



Type: Book Chapter

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Source: *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*

Editor(s): Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin

Published: Provo, UT/Salt Lake City; Foundation for Ancient Research and
Mormon Studies/Deseret Book, 1990

Page(s): 329-351



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Swords in the Book of Mormon

William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill

Man is perfectly capable of fighting and killing with his bare hands. However, he has found it useful to use specially designed tools for fighting known as “weapons” because, in a number of ways, they increase his capacity and efficiency in fighting. They increase the range at which an enemy can be injured and the degree of injury that can be inflicted. A soldier with a knife can damage vital internal organs that would remain relatively safe from his hands alone. Furthermore, using weapons defensively can help protect the soldier from harm. A warrior can use weapons not only to parry the attacks of an enemy, but also, by hitting an enemy with a club, to protect the hand from injury.

With the introduction of advanced types of weapons, ancient warfare took on a new complexion. In a conflict between two unarmed men, victory tends to go to the strongest or fastest. When using Pre-Modern weapons, however, victory often goes to the soldier who is better armed or trained. Because many ancient weapons were expensive or difficult to make, military systems relying on relatively sophisticated weapons (a sword instead of a club, or a spear instead of a rock) began to bring about the increasing militarization of society. Some people began to specialize in making weapons, while others spent their time learning the special skills required to use those weapons effectively. Still other members of society were required to provide extra food and other necessities for those

who specialized in warfare. Societies thus tended to become increasingly militarized, specialized, and complex.

Such an explanation, of course, does not necessarily imply an evolutionary or mechanistic interpretation of society. There were clearly cycles of declining and increasing military specialization in ancient societies. Furthermore, there were dozens of significant nonmilitary factors involved in the relative sophistication and specialization of an ancient society. In general development, however, the above simplified model seems to hold true: militarization was a key element in the origins and development of civilization.¹

There are a large number of factors that influenced the types of weapons and techniques for using those weapons an ancient army could employ, and there are no clear criteria for determining the absolute superiority or inferiority of a specific type of weapon. Technology, available raw materials, climate, military theory and practice, the weapons of the enemy, relative cost, and martial skill all influenced the development of which "weapons system" a civilization would adopt at given time. For example, French and Italian infantry adopted the crossbow as their major missile weapon beginning in the twelfth century A.D., and it continued in widespread use until the rise of effective gunpowder weapons in the sixteenth century. On the other hand, the English preferred the longbow, while the Muslims adopted a recurved composite bow. Each weapon has its advantages and disadvantages: the English longbow required extensive training in archery but had a long range. The crossbow required little training to use effectively but had a slow rate of fire. The composite bow was expensive and difficult to make but was powerful and could be shot from horseback. Each army adopted a different weapon and adapted its military system to that weapon's effectiveness and limitations.²

Many of these elements concerning the relationship

between weapons technology, society, and warfare are clearly reflected in the Book of Mormon and lead naturally to such questions as, What weapons did the armies in the Book of Mormon use? What was the nature and function of these weapons? How do they relate to known weapons of the Middle East and Mesoamerica?³ For this study and the subsequent studies in this section, weapons will be broadly classified into two categories: melee weapons, which a soldier holds in one or two hands for face-to-face combat; and missile weapons, which a soldier throws or propels at an enemy from a distance. There are a large variety of different types of weapons in each of these two categories, and weapons of both types mentioned in the Book of Mormon will be discussed in detail.⁴

The sword is a weapon consisting of a four-to-ten-inch handle or hilt and a blade that can measure in length from a foot to as much as five feet. Sword blades can be single or double edged and either straight or curved. The points of swords may be sharp, for thrusting, or blunt, where only the blade edge is used for cutting. Some swords are designed only for cutting or for thrusting, while others can be used with both techniques. Although in one sense *sword* is a common English word, in reality a vast variety of weapons with many different characteristics exist that can be categorized as swords.⁵ Thus a sword in one age or language might be totally different in size, design, construction, and use from a sword of another age, even though we might not normally think of one or both as swords. An excellent example of this is the *gladius*. The original classical Latin *gladius* was a technical term for a short sword, only about 18–22 inches long, used by Roman infantrymen (it was an unsuitable cavalry weapon).⁶ By the Middle Ages, however, the *gladius* had become a generic term used to designate any of the many types of swords European knights and soldiers used, some of

which—in contrast to the short Roman *gladius*—could be as tall as a man.

Sword Usage in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon mentions the sword 156 times, more than any other weapon. For the sake of discussion, we have divided its usage into two categories: literary or metaphorical and military-technical. We have classified seventy-eight instances as metaphorical and seventy-eight as technical (though many occurrences are ambiguous and could fall in either category). There are four major types of sword metaphors used in the Book of Mormon: fighting or warfare in general, violent death, military vigilance, and divine power. The book metaphorically describes fighting in battle with eighteen different sword phrases, violent death with seven major metaphors, military preparedness with two phrases, and divine power with five metaphors—all listed in the following tables:

Sword Metaphors for Fighting in Battle

<i>Phrases</i>	<i>References</i>
“take [‘raise,’ or ‘lift’] up the sword”	8 instances: 2 Nephi 12:4; Alma 27:29; 48:14; 60:16, 28; 61:11; 62:5; Helaman 15:9
“fall upon with the sword”	2 instances: Alma 58:18; Mormon 6:9
“smite with the sword”	2 instances: Alma 51:20; 60:30
“pestilence and the sword”	2 instances: Alma 10:22, 23
“visit with the sword”	3 instances: 2 Nephi 1:18; Helaman 13:9; 3 Nephi 3:6
“contend with swords”	2 instances: Alma 44:17; Ether 15:24
“resist them with our swords”	1 instance: Alma 61:14
“struggle with the sword”	1 instance: Mormon 2:14
“fought with the sword”	1 instance: Ether 15:29
“deliver . . . out of bondage by the sword”	1 instance: Mosiah 22:2

“let fall the sword”	1 instance: 3 Nephi 3:8
“enforce it by the sword”	1 instance: Alma 1:12
“preserved from swords”	1 instance: Alma 44:9
“swords of their own hands fall upon their own heads”	1 instance: 1 Nephi 22:13
“run upon swords”	1 instance: Alma 57:33
“pestilence of the sword”	1 instance: Helaman 11:14
“beating swords into plow- shares”	1 instance: 2 Nephi 12:4 = Isaiah 2:4
“famine and the sword”	1 instance: 2 Nephi 8:19

Sword Metaphors for Violent Death

<i>Phrases</i>	<i>References</i>
“fall by the sword”	18 instances: 2 Nephi 13:25 = Isaiah 3:25; 23:15 = Isaiah 13:15; Omni 1:17; Alma 24:24; 43:38; 44:18; 56:51; 58:39; 60:5, 8, 12, 22; Mormon 6:15; Ether 14:4, 24; 15:23, 29; Moroni 9:2
“perish by the sword”	4 instances: 1 Nephi 1:13; Alma 24:23; 50:22; Ether 15:28
“slain by the sword”	4 instances: Alma 1:9; Helaman 10:18; Ether 13:18; 15:2
“destroyed by the sword”	3 instances: Alma 57:23; Helaman 11:4, 5
“hewn down by the sword”	1 instance: Alma 51:19
“murder with the sword”	1 instance: Alma 60:17
“slaughters with the sword”	1 instance: 1 Nephi 12:2

Sword Metaphors for Military Preparedness

<i>Phrases</i>	<i>References</i>
“sleep upon swords”	4 instances: Alma 57:9; Ether 15:20, 22, 24
“guard them, swords in hand”	1 instance: Alma 57:15

Sword Metaphors for Divine Power

<i>Phrases</i>	<i>References</i>
"sword of justice"	6 instances: Alma 26:19; 60:29; Helaman 13:5; 3 Nephi 20:20; 29:4; Ether 8:23
"sword of vengeance"	1 instance: Mormon 8:41
"sword of almighty wrath"	1 instance: Alma 54:6
"sword of destruction"	1 instance: 3 Nephi 2:19
"mouth like a sharp sword"	1 instance: 1 Nephi 21:2 = Isaiah 49:2

Of course, some of these occurrences might represent technical statements that someone was actually killed by or was fighting with a sword rather than metaphors that he was killed by violence or fought in battle. However, when such stock literary phrases are employed, determining whether the intended meaning was technical, metaphorical, or both is often impossible. An excellent example of a sword metaphor being employed literally is Alma 1:9, where Nehor "was wroth with Gideon, and drew his sword and began to smite him. . . . Therefore he was slain by the sword." Here the phrase "slain by the sword" describes the fact that Gideon was actually killed by a sword rather than to say that he was killed by generic violence, as the phrase is often used metaphorically elsewhere.

It is possible to get a relatively good idea of the technical nature of the Book of Mormon sword from the usage of the word in military situations, unlike most other weapons in the Book of Mormon, which are simply mentioned in passing but never described in detail. There are several important incidents in which the use and nature of the Book of Mormon sword can be analyzed.

The first detailed description of the use of the sword in the Book of Mormon is the famous beheading of Laban (see 1 Nephi 4:7–19, ca. 590 B.C.). Here Laban's sword fits nicely into the pattern of a high-quality Middle Eastern

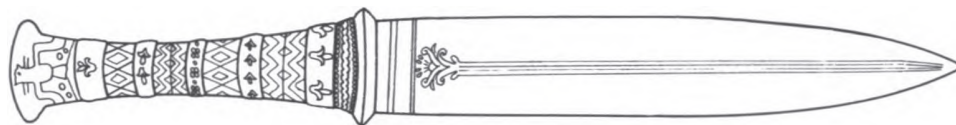


Figure 1. Sketch of an iron dagger with a gold handle and sheath, from Tutankhamun's tomb, ca. 1337 B.C. The blade is of nonmeteoric iron and apparently a Hittite import.

weapon—a sheath, gold hilt, fine workmanship, and “blade . . . of the most precious steel” (1 Nephi 4:9; see fig. 1). Nephi's method of beheading Laban by grasping his hair to pull up the head and expose the neck is a common technique (see fig. 2). Grasping the hair of the victim also insures that the head remains a stable target for the swordsman.

The second major incident involving swords is the story of Ammon and the brigands at the waters of Sebus (see Alma 17:26–39, ca. 90 B.C.). While defending the flocks of King Lamoni, Ammon was attacked by a band of brigands who had been marauding in the region. He killed a number of them at long range with his sling, after which “they came forth with clubs to slay him. But behold, every man that lifted his club to smite Ammon, he smote off their arms with his sword; for he did withstand their blows by smiting their arms with the edge of his sword” (Alma 17:36–37). This incident is important since it clearly indicates that Nephite swords were edged weapons used for cutting. Thrusting or stabbing with swords is rarely mentioned in the Book of Mormon.⁷ The weapon is generally “raised” and is used to “smite,” which imply a cutting action, as explicitly described in the incident with Ammon.

Ammon's sword technique deserves some attention. The text reads, “Every man that lifted his club to smite Ammon, he smote off their arms with his sword.” Actually severing an enemy's forearm or hand with a sword is a difficult task. What will generally occur is that the sword will cut into the flesh until it reaches the bone, partially



Figure 2. Rameses III grasping the hair of his enemies as he beheads them, from a relief at Medinet Habu, XXth Dynasty (1192–1160 B.C.). Note that Rameses is here holding a “cimeter,” as discussed in Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Scimitars, Cimeters!” in this volume.

severing or cracking it. However, since the victim’s arm is free to rotate at the shoulder, the sword will simply push the limb away in the direction of the blow rather than cut deeper into the limb. Thus, in most situations one would expect a sword to make a deep gash but not actually to sever the arm. In order to sever an arm with a sword, the sword must be extremely sharp, must be swung swiftly, and must strike against a limb that is either somehow fixed, or that is moving toward the sword blade.

Thus Ammon's sword technique makes perfect military sense. He waits for the enemy to attack him with his club. As the club is raised and brought down swiftly toward Ammon, Ammon swings his sword in a fast powerful blow aimed at the forearm. The combination of the attacker's swing *toward* Ammon and the force of Ammon's own swing is sufficient to sever the forearm. Thus, according to the Book of Mormon, Ammon waited for precisely the right moment to initiate his arm-severing sword technique with maximum efficacy against his enemy.

The final major incident involving swords occurred at the surrender of Zerahemnah after the battle at the river Sidon (see Alma 44:8–15, ca. 74 B.C.). After Moroni had defeated him, the Lamanite chief captain Zerahemnah "delivered up his sword and his cimeter, and his bow into the hands of Moroni" (Alma 44:8) in token of surrender. However, when Zerahemnah refused to take an oath of peace, Moroni did not accept his surrender, and Zerahemnah's weapons were ritually returned. This type of ritual disarming as part of surrender is a well-known and universal military custom. From a modern perspective of total warfare, returning weapons to an enemy after he has surrendered is unthinkable. However, Moroni and Zerahemnah were enacting a ritual of surrender, and Moroni ritually returned the weapons to show the Nephite soldiers who were watching that the surrender and truce were not in effect and that they should be on guard for further conflict.

Zerahemnah then attempted to kill Moroni, but was stopped by one of Moroni's personal guards. The guardsman "smote it [Zerahemnah's sword] even to the earth, and it broke by the hilt" (Alma 44:12). Apparently Zerahemnah swung his sword at Moroni, but the sword of a watchful guardsman parried the blow. The force of the parry knocked the sword from Zerahemnah's hand and broke it at the hilt. Swords are designed to be held by the hilt, which is generally the only part of a sword that is not

sharp. Hilts are usually made of a separate material from the blade (wood, bone, leather, stone). The joint between hilt and blade is therefore often structurally the weakest point of the sword.⁸ Thus if Zerahemnah's sword were to break, there would be a high probability that it would break at the hilt,⁹ just as described in the Book of Mormon. Possibly Moroni's guardsman was attempting a sword parry similar to Ammon's described above, but perhaps he missed the forearm, hitting the sword instead. Moroni's guardsman then aimed a blow at Zerahemnah's head, but succeeded only in scalping him. A light glancing sword blow against the head could scrape across the skull and succeed in slicing off a portion of the scalp. The scalp of the unfortunate Zerahemnah was then "laid" on the point of the guardsman's sword, raised aloft, and paraded before the Lamanites.¹⁰

There are a number of other cases in the Book of Mormon that mention a sword in a technical military context, but these incidents do not shed additional light on the nature or use of the sword.¹¹ The biblical image of cherubim and the flaming sword (see Genesis 3:24) is mentioned in Alma 12:21; 42:2, 3, but it is undoubtedly based on the account of the Garden of Eden in the brass plates of Laban (see 1 Nephi 5:11).

Near Eastern and Mesoamerican Swords

Does the sword of the Book of Mormon correspond with contemporary weapons known in the Old and New Worlds? The sword was a common weapon in the Near East during Nephi's time. Figures 1 and 2 show examples of Near Eastern swords perhaps similar to Laban's sword, which Nephi brought with him to the Americas.¹²

From the Mesoamerican perspective, the most likely candidate for the Book of Mormon sword is the weapon known in Nahuatl (Aztec) as the *macuahuitl* or *macana* (see figs. 3–4). The *macuahuitl* was constructed from a long staff



Figure 3. Pre-Classic warrior (before A.D. 200) from sculpture in Cave of Loltun, Yucatan, Mexico. His right hand holds a *macuahuitl*; his left, a possible scimitar. Note the obsidian blade on the top of the *macuahuitl*, which gives it a point and makes it useful for thrusting (see Alma 44:13, where a Nephite places the scalp of Zerahemnah on the point of his sword).

or large paddle-shaped piece of wood. Sharp obsidian flakes were fixed into the edges of the wooden blade, giving

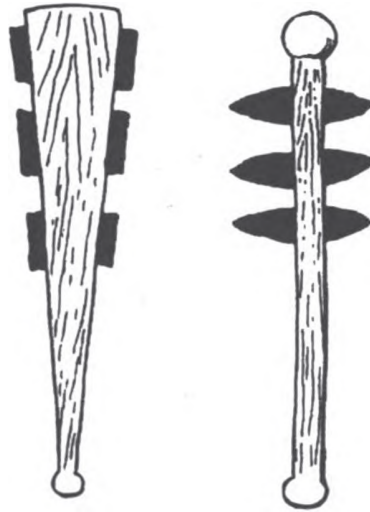


Figure 4. Left drawing is of a late Aztec *macuahuitl*. Right drawing is of a Maya *macuahuitl*.

it a deadly cutting edge.¹³ There are numerous representations of the *macuahuitl* in Mesoamerican art, the earliest dating back to the Pre-Classic era.

However, due to the paucity of artistic remains in Mesoamerica, there are actually only a few representations of the use of the *macuahuitl* in Pre-Classic times. The earliest artistic example of which we are aware is shown in figure 3, which depicts a *macuahuitl* in the standard pattern of later Maya weapons, with multiple obsidian blades on both edges of the weapon. Although early artistic evidence is sparse, these examples, combined with the clear evidence of the widespread obsidian blade industry, indicate that some type of the *macuahuitl* sword was known and used in Book of Mormon times. Mesoamerican art from the Classic and later periods provides many additional examples of the widespread use of the *macuahuitl* sword, continuing on until the Spanish conquest (see fig. 4).¹⁴

Does the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl* correspond with the descriptions of the nature and use of the sword in the Book of Mormon? The first question is whether the *macuahuitl* can be considered a "sword." This is really a question of semantics, and although some scholars prefer to call it a

war club, others call it a sword, and some even use both terms.¹⁵ The real question is not what modern scholars choose to call it, but whether the weapon matches the description of swords in the Book of Mormon.

The story of Ammon's battle at the waters of Sebus demonstrates that the cutting edge of the Book of Mormon sword was capable of severing arms. The cutting power of the obsidian edge of the *macuahuitl* was renowned at the time of the Spanish Conquest. An obsidian edge was even as sharp as that of surgical steel.¹⁶ In one famous incident, a Maya warrior cut off the head of a Spaniard's horse with one blow of a *macuahuitl*.¹⁷ Thus Ammon's feat of cutting off human arms would have been easily possible for a man armed with a *macuahuitl* sword.

The *macuahuitl* was clearly a cutting rather than a thrusting weapon, which causes some potential difficulty in the story of Moroni's guard raising Zerahemnah's scalp "upon the point of his sword." Although most later representations of *macuahuitl* swords do not show the weapon with a point, one of the earliest examples of the weapon, reproduced in figure 3, shows a triangular obsidian blade inserted in the top of the weapon, giving it a point that could be used for thrusting. Zerahemnah's scalp could easily have been laid upon the point of such a weapon.

Another possible problem in equating the *macuahuitl* with the Book of Mormon sword is the mention of the hilts of the swords (see Alma 44:12; Ether 14:21; 1 Nephi 4:9, having reference to Laban's Near Eastern sword; Mosiah 8:11, which will be discussed below). Mesoamerican *macuahuitls* show no evidence of a hilt made of special material, but rather are constructed of wooden shafts into which obsidian blades were embedded. However, structurally, the *macuahuitl* does have a hilt. The lower portion of the weapon lacks obsidian blades so it can be held, which thus functionally distinguishes the handle or hilt from the blade. If a *macuahuitl* were to be broken when struck by

another weapon, one expected place for such breakage would be where the obsidian blades did not protect the wood of the shaft, leaving the wood directly exposed to the blades of the other sword. Note that Zerahemnah's sword breaks at the hilt (Alma 44:12). Possibly a hilt in the Book of Mormon could also refer to the wooden shaft of the *macuahuitl* as a whole, distinguishing it from the obsidian blades. Thus, although there is a slight semantic difficulty associating "hilts" with the *macuahuitl* sword, on close examination, it does not prove to be significant.

An interesting incident in the Book of Mormon involves the staining of swords with blood (see Alma 24:12–15, ca. 90 B.C.). The Lamanites who had been converted by Ammon refused to take up arms, giving the following argument: "Since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren" (Alma 24:12; cf. Alma 24:13, 15). Two separate metaphors are used here: first, that the swords had been stained with blood, and second, that they had been made bright again by God.

Although today we speak of "stainless steel," in Joseph Smith's day, metals were not generally thought of as becoming stained. Staining was a term that generally applied to wood, cloth, or other substances subject to discoloration.¹⁸ Reference to staining swords with blood is not found in the Bible. Thus, although not impossible, the metaphor of staining metal swords with blood is somewhat unusual. However, if the Nephite sword were the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl* with a wooden shaft, blood would naturally stain and discolor the wood when an enemy was wounded. Furthermore, if a metal weapon becomes bloody, the blade can be easily wiped clean. Removing a bloodstain from wood is virtually impossible since the blood soaks into the fibers of the wood. Thus the metaphor of the great mercy of God in removing bloodstains from the swords becomes much more powerful and understandable if it refers to

wood stained with blood, which only a miracle would remove, rather than if it refers to metal stained with blood, which a piece of cloth could clean. As to the second metaphor of making the swords bright again, brightness can refer to any object that shines—metal, stars, or stone.¹⁹ Many types of obsidian have a fine luster and the stone edges of the *macuahuitl* could easily be described as bright. Thus, although the “bloodstained-to-bright” sword metaphor could apply to either metal- or stone-edged swords, it is actually a more powerful image if the sword referred to was a *macuahuitl*.

A possible difficulty with interpreting the *macuahuitl* as the Book of Mormon sword concerns the five references in the Book of Mormon to drawing a sword (see 1 Nephi 4:9; Mosiah 19:4; Alma 1:9; 19:22; 20:16). The clearest instance occurs in 1 Nephi 4:9, where Nephi saw Laban’s sword, “and . . . drew it forth from the sheath thereof.” The sword referred to here, however, is Laban’s standard Near Eastern sword, which generally was carried in a sheath. Significantly, in the other four cases of drawing a sword in the Book of Mormon, sheaths are not mentioned. In 145 B.C., Gideon “drew his sword, and swore in his wrath that he would slay the king” (Mosiah 19:4). According to Alma 1:9 (91 B.C.), Nehor “drew his sword and began to smite him.” Alma 19:22 reports that one of the brigands at the waters of Sebus “drew his sword and went forth that he might let it fall upon Ammon.” In Alma 20:16 (90 B.C.), King Lamoni “drew his sword that he might smite [Ammon].” These references could describe grasping or brandishing a sword before combat rather than actually “drawing” it from a sheath.

We are unaware of any example of a scabbard or sheath for the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl*. However, there is a case of several weapons being carried in a bag from which weapons would have to be drawn for combat.²⁰ A sheath or scabbard served three major functions. Most importantly,

it protected the soldier and his companions or mount from being accidentally cut or jabbed by an exposed blade or point. Second, it served to protect the blade from corrosion or from scratches or damage. Finally, weapon sheaths were often decorated and ornamented to serve as symbols of the bearer's wealth and rank. All of these functions were important in early Mesoamerican society. In addition to carrying bags such as that mentioned above, early Mesoamericans could have had some type of protective covering for valuable weapons from which the *macuahuitl* sword would need to be "drawn" in preparation for combat, as described in the Book of Mormon. In the *Popol Vuh*, there are examples of wrapping special royal insignia in cloth or skins.²¹

The final and perhaps most significant difficulty with associating the Book of Mormon sword with the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl* is references to metal swords and to Nephi making swords patterned after Laban's. Second Nephi 5:14 states that "Nephi did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords." The sword of Laban was undoubtedly a normal Near Eastern-style sword, and according to 1 Nephi 4:9, the blade was made of steel.

If Nephi patterned the swords he made after Laban's sword, we would expect that they too had metal blades, which might seem to contradict the *macuahuitl* theory. There are several aspects to this important question. First, it should be pointed out that the text does not say that Nephi instructed his people how to make swords, but rather that he made the swords himself. This may indicate that the metallurgical technology of the Nephites, following the pattern of many ancient societies, was the monopoly of a specific family or clan.²² If such a small clan were to die out somehow from war, disease, famine, or natural accidents, the metallurgical skills would also be lost.

The instance mentioned above is the only reference to

making swords after the pattern of Laban's.²³ After 2 Nephi 5:14, the Book of Mormon mentions Laban's sword three times: in Nephi's old age—"having wielded the sword of Laban in their defence" (Jacob 1:10); in a description of King Benjamin's fighting at the head of his armies (see Words of Mormon 1:13); and in King Mosiah's accession to the throne, where King Benjamin gave him charge of the records, the compass, and the sword of Laban (see Mosiah 1:15–16). Such use suggests that the weapon was not only well known, but also unique, wielded by kings, with no comparable weapons being used by others.

In view of the evidence of archaeology, it seems possible that after the Nephites moved inland away from the land of first inheritance, they may have been unable to discover adequate sources of ore. Without access to the ore necessary to train the new generation in extensive metal-making skills, their metallurgical technology in some fields could have been lost after a single generation had passed. The Nephites would have had to adopt or develop lithic technology. From that point on, they would have made most, if not all, of their weapons from stone and wood rather than metal. As a hypothetical scenario, then, it can be posited that the swords Nephi made in the early sixth century B.C. were originally metal weapons based directly on the pattern of Laban's sword, but that eventually the metallurgical technology was somehow lost, and *macuahuitl*-style swords replaced the original metal ones.²⁴

On the other hand, Nephi may also have written in a general sense: he made the Nephites' weapons on the general pattern of Laban's sword—a hand-held weapon with a double-edged long blade—rather than exactly copying its structure and material in every detail. And in a general sense, the *macuahuitl* has many parallels to a typical sword.

The overall question of the use of metals by Book of Mormon cultures is an important topic that deserves de-

tailed attention.²⁵ Here only the question of metal weapons will be analyzed. There are five explicit references to metal weapons and armor in the Book of Mormon. Two are references to Near East weapons: “the blade [of Laban’s sword] was of the most precious steel” (1 Nephi 4:9), and Nephi’s bow was made of “fine steel” (1 Nephi 16:18). The existence of steel (that is, carburized iron) weapons in the Near East in the early sixth century B.C. has been clearly demonstrated. Robert Maddin writes, “To sum up, by the beginning of the seventh century B.C. at the latest, the blacksmiths of the eastern Mediterranean had mastered two of the processes that make iron a useful material for tools and weapons: carburizing and quenching.”²⁶

Aside from Jarom 1:8 (see note 23), this leaves two cases of metal weapons, both of which, interestingly enough, are from Jaredite times. The Jaredites “did molten out of the hill, and made swords out of steel” (Ether 7:9). On returning from their expedition into the lands of the Jaredites (ca. 121 B.C.), a band of Nephite explorers “brought breastplates, which are large, and they are of brass and of copper, and are perfectly sound. And . . . they have brought swords, the hilts thereof have perished, and the blades thereof were cankered with rust” (Mosiah 8:10–11).²⁷ The steel-sword episode occurred during the civil war between Shule and Corihor. Although Jaredite chronology is very uncertain, John Sorenson has tentatively dated this period of Jaredite history to around 2800 B.C., putting it well before the beginning of the Iron Age in the Middle East.²⁸

In light of contemporary conditions in Mesoamerica, one can understand this passage a number of ways. Although the blades of most *macuahuitls* in Mesoamerica were made from obsidian, the Aztecs are known to have had war clubs studded with iron instead of the usual obsidian. There are even examples in Mesoamerica of ceremonial *macuahuitls* with feathers replacing the obsidian blades.²⁹

Various types of material, including iron, replaced the usual obsidian of the *macuahuitl*, and such a weapon could thus be described as a sword with a metal “blade.” Another possibility is to equate this Jaredite steel with the “steel” of the King James translation of the Old Testament, which actually refers to the Hebrew word for “bronze.”³⁰

Finally, we need to understand that Mosiah translated Ether’s plates into social and linguistic concepts with which he was familiar. Mosiah, as king, possessed Laban’s sword, a steel weapon that was passed down as one of the insignia of royalty. In translating Ether’s record, Mosiah might thus have given the Jaredite kings steel swords, like the one he himself possessed, because in Mosiah’s society a king was expected to have a steel sword as his royal weapon.³¹

Although there are some difficulties and obscure points not yet fully understood, none of the Book of Mormon descriptions of swords would exclude the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl* from consideration. Although additional archaeological evidence may eventually show that there were indeed Near Eastern–style swords with metal blades in use among the Book of Mormon peoples, with our present state of knowledge, it seems likely that the early Mesoamerican obsidian-edged *macuahuitl* was generally the “sword” referred to in the Book of Mormon, with the possible rare use of metal in place of the usual obsidian for special weapons.

Notes

1. See Jonathan Haas, *The Evolution of the Prehistoric State* (New York: Columbia, 1982).

2. On these weapons, see Ralph W. F. Payne-Gallwey, *The Crossbow: Mediaeval and Modern, Military and Sporting* (New York: Bramhall House, 1958; reprint of 1903 ed.); Robert Hardy, *The Longbow* (New York: Arco, 1977); and J. D. Latham and W. F. Paterson, *Saracen Archery* (London: Holland Press, 1970).

3. This study assumes that Mesoamerica is the land of the Book of Mormon, following John Sorenson’s *An Ancient American Setting*

for the *Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985).

4. The present article discusses swords, clubs, axes, and knives. For other weapons, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Scimitars, Cimemeters!"; William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, "Notes on the Cimemeter (Scimitar) in the Book of Mormon"; and William J. Hamblin, "The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon," in this volume.

5. One need only examine George C. Stone, *A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration, and Use of Arms and Armor* (New York: Jack Brussel, 1961; reprint of 1931 ed.), 594, fig. 762, to see the many shapes, sizes, and types of weapons that can be classified as swords. See Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Study*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), for numerous representations of swords in the ancient Near East.

6. Leonid Tarassuk and Claude Blair, eds., *The Complete Encyclopedia of Arms and Weapons* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1986), 193b.

7. The only major implication of thrusting with Book of Mormon swords is an ambiguous passage in Alma 57:33 (63 B.C.), where the Lamanites "did in a body run upon our swords." Although this passage could imply that the Lamanites rushed against the points of the Nephite's extended swords, this is not necessarily the intent of the passage. It is probably another sword metaphor referring to weapons in general. Second Nephi 24:19 reads, "those that are slain, thrust through with a sword," clearly describing thrusting as opposed to cutting with a sword, but this passage is a quotation from Isaiah 14:19. The significant incident of Zerahemnah's scalp being put on the point of a sword will be discussed below.

8. Of course, as there are many specific methods of attaching hilts to swords, the structural integrity and points of weakness of each type of sword differ.

9. On the question of the nature of the "hilt" of the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl*, see discussion later in the text.

10. The "point" of the Mesoamerican *macuahuitl* will be discussed later in the text.

11. Other than the incidents discussed above, swords are mentioned in Omni 1:2, 10; Mosiah 19:4; Alma 1:9; 2:1, 20, 29, 31; 3:2; 6:7; 18:16; 19:22, 24; 20:14, 16, 22; 24:21; 31:5; 50:26; 60:35; Helaman 1:23; Ether 9:27; 14:1, 2; 15:5, 30.

12. For brief discussions of swords in the Old Testament, see J. W. Wevers, "Sword," in George A. Buttrick, ed., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. plus supplement (New York: Abingdon, 1962-76), 4:469-70, and his "Weapons and Implements of War" in *ibid.*, 4:820-25.

13. For an excellent discussion on the structure and manufacture of the *macuahuitl*, see Prescott H. F. Follett, "War and Weapons of the Maya," *Middle American Papers, Middle American Research Series*, Publication No. 4 (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1932), 385–87.

14. Artistic depictions of the *macuahuitl* are widespread. See Follett, "War and Weapons of the Maya," figs. 15–20; Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *The Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. and tr. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. Anderson, 13 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1957–59), Bk. 8, figs. 78–80, Bk. 12, figs. 77, 80, 89, 90, 93, 104, 108–10. Examples could be further multiplied. See also Merle Greene, Robert L. Rands, and John A. Graham, *Maya Sculpture* (Berkeley: Lederer, Street & Zeus, 1972), 308–9, pl. 146.

15. Follett consistently calls the *macuahuitl* a war club. Sylvanus G. Morley and George W. Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, rev. by Robert J. Sharer, 4th ed. (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1983), 257, call it a sword. Miguel Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), alternately calls it a club (xxvi) or a sword (165). It is called a sword in Robert Wauchope, ed., *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, 16 vols. (Austin: University of Texas, 1964–73), 3:671, 969, 976.

16. Nigel Davies, *The Ancient Kingdoms of Mexico* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 96.

17. This event at the battle of Quetzaltenango in 1524 is recounted in George E. Stuart and Gene S. Stuart, *The Mysterious Maya* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1977), 131–33; cf. Robert M. Carnack's translation of the Quiché account, *Titulo C'oyoi* (38–39), in his *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 39–41, 283, 303, 341.

18. See *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter OED) 10:774–76. Wood, cloth, glass, hands, stars, earth, water, reputations, and even stones are all stained in abundance in the examples given in this entry. However, Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970; reprint of 1828 ed.), vol. 2, s.v. "stain," does mention "armor stained with blood."

19. OED, 1:1103a mentions precious stones as being "bright."

20. See the figure from Chichen Itza Temple of the Tigers and Shields, Temple A, in Follett, "War and Weapons of the Maya," 388, fig. 20, showing a warrior carrying *macuahuitls* in a bag on his back, from which the weapons would be drawn.

21. *Popol Vuh*, 205.

22. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), discusses the origins and cultural significance of metallurgy in ancient societies.

23. 2 Nephi 5:15 reports that Nephi taught his people "to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel." There are, however, no later examples of metal weapons specifically mentioned among the Nephites or of swords made after the pattern of Laban's sword. The next mention of weapon-making is two hundred years later: the Nephites had become "rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war – yea, the sharp pointed arrow, and the quiver, and the dart, and the javelin, and all preparations for war" (Jarom 1:8). Interestingly, swords are not mentioned here, and the weapons listed could have been made of wood as well as of metal, or with a combination of both (wood shafts with metal tips, for example). Though the passage could mean that the tools and weapons were of iron, copper, and steel, it could also simply mean that the Nephites had the metals mentioned, as well as tools and weapons constructed of unspecified materials (see also John A. Tvedtnes, *Was Lehi a Caravaneer?* F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, 1984; and "Lodestone and the Liahona," F.A.R.M.S. *Update*, March 1984).

24. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 278–82, discusses this general scenario, providing several references to additional literature on this topic.

25. Sorenson has done some excellent work in this regard in *ibid.*, 277–88; and in "A Reconsideration of Early Metal in Mesoamerica," *Miscellaneous Series*, University of Northern Colorado Museum of Anthropology, No. 45, 1982 (available as a F.A.R.M.S. Reprint, 1982).

26. Robert Maddin et al., "How the Iron Age Began," *Scientific American* 237 (October 1977): 131 (for a general discussion, 122–31); see also Robert Fisher, *The Epic of Steel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 5–24; and Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, vol. 7 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 221–23. The question of Nephi's steel bow is discussed in William J. Hamblin, "The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon," in this volume.

27. The possible significance of metal Jaredite armor is discussed in William J. Hamblin, "Armor in the Book of Mormon," in this volume.

28. See Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 116–19, and fig. 1 on p. 118; and “The Years of the Jaredites,” F.A.R.M.S. Preliminary Report, 1969.

29. H. H. Bancroft, *The Native Races (of the Pacific States)*, 5 vols. (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft, 1882), 2:407–8. For an example of a ceremonial *macuahuitl* with feathers instead of obsidian, from the *Florentine Codex* (sixteenth century A.D.), see Follett, “War and Weapons of the Maya,” 386–88, fig. 19.

30. See *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 1:467, s.v. “bronze.” The KJV biblical translation of bronze as “steel” is discussed in William J. Hamblin, “The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon,” in this volume.

31. For a discussion of the various factors involved in Mosiah’s translation of the plates of Ether, see John W. Welch, “Preliminary Comments for Discussion on the Sources behind the Book of Ether,” unpublished ms. See Vergil, *Aeneid* II, 333 and 627, for just two examples of anachronistic descriptions of Bronze Age Trojans using iron and steel weapons. References in the Book of Mormon to metals used by the Jaredites may in part be a similar anachronism.