



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>



Signature Books
<https://signaturebooks.com/>

Nephites at War

Author(s): Douglas Thayer

Source: *The Reader's Book of Mormon: Nephites at War: Alma 20 – Helaman 4*

Editor(s): Robert A. Rees and Eugene England

Published: Salt Lake City; Signature Books, 2008

Page(s): vii-xxiv

Nephites at War

Douglas Thayer

I was ten when World II started in 1939, and the thing I regretted most for the next six years was that I could not enlist. My brother enlisted at fifteen by forging his birth certificate. All the older boys in the Provo Sixth Ward joined or were drafted. I envied them. I wanted most to be a fighter pilot, but I would have settled for being a tank gunner or a sniper. At the Saturday matinees I sat, breathless, watching the black and white Fox Movietone News footage of the conflict. I listened to the radio reports and saw every night in the *Herald* the pictures of Provo servicemen wounded, missing in action, or killed. I envied them their opportunity to be heroes.

In 1946 I dropped out of high school, enlisted, and served in the army of occupation in devastated Germany. The German economic miracle had not started yet. The destruction was vast, almost incomprehensible, the German people morose, demoralized, staggered by what had happened to them. My time in Germany was one of the great experiences of my life, but it changed my imagination. I came to see the possibility of chaos, that it was possible at any time or place, including Provo where I had spent my life. This understanding helped make me somewhat sympathetic to the narrative of the Nephites in the last years when war engulfed them. I think of the Book of Mormon as an ironic book, in

fact incredibly ironic because of its reversal of what you think should happen: again and again the blessed and prosperous Nephites turn to sin and war and then pay a heavy price for it. I keep thinking they will wise up, but they never do.

When the Korean War started, I was called up in the reserves but did not serve because I was back in Germany on a church mission. I have always regretted not going to Korea. It was my war and I missed it. When I think of all the experiences I missed, the things I could have written about, I grow moody, although I had no desire to kill and maim people. I thought a writer needed war, at least a male writer, to be inspired. Vietnam knocked the desire out of most male writers, I suppose, and Afghanistan and Iraq have not helped in spite of so-called smart bombs and Kevlar vests. Of course, I assumed I would not be the one to be killed or seriously wounded in Korea. I would not have minded being superficially wounded and earning a medal or two, at least a Purple Heart or even a Bronze Star. I did not aspire to the Medal of Honor because I knew I did not have that kind of courage. Even so, had I been born to an Ammonite mother, I am sure I would have enjoyed being a stripling warrior.

Through the years I have been preoccupied with reading about war. If I could not fight, I would read the experiences of those who did. Over the years, my reading hobby provided me with a fairly comprehensive view of the topic, beginning with the stories of the Greeks. I came to specialize somewhat in the French and Indian Wars, the Napoleonic Wars, the Civil War, World Wars I and II, the Korean War, and the Apache Wars. I have also read war novels and attended screenings of war movies; but mostly I have limited

myself to historical studies, biographies, and diaries, so my idea of war is not entirely fanciful.

This is the background I bring to a section of the Book of Mormon that is preoccupied with war and a rather extraordinary man named Moroni. My observations come from a fairly close reading of the text. I am not an expert on the topic from a professional standpoint. I have not done scholarly research on it. I see myself as an interested, reasonably intelligent reader who, if anything, asks too many questions. Mostly I wonder about the Gadianton Robbers, Moroni, the Sons of Helaman, and the Nephites and Lamanites as people with differing war strategies, and about the geography, Mormon as an interpreter of the records, and the religious focus of these chapters. There are other themes that would be of interest to other observers, to which I probably remain oblivious. One thing worth keeping in mind, which I often forget, is that the overall narrative structure derives from one person, Mormon. He interprets the original accounts by Alma and Helaman, who were themselves interpreters of what they experienced. Of course, the three of them stay true to the central religious purpose of the record. Even so, they have to pick and choose details and interpret and infer and, in Mormon's case, abridge. I try to remember that these are stories of people who are human, Lamanites as well as Nephites, however splendid or terrible, and therefore much like I am. If I think of them as anything other than rather ordinary, the text slips out of focus and becomes less valuable and less interesting than it might otherwise be.

Perhaps the part of the text that concerns me most as someone alive in the early twenty-first century is the story of

the Gadianton Robbers who ultimately destroy the Nephites. They are able to do so because they undermine the Nephite legal system through their ravaging quest for power, influence, and wealth, enacted by means of “secret combinations.” I have always found it difficult to take lessons from the Book of Mormon because I do not like to be lessoned; it puts me on guard. However, there is something to ponder here (pondering doesn’t obligate me) because it has a contemporary ring to it.

For instance, I read recently an article describing Russia as a gangster nation beset with criminal elements in every facet of daily life. The Russian mafia has gone international and is considered one of the most vicious of the various mafias. Similarly, the drug lords of Central and South America and Southeast Asia have incredible power and wealth and infest and corrupt government and legal and business life wherever they are found. The world-wide terrorist organizations, whatever their political agendas, breed a spirit of anarchy. When I read about the Gadianton Robbers, this secret brotherhood with its secret signs and symbols, its use of lies, murder, wealth, legal manipulation, and political office to gain control and power and to eventually destroy a whole civilization, I am concerned.

Living in a good neighborhood and having a good job does not protect me or those I love from what I come to think of in a generic sense as evil and its attendant ultimate chaos. This chaos could come swiftly, given the contributing factors of worldwide poverty, pollution, unequal distribution of wealth, migrations of the poor, population increases, disease, drought, terrorism, and especially war. So the Gadi-

anton Robbers are a kind of benchmark, talisman, or symbol for me of what is happening in my world and which I ignore at my peril. I cannot feel too encouraged when law, justice, and free institutions prevail in some nations, for although at times suppressed, even wiped out, the Gadianton Robbers always return.

The Sons of Helaman, like the Gadianton Robbers, preoccupy me somewhat. Teaching at Brigham Young University, I see Helaman Halls virtually every day or hear some reference to them. (Shouldn't there be a heroic statue in the middle of that quad celebrating the striplings?) But then, too, I have always been a little curious about the stripling warriors. They are a rather strange group because even though the Ammonites cannot fight, they allow their sons to go into battle. We might assume the oath would include the children, but evidently not. How old are these boys? A generation has passed since the Ammonites promised not to fight. Have these boys all been born since then? I assume so; otherwise they would be under the oath. So the oldest could be about twenty-five. At twenty-five a man is not considered a "stripling." I would guess most of them were probably sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen. Helaman refers to them as his "little sons," which suggests youth. The word "stripling" itself suggests someone of slight of build, not physical maturity.

I have four sons, the youngest approaching twenty-four. They have had their innumerable friends troop through our house for years. They play Nerf football in our large open basement. All four of them played high school football. I was involved in all facets of Scouting for forty years and

have taught numerous BYU freshman English classes, so I have had my share of experience with Zion's young men. I am pleased to say that in general they have been a pretty good bunch of boys.

When I think of Helaman's warriors, what comes to mind are the boys I have known. I assume Helaman's "sons" were pretty much the same. We tend to glorify these stripling warriors, but they were just boys. They were courageous, valiant, sober, and faithful, but probably not paragons either. Would they have been much different than the 2,000 nineteen-year-old elders at any given time in the Missionary Training Center, whom we often compare to the Sons of Helaman? The elders are similarly required to have strong testimonies and maintain a high standard of conduct.

I want more detail about the stripling warriors, but Mormon refuses to elaborate since he is abridging what Helaman wrote. Did the boys have girlfriends? It would be unusual if they did not. How did the girls feel about the boys leaving so suddenly for war? Did they stand there, tearful and proud, to wave them off? The boys gained their faith through their mothers, which I have always liked, given the dearth of women in the Book of Mormon. But what about their fathers? What did they contribute to their sons' faith and how did they feel watching their boys march off to fight in their stead? It could not have been easy. I appreciate Mormon's need to cut details, but the account becomes more real to me if I think of my own sons and the other boys I have known in the church.

What did it feel like for the first group of 2,000 to march off to battle? There is no mention of their training, although

they must have had some. I enlisted at Fort Douglas and can remember how strange I felt standing in my shorts in line with about sixty or seventy other men, some of us boys, taking the required physical and then later taking the oath of allegiance and being issued our uniforms and other equipment. I was so homesick the first weeks in basic training that at times I favored coming down with a fatal disease to end the misery. Some of those 2,000 boys must have felt the first pangs of homesickness lying in bivouac that first night in basic training.

Helaman tells us that his boys had never fought before. The fighting he refers to did not involve dropping bombs from thirty thousand feet, firing cannon ten or fifteen miles behind the lines, or launching Tomahawk missiles from far out at sea. These young men were fighting with swords and spears, standing toe-to-toe and slashing and cutting, much like the Roman legions fighting in Gaul or the English at Agincourt. The din, the bloodletting, the smell, the choking dust must have been terrible, this killing of other men. What does a religious boy feel running his sword into another warrior's stomach, slashing him across the face, or cutting off a hand? The boy knows he is fighting for freedom, family, religion, but still he is killing. None of the striplings dies, but all are wounded, many fainting from loss of blood. The wounds were not slight. What does it do to you to have an enemy slash your chest with a sword or drive his spear into your thigh?

The boys fought to exhaustion, even though, as Alma reports, they fought with "miraculous strength." Then they saw what they had done, the bodies of the slain enemy—

hundreds of them, thousands—and on their own bodies blood that was not all theirs. How would a religious boy deal with that? Would he shout triumphantly, stare in apathy and shock, or start to bawl? The text does not tell us, but I can pause for a moment in my reading to imagine the scene, compare my experience, try to understand, to feel. What would it have felt like for me in Korea to throw a grenade into a trench crowded with Chinese or Koreans, to shoot a man at point-blank range, or to drive a bayonet into a man's stomach? Like the mothers of the striplings, my mother had also taught me to do what was right.

What about Moroni in all this carnage and war? He is the central figure in the wars, yet we know little about him. He suddenly appears in the text. He is appointed chief captain at twenty-five. He is said to be strong and mighty. Otherwise we know nothing about his background or his family, although there is a reference to his son, Moronihah, so we know he was married. Moroni develops armor for his troops and marches them off to fight the Lamanites, who are cut to pieces because they fight naked except for a loincloth. Later, Moroni has the Nephites, sometimes using prisoners of war, fortify the Nephite cities with wooden battle towers, high walls, moats, and earthen mounds, to the consternation of the Lamanites. I am reminded of the Romans in Gaul; in fact, the Romans probably spent as much time working as engineers as they did at being soldiers.

Where did Moroni learn these tactics? About all we can assume is that he was an outstanding captain and learned from his predecessors. Perhaps he was chosen through revelation, but Alma does not say. Moroni expresses guilt about

his use of stratagems; that is, he sends out spies and uses their information to plan his battles. He justifies the necessity of this while admitting that it may not be quite fair. To my ear, it seems to be splitting hairs. In any case, he constantly sends out men to find out what the Lamanites are up to. On one occasion, in the middle of the night, he himself climbs up on the wall of a city to do some spying. This seems strange. Why would the chief captain risk his neck doing something any reasonably competent lieutenant could do? Notice that the Lamanite guards are asleep at their posts and that Moroni takes advantage of the situation.

Moroni is tough. He is capable of extreme anger—wrath, really, which is more than anger, more like righteous fury. He threatens, if necessary, to arm the women and children to fight the Lamanites. Moroni has cause to do so, particularly when the king men, who are always trying to overthrow the Nephite government, link up with the Lamanites and create even more trouble. Moroni's letter to his friend Pahoran, the governor, accusing him of neglecting to send troops and supplies, is a letter that would take the hide off an elephant.

It pleases me that Moroni is wrathful. It makes him human, although there is never a sense that he is out of control. However, that he has prisoners executed bothers me a great deal. Nevertheless, he does give the prisoners the option of covenanting not to fight the Nephites again—upon which they are released. This practice, called “taking parole,” was popular during the Civil War, although the custom dates back to the second century BC. It was not customary to back up the offer with the threat of execution unless a prisoner was caught a second time. I realize that the political and mil-

itary situation was fragile, as the Book of Mormon emphasizes, and that total annihilation was a constant threat, but still...

On the other hand, I have read too much of wholesale killings to be too shocked by this. The Mongols slaughtered everybody in a captured city, the Romans crucified people by the thousands, the Russians executed (murdered) 8,000 Polish officers in the Katyn Forest, Hitler set up murder factories, the Americans slaughtered the entire village of My Lai in Vietnam, the Japanese army went on a binge of wanton rape and murder in Nanking, the Aztecs fought wars to capture prisoners for ritual sacrifice. Executing prisoners is not an innovation of the Nephites. We are told they had trouble feeding, transporting, guarding, and exchanging prisoners. It may be that the Lamanites are particularly ungovernable and vicious, probably much like the Chinese and Korean prisoners during the Korean War. Yet I would have thought that the Nephites might have set up a system of labor camps, far removed from the frontiers, where the prisoners could be put to use and made to be more governable. Perhaps this was impossible under the circumstances. Yet, it bothers me—and again we have too few details to judge. How were the mass executions carried out? Was it a quick sword thrust to the heart? Did the stripling warriors participate? War is acknowledged by Mormon to be “the work of death,” and so it is, by whatever means it is carried out.

It is clear that Moroni was a man of righteousness. Even when he writes a letter to Ammaron, the Lamanite king, he preaches to him. As Alma says, if all men were like Moroni, hell would have no power. Among his other traits, Moroni

had “perfect understanding.” That intrigues me. What does it mean to have perfect understanding? Is it understanding every situation perfectly? If so, does it mean you understand something as it is, as you should, or as it was meant to be understood? Does it imply an absence of doubt and complete confidence that everything fits? I am piling up questions, which is not very helpful. Certainly Moroni knew what had to be done to win wars and preserve the peace, and he preached and taught and commanded, but still he could not get the Nephites to keep the faith very long.

Continuing my line of questions, why is it that Moroni had a perfect understanding and others did not? I wonder. Who were his parents and how was he raised? What about his wife’s perspective? What was it like to be married to a man who understood perfectly? Alma, Lehi, Helaman, and Pahoran loved Moroni. So he inspired love. Yet he also strikes me as a man who is rather austere and lonely. He seems never to take time out to relax, go to a party, or visit his family. If he had played some kind of musical instrument, that might have helped. I suppose someone of his abilities and responsibilities would be lonely, ironically cut off from others by his virtues.

We know that he hated war; he was not a man of blood. In defense of this proposition, we see the limited scope of war whenever he could manage it. He fought primarily defensive wars. He did not seek the conflict. He never waged an offensive outside the borders of the lands his armies were defending. He always stopped fighting when the Lamanites were willing to stop; he did not insist on unconditional surrender, but only that the Lamanites give up their arms,

promise not to fight again, and march away. Unlike Napoleon, Patton, Alexander, Caesar, and Rommel, war held no glory for Moroni. He knew that war and the desire for war contradicted the gospel.

One of Moroni's main strategies was to fortify the Nephite cities and protect them behind a wall of garrisons. After completing this task, Moroni quit as chief captain and allowed his son to take his place. A few years later, he died; he completely vanishes from the scene. Signifying how important a figure Moroni was in Nephite history, Mormon names his son after him. If we had a fuller record of Moroni's life, we would know him better; but as it stands, there is just enough to keep readers thinking and trying to understand him, filling in blank spots, asking questions, and musing over the answers.

It is clear that the war was carried out according to Moroni's strategy. No armchair general, he ran things, not from a safe retreat behind the lines, but at the head of his army. On one occasion he was wounded. He was always preoccupied with the problems of supplying and replenishing his armies, finding competent leaders, figuring out what the Lamanites were going to do next, dealing with large numbers of prisoners, putting down rebellions, and deciding when to employ a scorched earth policy. There was no question about his competency as a chief captain. He knew how to get the job done.

Another of his responsibilities was to motivate the Nephites to fight, always drawing on religious themes. Moroni was not only chief captain but a significant religious teacher who was portrayed almost as a prophet. He constantly re-

minded people of what they were fighting for—their families, freedom, religion, and land. He taught them that success in battle depended on righteousness: God would help defend them if they kept his commandments, but there was no guarantee if they did not. He also preached on the need for freedom to live their religion. As I survey what I know of history, I realize that this combination of religious teacher and chief captain is not without precedent. One has only to think of the Crusades, the Thirty Years War, the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and the Muslim holy wars to realize how relatively common it has been.

What about the enemy Moroni and his Nephites must fight? What kind of an army do the Lamanites have and what kind of strategy do they use? Why do they fight? The Lamanites always seem to be either coming out of the wilderness or retreating back into it. There are no Lamanite cities except those they have taken from the Nephites. They do not seem to have an agricultural base for supplying their armies. In fact, when they are unable to capture food from the Nephites, they retreat back to the forest to hunt game. I assume this means they live a nomadic life, moving wherever the game is most plentiful. Given their numbers, I think it would be difficult to find enough game to feed them all. Even though some of the American Indian tribes lived off the land, with so many Lamanites gathered in such a relatively small geographical area, this would pose a real supply problem. Nor are we told what the wilderness is like. I picture it as a tropical jungle, although I am not sure why. I suppose I associate the Book of Mormon with Central America, but I am not even sure why I do that. In any case, I picture

them in rain forests thick with vines, canopies of great trees, jaguars, snakes, insects five inches long, and rivers full of crocodiles and piranhas. Until Moroni puts his soldiers in armor, the Lamanites wear loincloths; but then the Lamanites start wearing armor, too, which brings up another question: if they are so primitive, how do they manufacture metal for weapons and armor unless all the armor is made of wood and leather? I assume they must have been pretty good at working leather, given all the animals they would have had to kill for food.

I do not get the idea that the enemy was particularly well organized or led. They seem to simply swarm out of the wilderness painted with blood (at least before they got armor), hoping to terrify, and thus weaken, the waiting Nephites. They are fierce fighters who battle to the death and overcome the opponent by sheer weight of numbers. There are so many of them, it would seem impossible to withstand them. However, the Lamanites often make stupid mistakes. They have a habit of being decoyed out of their captured cities, where they are safe, and led on a wild goose chase, the Nephite army doubling back to re-occupy the poorly guarded city, much to the amazement of the Lamanites. Or a second Nephite army, carefully hidden, takes over the city as soon as the Lamanites leave. You would think that the Lamanites would wise up after they were tricked the first time.

The Lamanites have the further bad habit of getting boxed in by Moroni's armies. Sometimes Moroni's forces are smaller, but when the Lamanites are hit on all flanks, they fold. On another occasion the Lamanites pull the classic blunder of attacking the center of the Nephite defenses,

leaving themselves open to counter-attack from every quarter. Lamanites guarding the cities and camps seem to be perennially asleep or drunk, often because Moroni has sent them some very potent wine. When Moroni climbs on the city wall, he finds the guards asleep, as mentioned above. They know the Nephite armies are outside the gates, yet they slumber. Where is the sergeant of the guards? Do the guards not have to report that all is well or not well? This suggests very poor discipline. When I was in the army during peacetime and a guard fell asleep, he was given company punishment, short of a court-martial. But in wartime, a guard falling asleep could be placed before a firing squad.

One of the Nephite captains is able to slip by the guards on two separate occasions to put a javelin into the heart of a Lamanite king. The Lamanites catch him the second time and do him in, but this is only after he has accomplished his mission. Which brings up the question of why Teancum, an important Nephite captain and a man Moroni loved, would risk his life in this reckless fashion? We are told he was angry because he blamed the Lamanite kings for the wars. We are not told that he counseled with Moroni, only that he went out in anger and did what he wanted to. This is strange, but very human, I think. His anger, his being out of control, endears him to me somewhat. Of course, Moroni was often the same but had better self-control. Maybe the subordinate thought if his commanding officer could be wrathful, he could too.

The Lamanites have a very poor spy system. As noted above, they were surprised by the Nephites' armor and by the fortified Nephite cities. This fortifying had been going

on for months, even years, and the Lamanites knew nothing about it! They must have been really deep in the wilderness not to know about the hidden Nephite armies (the ones that would box them in or occupy the cities while they were gone), and they did not know much, if anything, about how Moroni was maneuvering. They are quite inept.

Why, then, did the Lamanites continue undeterred? Against all odds, they kept fighting, although sometimes with considerable reluctance, until eventually, with the help of the Gadianton Robbers, they destroyed the Nephites. What motivated them? They were slaughtered again and again in various battles but kept coming back for more. We are told the dissenting Nephites had a lot to do with it. They joined with the Lamanites, and because the dissenters were so angry, so full of hatred against their Nephite brethren, they worked the Lamanites into a frenzy to come out of the wilderness and attack. The dissenters preached that the Nephites had taken the Lamanite lands, stolen their birthright, and in general not treated the Lamanites well. Then, too, the Lamanites, because they were lazy, wanted to occupy Nephite cities, enslave the Nephites, and live off the fat of the land. I am reminded that most wars have been fought for booty of one kind or another. A fierce blood lust, which we can infer from the use of blood in painting their bodies, must have been another reason for fighting. General Robert E. Lee said, "It is good that war is so terrible, else we should grow too fond of it." That was before the atomic bomb, which took the pleasure out of the whole enterprise.

Looking at this war section of the Book of Mormon and considering, however randomly, the Gadianton Robbers,

the stripling warriors, Moroni, the Lamanites, and all the rest, I am struck by how Mormon keeps the religious theme dominant. Whatever happens—battles, victories, defeats, incredible suffering, and death—he focuses on the blessings afforded the righteous and the despair of sin. The wars and suffering and eventual destruction of the Nephites are lessons for people in the future. Later on in the Book of Mormon, we read of those who have fallen into wanton sin, can no longer love, hold no fear of death, “thirst after blood and revenge continually,” engage in cannibalism, commit rape and torture, recognize no prevailing order, show no mercy, have no principles, and are “past feeling.” God looks askance at this but still provides a way of salvation for those who seek it. The focus here is on religion, war being the backdrop for a call to repentance. Alma, Helaman, Moroni, Nephi, Lehi, and Pahoran all seek to save the Nephites. They also seek to save the Lamanites, if they will, and convert them to Christ.

The spiritual highlight of these chapters occurs when Lehi and Nephi, named after their forefathers, attempt to convert the Lamanites. They are incarcerated, but in prison they are surrounded by a protective heavenly fire. The Lamanites are confused about what is happening, especially when they see the missionaries conversing with angels. Wanting to know how they can have the cloud of darkness lifted from their eyes so they too may behold the angels, the Lamanites are told they must repent and seek faith in Christ. They no sooner do so than they become encircled by fire and are filled with unspeakable joy and glory. The heavens open and the Holy Spirit of God enters their hearts. Angels minister unto them. A voice speaks peace to their souls.

They are filled with a heavenly fire. Three hundred in number, these Lamanites go out to preach to their brethren and bring souls to repentance, and “the more part of the Lamanites were convinced of them.”

I have never read such a chronicle of war before, and I think I never shall. Nothing I have encountered in the annals of the world’s conflicts I have read about comes near to approaching this kind of narrative. Of course, because of my interest in military history, I have questions about the strategies and mobilization of soldiers outlined in Alma and Helaman. On a deeper level, however, I find myself pondering what it means to experience the kind of unspeakable joy mentioned in this section of the Book of Mormon, to have the Holy Spirit enter my heart with force, to have an audible voice speak peace to my soul, and to be surrounded and then filled with heavenly fire. I assume it was Moroni’s intent that I meditate on these things. It is the Book of Mormon’s intent generally, even as we wade through the interminable war section, that we have such questions and desires. I believe this chronicle was meant for careful readers and earnest hearts.