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## The Nephite Wars

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**Abstract:** A discussion of war in the Book of Mormon. Reasons for Nephite successes and failures in war are cited.

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*History has a way of repeating itself. The Book of Mormon tells the dramatic story of God's dealings with a mighty people who once occupied the Americas and the sad finale of their ultimate destruction. Modern nations could learn a lesson from . . .*

# THE NEPHITE WARS

*by H. George Bickerstaff*

Any nation that can boast a thousand-year history is bound to have had its share of wars. The Nephites certainly did. What makes their military history of such high interest value is the perhaps unique factor that for most of their thousand years they were a nation living under Gospel law. Their response to the ugly business of war is therefore enlightening.

The accompanying chart summarizes the recorded Nephite wars. No doubt some went unrecorded. (See *Helaman* 3:14.)

The first Book of Mormon reference to a Nephite war indicates that by about thirty years after the arrival in America, the Lamanites were "a scourge unto . . . [Nephi's] seed, to stir them up in remembrance of" God (*2 Nephi* 5:25); and they performed this service throughout the ensuing centuries with remarkable consistency and effectiveness. The last recorded war ended in 385 A.D., with the destruction of the Nephite people. (See *Mormon*, chapters 6 and 8.) As the chart suggests, apart from the idyllic period immediately after the Savior's visit, those who lived a normal span of years knew at least one war, and in some periods, several; and virtually every able-bodied Nephite man must have wielded a sword in defense of his country. Between wars, the threat of the next one hovered menacingly over the nation.

Some of the strife was civil war, instigated by power-hungry tyrants who sought to overthrow the Nephite constitution. Some wars were provoked by Nephite dissenters who, out of ambition or hatred (see *Alma* 43:6, 7), stirred up and often led the Lamanites to war against the Nephites. But in almost all of the wars the Lamanites, however led, were the major enemy.

Apart from the final series of wars, when bloodshed and destruction was the goal of both contenders, the Lamanite reasons for fighting were uncomplex and consistent. Unconverted Lamanites were "an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety . . ." (*2 Nephi* 5:24), who coveted the property and pros-

perity of the industrious Nephites. They frankly sought to reduce the Nephites to bondage—which meant their being supported economically by the Nephites—and this state they actually managed to impose on a group of Nephites who had unwisely returned to the Land of Nephi. (See *Mosiah* 9:5-10; 19:26; 21:3, 13.) They justified this aim through the centuries by the traditional claim commenced by Laman and Lemuel, their first progenitors, that the rule and government over Lehi's undivided descendants was theirs by right of seniority, but had been cunningly stolen by the Nephites. (See *Mosiah* 10:11-17.) Notwithstanding their obvious inferiority in the art of government, they undertook to right the alleged wrong by means of war.

The Nephites, for their part, apparently desired merely to be left alone to mind their own business, develop their country, build material prosperity, and, in times of righteousness, serve God and their fellowmen. Because the Lamanites were always the aggressors, the wars were almost always fought on Nephite territory. In fact, God forbade the Nephites to make war on the Lamanites in the latter's land unless He should expressly command it. (See *Mormon* 3:14-16; 4:1-5; Doctrine and Covenants 98:32-38.) Thus, until near the end of their history the Nephites fought only defensive wars, their justification being that of any free men: to preserve what they had built—lives, homes, families, and not least, liberty. Their hearts fixed upon the great Gospel principle of freedom, and being especially jealous to preserve their freedom of worship,

*. . . The design of the Nephites was . . . that they might preserve their rights and their privileges, yea, and also their liberty, that they might worship God according to their desires.*

*For they knew that if they should fall into the hands of the Lamanites, that whosoever should worship God in spirit and in truth, the true and the living God, the Lamanites would destroy. (Alma 43:9, 10.)*

Further, they had the Lord's word approving defensive war:

*. . . 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. . . . Ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed. . . . (Alma 43:46, 47; see also Doctrine and Covenants 98:23-31.)*

*(Concluded on following page.)*

(For Course 15, lessons of August 13 to 27, "Moroni vs. Zarahemnah," "Moroni vs. Amalickiah," and "Moroni vs. Ammoron"; for Course 17, lesson of September 24, "Structure and Purpose of the Book of Mormon"; for Course 19, lesson of September 17, "The Gospel Before the Birth of Jesus"; for Course 25, lessons of August 13, and September 10, "Joy Comes Through Obedience" and "Choose Light or Darkness"; and of general interest.)

## THE NEPHITE WARS (Concluded from preceding page.)

To be ready to defend their liberties, the Nephites made preparations under inspired leadership to receive the enemy. Shortly after separating from his brothers, Nephi wisely began to make arms for his people. (2 *Nephi* 5:14.) Such preparations were a continuing part of Nephite life and produced weapons such as bows and arrows, darts, javelins, swords, clubs, cimeters, slings, and stones. (See *Jarom* 8; *Mosiah* 9:16; *Alma* 2:12; 43:18.) To these offensive weapons were added shields, bucklers, and armor for personal protection. (See *Alma* 43:19, 38; 3 *Nephi* 3:26.) The preparations were sometimes extended to include guards posted around the land and fixed fortifications like earthworks, forts, and stone walls to protect cities and armies. (See *Jarom* 7; *Mosiah* 10:2; *Alma* 48:7-9; 49:2.)

Superior Nephite generalship was a highly significant factor. For example, the generals did not fight today's war with yesterday's methods. The Lamanites discovered this to their cost when, having been soundly beaten two years previously by a Nephite army wearing protective body covering, they themselves attacked in about 72 B.C., wearing similar covering—only to find the great man and general, Moroni, a step ahead of them in preparation. (See *Alma* 43:19-21, 37, 38; 49:1-23.) Good scouting arrangements, ambushes, decoy movements, attacking the enemy simultaneously in his front and rear, refusing to be drawn by impatience into unfavorable battle conditions—such superior tactics more than once compensated for numerical inferiority and helped to bring victory to the Nephite arms. (See *Alma* 2:21-38; 43:22-52; 52:21-40; 3 *Nephi* 3:20, 21.)

While the military leaders certainly were men of intelligence and experience, their successful generalship was no doubt partly inspiration, for they were men of God. (See 3 *Nephi* 3:19.) Alma, Zoram, Teancum, Lehi, Moroni, Helaman, Moronihah, Giddidoni, Mormon—for the Book of Mormon reader these names are synonymous with principle, courage, righteousness, and love of freedom. Their righteousness was shown in victory—they spared the defeated foe even when they could easily have slaughtered them and thus permanently depleted the enemy forces. (See *Alma* 44:17-20.) Their wisdom was shown in a victor's firmness—they demanded requisite assurances from the enemy, whether Nephite dissenter or Lamanite; they enforced the law; and they inflicted the death penalty on those who asserted a continuing threat to national freedom. (*Alma* chapter 44; *Alma* 46:34-36; 62:7-10.)

But the reasons given above for consistent Nephite victory were merely contributory to the over-

whelming one—their faith and trust in God, which of course was allied with good works. When they had made this inner preparation and fortification, it exceeded in its effect all the military ones, however important those were. It imparted the strength needed against the more numerous and bloodthirsty Lamanites. (See *Jarom* 6.) It gave courage to face a terrible foe. (See 3 *Nephi* 4:7-10.) Fortified by prayer and God's assurances (see *Alma* 2:28; 58:10, 11), the Nephites always could be confident of victory.

And when were the Nephites not worthy? At times throughout Nephite history, national righteousness declined. Spiritually unprepared, their best defense—God's assistance—therefore unavailable, the Nephites were not victorious until and unless they repented. They finally became as wicked and bloodthirsty as the Lamanites. (See *Mormon* 4:11; *Moroni* 9:9, 10.) They refused to repent and utterly rejected God. (See *Mormon* 2:14; 3:3.) Boasting in their own strength they enjoyed several victories, and even foolishly carried the war into Lamanite territory. (See *Mormon* 3:9; 4:1-4.) But the tide turned, and they were finally engulfed and then exterminated by the Lamanite hordes. A people blessed with the fulness of the Gospel had excelled all Israel in wickedness (see *Mormon* 4:10-12), and God had withdrawn His aid from them. Hence they fell to a relentless enemy.

Mormon's heart-rending words, written after the last great battle and not long before he was to meet death at Lamanite hands, contrast what might have been with the harrowing reality for those lost souls. His words are a fitting comment on this gripping and poignant story of a nation which rejected God.

*O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you!*

*Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen. But behold, ye are fallen, and I mourn your loss.*

*O ye fair sons and daughters, ye fathers and mothers, ye husbands and wives, ye fair ones, how is it that ye could have fallen!*

*But behold, ye are gone, and my sorrows cannot bring your return. (Mormon 6:17-20.)*

Our chart shows an unmistakable connection between righteousness and victory. Continued righteousness would have ensured national survival. Cynics notwithstanding, God *does* stand ready to assist a righteous cause, both in peace and in war. The writer of Proverbs expressed it thus: "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people." (*Proverbs* 14:34.) Righteousness not only exalts a nation; it also saves it. Unfortunately, as a nation, the fourth century Nephites did not learn this in time.

Library File Reference: NEPHITES.



# THE NEPHITE WARS



(As recorded in The Book of Mormon)

References	Approx. Dates	Nephites' Spiritual Condition	Comments
2 Nephi 5:34; Jacob 7:24, 26; Jarom; Enos; Omni	†Various, 559-279 B.C.	<i>Apparently faith was exercised</i>	There were many wars in the land of Nephi. Nephites apparently victorious.
<b>MOSIAH LEADS RIGHTEOUS NEPHITES TO LAND OF ZARHEMLA (Omni 12-14)</b>			
Omni 24; Words of Mormon 13, 14	Between 279 and 130 B.C.	<i>Fought "in the strength of the Lord"</i>	Much bloodshed. Many thousands of Lamanites slain. Nephites victorious.
Mosiah 9-11, 19-21	†Between 187 and 123 B.C.	<i>Initially good; bad under King Noah; then repentance was exercised</i>	Wars in land of Nephi, to which a group of Nephites had returned about 200 B.C. Nephites prevail at first, latterly made slaves of Lamanites. They rejoin main Nephite body in Zarahemla about 122 B.C.
Alma 2	87 B.C.	<i>God "strengthened their hand"</i>	Amlicites* seek to establish monarchy by force. Great slaughter. Nephites defeat (1) Amlicites, (2) combined Amlicites and Lamanites. Military leaders: Alma, Jr. and [Amlici*].
Alma 3:20-23	87 B.C.	<i>Prayerful and humble</i>	Nephites victorious. Dead slain in battle this year totaled tens of thousands.
Alma 16:1-11	81 B.C.	<i>General Zoram seeks God's direction</i>	Lamanites destroy wicked city of Ammonihah. Nephites victorious. Military leader: Zoram.
Alma 25:3; 28:1-3	Between 81 and 76 B.C.	<i>Kindness shown to converted Lamanites</i>	Many battles, tremendous slaughter. Tens of thousands of Lamanites slain. Nephites victorious.
Alma 35:10-13; 43 and 44	74 B.C.	<i>Righteous desires and principles were manifest</i>	Zoramites,* Amalekites,* and Lamanites combine against Nephites. Nephites victorious. Dead too numerous to count. Military leaders: Moroni, Lehi, and [Zarahemnah*].
Alma 46:1-33; 49:1-25; 51:22 to 62:39	73-60 B.C.	<i>Righteous were apparently sufficiently numerous for the nation to win God's favor</i>	Amalickiah* aspires to be Nephite king. Moroni raises "title of liberty." Amalickiah usurps Lamanite throne, attacks Nephites. Nephite dissensions and civil strife benefit the enemy. (See Alma 50:26-36; 51:13-20.) Considerable Lamanite successes, but Nephites eventually victorious. Military leaders: Moroni, Lehi, Teancum, Helaman, [Amalickiah,* Ammoron,* and Jacob*].
Alma 63:14, 15	53 B.C.	<i>No indication given</i>	Lamanites, stirred up by Nephite dissenters, are defeated with great losses. Military leader: Moronihah.
Helaman 1:14-33	51 B.C.	<i>Much contention</i>	Coriantumr* leads Lamanites, thrusts deep into Nephite territory, takes many cities (including Zarahemla) with great slaughter of Nephites. Nephites finally victorious. Gadianton robbers beginning. Military leaders: Moronihah, Lehi, and [Coriantumr*].
Helaman 4:1, 2	38 B.C.	<i>Many dissensions in the Church</i>	Civil war. Rebellious are slain or they defect to Lamanites.
Helaman 4:4-19	35 B.C.	<i>Unrighteousness, followed by repentance</i>	Dissenters stir up Lamanites. Great slaughter of Nephites, who lose half their lands to the Lamanites. (Converted Lamanites later restore Nephite lands.) Military leader: Moronihah.
Helaman 11:1-3, 24-33 3 Nephi 1:27; 2:11-19; 3 and 4	Various, 20 B.C.- A.D. 22	<i>Famine brings repentance, then wickedness returns. Latterly people become repentant</i>	Gadianton robbers made up of Nephites and Lamanites, cause much contention and bloodshed. Loyal Nephites and converted Lamanites combine against them, finally eliminate them after greatest slaughter to date in Nephite/Lamanite history. Military leaders: Gidgiddoni, [Giddianhi and Zemnarihah].
<b>RESURRECTED SAVIOR APPEARS, A.D. 34 (3 Nephi 11-28)</b>			
Mormon 1:8; 2:1-9, 16-29; 3:4-11; 4:1-22; 5:1-17; 6:1-15	Various, A.D. 322- 385	<i>Spiritual decline until wickedness rules the whole land. Nephites reject call to repentance</i>	Fortunes of war fluctuate until A.D. 375, then Lamanites prevail continuously. Gadianton robbers aid Lamanites in struggle. Utter wickedness and love of bloodshed provokes war of extermination. Nephite nation destroyed. Military leaders: Mormon (several other Nephite men mentioned), and [Aaron].

[ ] Enemy Leader \* = Nephite dissenters † = Wars in land of Nephi, original Nephite territory  
 Note: Unless otherwise indicated, Lamanites were the enemy.

—Compiled by H. George Bickerstaff.