, but exerting loving resistance in the face of threats will accomplish so much more*—and he seems to recognize that we, his future readers, may be blind to it. Thus, he pleads with us in the same way his son Moroni pleads with us to "learn to be more wise than [they] have been" (Morm. 9:31) and the same way that Shakespeare's Earl of Kent pleads with King Lear to "see better."[28] Patterns of redemptive love are woven throughout the text, but we won't

accessed March 9, 2021, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/true-to-the-faith/war.

28. William Shakespeare, *King Lear,* 1.1.140.

see them unless we confront our cultural biases and alter our collective gaze. Similar to a "magic eye" picture, in which a three-dimensional image is hidden in what initially appears to be a completely unrelated pattern of colors and swirls, the subtle efficacy and sanctifying potential of loving resistance can be difficult to perceive within the Book of Mormon's bold strokes of justified violence. However, once our eyes adjust, and the pattern "pops" from the textual tapestry, it may be challenging to see anything else.

The process of seeing better begins with the desires we bring to the text. After all, the Lord "granteth unto men [and women] according to their desire." So, what do we desire? If we desire a narrative that is full of divinely justified violence, then God will certainly grant us that desire, and the narrative's patterns of righteous self-defense will (rightfully) reassure us that such responses are "blessed." But if we desire a narrative that reveals "more blessed" patterns of even more effective, redemptive, loving, and nonviolent responses, then the Lord will surely grant us that desire as well, and patterns of compassionate confrontation will emerge from the text and direct us on an even more challenging path. God might have a preference; one path may be better than the other, and he may encourage us to pursue that "more excellent way" (Ether 12:11). But both responses are "blessed," and neither response, it turns out, is required. So, while the Book of Mormon enjoins disciples of Christ to both protect the innocent and love the aggressor, the narrative suggests that the choice of exactly how to do that is ultimately up to the moral desires and imaginations of both individuals and communities.

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