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Introduction

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Abstract: Morgan Deane, a military historian and former Marine sustains the authenticity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient document and shows how text contains a strong and distinctive voice on military matters that should be taken seriously by modern readers and even policy makers and generals. Through a Hugh Nibley like command of ancient societies from Mesoamerica, China, and Rome, as well as a grasp of military theory from Clausewitz to Sun-Tzu he expands upon the Jaredite civil war, the face of battle, logistics, ethno-religious conflict, the political dimensions of conflict and insurgency, and strategy. He specifically valorizes Captain Moroni against a rise in attacks against his character, presents a Nephite and Latter Day Saint just war theory, and shows how The Book of Mormon defends the use pre-emptive war. In a world filled with strife and conflict, *Bleached Bones and Wicked Serpents* will help the reader understand the context and society in which the Nephites lived...and died, and provide critical tools to evaluate modern military issues ranging from how to understand the threat posed by terrorists to assessing the wisdom of military action

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<http://www.amazon.com/Bleached-Bones-Wicked-Serpents-Ancient/dp/1456622862>

INTRODUCTION

The soldiers, worn out from a day of campaigning in the heat, braced themselves for a long night of guard duty. Their body armor chafed against their necks, but at least the cooler air ameliorated their discomfort. After a short time, a member from another unit approached their checkpoint. The soldiers noted the alcoholic refreshment he carried with him, and longed for the promise of a better time it offered. They weighed the need to be diligent against the monotony of their conscripted service. Adding in the desire to wash down their rations, they decided to indulge with their new guest. Only after they drank to the point of intoxication did their guest call the waiting and hiding enemies past the checkpoint into the city. It quickly fell to the invaders.

THIS RELATABLE STORY of bored troops, lax discipline, and monotony is not an account of American soldiers in Vietnam, or Roman soldiers on the German frontier. Rather, it is an event recorded by an ancient historian named Mormon and is contained in *The Book of Mormon* (Alma 55:4-19).¹ As the foundational book of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it receives constant national attention. Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman were serious candidates for the Presidency of the United States. *The Book of Mormon: A Musical* was a recent hit on Broadway and nominated for fourteen Tony awards. The sociologist Rodney Starks has described Mormonism as a “new world faith.”² And recent news stories repeatedly describe the Mormon people as a “major player” in national political and religious discourse.³

Claremont Graduate School and the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies recently concluded a conference seeking to understand Mormon perspectives on war. Eager audiences flocked to hear the different perspectives. Dozens of scholars in the humanities and various government officials offered their understanding of war. Outside of academia, American members of the Church still argue the merits and righteousness of war, specific prosecution of war, such as preemptive attacks, and the relative necessity of U.S. intervention. And the average American continues to wonder what position the Church takes on warfare. With an increasingly cosmopolitan and international membership, the guidance from the Church leadership has emphasized basic and sound gospel principles. This leaves members with a great deal of interest in military history and current conflicts, but with an equally great deal of varying opinion beyond the basic principles provided from Church leaders.

Yet many people lack the tools for studying thoughtful positions on military

matters. The Church emphasizes a method where a person must search the scriptures, ponder their messages, and pray about them. This method leads a person to spiritual enlightenment, but it can also lead to an opinion which suffers from bias and lack of context. A person reads his or her current understanding into the scriptures, and uses texts to support their particular stance. Those who are not members of the Church are then confused by the array of positions that members take, from just war to pacifism.

With all the options available for study in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, why pursue an academic study of warfare in *The Book of Mormon*? Some might think that a study of how *The Book of Mormon* was used in Smith's day or is used today would be more useful. With the debatable historicity of the book, some might question the need to study its contents at all. But Joseph Smith called it the "keystone" of the LDS church.⁴ And the author which compiled the book, Mor-mon, explicitly wrote his record with the future in mind (Mormon 8:35). Over one third of this pivotal book is devoted to warfare, yet there are only a handful of books exclusively devoted to the study of warfare within. The first and most widely known, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*,⁵ resulted from a conference on the subject held by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies in 1989. The essays from the various authors are well-written and insightful, and the book is well-liked within the LDS community. But the essays were written twenty years ago and have not been built upon since. They were written too early to connect the essays to current pertinent questions that weigh on members' minds, such as the DNA controversy, the doctrine of pre-emptive war, and the acute awareness of terrorism and the difficulty democracies have in fighting it. These deficiencies leave the LDS and national market wanting more.

The other published books contain the same positive points, but still leave room for additional research. The most recent book on the warfare is a more general title based on the recent conference at Claremont Graduate University. This book was recently published with the title *War and Peace in Our Times: Mormon Perspectives*.⁶ This has the advantage of directly addressing current concerns facing U.S. and worldwide members of the church. But it does so from a variety of disciplines. The articles based on *The Book of Mormon* often rely on disciplines other than history for their analysis.⁷ The book is a pleasure to read, but the lack of military history is a glaring lacuna. Moreover, the conference was specifically convened to discuss ways to provide "constructive alternatives to prevailing opinions [which support the just use of force]" contained within the Church.⁸ While this is an admirable goal, many military historians and military professionals, including me, who researched *The Book of Mormon* did not share their views, and had many views that remained pertinent and unpublished.⁹

A reading of scripture supplemented by scholarly study of these issues can decrease the confusion from so many conflicting individual interpretations. A scholarly study

includes an examination of primary sources, careful comparisons between events, attempts to understand the historical origins of beliefs and attitudes, and an attempt to judiciously apply the lessons of the past in order to better assess current events. Many members of the Church may question the need for academic study of the book at all. Some of them would say it's the equivalent of the Old Testament individual that "steadied the Ark" because of his lack of faith or witness of the Holy Spirit (2 Samuel 6:6-7). This is an understandable concern based on an abundant love for *The Book of Mormon*. I share that love. And as intimated above, I believe an academic study of the book enhances our understanding and faith. B.H. Roberts wrote of the text:

The Book of Mormon of necessity must submit to every test, to literary criticism, as well as to every other class of criticism; for our age is above all things critical, and especially critical of sacred literature, and we may not hope that the Book of Mormon will escape closest scrutiny; neither, indeed, is it desirable that it should escape. It is given to the world as a revelation from God. It is a volume of American scripture. Men have a right to test it by the keenest criticism, and to pass severest judgment upon it, and we who accept it as a revelation from God have every reason to believe that it will endure every test; and the more thoroughly it is investigated, the greater shall be its ultimate triumph. ¹⁰

This kind of criticism and examination doesn't replace our faith as a witness from God, but rather supplements it. It doesn't imply that God is too weak to supply evidence for His book, but rather that we need to increase our talent in identifying evidence that already exists for it. LDS institute manuals produced by the Church offer historical context and commentary for every book of scripture. In a similar manner, my book provides insight into the world and people that created *The Book of Mormon*. It provides additional ancient societies for comparison and understanding. And it should increase our ability to relate to the lives and concerns of ancient people. Above all, an academic study establishes a set of controls for converting a book written by ancient peoples in different cultures into relevant and actionable principles in the modern world. So even though there are not any overt testimonies, my methods and results consistently sustain the authenticity of *The Book of Mormon* as a translated ancient text.

Conversely, many academics question the need to study it at all. The translated text comes with the baggage of angels, bitterly polemic religious debates, and the question of divine intervention. In fact, my proposed topic for my Master's thesis on warfare in *The Book of Mormon* was rejected on the grounds that it was too "religiously charged" for an academic environment. The charged topic, combined with a perception, sometimes rightly earned, that the study of *The Book of Mormon* is dominated by faux academics and junk science, dissuade almost every non-Mormon

scholar from significant study. Some even conclude from the above that there is no evidence for *The Book of Mormon*. Thus this study seeks to use language and methods that academics of any faith and LDS members with any level of faith would be comfortable in reading while avoiding the extremes of a faithless study of the book or special pleading and replacing argument with testimony. This kind of balance needed between the scholarly and the faithful reminds me of the dangers faced by the Greek hero Ulysses, as he had to navigate a narrow channel between the six-headed monster of Scylla on one side and the sucking vortex called Charybdis on the other. But if the method is sound and *The Book of Mormon* important, why does military history matter? Military history is a study of why a side wins armed engagements, the confluence of societal values and army action, and the examination of technology and leadership. Yet many anti-war critics contend that violence only begets violence.¹¹ Historian John Lynn has said the field has an “embattled future,”¹² and ROTC has been banished from many of the elite institutions of learning.¹³ Out of a thousand history professors at top universities, only twenty-one listed military history as their specialty.¹⁴ So the general trend has been to avoid an academic study of warfare and view the use of force as morally reprehensible. As a result, a study of the subject is seen as somehow loving, or endorsing, armed conflict. One reviewer seemed to echo those sentiments in reviewing this text. Yet, at its most basic level, military history is a tale of morality. Youth learn the value of honor, duty, commitment, and courage from studying the actions of their ancestors. Americans that don’t know the result of Gettysburg, let alone the reasons for fighting, are apt to think of military conflict as little more than a fool’s errand. Hence an understanding of the motivations behind the fighting at Gettysburg helps us better appreciate Lincoln’s resolution in his famous address that the dead should not have died in vain.

The study of military history helps a person understand the relationship between justice, power, and human nature,¹⁵ and the relationship between a government and its people. Its study touches upon philosophy, economics, technology,¹⁶ and mathematics.¹⁷ Most importantly, American citizens have the ability to affect military decisions through public opinion and at the ballot box. Hence, military history gives them the crucial context and tools to gauge the wisdom of American decisions concerning its foreign policy and military. As military historian Victor Davis Hanson has explained:

A wartime public illiterate about the conflicts of the past can easily find itself paralyzed in the acrimony of the present. Without standards of historical comparison, it will prove ill equipped to make informed judgments. Neither our politicians nor most of our citizens seem to recall the incompetence and terrible decisions that, in December 1777, December 1941, and November 1950, led to massive American casualties and, for a time, public despair. So it’s no surprise that today so many seem to think that the violence in Iraq is unprecedented in

our history...

Instead, knowledge of past wars establishes wide parameters of what to expect from new ones. Themes, emotions, and rhetoric remain constant over the centuries, and thus generally predictable. Athens' disastrous expedition in 415 BC against Sicily, the largest democracy in the Greek world, may not prefigure our war in Iraq. But the story of the Sicilian calamity does instruct us on how consensual societies can clamor for war—yet soon become disheartened and predictate their support on the perceived pulse of the battlefield.¹⁸

Thus at a time when warfare is often neglected or even disdained by academia, a study of warfare in *The Book of Mormon* provides the reader with the rudimentary tools to judge the need and efficacy of America's military endeavors. Above all, I hope my book allows interested parties to remove the facile comparisons that support their political leanings and instead study the fundamental nature of conflict presented in *The Book of Mormon*. As Hanson said, history does not provide a cookie cutter, but the thoughtful reader, with the tools of historical study and knowledge of military history, can glean principles applicable and appropriate to the modern questions that Americans and members of the Church face.

My study of warfare in *The Book of Mormon* adds context to the flesh and blood lives of an ancient people, addresses current controversy surrounding the book, and provides insight during a critical time of conflict in America's history. The desire to study military conflicts will enhance the member's understanding and appreciation of God's "other sheep." Warfare has a particular ability to do this. As military historian Victor Davis Hanson wrote, and Mormon would agree, "There is an inherent truth in battle. It is hard to disguise the verdict of the battlefield, and nearly impossible to explain away the dead...We owe it to the dead to discover at all costs how [their culture]... and religion instantaneously determines the fate of thousands on the battlefield—and why."¹⁹ The often repeated spiritual message of *The Book of Mormon*, that obedience brings prosperity and disobedience destruction, is fulfilled through warfare.

Each chapter will examine these truths by presenting an intriguing historical essay that also addresses a controversial topic or current event. The first chapter will include a detailed examination of the Jaredite Civil War using the Chinese "War of the Eight Princes." This builds upon Hugh Nibley's research detailing Asian influences in *The Book of Mormon* and the idea that DNA shows a dominant Asian influence in Amerindian DNA. It also shows how a civilization can plummet into a self-destructive war. In this case, at least, the paper will show that anti-war critics sometimes have a point when they say violence begets violence. Thus this conflict serves to amplify the didactic warning in *The Book of Mormon*.

The next chapter will examine Nephite society that led to the rise of the Gadianton Robbers. In addition to a study in the power of words, this includes an important

examination of how words identify relationships of power. This has particular application in a world where “terrorist” evokes an intense emotional response, and the hyper-partisan politics can spin the same events different ways using evocative words.

The next chapter will closely compare the battles in *The Book of Mormon* with prominent Mesoamerican practices. This allows us to better understand both histories, but also calls attention to what historians call the “Face of Battle.”²⁰ Many documents and histories from the past focus on the eye of command, but the experiences of common soldiers as they experience the horrors of hand-to-hand combat have received less attention. This contains obvious application for the military members of the Church and citizen soldiers. It also shows the reader how *The Book of Mormon* can both conform and add to the study of Mesoamerican warfare.

I will next address a supposed “lack of connection to the real world” by judging the leadership of Captain Moroni against the criteria established by the influential military theoretician Carl Von Clausewitz. The practice of Moroni’s leadership matches the theory established by Clausewitz, which thus enhances the reality of events in *The Book of Mormon*. But it also adds an important spiritual dimension to the study. A critical element of military leadership is a commander’s ability to see the light, and then his strength to follow it. This element contains simple but profound spiritual lessons, where one can argue that military leaders are not only called based on their technical war-making proficiency, but also their spiritual power (3 Nephi 3:19).

I will use my experience in East Asian history to present the ways that *The Book of Mormon* reflects ancient non-Western ideas, such as the concept of a “good” and “bad” emperor, the troops of father and son, the Principles of War, and classical Chinese military theory. This will provide additional understanding into *The Book of Mormon* and the debates surrounding its origin and meaning. While some Americans complain about the arrogance of Barack Obama or the radical policies of Sarah Palin, we can compare them to historical archetypes of “good” and “bad” rulers (and quickly realize that their leadership does not signal the end of civilization). The troops of father and son contain a striking comparison to the sons of Helaman inside *The Book of Mormon*. This and the military theory allow us to see how ancient armies organized themselves, thought about combat, and fought. Again, these points provide insight into their lives and better tools to judge ours. With a better understanding of the theory of the preferred methods of war-making, we can better judge their practice. Or, in even simpler terms, if you are going to armchair-quarterback the wars, this will teach you how to throw.

Next, I will present my findings on logistics that will help influence the debates between the “hemispheric” and “limited” geographic models. The research on logistics, much like all the other chapters, uses the best of current methodology and trends in the field of military history for the benefit of Latter-day Saints topics. It also moves away from the aristocratic study of warfare, which usually focuses on the

leadership and strategy of Kings, and examines the mechanics led by bean counters and wagon masters. The supply of an army was not simply an exercise in arithmetic, or background for the sport of Kings; it was a critical driver of military strategy and a factor in the soldiers' experiences in battle.

Finally, I wade into the modern arena by arguing how *The Book of Mormon* supports pre-emptive war and the Bush Doctrine. This chapter is a prime example of how the study of the military history can provide context that Americans can use to judge the wisdom of policy decisions, and the members of the church can use to judge their morality.

Every chapter builds on the other to support this book's intent: to add context to the flesh and blood lives of an ancient people, address current controversy surrounding the book (including critical arguments against its' authenticity and arguments against the use of force), and provide insight during a critical time of conflict in America's history. The study of why nations fought, how they might justify the use of force, how they employed their troops to battle and during battle, how nations supplied their armies, and the effects of battle on soldiers and societies permeates every chapter. It is designed to give readers the tools necessary to assess the impact of potential military action and efficacy of conflict.

The text also shows three types of comparisons. The first is a general way that the authenticity of *The Book of Mormon* is enhanced. While I often don't argue that there is dependence between two societies, using illuminating examples from one society, such as ancient China, helps us understand another society, such as the Jaredites. In this and other cases, the comparison increases the plausibility of *The Book of Mormon* as an ancient text without arguing that ancient China had a direct relation to Mesoamerica.

The second example shows more concrete connections between what is known in secular circles about ancient Mesoamerica, and how that knowledge interacts with *The Book of Mormon*. My book belongs in the same family as much of the apologetic literature which defends it from such organizations as The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies.

The third example takes ancient comparisons and uses them to define principles applicable to modern warfare. Warfare often operates under a set of strict rules that can be used to analyze and understand a conflict. The Ivy League military historian Barry Straus recently wrote a book that not only provided principles to understand Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and Caesar, but also principles designed to help the reader understand modern conflict.²¹ The U.S. Army teaches principles that are used to study ancient conflict and also understand current ones. Military theory is simply a way to categorize and understand conflict; thus ancient and modern theoreticians can and often are used to better analyze a variety of conflict. Thus my book not only uses modern theory and historical methods to understand ancient texts, but tries to apply ancient warfare to the modern world. I hope you enjoy reading it.

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