



Type: Journal Article

Captain Moroni and the Sermon on the Mount: Resolving a Scriptural Tension

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Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2021)

Published by: BYU Studies

Page(s): 127–162

Abstract: A natural tension seems to exist between two important features of the Book of Mormon. On one hand, Mormon includes in his record a version of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus gave to the Nephites—an address that sets the standard for discipleship and that contains teachings obviously opposed to violence. In it, we hear about not resisting evil, turning the other cheek, going another mile when compelled to go one, loving our enemies—and so forth (3 Ne. 12:39–44). On the other hand, Mormon also presents various Nephite leaders as righteous even though they were immersed in violence. Captain Moroni stands out among these leaders because his wartime activities dominate the last third of the book of Alma: we see him in significant detail.

The juxtaposition of these two threads appears contradictory. We see righteous men, including prophetic figures, engaged in the very activities that the text itself seems to prohibit. And this apparent contradiction seems significant even though most of these leaders lived before the Sermon was even given. This is because it is natural to think of the Book of Mormon as a whole—as a collection of significant experiences and teachings that are consistent with one another and that together present a unified, divine message to the world. We thus expect to see the book’s most prominent leaders actually live the standard found in the book’s most prominent teachings—whether they actually possessed the Sermon on the Mount or not. And therein lies the problem. Although these prominent teachings clearly seem to be opposed to violence, we see these prominent leaders very much engaged in violence.

It is not necessarily obvious how to resolve this tension. One strategy, of course, would be to ignore the tension and to simply avoid thinking about it. But a sacred text requires more from us than that. So the apparent disparity has to be faced. How is it possible to reconcile Captain Moroni with the Sermon on the Mount?



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Captain Moroni and the Sermon on the Mount

Resolving a Scriptural Tension

Duane Boyce

A natural tension seems to exist between two important features of the Book of Mormon. On one hand, Mormon includes in his record a version of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus gave to the Nephites—an address that sets the standard for discipleship and that contains teachings obviously opposed to violence.¹ In it, we hear about not resisting evil, turning the other cheek, going another mile when compelled to go one, loving our enemies—and so forth (3 Ne. 12:39–44). On the other hand, Mormon also presents various Nephite leaders as righteous even though they were *immersed* in violence. Captain Moroni stands out among these leaders because his wartime activities dominate the last third of the book of Alma: we see him in significant detail.

The juxtaposition of these two threads appears contradictory. We see righteous men, including prophetic figures, engaged in the very activities that the text itself seems to prohibit. And this apparent contradiction seems significant even though most of these leaders lived before the Sermon was even given. This is because it is natural to think of the Book of Mormon as a whole—as a collection of significant experiences and teachings that are consistent with one another and that together present a unified, divine message to the world. We thus expect to see

1. Although there are two different presentations of this sermon, the Nephite and New Testament versions are virtually identical in the passage that is relevant to my topic (3 Ne. 12:39–44 and Matt. 5:39–44). For this reason, and because it is the most common way to speak about these teachings, I will simply refer to “the Sermon on the Mount.” That there are actually two presentations of this sermon should be understood.

the book's most prominent leaders actually live the standard found in the book's most prominent teachings—whether they actually possessed the Sermon on the Mount or not.² And therein lies the problem. Although these prominent teachings clearly seem to be opposed to violence, we see these prominent leaders very much engaged in violence.

It is not necessarily obvious how to resolve this tension. One strategy, of course, would be to ignore the tension and to simply avoid thinking about it. But a sacred text requires more from us than that. So the apparent disparity has to be faced. How is it possible to reconcile Captain Moroni with the Sermon on the Mount?³

Mormon's Perspective

In thinking about this question, it is useful to recognize an important element of the text at the outset—namely, that although modern readers might see a tension between these threads, Mormon himself apparently did not. He gives no indication that he believed there was a conflict between the Sermon on the Mount—which *he* included in the text—and the conduct of multiple Nephite leaders who engaged in conflict. Nowhere does he criticize the wartime involvement or behavior of any Nephite leader—a list that includes Nephi, King Benjamin, Alma, Ammon, Captain Moroni, Teancum, Lehi, Helaman, Lachoneus, Gidgiddoni, Moroni (the son of Mormon), and Mormon himself. If he had wanted to contrast the behavior of Nephite leaders with the standard taught in the Sermon on the Mount, or at least to express reservations about their conduct on this basis, he had plenty of occasion to do so. Mormon never does this, however, and even goes out of his way to praise Captain Moroni for his spiritual qualities—and he does so specifically in the context of Moroni's

2. Note, for example, that Mormon and Moroni certainly possessed the Sermon on the Mount, and yet, when faced with conflict, they behaved no differently than earlier Nephite leaders had behaved. This suggests that possession of the Sermon itself is not an important line of demarcation between earlier and later Nephite leaders. We can consider them as a group. And the question about them, then, is not whether they, or any subset of them, actually possessed the Sermon, but only whether they lived the *standard* that appears in it.

3. Although they do not normally frame the matter in terms of the Sermon on the Mount specifically, writers have long wrestled with the problem of Christianity and war. See, for example, John Howard Yoder's historical treatise, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2009). Latter-day Saint writers have done the same. For a brief introduction, see appendix A.

wartime efforts (Alma 48:11–18). He does the same regarding King Benjamin, calling him a “holy man” while simultaneously describing his leadership in war (W of M 1:13–18). That Mormon does this, and that he never criticizes any Nephite leader’s wartime involvement, suggests that we should not be quick to do so either.⁴ This seems especially the case when we remember that Mormon not only possessed the Sermon on the Mount but also enjoyed a spiritual status and nearness to the Lord that is quite breathtaking.⁵

This point regarding Mormon is important because, on the face of it, one tempting path for reconciling the apparent conflict between the Sermon on the Mount and Nephite leaders’ engagement in war would be to conclude that these leaders were simply wrong; whatever their other qualities, they did not live up to the Lord’s most important teachings.⁶ However, since this was quite evidently not Mormon’s own view,

4. It should also be noted that Mormon’s lack of criticism cannot be attributed to a general aversion to criticizing people he thought deserved it. His record contains numerous observations of people’s wickedness (see, for example, Alma 17:14; 30:60; 43:6; 46:8–10; 47:4; 48:24; 50:21; Hel. 4:11–13; 6:2, 31, 35; 3 Ne. 2:1–3; Morm. 3:9–12; 4:11–12; Moro. 9:7–20). Indeed, in one place he devotes an entire chapter to denouncing mortals’ tendency to wickedness (Hel. 12). All of this suggests that Mormon would have been comfortable criticizing various Nephite leaders if he had wanted to.

5. Mormon “was visited of the Lord” at the age of fifteen (Morm. 1:15), he taught canonized doctrine by the power of the Spirit (for example, Hel. 12; 3 Ne. 29, 30; Morm. 7; Moro. 7–9), he was visited by the Three Nephites (3 Ne. 28:24–26), he received multiple revelations from the Lord (for example, 3 Ne. 30; Moro. 8:7–9; W of M 1:6–7), and he was entrusted with the responsibility of crafting the primary historical and doctrinal instrument for gathering Israel in the latter days.

6. Adopting a narrative approach to the Book of Mormon, Joshua Madson argues for this general kind of view. See his “A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon,” 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. He argues that the Book of Mormon is not actually a self-consistent whole, but instead a developing narrative (with a beginning, a middle, and an end) whose overall message of nonviolence can only be discerned by attending to particular instances of the Lord’s teachings in 3 Nephi (specifically what the Lord says in 3 Ne. 9:19–20) and to how the book ends in violence. Seeing this developing narrative, including the collapse of Nephite civilization through violence at the end, is how the book is to be read as a “whole”—a reading that is said to convey a clear message of nonviolence. Derived in this way, this overall nonviolent theme of the book is said to supersede and correct any parts of the text that are inconsistent with it, such as Nephite leaders’ involvement in war. For an analysis of this argument and why it does not succeed, see Duane Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), chapters 8 and 9.

and since he created the record in the first place, we should be cautious about simply defaulting to this conclusion. It seems preferable to see if we can gain the kind of perspective Mormon himself apparently had on these features of his text.⁷

To do this would seem to require just a few steps. These steps involve the following: noticing certain features of the scriptural record that might be easy to overlook, making explicit an elementary moral distinction (that we actually draw tacitly all the time), making sure we are thinking carefully about the Sermon on the Mount itself, and being clear about the wartime conduct of Book of Mormon leaders, including Captain Moroni. All of this can be seen as we proceed through six central topics.

1. The Savior's Personal Conduct

Because the Lord's teachings speak of turning the other cheek and of loving our enemies, as well as of other charitable responses to mistreatment, it is easy to think that the Sermon teaches an ethic of complete nonviolence.⁸ Two aspects of the scriptural record seem to demonstrate that this perception is mistaken, however.

The Lord Gave the Sermon . . . and He Exercises Violence

The most obvious indicator that there is no intrinsic conflict between the Sermon on the Mount and violence per se is the Lord's own behavior. He, after all, exercises violence, and he *gave* the Sermon. From the destruction at the time of Noah (Gen. 7:13; Moses 7:34, 43) to his destruction of numerous Nephite cities following his Crucifixion (3 Ne. 9:3–12) to the destruction he will visit on the wicked incident to his Second

7. In one place, Mormon says to his latter-day readers that "ye must lay down your weapons of war," which might be taken to indicate his rejection of violence. But of course he immediately goes on to say that we should not take them up again "save it be that God shall command you" (Morm. 7:4)—a command that, as we will see in section 1, the Lord explicitly gave to the Nephites and that Mormon records. And of course, Mormon himself took up arms in defense of his people after making this statement in Mormon 7. (Mormon specifically identifies the "remnant of the house of Israel" as his audience in this passage [Morm. 7:1], but his remarks about taking up arms would seem to have application to people generally.)

8. This is what Eugene England thought, for example. See his "Hugh Nibley as Cassandra," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1990): 104–16. A more recent expression is found in Joshua Madson, "A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon."

Coming⁹—to multiple episodes in between¹⁰—the Lord demonstrates his willingness to employ violence. It would seem evident, therefore, that the Sermon—which *he* gave—cannot be a denunciation of violence *per se*. He, at least, is morally permitted to exercise that kind of conduct.

***The Lord Instructs His People to Defend Themselves,
and He Helps Them Do So***

The Lord does not limit this propriety to himself, however. More than once he has told his followers that there are times when they, too, can exercise violence: specifically, when they are forced to defend themselves against aggression. He told the Nephites that “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 also that “ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed” (Alma 43:46–47). Captain Moroni thus explained that it was explicitly because of God’s commandments that he took up the sword to defend the cause of his country (Alma 60:28, 34) and that resisting Lamanite invasion was “the cause of our God” (Alma 54:10). We also see that Moroni went to battle against traitors in the government precisely because the Lord instructed him in an explicit revelation to do so (Alma 60:33).¹¹

This theme is corroborated in Doctrine and Covenants 134:11 as well as in 98:33–36, where the Lord speaks of appropriate defense as “the law” he has given over the earth’s history. Moreover, speaking of the prediction that in the last days it will be “army . . . against army,” the Prophet Joseph Smith remarked, “It may be that the saints will have to beat their ploughs into swords, for it will not do for men to sit down [patiently] and see their women and children destroyed.”¹²

9. For example, Malachi 4:1; Isaiah 11:4; 66:15–16; 1 Nephi 22:23; 2 Nephi 30:10; Doctrine and Covenants 1:13; 29:17; 45:50; 63:34; 133:50–51.

10. See, for example, Exodus 9, 12, 14; John 2:14–17; Matthew 21:12–13; Jacob 7:15–20; Alma 19:21–23; Alma 33:10.

11. Some modern writers assert that Moroni’s report of this revelation is flawed. See, for example, Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 176, 177, and Kindle location 6815. In a recent paper, I have demonstrated why this view is a mistake, however. See Duane Boyce, “Captain Moroni’s Revelation,” *BYU Studies Quarterly*, 58, no. 4 (2019): 155–59.

12. “History, 1838–1856, Volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844],” 19, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/25>. This quotation is taken from Thomas Bullock’s report, which is the most complete firsthand record of the sermon. See also Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo*

The Lord's approving attitude toward his people's defense of themselves is further evident in the help he gives them. Because of the Lord's command to the Nephites "to defend your families even unto bloodshed" (Alma 43:47), they understood that, as they were faithful, the Lord would warn them "to flee, or to prepare for war, according to their danger" and that he would actually tell them "whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies" (Alma 48:15–16)—and the text records more than one incident of exactly this type (Alma 16:6–8; 43:23–24). The Book of Mormon also reports numerous incidents when the Lord strengthened and helped the Nephites in battle against their aggressors, including strengthening Alma in his hand-to-hand combat with Amlici (Alma 2:29–31).¹³ In each of these cases, the record directly attributes the Nephites' strength and success in waging battle to the Lord.

Thus, although the Lord gave the Sermon on the Mount, the scriptural record depicts him as not only exercising violence himself but also as commanding—and helping—his people defend themselves with violence when necessary. Such features of the scriptural record clearly preclude the idea that the Lord's Sermon prohibits violence in itself: the Lord cannot really be forbidding in the Sermon what he himself explicitly teaches and does elsewhere. To read the Sermon as a condemnation of all violence is a mistake because doing so entails that it is a condemnation of the Lord himself.

2. The Moral Difference between Aggressors and Victims

The Sermon on the Mount, then, does not prohibit violence per se. It obviously does not follow from this, however, that it permits all violence in any circumstance. We can start to see what the dividing line might be by noticing the fundamental moral distinction between acts of aggression and acts of defense. Most recognize, for instance, that the violent conduct of a victim who is defending herself against rape is nothing

Discourses of the Prophet Joseph (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 367. The report of this statement in the Joseph Smith Papers places the word "patiently" at the end of the statement: "[I]t may be that the saints will have to beat their ploughs into swords, for it will not do for men to sit down and see their women and children destroyed patiently." I have changed placement of the word "patiently" to capture the obvious intent of the statement and thus to improve its clarity.

13. Passages that either report or presuppose the Lord's help include Words of Mormon 1:13–14; Mosiah 1:13–14; Alma 2:16–19, 28; 44:3–5; 57:25–26, 35, 36; 58:10–12, 33, 37, 39; 59:3; 60:20–21; 61:13, 21; Helaman 4:24–25; 7:22; 12:2; 3 Nephi 3:15, 21, 25; 4:10, 31, 33; Mormon 3:3, 15.

like the violent conduct of her assailant. Both might be acting violently, but, morally speaking, few would think to compare their actions. Nor would we compare the conduct of a victim—who, say, is merely defending himself against being murdered—with the conduct of the aggressor who is attempting to murder him.

Such distinctions are codified in criminal law because we recognize a fundamental distinction between aggressors and victims. They have a different moral status. Aggressors, after all, are *violating* the rights of their victims, whereas victims—when all they do is fight back to defend themselves—are only *defending* certain rights. Although both might be committing violent acts, their acts are not morally equivalent. Because aggressors and victims have a different moral status, their *acts* have a different moral status.¹⁴

This is why, although both Alma and Amlici exercised violence toward one another (Alma 2), including in hand-to-hand combat (vv. 29–31), Amlici was wrong, and Alma was right. Although both wielded swords, their wieldings were not remotely the same. One was an aggressor, seeking to overthrow, slay, and subjugate the Nephites, while the other was merely defending *against* that aggression. And, of course, the Lord actually intervened to help Alma in his defense (vv. 30–31). As we saw above in section 1, this is something he did with regard to the Nephites generally. Thus, while the Nephites were prohibited from committing acts of aggression or offense themselves (see 3 Ne. 3:20 and Morm. 3:14),¹⁵ the Lord specifically approved the violence necessary for the Nephites to defend themselves.

It can help to think of all this in terms of simple mistreatment. When aggressors attack their victims, it is obvious that they are mistreating them. But there is no sense in which victims, in merely defending themselves, are mistreating their attackers. How does it *mistreat* a would-be murderer to prevent him from murdering you?

All of this helps us see why the Lord can support and even direct violence in certain circumstances while forbidding it in others: some acts of violence are immoral, while others are not, and the Lord, so it would seem, treats them accordingly.¹⁶

14. This is the case to the extent that defensive acts are genuinely defensive. If they move from being defensive to becoming their own acts of hostility and aggression, they lose their defensive status and the moral status that goes along with it.

15. This prohibition is also presupposed in Alma 43:46–47.

16. Although the difference between aggressors and victims is a common-sense distinction, my personal thinking on the matter derives from important works stretching

3. The Sermon on the Mount and the Righteous State of Heart

With these clarifications about violence in mind—both regarding the Lord’s attitude and conduct and regarding the distinction between aggressors and victims—we can turn our attention to the Sermon on the Mount itself.

To begin, note that part of the reason the Sermon seems to contradict the behavior of Captain Moroni and others is that it is easy to assume that its instructions (for example, turn the other cheek) are meant to apply to every dimension and scale of life. Coupled with this is the additional tendency to think that the same instructions are behavior oriented—that they are about our physical conduct. If we think this way, it is natural to suppose that if the Lord prohibits something as small as slapping someone in return for their having slapped us, then it obviously must be wrong to do something *more* violent than this—for instance, to take up the sword to actually kill someone. If mere slapping is forbidden, how could something like wielding a sword *not* be forbidden—indeed, forbidden even more stringently?

If we assume the Sermon’s injunctions apply to every scale of life and that they are about behavior per se, this is a natural conclusion to draw. Actually, though, there is no reason to make these assumptions. Two elements of the Sermon suggest a completely different line of thinking.

The Scope Presupposed by the Sermon on the Mount

Notice, first, the kind of circumstance the Sermon presupposes. The Lord does not use images of serious threats to one’s life or limb (for example, rape and murder) in his teachings; much less does he employ images of peril to a whole society. The scale of life the Lord chooses to speak of is the scale of everyday living. He thus speaks of cheeks and smiting and cloaks and second miles, not of raping and killing and military devastation. This scope is evident not only in the examples the Lord selects but also in the audience he is addressing. These are normal, everyday citizens faced with the circumstances of ordinary life. He is not addressing them as heads of state confronted with the complexities of international relations, including that of protecting the lives of their citizens.¹⁷

from Kant, Buber, and Levinas to Constant, Foot, Anscombe, Thompson, Kamm, Fried, and Dworkin. A deeper discussion does not seem required for present purposes, however. I will be content if my remarks correspond to most readers’ considered judgments.

17. Classical writers have typically considered the scope of these injunctions, as found in the New Testament, to be narrow as well. For a sample, see appendix B.

Because the scope of the Lord's Sermon is limited in this way, its specific injunctions simply do not "map" more extreme circumstances. Turning the other cheek is the proper behavioral response when the issue is one of slapping, but in extreme circumstances the issue is *not* one of slapping. It is one of rape or murder or genocide. We have already seen that the Lord clearly countenances and even commands his people to defend themselves in violent circumstances of that sort. This in itself indicates (1) that the Lord is presupposing something other than violent circumstances in this sermon and (2) that its specific injunctions, therefore, are not intended to cover every possible situation. His own conduct and commandments demonstrate this.¹⁸

The Focus of the Sermon on the Mount

In addition to presupposing a limited scope, the injunctions in the Sermon on the Mount are not really about specific *behaviors* in the first place. They actually teach a larger point than just what to do if someone literally slaps us on the cheek. The prescriptions are metaphorical expressions that teach us a certain way of *living*, evoking in us a sense of the kind of people we are to be.¹⁹ N. T. Wright describes them as sketches that simply give us the general idea of what the Lord wants.²⁰ This becomes more

18. Along with key passages in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Book of Mormon is the most decisive witness of this claim (see section 1 above: "The Savior's Personal Conduct"). Nevertheless, this point has been evident to Christian writers even though they have not had the benefit of these modern scriptures. This is one reason both Augustine (354–430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)—both of whom knew the Sermon on the Mount well—could justify entering war to defend against aggression. Indeed, they are the ancient architects of what has come to be called "just-war theory." Augustine himself coined the term "just war" (see *The City of God* 19.7, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120119.htm>), and Aquinas further developed the concept centuries later (see St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros., 1947), second part of the second part, question 40, esp. article 1, <https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/SS/SSo40.html#SSQ40OUTP1>).

19. Although I am relying on the account in the Book of Mormon, commentators on the New Testament have long made this kind of point about this passage in the Sermon on the Mount. For remarks by Augustine and Aquinas, see appendix C.

20. Of course, Wright is commenting specifically on the New Testament version of the Sermon, but, as mentioned earlier (note 1), the relevant verses are virtually identical to those found in 3 Nephi. For his comments, see N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, part one (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 49–53. Ellicott's nineteenth-century commentary sees it the same way: the Sermon is not a code of laws, but an expression of principles—the central core of which is that we are to eliminate from ourselves the natural desire for

obvious when the Lord follows these images with an explicit description of the deep attitude they exemplify. “Love your enemies,” he instructs; “bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you” (3 Ne. 12:44). And this, of course, simply reflects what he had said earlier: it is not enough that we simply not kill (that is, murder) our brother;²¹ we are condemned by the Lord if we are even angry with him (3 Ne. 12:21–22). And he said the same about adultery and lusting (vv. 27–28). The Lord is teaching a higher standard than simply avoiding certain kinds of behavior; he cares about who we are *inside*. “Suffer none of these things to enter into your *heart*,” he emphasized (3 Ne. 12:29, emphasis added).

The Sermon on the Mount thus pertains primarily to a certain condition of heart—not to specific behavior itself.²² Toward the Lord, this condition is characterized by a responsiveness to his Spirit and a humility and earnestness in trying to follow him. Toward others, it is characterized by charity and unselfishness—by an attitude of patience and longsuffering rather than of spitefulness and vengeance.²³

4. The Righteous State of Heart and Violent Conduct

Because the Sermon on the Mount does not pertain to behavior *per se*, its specific injunctions (such as turn the other cheek) are limited in scope: they do not apply universally but are meant for matters of

retaliation. See C. J. Ellicott, *New Testament Commentary for English Readers* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1878), 29 (commentary on Matthew 5:39), <https://archive.org/details/new-testamentcommo1elli/page/28> and <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/matthew/5.htm>.

21. The Hebrew word used in this commandment is roughly equivalent to “unlawful killing.” The commandment is not a prohibition against killing *per se* but against murder.

22. This is apparent for an additional reason. New Testament commentators (William F. Albright, for instance) frequently point out the meaning of specific references in this passage to the circumstances of the Jews (for example, the Roman customs of slapping and of forced labor), and yet the Lord repeated these same expressions to the Nephites—who experienced no such customs from Roman occupiers. This indicates that the specifics of these edicts are secondary and that what matters is the state of heart they exemplify. Additionally, a strict and literal reading of such edicts would also make the Sermon more of an addition to the Law of Moses—with its detailed behavioral requirements—than a replacement of it. We would just have *new* rules—about slapping, walking two miles, giving two articles of clothing, and so forth—along with all the previous rules. I am indebted to Kim Sloan for this observation. For Albright’s commentary on the Near Eastern context of these edicts, see his *Matthew: A New Translation by W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann*, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 68–70.

23. This emphasis on the heart—on who we are inside—is true of scriptural teachings generally. For a brief introduction, see appendix D.

everyday life. What *does* apply universally is what these injunctions teach us about the proper state of heart. What we seem to learn from the Lord's Sermon is that we are to approach all situations—both everyday and extreme—with an attitude of humility and earnestness toward following the Lord and an attitude of patience and unselfishness toward others. In matters of ordinary life *and* in situations of violence, we are to possess the righteous state of heart.

Such a condition of heart does not prohibit all violent conduct, however. As we saw earlier, although the Lord's state of heart is not only righteous but perfect, he himself commits acts of violence. We see this in the mild violence he exercised in the temple: wielding a whip, turning over tables, and threatening those who were present (John 2:14–17; see also Matt. 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46). But we also see it in far more violent acts than just clearing the temple. As we saw above in section 1, he has destroyed countless lives over the history of the earth and will do so again at the end.

Since the Lord performs such acts with a perfect and devoted heart, it should not be surprising that mortals can be expected to possess a righteous state of heart under violent circumstances as well—situations in which the Lord countenances and even commands the violence necessary for self-defense.²⁴

Certainly we see this state of heart in the lives of prophets like Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. All of them engaged in defensive war and yet all of them enjoyed visions, revelations, and angelic ministrations.²⁵ It would seem unlikely that the Lord would bless them with such divine experiences if they had not approached even the most desperate circumstances with the heart the Lord expects of us.

We see the same spiritual condition in King Benjamin. Many write and speak of his saintly demeanor in the early chapters of Mosiah. What might be less familiar is the degree to which he was forced to engage in war prior to this time. The record tells us that “armies of the Lamanites” came against King Benjamin's people and that King Benjamin therefore “gathered together his armies,” fought “with the strength of his own arm,” contended “in the strength of the Lord,” slew with his army

24. Note the Lord's statement to the Nephites in one situation that “*ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed*” (Alma 43:47, emphasis added). The Lord's attitude toward self-defense is an important topic, and I have treated it at length in Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed*, particularly chapter 7.

25. See, for example, 1 Nephi 11–14; 2 Ne. 4:23–25; 11:3; 25; 26:1–22; 28–30; 31:10–15; Helaman 12; 3 Nephi 30; Mormon 1:15; 7; 8:10–11; Ether 12:39; Moroni 8:7–9.

“many thousands of the Lamanites,” and contended against the invading armies until “they had driven them out of all the lands of their inheritance” (W of M 1:13–14). And specifically around the time of these wars, Mormon explicitly describes King Benjamin as reigning over his people “in righteousness”—indeed, as a “holy man” (W of M 1:17).

From Nephi to King Benjamin to Mormon and Moroni, all of these spiritual figures would seem to exemplify the condition of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount. And yet, with such hearts, all of them took up the sword to defend their people against Lamanite assault.

5. The Conduct of Book of Mormon Leaders

If the wartime behavior of various prophetic leaders flowed from the state of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount, we would expect it to show in how they conducted themselves in war. And this is in fact what the record shows. Three general themes emerge when we consider the actions of prominent figures in the Book of Mormon.

Personal Righteousness and Encouragement of Righteousness in Others

An obvious feature of the text is the frequency with which *prophets* led their people in defense against aggression. Nephi, Alma, Helaman, Lachoneus, Gidgiddoni, Mormon, and Moroni all held the highest spiritual designation, and they all actively led people in war. Their spiritual devotion is obvious. And that devotion was reflected in their efforts to help their people repent and develop the same spiritual earnestness. During a period when the Nephites were under threat from the robbers of Gadianton, for example, the first action taken by Lachoneus was to “cause that his people should cry unto the Lord” and to teach them to “repent of all [their] iniquities” (3 Ne. 3:12–15). Some two or three years later, when the Nephites had finally prevailed against those robbers, “they knew it was because of their repentance and their humility that they had been delivered from an everlasting destruction” (3 Ne. 4:33).

Similarly, Helaman, who led armies during one long stretch of war (including leading the Ammonites’ sons in battle), first engaged in an explicit effort to help the Nephites repent and humble themselves before the Lord as they faced the Lamanite threat (Alma 48:1–6, 19–20). Mormon, too, famously exhorted his people to repentance as they faced danger (for example, Morm. 3:1–3).

All such efforts were completely consistent with the early promise to Nephi, which explicitly required remembrance of God (1 Ne. 2:19–24).

This promise was highly familiar to later Nephite leaders,²⁶ and creating this spiritual remembrance was consistently their concern in leading the Nephites—including in preparing them to thwart aggressors’ assaults.

The same spiritual devotion is evident even earlier in Shule—an important figure in the history of the Jaredites—who was involved to a considerable degree in war. We are told that he “did execute judgment in righteousness” (Ether 7:11), that he provided protection to prophets who had been sent to declare repentance to the people so that they “were brought unto repentance” (Ether 7:25), and that he “did execute judgment in righteousness all his days” (Ether 7:27).

Generosity of Spirit

The story of Shule also introduces a second theme common to righteous Book of Mormon leaders who engaged in war. In addition to his spiritual devotion, we see a surprising generosity of spirit in Shule’s dealings with his enemies. He eventually reclaimed the kingdom of his father from his treacherous older brother (who had plundered it years earlier), and then, when that brother repented, Shule forgave him and even gave him authority in the restored kingdom (Ether 7:1–13). In the course of additional family drama over a period of years, which included wars and multiple shifts in Jaredite power, Shule again showed remarkable expansiveness of soul in the wake of the treachery and threat that had been imposed upon him (Ether 7:14–22).

Think also of prophets Jacob, Enos, Mormon, and Moroni. All of them experienced repeated aggression from the Lamanites, and yet all were motivated to make and preserve sacred records *specifically in order to bless them*.²⁷ This is particularly poignant in Moroni’s case: he was preparing records to bless the Lamanites in the latter days at the very time the Lamanites were hunting him down to kill him (Morm. 8:2; Moro. 1:1–3; 10:1, 32–33).

26. Some version of this promise is explicitly reported twenty different times in the Book of Mormon. It is mentioned by seven different figures, in seven different books, in six different centuries. See 1 Nephi 4:14; 2 Nephi 1:9, 20; 5:20, 25; Jarom 1:9; Omni 1:6; Mosiah 1:7; 2:22, 31; Alma 9:13–14, 24; 36:1, 30; 37:13; 38:1; 48:25; 50:20–21; 3 Nephi 5:22. My thanks to Royal Skousen for assisting me in identifying this list.

27. See Jacob 7:24; 4:2–3; Enos 1:11–17; Words of Mormon 1:6–8; Mormon 7; Moroni 1:4; 10:1; title page.

Defensive Fighting Only

A third characteristic of righteous Book of Mormon leaders is that they were never motivated by greed or the desire for power in their military conduct but only by defense. This was true of Shule (see Ether 7) as well as of all the righteous Nephite leaders who came later. We already observed above in section 2 the difference between the aggression of Amlici and the defensive posture of Alma and the Nephites he led (Alma 2). We see the same in Mormon, who, as the Nephites faced dire circumstances, urged “them with great energy . . . [to] fight for their wives, and their children, and their houses, and their homes” (Morm. 2:23). Whereas their enemies sought for power and subjugation, the Nephites were urged by Mormon only to defend sacred matters of life, family, and freedom.²⁸

Ammon’s story, in particular, is interesting in this respect. Although he embarked on his mission to the Lamanites with a desire to share the gospel with them, that didn’t stop him from wielding a sword and killing enemies when circumstances became threatening and defense was required. Nevertheless, Ammon never harmed or even threatened anyone for selfish reasons of power or gain or self-aggrandizement. He took up the sword only when defense required it (Alma 17:19–39; 20:1–27).

28. This description of the difference between Lamanite and Nephite motives in war does not overstate the matter. The text depicts the Lamanites as prone to attack and wage war against the Nephites from the beginning. In the very earliest days, Nephi himself had to fight to defend his people from Lamanite assault (Jacob 1:10; also 2 Ne. 5:14), and aggressive wars are also reported by Jacob (Jacob 7:24), Enos (Enos 1:20), Jarom (Jarom 1:6), Abinadom (Omni 1:10), Amaleki (Omni 1:24), Zeniff (Mosiah 9–10, 19–21), and Mormon (W of M 1:13–14). This is a record of aggression starting centuries before the detailed reports we get in Alma’s time and spanning the first four hundred and sixty years or so of Book of Mormon history. We also know from multiple reports that the Lamanites were motivated by hatred in their assaults on the Nephites (Jacob 3:7; 7:24; Enos 1:14, 20; Jarom 1:6; Mosiah 1:14; Alma 26:9; 4 Ne. 1:39) and that they “delighted in murdering the Nephites” (Alma 17:14). Captain Moroni also reports at one point that the Lamanites are “murdering our people with the sword,” including “our women and our children” (Alma 60:17). Indeed, we learn that Moroni, and the Nephites generally, fought to prevent their wives and their children from being “massacred by the barbarous cruelty” of those who would destroy them (Alma 48:24) and that this was one of the Lamanites’ explicit aims—to “slay and massacre” the Nephites (Alma 49:7). Indeed, one Lamanite leader (a Nephite dissenter who joined the Lamanites and stoked their anger against the Nephites) declared that the Lamanites’ aggression would be “eternal”—it would continue either to the complete subjugation of the Nephites or to their “eternal extinction” (Alma 54:20).

This was true of all recorded Nephite leaders. Gidgiddoni prohibited the Nephites from starting war themselves, even though they were under constant threat of assault and murder from the robbers of Gadanton (3 Ne. 3:20–21). Similarly, centuries later, Mormon refused to lead the Nephites in battle once they became hostile in outlook and were motivated by the desire for vengeance (Morm. 3:14–16). Indeed, the single indication we have of the Nephites apparently aggressing against the Lamanites occurred at this time (Morm. 4:1–4). It is significant, however, that, in addition to being very late in Book of Mormon history, this was also a rogue action. The apparent aggression explicitly violated Nephite principles, occurred in violation of Mormon’s personal command, and was conducted in the absence of properly constituted Nephite leadership—authority that resided in Mormon, who was refusing to lead them.²⁹

In short, the Nephites repeatedly found themselves embroiled in conflict simply because they were repeatedly defending themselves against enemy assault. Indeed, as Hugh Nibley observed long ago, all wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites occurred on Nephite lands: they were the result of Lamanite invasions.³⁰ This was true for all instances, through a thousand years of history, except for the one rogue episode cited above in which they were not led by anyone in actual authority.

The difference between Nephite and Lamanite societies is displayed even in those cases where Nephite dissenters led the Lamanites into war against the Nephites. Examples include the Amalekites and Amulonites

29. Although an army of Nephites once set out to attack the Lamanites who were settled in the land of Nephi—so that they might retake that land—no attack ever materialized. Indeed, led by Zeniff, one faction of this party actually went to battle with others to prevent any attack on the Lamanites, and they succeeded (Mosiah 9:1–2). We are not told how this army originated or on whose authority it was acting. We do know, however, (1) that its leader was completely unlike other leaders actually named in the record—from Nephi and King Benjamin to Alma, Gidgiddoni, and Mormon—since he is explicitly described as “austere” and “bloodthirsty” (Mosiah 9:2), and (2) that, due to objections within its own ranks (resulting in the forceful overthrow of those wanting to attack the Lamanites), no attack ever occurred.

30. For Nibley’s observation, see “Warfare and the Book of Mormon,” in Hugh Nibley, *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, ed. Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994), 294; see also Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988), 298; and “Freemen and King-men in the Book of Mormon,” in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1989), 354.

(Alma 24), the Amalekites (Alma 27), the Zoramites and Amalekites (Alma 43–44), Amalickiah (Alma 46–51), Ammoron (Alma 52–62), and Coriantumr (Hel. 1). In addition, although they are not named, the text records additional instances of Nephite dissenters who were highly instrumental in fomenting Lamanite aggression (see Alma 63:14–15, Hel. 4, and Hel. 11). The Book of Mormon records no instances in which agitators gained power by stirring the Nephites up to anger and prodding them into war against the Lamanites. There are numerous examples, however, of such dissidents doing exactly that with the Lamanites toward the Nephites.

All of this—based on the record we have—highlights an important distinction between Nephite and Lamanite societies: Lamanite unrighteousness consisted at least partly in large-scale invasion, attack, and murder—including, on a smaller scale, acts of spoliation and plunder—while Nephite unrighteousness did not. Moreover, although Nephite dissenters had significant success in prodding Lamanites into war against the Nephites, there is no example of the opposite occurring.

The text thus shows us that the pattern of war between the Nephites and Lamanites was not a cycle of violence in which the two populations took turns attacking each other. The pattern, over a thousand years, was actually one in which the Nephites routinely had to *defend* against attack. Indeed, fighting only in defense was a Nephite principle.³¹ Thus, while we saw earlier that King Benjamin took up the sword, this was only because his people were under attack from Lamanite armies. His wartime behavior was not aggressive, but defensive, motivated purely by the responsibility to protect his people from attack and murder.³²

31. Years after the events mentioned in note 29, and after Zeniff and another party of Nephites had been granted permission by the Lamanites to settle among them in the land of Nephi, “a numerous host of Lamanites” attacked and killed some people of Zeniff who “were watering and feeding their flocks, and tilling their lands” (Mosiah 9:14). Zeniff and his people formed an army at this time and drove the Lamanites out of their appointed land, slaying many of them. Thus began a series of subsequent conflicts—yet even here it is noteworthy that the clash was initiated by Lamanites (1) entering land that was legitimately occupied by the Nephites, (2) killing the Nephites who dwelt there, (3) stealing the Nephites’ goods (in this case “flocks, and the corn of their fields”), and (4) having then to be driven out by force of arms. Zeniff was not one of the Nephites’ prophetic leaders, but even he is not a counterexample to the way such Nephites behaved in terms of defensive fighting.

32. It might seem that Captain Moroni was the aggressor on occasion, but we will see in the following section, “The Conduct of Captain Moroni,” that this was not the case.

State of Heart and Extreme Circumstances

These three themes in the wartime behavior of Book of Mormon leaders teach us something important about the state of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount. After all, we already appreciate, at least in a general sense, what it means to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to turn the other cheek, and so forth in the *ordinary* circumstances of life. We understand that we are to be patient and unselfish toward others and that we are to resist the temptation for retaliation when we suffer insult, for example. But it is more difficult to understand what this state of heart means in the *extreme* circumstances of life. It is natural to wonder what an attitude of unselfishness and patience looks like when aggressors (1) repeatedly invade one's country; (2) seek to murder men, women, and children; (3) explicitly pursue overthrow of one's gospel-founded society; and (4) plan to replace that society with a culture that is united in open hatred of one's people and their gospel roots.³³

Book of Mormon leaders give us a good picture of what the righteous state of heart looks like in exactly such circumstances, however. As we have seen, all of these prophets and other righteous leaders (1) were personally devoted to the Lord (and implored their people to be the same), (2) were surprisingly generous in the way they dealt with their assailants, and (3) engaged only in defending their people and themselves—they did not start aggressive wars of their own and were not motivated by greed, power, or a spirit of vengeance. This is true of leaders from Shule and King Benjamin to Mormon and Moroni.

Such characteristics are impressive. It is fair to say that these leaders lived the principles taught in the Sermon on the Mount, at least to the degree that any mortal can, in the extreme circumstances that were forced upon them. Indeed, it would seem that their behavior demonstrates what living up to the Sermon simply *meant* in their threatening and violent circumstances.

A Note on the Ammonites (Anti-Nephi-Lehies)

Now, it might be tempting to think that the Sermon on the Mount is actually best exemplified in the conduct of the Ammonites, not that of Alma, Mormon, King Benjamin, and others. After all, allowing themselves to be killed seems a direct instantiation of the instruction to “turn

33. Again, this way of putting it does not overstate the matter. See note 28.

the other cheek” and thus might seem superior to the defensive fighting seen in King Benjamin and other Nephite leaders.

This conclusion would seem to be a mistake, however. A careful reading of the text indicates that the Ammonites were actually not opposed to violence in principle. The reason the Ammonite men allowed themselves to be killed—perhaps the most dramatic episode in the Book of Mormon—is that they were a people who were repenting of murder. Their repudiation of violence was a token of their penitence for past acts of aggression and violence against the Nephites; refusing to take up arms, even in self-defense, was a part of their repentance.³⁴

The Ammonites are wonderfully impressive, of course. They supply what must certainly be among the most inspiring examples of repentance, contrition, humility, and sustained devotion to the Lord that can be found anywhere in scripture. Nevertheless, their attitude toward war was actually no different than the attitude of Alma, King Benjamin, and other Nephite leaders. Their outward behavior was materially different only because their past was materially different.³⁵

6. The Conduct of Captain Moroni

The themes we see in Nephite leaders generally, then, are (1) personal righteousness and the encouragement of righteousness in those they led, (2) generosity of spirit toward their attackers, and (3) confinement to defensive fighting. These, it would seem, are expressions of the state of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount as applied to extreme circumstances. What does the text show us about Captain Moroni?

34. I have developed these points at length in other publications, each with a somewhat different slant. See Duane Boyce, “The Ammonites Were Not Pacifists,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 293–313; “Were the Ammonites Pacifists?” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18, no. 1 (2009): 32–47; and Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed*, chapters 4 and 5, where I go into the greatest detail.

35. This is one reason, among others, why the view advanced by J. David Pulsipher in an earlier paper does not succeed. He argues that the Book of Mormon exhibits a continuum of acceptable approaches to aggression, with active defense on one end of the spectrum and pacifist response (the more divine approach) on the other end. In addition to other difficulties, however, this argument appeals for support to the pacifism of the Ammonites when, in fact, the Ammonites were not pacifists. For Pulsipher’s discussion, see J. David Pulsipher, “The Ammonite Conundrum,” in Mason, Pulsipher, and Bushman, *War and Peace in Our Time*, 1–12.

Personal Righteousness and Encouragement of Righteousness in Others

Here is a sample of what we see in the text regarding Captain Moroni's spiritual devotion:

1. He engages in "mighty" prayer (Alma 46:13, 16, 17).
2. He receives revelation from the Lord in the form of a full sentence (Alma 60:33).³⁶
3. He writes "In memory of our God" as the first words on the title of liberty (Alma 46:12).
4. He identifies those he is defending at this time specifically as those "who have taken upon [them] the name of Christ" (Alma 46:18).
5. He invites the people to rally around the symbolism of the title of liberty "in the strength of the Lord" (Alma 46:20).
6. He implores the people at this time to "keep the commandments of God," quotes the prophet Jacob from the brass plates in order to provide the context for the title of liberty, and ends by framing it all in terms of "the faith of Christ" (Alma 46:23–27).
7. He specifically attributes the victory over Zerahemnah to "our faith in Christ," speaks of the "all-powerful God," considers the duty of the Nephites to defend their families as something "sacred," and declares that the Nephites "owe all our happiness" to "the sacred word of God" (Alma 44:3–5).
8. He explains the purpose of the Nephites' defense against Lamanite invasion in terms of "our religion and the cause of our God" (Alma 54:10).
9. He explains that he is engaged in defense specifically to honor "the covenant which I have made to keep the commandments of my God" (Alma 60:34).
10. He commands one Lamanite leader to deliver up his army's weapons and cease their aggression "in the name of" (a) "that all-powerful God, who has strengthened our arms that we have gained power over you"; (b) "our faith"; (c) "our religion"; (d) "our rites of worship"; (e) "our church"; (f) "the sacred support" that

36. As mentioned earlier, some doubt the accuracy of this revelation. But see again note 11.

the Nephites owe their wives and children; and (g) “the sacred word of God” (Alma 44:3–6).

11. He is referred to by Helaman, high priest at the time, as his “dearly beloved brother . . . in the Lord” (Alma 56:2).
12. He is described by Pahoran as having “greatness” of heart, even though Pahoran felt wrongly censured by Moroni (Alma 61:9).³⁷

And, in his running commentary on the text, Mormon tells us of Captain Moroni:

1. His very first effort in preparing the Nephites to defend themselves from Lamanite assault was to prepare them spiritually—to be faithful to the Lord (Alma 48:7).
2. His purpose was to allow the Nephites to “live unto the Lord their God” and to maintain “the cause of Christians” (Alma 48:10).
3. His heart “swelled” in thanksgiving to God (Alma 48:12).
4. He was a man “firm in the faith of Christ” (Alma 48:13).
5. He “gloried” in keeping the commandments of God (Alma 48:16).
6. He gloried in “doing good” (Alma 48:16).
7. “The very powers of hell would have been shaken forever” if all men were like him (Alma 48:17).
8. “The devil would never have power over the hearts of the children of men” if they were like him (Alma 48:17).
9. He was “like unto Ammon” and “the other sons of Mosiah,” and he was even like Alma (Alma 48:18).

These features of the text are significant. Despite the text’s recording of Moroni’s many wartime activities, along the way it also portrays him as a spiritually earnest disciple of Christ who prayed mightily and repeatedly invoked the name of the Lord in his defensive efforts, and who also received revelation, gloried in keeping the commandments of God, rejoiced in doing good, and implored his people to be faithful disciples of the Lord.

37. Pahoran took Moroni’s censure personally, even though Moroni wrote his epistle to all the Nephite governors—not just Pahoran—who had responsibility for managing the war. For a discussion of this, see Duane Boyce, “Captain Moroni’s Revelation,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 155–59.

Generosity of Spirit

Mormon also tells us that Captain Moroni, though embroiled in war, “did not delight in bloodshed” (Alma 48:11). Indeed, like other Book of Mormon leaders, Moroni displayed a surprising generosity of spirit in view of his circumstances. For example,

1. He gave Zerahemnah’s army every chance to end the battle it was losing, saying, “Behold, Zerahemnah, that we do not desire to be men of blood. Ye know that ye are in our hands, yet we do not desire to slay you” (Alma 44:1).
2. He ceased this battle altogether on the simple condition that the Lamanite attackers enter a covenant that they would never aggress against the Nephites again (Alma 44:19–20).
3. He forgave rebellious Nephites, who were compelled to end their aggression against other Nephites, and permitted them to return to their own lands in peace (Alma 50:25–36).
4. He refused to attack defenseless Lamanite soldiers when he easily could have assaulted them (Alma 55:18–19).
5. He managed on two occasions to completely surround an army of Lamanites and, though he could have slain them at will, spared their lives and permitted them to surrender (Alma 52:31–39; 55:20–24). This is in stark contrast to the Lamanites who, in one theater of the war, spared only the chief captains of the Nephites whom they took prisoner—and killed all their other prisoners of war (Alma 56:10–12).
6. Despite his anger toward Ammoron, he still held out the possibility of Ammoron’s repentance, stating that there would be no more war if Ammoron withdrew his aggression and returned to his own lands (Alma 54:6–11).
7. He attributed the Lamanites’ hatred of the Nephites to “the tradition of their fathers,” contrasting it with the much worse “love of glory and the vain things of the world” afflicting Nephite dissidents (Alma 60:32).
8. He led people who “were sorry to take up arms against the Lamanites, because they did not delight in the shedding of blood . . . [and] 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 48:21–23).

9. At the end of one battle, in the final year of the war, he extracted a covenant from the Lamanite invaders that they would no longer aggress against the Nephites and then simply sent them in peace to live with the people of Ammon (Alma 62:14–17).
10. He did what we see in the previous example a second time as well, later that same year (Alma 62:19–28).

It is not uncommon for those embroiled in war to become hardened, cynical, and even cruel in their conduct—to actually seek blood and to lust after revenge (think of Mormon’s soldiers, for example, in Mormon 3:9–11, 14).³⁸ As mentioned above, in one theater of the war, the Lamanites actually killed most of the Nephites they took as prisoners. But this was not true of Moroni. Although he was engulfed in war for nearly fifteen years,³⁹ even in the final year of war he was willing to spare his attackers and allow them to leave the battlefield in peace.

Moroni’s Anger toward Ammoron

Moroni was not without anger in the extreme circumstances of his war, of course. In an epistle to Ammoron, for example, he said, “Behold, I am in my anger” (Alma 54:13), and then, after receiving Ammoron’s reply, “was more angry” with him (Alma 55:1). It was during this exchange that Moroni said, “I will come against you with my armies; yea, even I will arm my women and my children . . . ; yea, and it shall be blood for blood, yea, life for life; and I will give you battle even until you are destroyed from off the face of the earth” (Alma 54:12).

Such anger might seem to disqualify Captain Moroni as having the state of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount. But it is important to keep three significant factors in mind.

The first is that Moroni expressed his anger toward Ammoron after suffering attacks from the Lamanites for a full decade.⁴⁰ These assaults caused massive destruction and loss of life, and they were all completely needless and unjust. It does not seem much of a defect to

38. See also Mormon 4:11; Moroni 9:5, 8–10, 19, 23.

39. The long conflict in the book of Alma begins at the start of the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges, and Captain Moroni has charge over all the Nephite armies at that time as well (Alma 35:13; 43:4, 16–17). The long series of conflicts finally ceases at the end of the thirty-first year of the judges (Alma 62:39), making fourteen years in all.

40. Moroni became general of the Nephite armies in the beginning of the eighteenth year of the judges (Alma 43:4, 16–17), and he wrote this epistle in the beginning of the twenty-ninth year (Alma 54:1).

express anger at one's assailants after suffering attack and murder from them for a *decade*.

Second, Moroni sounds more violent in these statements than he ended up actually behaving. Following this exchange of epistles, when he actually had the chance to pursue “blood for blood” and “life for life” and to “destroy” large numbers of Lamanite warriors who were completely at his mercy, he did not follow through. This was one of the episodes mentioned above in which Moroni managed to completely surround a whole army of Lamanites whom he could have slain almost at will. Yet despite his earlier expressions about “blood,” “destroying,” and “seeking death,” he spared their lives and simply invited them to surrender (Alma 55:20–24).

Thus, while Moroni might have gotten carried away in his feelings in writing to Ammoron, his anger was not such that he actually delivered on his rhetoric. To possess the right state of heart is not equivalent to being perfect, after all. That Moroni engaged in extreme threats is undoubtedly evidence that he was not perfect, but the fact that he did not come close to carrying out those threats—when he easily could have—is evidence that he also possessed the right state of heart in the way that mortals are able to possess it. He apparently repented of the excesses in his epistle, and it was because of his righteous state of heart in general that he was led to do so.

Finally, it is important to note that the Lord himself expresses anger numerous times in scripture.⁴¹ This indicates that anger in itself is not a spiritual defect. Instead, it would seem that anger, like violence, can actually flow from the righteous state of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Just as the Lord's violence stems from a perfect and divine state, so, too, does his anger. It is not the selfish emotional mistreatment of others that typically comprises mortal anger. It is the natural condemning response of a pure and sinless soul to craven wickedness.

To the degree mortals approximate this same state of heart, it is plausible that they would have the same condemning response. They would experience moral indignation where the Lord experiences it. This seems to be the case with Moroni in his attitude toward Ammoron.

41. In one place, for instance, the Lord says: “I command you to repent—repent, lest I smite you by the rod of my mouth, and by my wrath, and by my anger, and your sufferings be sore—how sore you know not, how exquisite you know not, yea, how hard to bear you know not” (D&C 19:15). For just a few more examples, see Isaiah 1:4; 65:3; 66:15–16; Jeremiah 32:30; Alma 8:29; 9:12, 18; 33:10; Helaman 13:10; Doctrine and Covenants 1:13; 5:8; 29:17; 63:2, 11, 32; 84:24; 87:6; 133:50–51; Moses 7:1, 34; 8:15.

From Zerahemnah to Amalickiah to Ammoron himself, the Nephites had had to defend themselves repeatedly from being murdered. And, in conducting defense against this ongoing violence and aggression, the Nephites had suffered huge loss of life over many years—many thousands of deaths of Nephite citizens who should not have had to defend themselves in the first place. And the Lamanites, led by these Nephite dissenters, pursued their aggression without end. The Lord expressed his anger at the violence filling the earth at the time of Noah (Moses 7:34–36; 8:28–30), so if Moroni had a heart similar to the Lord’s (in kind if not in degree), then it is no surprise that he would have a similar response to the violence being visited upon his own people in his own time.⁴²

What we seem to see in all this is that anger, just like violence, can flow from the state of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount. We saw earlier that the Lord’s Sermon denounces anger; however, based on present considerations, it would seem to do so in exactly the way it denounces violence: the condemnation presupposes a certain *kind* of anger, just as it presupposes a certain *kind* of violence. The Sermon obviously does not condemn the *Lord’s* kind of anger, after all—any more than it condemns the Lord’s kind of violence. And it would seem that, in large degree at least, Moroni’s anger toward Ammoron was just that: the Lord’s kind of anger. As such, neither is it condemned. And the same analysis applies to other incidents of Moroni’s anger during the long war.⁴³

It is true, of course, that all judgment is left to the Lord and that we are required to forgive everyone (see, for example, D&C 64:10). Thus, whatever the Lord does with Ammoron and other aggressors, Captain

42. This is in contrast to the anger we see in Amalickiah. In his failure to outmaneuver Moroni on one occasion, we are told that Amalickiah “was exceedingly wroth, and he did curse God, and also Moroni, swearing with an oath that he would drink his blood”—and all this “because Moroni had kept the commandments of God in preparing for the safety of his people” (Alma 49:27). The text depicts Amalickiah as fighting only because he lusted after power, and he did so in murderous threat to innocent lives. His anger toward Moroni was the tantrum of a wicked and violent man who found himself thwarted in his wicked and violent purposes. This was completely unlike Moroni’s anger. In circumstances of defending his people from unjustified violence and attack, Moroni was fighting only because he had to, and he did so purely in defense of innocent lives. His anger in the circumstances was a natural condemning response to the suffering of his people and to the wicked men who were causing it. Similar to the Lord’s own case (again, in kind if not in degree), it was an expression of the spiritually earnest, unselfish state of heart.

43. See, for example, his attitude toward Amalickiah (who explicitly intended to kill Nephites in his quest for power) in Alma 46 and toward the traitorous Nephite governors (who were complicit with the Lamanites’ aggression) in Alma 60.

Moroni must ultimately forgive them. But it does not follow from this that, in facing their aggression, he cannot have the same condemning response toward them that the Lord has. It would seem obvious that he can, and that's what the account appears to show us.⁴⁴

Defensive Fighting Only

With all this in mind, it is no surprise that Captain Moroni also fought purely in defense. We saw earlier that this was a Nephite principle, and we are told more than once that Moroni's motivation in taking up the sword (as well as the motivation of those he led) was the same: strictly to defend Nephite lives and Nephite society.⁴⁵

It might be tempting to think that Moroni engaged in aggression in a number of incidents, including when one of his subordinates, Teancum, slew Amalickiah and Ammoron (Alma 51:33–34; 62:36).⁴⁶ But to draw connections of this sort is to confuse offensive tactics with offensive *war*. The famous Jewish uprising against Nazi forces in the Warsaw ghetto in 1943 was certainly an offensive tactic, for example—but it could hardly be considered an act of offensive war. The Jews were already engulfed in war as a result of the Nazis trying to exterminate their race, and their revolt was simply a defense against *that*. This was also true of Allied forces generally in World War II, from the invasion of Normandy to a thousand other incidents: their defense against Axis aggression required countless offensive tactics, but that's exactly what they were: offensive tactics integral to defending themselves from the Axis onslaught.

The same was true of the Nephites. Whenever Nephite leaders pursued offensive military tactics, it was only because they were already engaged in a defensive war that was not their doing.⁴⁷ They themselves

44. Classical writers on the New Testament have addressed the question of anger for disciples of Christ. For some examples, see appendix E.

45. See, for example, Alma 35:14; 43:9–10, 45, 47; 48:10, 12–14, 24; 49:7; 56:46; 60:17; 61:10. We saw the one apparent exception to this Nephite pattern earlier, but it was an exception that occurred during Mormon's time (and in spite of Mormon), centuries after Captain Moroni. We also saw an instance in which Nephites intended to attack the Lamanites but in which other Nephites forcefully prevented this (see note 29).

46. See, for example, Alma 43:30–42; 44:8–18; 46; 50:6–12; 51:13–21; 62:1–8, 15, 25, 31–32, 38.

47. Examples include Alma 2:35–37; 3 Nephi 4:11–14, 20–22, 25–27. When considered in full context, such actions are different from those condemned by Gidgiddoni and Mormon when, as we saw earlier, they insisted that the Nephites act only defensively (3 Ne. 3:20; Morm. 3:14). In the Gidgiddoni and Mormon examples, the Nephites who were pressing for revenge would not have been purely defensive in their actions: in an

had not instigated the hostilities but were merely defending against them. Moroni himself initiated no aggression, for instance. He invaded no lands, and he sought no power over other populations. He fought only because, and when, the Lamanites were invading and assaulting his people in their own lands.

The Episode in Alma 50

The commitment to defensive fighting was true of Moroni even when he drove Lamanites out of lands that were part of Nephite territory and back into Lamanite lands (Alma 50:6–12). This action occurred during a lull in the actual fighting, but this lull was nothing like a cessation of hostilities or of danger. Indeed, Mormon reports of the circumstances during this period of Nephite history that the wars did not cease “for the space of many years” (Alma 48:22). Moroni was thus urgently engaged in defense against ongoing Lamanite assault at the time, and he was responsible, as general of all the armies, for protecting Nephite lives and Nephite society against such murderous aggression. All the while, these Lamanite settlements established “strongholds of the Lamanites” and were seen as sources of “strength and power” for Lamanite invasion—and they were all situated in Nephite territory (Alma 50:11–12). It would seem that no responsible leader could fail to attempt what Moroni did: drive these Lamanite settlers back into Lamanite lands. Indeed, later Nephite dissenters appreciably increased the threat to Nephite lives when, living on Nephite lands, they actually overthrew and possessed the city of Zarahemla and then entered into an alliance with the Lamanites—specifically in order to assist them in achieving victory over the Nephites (Alma 61:1–8). This episode indicates the extreme danger faced by the Nephites in having Lamanites positioned in Nephite territory.

Thus, while Moroni’s act of driving Lamanites from Nephite land certainly constituted an offensive tactic, it was nothing close to aggression or to the launching of offensive war.⁴⁸ What is someone *supposed* to

important sense they would have been doing more than employing offensive tactics in a defensive war but actually instigating conflict of their own. This is not true of the incidents in Alma 2:35–37; 3 Nephi 4:11–14, 20–22, 25–27.

48. On one occasion, Captain Moroni threatened to follow the Lamanites into their own land and to wage war until the Lamanite invaders were “destroyed from off the face of the earth” (Alma 54:12). This occurred during the exchange of epistles with Ammoron mentioned earlier, in which Moroni demanded both a certain type of prisoner exchange and the withdrawal of the Lamanites from their “murderous purposes” and of their armies from Nephite lands (Alma 54:4–14). Even though the Lamanites refused to withdraw,

do when his people face ongoing attack and murder and he is explicitly charged with protecting them? And the same analysis applies to every other incident in which Moroni employed offensive tactics.

Summary and Conclusion

It is one thing to think of the Sermon on the Mount in terms of ordinary life—to feel the necessity of absorbing slights or insults rather than replying to them in kind, for instance. Life with family, friends, neighbors, and so forth supplies the domain in which most of us practice the teachings of the Lord’s Sermon.

Prominent Book of Mormon leaders did not enjoy such luxury. If we want to consider their conduct against the standard taught in the Sermon on the Mount, we have to recognize at the outset that their circumstances were very different from ours. They repeatedly faced invaders who were trying to *kill* them—and not only them, of course, but their families, their people, and their way of life. What does living the standard taught in the Sermon on the Mount look like in circumstances like *that*?

That is precisely what the Book of Mormon shows us. To appreciate this, it helps to recognize that the Sermon does not prohibit violence *per se*. Some types of violence certainly fall within its prohibitions, but not all, and we begin to see what the dividing line might be when we recognize the common-sense moral distinction that we implicitly draw all the time—the distinction between aggressors’ acts and victims’ acts. It helps further to notice that the Lord’s Sermon presupposes a limited scale in its specific injunctions: it is manifestly not about circumstances of murder, rape, or war. Perhaps it helps most, however, to notice that the Lord’s Sermon is also not about specific behaviors in the first place—for example, about literally turning the other cheek. Rather, the Sermon on the Mount is primarily about *possessing a righteous state of heart*—and

however, and instead continued their war against the Nephites, Captain Moroni never carried out this threat. Indeed, as we saw in the previous section (“Generosity of Spirit”), the record tells us of three separate occasions, following Moroni’s epistle, on which he had Lamanite warriors completely at his mercy—and yet spared them (Alma 55:20–24; 62:14–17, 19–28). He did not come close to trying to destroy the Lamanite invaders “from off the face of the earth” as he had threatened: simply put, Captain Moroni behaved far less violently than he sounded in his epistle. This is consistent, of course, with what the record reveals in general about him: his spiritual stature, his generosity of spirit, his hatred of bloodshed, and his commitment to defensive fighting only.

this state of heart is completely consistent with acts of defense in violent situations that require them.

Prominent Book of Mormon leaders—from Shule and King Benjamin to Mormon and Moroni—possessed this state of heart when they led the defense of their countries and of their people’s lives, and they conducted themselves accordingly. Their extraordinary behavior demonstrates what living the Sermon simply *meant* in their extraordinary circumstances—circumstances of pervasive threat and violence. When we appreciate this, we see that they did not violate the Sermon on the Mount. They manifested it.⁴⁹

The text indicates that the same was true of Captain Moroni. He, too, faced extraordinary circumstances. Though he bore immense responsibility over many years to protect the Nephites’ lives from unjustified attack and murder, just like other leaders he, too, was personally devoted to the Lord (and implored those he led to be devoted to him as well), avoided all the bloodshed of Lamanite aggressors that he could, and fought in the first place only *because* of such assaults on his people. It is hard to see how any mortal could have done better in the violent and threatening circumstances created by those attacking and seeking to kill his people. Indeed, far from violating the Sermon on the Mount, Moroni appears to have manifested its virtues in exactly the way they *would* be manifested in such extreme circumstances. He thus appears to have waged defense with the same state of heart possessed by other Nephite leaders—the state of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount.⁵⁰

Apparent Tension Resolved

What we seem to see, then, is that the Sermon on the Mount and the war-time conduct of various Nephite leaders—including Captain Moroni—are actually not in tension. They are not disjointed and competing textual threads, one demanding nonviolence and the other accepting

49. No one can approach the perfection of the Lord, of course, but it is hard to see how anyone could have done better than these leaders did to live the standard taught in the Sermon on the Mount—in exactly the ways their violent circumstances required of them—indeed, in circumstances that exercised enormous pressure to do the exact opposite.

50. This is no doubt why Mormon could say of Captain Moroni that he was “beloved by all the people of Nephi” (Alma 53:2). I examine why this would be so in Duane Boyce, “Beloved by All the People: A Fresh Look at Captain Moroni,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 45 (2021): 179–201.

and embracing it. Rather, the conduct of Nephite leaders is completely synchronized with the Sermon on the Mount at a deep level. *The Lord's Sermon teaches a certain state of heart, and Book of Mormon leaders displayed this state of heart in exactly the way it would be displayed in violent circumstances.* Thus, together, the two threads—the Sermon and the wartime conduct of Nephite leaders—illuminate the subject of war in a way that is completely consistent and whole. In appreciating this, perhaps our perspective approximates Mormon's own.

It is only natural, of course, to hope that different threads in the Book of Mormon would speak with a single voice and that they would thus provide clear direction on a matter like the relationship between violence and righteousness. The good news is that they do. And the upshot of this is significant: while it might seem ironic, it would appear that the Lord's most famous sermon is actually exemplified by the Book of Mormon's most famous warrior.

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APPENDIX A:

A SAMPLE OF LDS WRITERS ON THE GOSPEL AND WAR

Among prominent Latter-day Saint writers, Hugh Nibley has made the most statements about war, often related to his admiration for what he considered the Ammonites' pacifism. His biographer reports that Nibley considered the Ammonites' refusal to take up arms "the perfect example" of what to do in cases of conflict.⁵¹ Nibley also contested the

51. See Boyd J. Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 221. For additional examples of Hugh Nibley's writings on war, see "Last Call: An Apocalyptic Warning from the Book of Mormon," in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 8 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1989), 517; "Freemen and King-men in the Book of Mormon," in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 356; "Scriptural Perspectives on How to Survive the Calamities of the Last Days," in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 487; "The Prophetic

righteousness of war by frequently insisting that the Nephites were not righteous when they were involved in war—they were not “the good guys.”⁵² He also thought that war could simply be avoided by discussion⁵³ and that Mormon and Moroni both considered war to be unnecessary.⁵⁴ In addition, he seemed to believe that the Lord would fight the battles of the righteous and therefore that they need not resort to violence to defend themselves.⁵⁵

Eugene England also wrote much on the topic of war and peace,⁵⁶ and a significant number of other Latter-day Saint authors have taken up the topic more recently—predominantly from a non- or antiviolence perspective.⁵⁷ The topic, and its antiviolence lean, is an important thread in scholarly Latter-day Saint discourse.⁵⁸

Book of Mormon,” in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 466; “Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, ed. Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994), 499; *Since Cumorah*, ed. John W. Welch, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988), 348 (where, by “the good guys,” Nibley obviously means the Ammonites).

52. See Nibley’s “Warfare and the Book of Mormon,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges*, 283–84; “Freemen and King-men in the Book of Mormon,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges*, 338; *Since Cumorah*, 339, 340, 342–343, 348; “In the Party but Not of the Party,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges*, 122; “The Prophetic Book of Mormon,” in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 436–37; “Last Call: An Apocalyptic Warning from the Book of Mormon,” in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 524; “Brigham Young and the Enemy,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges*, 238; and “Scriptural Perspectives on How to Survive the Calamities of the Last Days,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges*, 493.

53. As reported in Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 221.

54. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 292.

55. Hugh Nibley, “If There Must Needs Be Offense,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges*, 270–71.

56. See Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995); and his “A Case for Mormon Christian Pacifism,” in *Moral Perspectives on U.S. Security Policy: Views from the LDS Community*, ed. Valerie M. Hudson and Kerry M. Kartchner (Provo, Utah: David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, Brigham Young University, 1995), 96–103.

57. See Mason, Pulsipher, and Bushman, *War and Peace in Our Time*.

58. My volume, *Even unto Bloodshed*, addresses this thread comprehensively and identifies the errors that appear in all the significant pacifist (and pacifist-like) arguments, including those made by Nibley, England, and more recent writers.

**APPENDIX B:
THE SCOPE OF THE RELEVANT EDICTS
IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

The Church Father John Chrysostom (349–407) presupposed a narrow scope for the passage we are considering (Matt. 5:39–44; 3 Ne. 12:39–44). Writing in the fourth century, he speaks specifically in terms of “neighbors” and does not even consider applying the injunctions in any broader or more extreme contexts.⁵⁹ Additionally, the commentary edited by Charles John Ellicott (1819–1905) notes that this passage requires disciples to free themselves of a retaliatory spirit, but simultaneously recognizes that the same people also have other duties in other spheres of life, including prosecution, punishment, and protection of society. The assumption is that one’s duties in these other spheres of life are not exhausted by the edicts in this sermon.⁶⁰

The venerable Adam Clarke (1762–1832) draws the scope even more narrowly, indicating that this passage specifically contemplates the persecution one might suffer specifically for righteousness’ sake—that is, (presumably) for being a Christian.⁶¹

Such commentators see the Sermon on the Mount as applying to its listeners in the ordinary aspects of their lives—not, apparently, to other dimensions of living (such as the prosecution, punishment, and protection of society mentioned in Ellicott).

**APPENDIX C:
HEART VERSUS SPECIFIC BEHAVIOR**

Martin Luther appreciated the distinction between the heart and outward behavior as a general gospel matter. Indeed, it was precisely in such terms that he saw faith itself, profoundly identifying such a believing

59. See his Homily 18 in *St. Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, vol. 10 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d.), 226–35, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf110/cache/npnf110.pdf> and <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/chrysostom/matthew/5.htm>.

60. See Ellicott, *New Testament Commentary for English Readers*, 29 (commentary on Matt. 5:39).

61. See his comments on Matthew 5, especially verse 39, in *Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (originally eight volumes and published 1810–26), available at <https://www.studydrive.com/commentaries/eng/acc/matthew-5.html> and <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/clarke/matthew/5.htm>.

response to the Lord as “the yes of the heart.”⁶² In another place, he distinguishes between the heart and outward behavior in a way very reminiscent of Mormon (Moro. 7:6–11). “It is not right to judge a man merely by the kind of works he does,” Luther observes. “One should judge him on the basis of why he does them . . . on the spring and fountain whence they flow.”⁶³

Centuries earlier, Augustine saw the same distinction, specifically in relation to the passage we are considering in the Sermon on the Mount. In seeing the Lord’s Sermon as more about the heart than about specific behavior, Augustine draws attention to Psalm 108:1. He quotes this verse to say, “My heart is prepared, O God, my heart is prepared,” in order to distinguish between literally turning the other cheek (which, he points out, Christ did not do in John 18:22–23) and having a heart *prepared* to turn the other cheek on the occasions when it is right to do so (that is, a heart that has the *inclination* to do so). He applies the same concept of “preparation of heart” to the edict about giving our cloak to someone who has already sued us for our coat.⁶⁴

In other words, to Augustine, turning the other cheek might not always be the correct behavior to perform, but being able and inclined to do so is always the right heart to have. In the same spirit, he said on another occasion that turning the other cheek is not a matter of bodily action but of “inward disposition,” adding that “the sacred seat of virtue is the heart.”⁶⁵

Thomas Aquinas speaks the same way. Referring to Augustine on the matter, he says that although we are not always required to suffer reviling from others (there are times when that would not be right), our

62. Martin Luther, in *What Luther Says: An Anthology, Volume I*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 466.

63. Martin Luther, in *What Luther Says: An Anthology, Volume III*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 1511.

64. See Augustine, *On the Sermon on the Mount*, 1.58–59, vol. 6 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. and ed. for New Advent by Kevin Knight, trans. William Findlay (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/16011.htm>.

65. See Augustine, “Reply to Faustus the Manichæan (Contra Faustum Manichæum),” in *St. Augustin: The Writings against the Manichæans and against the Donatists*, vol. 4 of Schaff, *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, sec. 76, p. 301, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf104/npnf104.iv.ix.xxiv.html>.

minds must be *prepared* to suffer in this way. The central issue, in his view, is also one of our inner condition.⁶⁶

An additional point is this: if the injunctions in the Lord’s Sermon were really about specific behaviors, then they would also be about specific *numbers*—a second cheek, a second mile, and a second article of clothing (3 Ne. 12:30–41). But it would seem evident that these edicts are not making a point about a specific number any more than the command that we are to forgive “until seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:21–22) is about a specific number. Scriptural commentators have long, and persuasively, viewed the expression “seventy times seven” in this passage as metaphorical rather than literal. In one argument for the view, Augustine refers to Colossians 3:13, which speaks of “forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: *even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye*” (emphasis added; for obvious reasons Augustine does not use this King James translation of the verse, but the sense is the same). “Here you have the rule,” Augustine says. If Christ has forgiven us seventy times seven, but no more, then fair enough: the number is literal, and we ourselves should forgive others no more than seventy times seven. But if Christ has forgiven us for “thousands of sins upon sins,” as indeed he has, then to forgive others *as Christ has forgiven us* (as Paul in this passage says we must) requires that we do the same: there is no limit to how much we should forgive. This, therefore, is the actual meaning of the expression “seventy times seven.” It is not literal, affirming that we are to forgive a certain number of times. It is metaphorical, affirming that we are to forgive without end.⁶⁷

In understanding Augustine, it helps to know that he, and the Church fathers generally, interpret Jesus’s remark “seventy times seven,” when read literally, to refer to the number 77 (“70 times, plus 7 times”) and not to 490 (“70 times multiplied by 7”), as modern readers typically interpret the text. Thus, Augustine also argues in the same place for the metaphorical interpretation of the expression by noting (1) that the number 11 denotes the concept of sin because it exceeds the number of commandments in the Decalogue, and (2) that the number 7 “is usually put for a whole; because in seven days the revolution of time is completed.” Augustine then observes that if we multiply the number

66. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, second part of the second part, question 72, article 3.

67. See Augustine, “Sermon 33 on the New Testament,” *City of God*, 19.7.

that denotes sin (11) by the number that denotes wholeness (7), we get the number 77, which thus denotes *sin in its wholeness, or totality*. And this means that in saying we are to forgive 77 times (again, the classical understanding of Jesus's expression), we are saying that we are to forgive the *whole* of sin, not some particular number: we are to forgive without limit.

Although this second argument of Augustine's is tortured, his first, from Colossians 3:13, is credible and supports the idea that we are to forgive without limit rather than up to a particular number.⁶⁸

All of this is relevant to our current topic, since the Lord's command that we are to forgive completely and endlessly is tantamount to the command that we are to have a certain kind of *heart*. We must achieve the condition of soul that can actually forgive to this degree.

APPENDIX D: STATE OF HEART

Central to the gospel are "a broken heart and a contrite spirit," the offering of our hearts and souls to the Lord, and the desires of our hearts (2 Ne. 2:7; see also Omni 1:26; 3 Ne. 9:20; Hel. 3:35; Morm. 9:27; D&C 59:8; 137:9). To have a spiritual condition of humility before the Lord and unselfishness toward others is the general state of heart taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Its specific characteristics are described in different ways at different times (for example, Alma 7:23–24; 13:28; 1 Cor. 13; Gal. 5:22–23), but in its fullness, this condition of heart seems captured in Paul's declaration, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20). This state of heart is frequently contrasted with its opposite. It is evident, for example, in every mention of heeding the Spirit versus resisting the Spirit, humility versus pride, submissiveness versus willfulness, softheartedness versus hardheartedness, obedience versus disobedience, devotion versus slothfulness, faithfulness versus unfaithfulness, meekness versus stiffneckedness, circumcision of heart versus

68. The linguistic reasons for why the Church fathers were correct to understand "seventy times seven" to mean 77 are identified in a number of places; one of the most trenchant is Royal Skousen's "Through a Glass Darkly: Trying to Understand the Scriptures," *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 2–20, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/through-a-glass-darkly-trying-to-understand-the-scriptures>.

uncircumcision of heart, and so forth. Perhaps the best single passage contrasting the two states of heart is the statement by the angel who visited King Benjamin. He spoke of the “natural man” and explained that one becomes a “saint” by “putting off” the natural man. He then provided a partial list of qualities that characterize this spiritual condition, the most common and fundamental of which is the concept of submissiveness to God (Mosiah 3:19).⁶⁹ Paul’s explanation to the Romans makes the same point. He speaks of the difference between walking “after the flesh” and walking “after the Spirit,” and of minding “the things of the flesh” and minding “the things of the Spirit.” He adds that “to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace,” and that the “carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God.” He also says that we are “in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in [us]” and that “as many as are led by the Spirit of God . . . are the sons of God.” All of this is in contrast to living “after the flesh” (Rom. 8:4–14). Stephen drew the same distinction. In condemning the spiritual condition of his accusers, he told them they were “stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart” and that they did “always resist the Holy Ghost” (Acts 7:51). The contrast is also elegantly captured in Hezekiah’s invitation to Israel: “Now be ye not stiffnecked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the Lord” (2 Chr. 30:8).

APPENDIX E: CLASSICAL WRITERS ON ANGER

Commentators on the New Testament have addressed the question of anger. Although he maintains a high standard regarding anger (and enmity generally), in one place Chrysostom (349–407) nevertheless tries to get at the distinction between types of anger by speaking of the proper *time* for anger—namely, not when we are seeking personal revenge, but (for example) when we are preventing others’ lawlessness.⁷⁰

69. All of the remarks in this verse seem to be expressions of the concept of submission to God. We read of yielding to the Holy Spirit, of putting off the natural man through Christ, and of becoming as a child—and all of the childlike characteristics listed by the angel can be summed up in the idea of submission to the Lord “even as a child doth submit to his father.”

70. See his discussion regarding Matthew 5:17 in Homily 16 in *St. Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, vol. 10 of Schaff, *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 203.

In his personal commentary on Ephesians 4:26 (“Be ye angry, and sin not”), Ellicott (1819–1905) cites Chrysostom and agrees with him that there is a proper anger against sin and that a good person *ought* to have such feelings.⁷¹ Others—quite mistakenly, I believe—have failed to see this distinction and have expressed condemnation of all anger. This is the case with the contributor who wrote on Ephesians in Ellicott’s edited commentary (1878)⁷²—contrary to Ellicott’s own view as expressed in his personal writings⁷³—and with Adam Clarke in his biblical commentary (1810–1826).⁷⁴ In neither case is the reasoning about anger persuasive when compared to the thoughts of Chrysostom and Ellicott, however—and certainly not when compared to the additional insights gained from the Book of Mormon and other modern revelation.

71. See Charles J. Ellicott, *Commentary, Critical and Grammatical, on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, with a Revised Translation* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1863), 110–11, <https://archive.org/details/commentarycritooelli/page/110>.

72. See Ellicott, *New Testament Commentary for English Readers*, commentary on Ephesians 4:26.

73. See again Ellicott, *Commentary, Critical and Grammatical*, 110–11.

74. See *Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, in his remarks regarding Ephesians 4:26, <https://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/acc/ephesians-4.html>.