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“IN THE CAUSE ... OF THEIR GOD”: CLARIFYING SOME ISSUES REGARDING THE BOOK OF MORMON AND A GOSPEL VIEW OF WAR

Duane Boyce

Abstract: *A recent effort to think about war concludes that the Book of Mormon displays two righteous approaches to conflict: a violent approach that is justified and therefore “blessed;” and a nonviolent approach that is higher than this and therefore “more blessed” (an approach that is also said to be effective in ending conflict). This effort, however, turns out to be unsuccessful for multiple reasons. Attending to these reasons can be valuable, since doing so can help clarify several important issues about the Book of Mormon and a gospel view of war.*

In an earlier publication, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War*¹ (hereafter referred to as *EUB*), I argued that a careful look at the scriptures permits us to create a structure for a comprehensive view of war from a Latter-day Saint perspective. This general framework, stated (for brevity’s sake) in the form of broad principles, is summarized in Table 1.² The framework is derived in part from an examination of classical just-war theory. Initiated by important religious thinkers in centuries past and expanded upon by others (not necessarily religious) in modern times, this theory argues that although war is always to be earnestly and energetically avoided, a given war is just when (a) it is fought for just reasons, and (b) it is conducted in a just way (i.e., the methods of conducting it meet various moral standards). The just-war

1. Duane Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015).

2. This framework appears in *EUB*, 271–73. It is distilled from the analysis conducted in the book’s previous sixteen chapters.

Table 1. A Latter-day Saint Framework Regarding War

A. THE REQUIREMENT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

1. The most important requirement for any society is to be righteous — to be devoted to following God.
2. A society that is not righteous must repent and begin seeking righteousness.
3. As part of this righteousness such a society:
 - (a) must seek to bring its enemies to Christ; and
 - (b) must never provoke or seek conflict, but endeavor vigorously to achieve peace and avoid war.

B. CONDITIONS THAT JUSTIFY WAR AND QUALIFY FOR GOD’S HELP

4. If such a society:
 - (a) is ultimately compelled, as a final resort, to fight in defense of important human values against the aggression of evil leaders;
 - (b) fights only to defend those important human values and not to achieve any unworthy purpose;
 - (c) stands a reasonable chance of success in defending itself; and
 - (d) can reach a reasonable judgment that the benefits of waging a war of defense are proportional to the costs of doing so; then,
 - (e) that society may use military means in its defense, and it will qualify to enjoy God’s help in doing so (in rare cases, He may even fight the necessary battles unilaterally)

C. CONDITIONS THAT GOVERN THE CONDUCT OF WAR AND QUALIFY FOR GOD’S HELP

5. Engaged in such defensive conflict, the society must:
 - (a) foremost, continue to repent and to recognize and embrace its dependence on God and the necessity of faithfulness to Him;
 - (b) maintain a peaceable heart, after the manner of the Sermon on the Mount;
 - (c) spill as little blood as necessary;
 - (d) aim only at legitimate military targets, minimizing civilian suffering and risk — including assuming greater personal risk in order to do so;
 - (e) not use weapons that are intrinsically heinous — that cause mutilation and suffering beyond the need simply to stop the aggressors;
 - (f) engage only in military tactics whose benefits are proportional to their costs;
 - (g) maintain its righteousness of intent in fighting; and
 - (h) end the fighting the minute peace and freedom can be secured without fighting.

framework seeks to identify the broad principles that would satisfy these two moral requirements. The general framework appearing in Table 1 follows this same structure, and indeed adopts several of its provisions from modern academic treatises of just-war theory.³

The framework is also derived from a comprehensive study of the scriptures and the most relevant statements by modern prophets. It also reflects careful consideration of numerous arguments for pacifism — the view that war is never justified⁴ — from both secular and gospel perspectives.

As is evident on even a quick perusal, this framework is constructed specifically for a gospel-based society. Although standard just-war theory provides multiple concepts that, it would seem, many Latter-day Saints would find congenial, the restored gospel supplies additions that are crucial in thinking about Book of Mormon conflicts, for example — and thus that are important for developing a comprehensive LDS perspective on war. *EUB* is an attempt to do just that: to fill out the just-war perspective with essential scriptural principles, and thus to fashion an overall framework regarding war that will resonate with the considered judgments of at least many Latter-day Saint readers.

Because the framework is a distillation of many issues into a few broad moral principles, the principles, by themselves, do not address

3. There are many such treatments, and here I am following Brian Orend, “A Just-War Critique of Realism and Pacifism,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26 (2001): 437–41. The earliest works on just-war theory include Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 683, https://archive.org/details/cityofgod0000augu_w6d9/page/682/mode/2up; and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1922), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.188676/page/n1/mode/2up>. Centuries later, Hugo Grotius addressed the topic in much greater detail, in his *On the Law of War and Peace* (Paris: printed by the author, 1625). See Stephen C. Neff, ed., *Hugo Grotius: On the Law of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). A recent classic study is Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

4. Pacifism, by definition, is the view that it is always impermissible to either participate in or support war, because war itself is always wrong. See, for example, Martin Ceadel, *Thinking about Peace and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5; and Orend, “A Just-War Critique,” 455. Providing a definition is important whenever this term is used, since, historically, it has been used to describe multiple different peace-oriented attitudes toward war, including those that do not, in the end, reject all war as a matter of principle. (A discussion of this matter appears in *EUB*, 17–20.)

every question one might want to have answered. Principle B. 4. (a), for example, states that fighting in defense must be a “final resort,” but this should not be taken to entail a prohibition of any and all forms of preemptive action. Chapter 12 in *EUB* addresses the matter of self-defense and preemptive action at some length, specifically treating examples of U.S. involvement in conflict raised by Eugene England. This discussion notes that preemptive action — as a form of necessary and therefore legitimate self-defense — can be appropriate and justified in certain circumstances.⁵ As a general matter, because war entails nearly endless issues of this sort, the just-war framework should not be thought of as a formula that serves to remove all questions. Instead, it is a framework that simply tells us what questions to ask. It identifies the moral considerations that it seems we must account for, analyze, and weigh if we want to reach a thoughtful decision regarding both the justifiability of any given entrance into war, and the conduct of war once it is engaged.

“Another Lens”

One effort toward understanding war, appearing in a recent article by David Pulsipher,⁶ begins by saying there are currently two basic approaches to the Book of Mormon on the topic of violence. One of these, he says, is *EUB* itself, which sees the text as displaying a just-war perspective. The other approach, in contrast, sees the Book of Mormon fundamentally as a pacifist document that condemns all violence.⁷ Both approaches, it is said, are based on their “gravitation” toward certain

5. Morgan Deane argues for the same point about self-defense and preemptive action, specifically in terms of Book of Mormon episodes and the war in Iraq. See his “Offensive Warfare in the Book of Mormon and a Defense of the Bush Doctrine,” in *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives*, eds. Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 29–39. Michael Walzer treats the topic at length in Chapter 5, “Anticipations,” of his *Just and Unjust Wars*.

6. J. David Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families *and* Love Your Enemies: A New Look at the Book of Mormon’s Patterns of Protection,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 163–83. The same general theme appears in Pulsipher’s earlier article, “The Ammonite Conundrum,” in *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon*, 1–12.

7. In different places, Pulsipher refers to Joshua Madson, Rick Duran, and Eugene England as representing this type of approach. See Joshua Madson, “A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon,” in *War and Peace in Our Time*, 13–28; F.R. Rick Duran, “Pax Sanctorum,” in *War and Peace in Our Time*, 57–79; and Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995). *EUB* addresses all three of these authors (and multiple others) and

passages in the Book of Mormon that support their respective views, a gravitation that leads to competing overall perspectives on the text.

Against these two approaches Pulsipher argues that if we use "another lens" we can see that both approaches to conflict actually appear in the Book of Mormon, and that both are presented as righteous and approved by the Lord. The better way to see the text, therefore, is to recognize that while both responses are presented as righteous, one — the nonviolent response — is presented as *more* righteous: it is "higher" than the alternative. Nonviolent response is higher both because it has "redemptive potential" — it offers "personal sanctifying effects" to the relevant parties — and because it is also more effective in creating long-term peace.⁸ For these reasons, although the just-war approach is justified and "blessed," the nonviolent approach is more than merely justified, and thus is "more blessed." It is the more excellent way.⁹

This way of thinking is unlike most approaches to the Book of Mormon, and the issues Pulsipher raises are important to consider in any attempt to reach conclusions about war. The issues are also the natural ones to emphasize in explicating and defending his "other lens" view. Having a look at them, therefore, is a productive way to gain, and maintain, increased clarity in our own thinking about this topic.¹⁰

shows why their arguments do not succeed. See *EUB*, 131–50, 164–71, and 175–209, respectively.

8. Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 178. That nonviolent approaches have redemptive effects and/or potential — indeed, that they possess "transformative power" and the ability to "induce divine blessings that extend down through the generations" — appears in several places in the article (for example, *ibid.*, 169, 170, 175, 177, 178, 179, 183). An upcoming section ("Nonviolent Response: The Issue of Effectiveness") will address the additional claim that nonviolent approaches are also superior in achieving enduring peace.

9. Pulsipher identifies different nonviolent ways of defending against threat, including flight, pacifying one's enemies, and unarmed loving confrontation (variously called "assertive love," "confrontational love," and the like). "Nonviolent" is too passive a term to capture what is involved in actually confronting enemies with love, of course (an approach, it is said, that is characterized by the Ammonites, for instance). Nevertheless, it contrasts with violent approaches to conflict, just as flight and pacification do, so it is naturally included with them under the broad umbrella of "nonviolent" approaches. That is the general category I will use, too, as a way to address them all.

10. In the interest of such clarity in our thinking, it might be useful to point out that the description of *EUB* as gravitating toward a couple of passages (Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 166–67), and that it is based fundamentally on "intuition" and "common sense" (*ibid.*, 164n7), is perhaps not the most apt description of

Just-War Theory

Central to Pulsipher’s “other lens” approach is the conviction that it is a contrast to just-war theory, both in its secular form and as expressed specifically in *EUB*. He emphasizes this contrast because he understands just-war theory to say that we *should* defend with violence when faced with a threat; we are *supposed to*. Thus, we are told that *EUB* reads the scriptural declaration, “ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed” (Alma 43:47), to mean that defense “requires” bloodshed — i.e., that “*God requires us to use defensive violence*” when faced with a threat.¹¹ In response to this “just-war” interpretation, the “other lens” approach asserts that such a reading is mistaken because every situation actually presents a choice: God does not *require* that we defend our families with violence; other options are available. Thus, it is claimed, even though defensive violence is a righteous and “blessed” alternative, choosing other, nonviolent options is simply higher and “more blessed.”

Clarifying the Just-War Approach

All of this is useful, because it gives occasion to clarify just-war theory, particularly as it appears in *EUB*. The clarification is that, in reality, neither *EUB* nor classical just-war theory says that violent defense is the right response to every threat — that violence is what “should” be pursued. That characterization is completely mistaken. Indeed, an explicit feature of the classical theory is that defensive violence is justified only when the state under attack has “no other reasonable means of defense at its disposal,” and “only when other means (such as diplomacy) cannot prevent the conflict.” And even all of this applies only when “fundamental human rights” themselves (such as life and liberty) are under violent attack — and when defense is pursued strictly in order to preserve such rights.¹²

Even stricter conditions are outlined in *EUB*, where the concern is specifically with a society (like the Nephites’) that is founded on the gospel. Such a society must be righteous, or at least repent and seek righteousness, and must first of all “seek to bring its enemies to Christ.” It must also “endeavor vigorously to achieve peace and avoid war,” since fighting to preserve important human values is “a *final* resort.”

the volume. Most readers, I think, would find its arguments to be both many and detailed, whether they agreed with them or not.

11. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 173.

12. *EUB* identifies the principles of classical just-war theory in Chapter 1. These particular elements appear on p. 8 of that volume.

Moreover, when fighting is actually necessary, a state must make sure to “maintain a peaceable heart,” “spill as little blood as necessary” and “end the fighting the minute peace and freedom can be secured without fighting.”¹³

EUB, then, does not interpret the command, “ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed,” to mean that the Nephites were *required* to use violence in defending their families whenever they faced a threat. Rather, *EUB* follows the straightforward meaning of the words — namely, that “ye shall defend your families *even if* you must shed blood,” or, “ye shall defend your families, even unto bloodshed *if necessary*.” That is what “even” means. It is what Mormon explains later, in remarking that the Nephites were to defend themselves “even to the shedding of blood *if it were necessary*” (Alma 48:14).

In other words, neither secular just-war theory nor *EUB* maintains that violent defense is the best option in every threatening situation — and certainly not that it is the *only* option. *EUB* states only that violent defense is *sometimes* the best option, and that when it is, such defense is completely righteous and even commanded by the Lord. Thus, when Pulsipher remarks that this passage (regarding “even unto bloodshed”) indicates that violence is “only the most drastic of several options,”¹⁴ he is actually stating the view of *EUB*, not contesting it.¹⁵

Mistaken Examples

This misunderstanding of *EUB*, and of just-war theory generally, leads to a discussion of several scriptural episodes in which Pulsipher says that the parties do the opposite of what just-war theory would direct.¹⁶ Seven of the episodes are:

13. *Ibid.*, 272-73.

14. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 173.

15. *Ibid.*, points to one place in *EUB* that identifies a particular situation in which *EUB* says that “most people” would find a certain killing to be “morally obligatory” (*EUB*, 1). Unfortunately, pointing to this as an assertion that violent defense is required in all situations of threat is a non sequitur. The case being considered is highly specific in its assumptions and conditions, and nothing in its discussion, or anywhere else in *EUB*, generalizes from this specific circumstance, with these specific assumptions, to the conclusion that violent defense is therefore required in all situations of threat. That is a complete mischaracterization of *EUB*.

16. These examples are presented in Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 174–78. There is an eighth example — the Ammonites — and this case will be discussed a little later, in its own section.

1. King Limhi's experience in pacifying both the Lamanite king and the Lamanite army when they posed a threat (Mosiah 20).
2. Alma₁'s successful unarmed confrontation of a Lamanite army (Mosiah 23:25–29).
3. The surrender of the priests of Noah to a Lamanite army (Mosiah 23:33–34).
4. Nephi and Lehi, who entered Lamanite territory in order to preach the gospel to them (Helaman 5).
5. The sons of Mosiah, who also entered Lamanite territory in order to preach the gospel to them (Mosiah 28:1–9; Alma 17–27).
6. The conversion of the robbers of Gadianton, through preaching, in two instances (Helaman 6:37; 3 Nephi 5:4–6).
7. The peace that was established due to the Lord's appearance to the Nephites and to His teachings at that time (3 Nephi and 4 Nephi).

Rather than the opposite of what just-war theory would dictate, however, these examples demonstrate instead what it *would* dictate, particularly as formulated in *EUB*. Recall that even when one's cause is just, this framework permits entering conflict only as a final resort, requiring the threatened party to vigorously seek ways to preserve peace instead. And conflict is not even an *option* — in defending the fundamental right to liberty, for example — when (a) there is no reasonable chance of success and (b) the benefits of conflict would not be proportional to its costs. Although examples 1–3 are not identical, they nevertheless all fall under these principles identified in *EUB*. Even more fundamental, of course, is the principle in *EUB* that gospel-based societies are specifically required to seek to bring their enemies to Christ. Examples 4–7 all fall under this principle and exemplify it.

Recognizing all this helps further clarify the *EUB* framework (and just-war theory generally), since these episodes illustrate exactly what that framework would require in their circumstances. They do not fall outside the framework but actually express it. Again, presenting that framework otherwise is a straightforward mistake.

The Central Idea of the “Other Lens” Approach

Clarifying the nature of just-war thinking is valuable, but even more important for gaining increased clarity in our thinking about war is examination of the central idea of Pulsipher's “other lens” approach

itself. Remember, this idea is that violence is never the “more blessed” option in situations of conflict; instead, nonviolent conduct — because it is more effective in achieving peace and because it is redemptive in nature — is always the higher, more blessed choice.

The most fundamental way to begin examining this claim is to ask if it matches the instructions the Lord has actually given to His people. What has He said?

The Lord’s Instructions

As previously mentioned, the Lord instructs in the Book of Mormon that “ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed” (Alma 43:47), which we understand to mean “ye shall defend your families, even unto bloodshed *if necessary*.” Indeed, the Nephites were explicitly told this — to defend themselves “even to the shedding of blood *if it were necessary*” (Alma 48:14). This is given as a general command. Such instruction is helpful in our thinking, because it presupposes that there are times when such defense *is* necessary — times when only bloodshed will suffice in protecting the Nephites’ lives, families, and way of life. If that were not the case, it is difficult to see how the Lord could have said it. And, at such times — when only violent defense will suffice — the Lord actually prescribes it: “ye *shall*,” He says.

We see the same thing when the Lord tells the Nephites they are never to initiate violence, but that they are nevertheless to defend themselves. “Ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies,” He says (Alma 43:46). In context, this statement is referring to active defense, not merely fleeing or hiding, and it too presupposes that there are times when the Nephites *would* be slain by their enemies if they did not actively defend themselves: there are no options *except* such self-defense. As before, if this were not the case, it is difficult to see how the Lord could have said it. And also as before, in such circumstances the Lord actually prescribes self-defense: “ye *shall not* suffer yourselves to be slain,” He instructs.

It is in this spirit that Mormon tells us there are occasions when the Lord will actually command His children to enter conflict (Mormon 7:4). Indeed, Captain Moroni 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 specifically in the interest of “maintaining 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: “ye *shall* go up to battle against them,” the Lord says (Alma 60:33). Not only did the Lord instruct defense in these ways, but the text also indicates that He would *warn* the Nephites “to prepare for war” and that He “would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies” (Alma 48:15–16).¹⁷

In this dispensation the Lord has also said that there are times when He will “command” His people to go out to battle (D&C 98:33, 36). All of this is echoed by Joseph Smith. In speaking of the prediction that in the last days it will be “army ... against army,” the Prophet 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.”¹⁸ These statements simply express what the Lord had said earlier: that “ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies” and “ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed.”¹⁹

The “other lens” view that nonviolent conduct is always the higher, “more blessed” option maintains that such circumstances never actually

17. Further discussion of this particular passage will appear under “Warnings to Flee” in the later section, “Patterns of Fleeing.”

18. “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 Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: 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. It also might be noted that D&C 134:11 appears to make the same general point about defense. It speaks of persons’ justification in defending themselves against assaults “in times of exigency,” when no other recourse is available to them.

19. One view of the Book of Mormon argues that statements about war made prior to the Lord’s appearance in Third Nephi are no longer normative for us, since there the Lord provides teachings that correct and supersede everything that was said or done before. See Madson, “A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon.” However, *EUB* examines this claim over the course of two chapters (8 and 9) and shows why it is mistaken. This is useful to note since Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” typically refers to Madson’s take as a straightforward alternative to *EUB* — a contrasting but equally valid point of view. I believe *EUB* has already shown this to be mistaken, however.

occur — that “alternatives to violence still exist, even in moments of extremity.”²⁰ However, the Lord’s instructions, as seen here, show that this does not actually appear to be the case. Indeed, the Lord gives them a standing command to defend themselves when necessary. It is true, of course, that even in such aggressive circumstances, nonviolent responses would still be the option to choose if they were available and effective in every circumstance — i.e., if defense were not actually necessary. Unfortunately, the scriptures, including statements from the Lord himself, demonstrate that this is not the case either. This is evident even in the “warning” passage, already mentioned (Alma 48:15–16), where the Lord goes on to say that He will warn the Nephites about what to do (including to prepare for war) “*according to their danger*” (Alma 48:15). This would seem to indicate that the Lord sees that different circumstances call for different responses, and that sometimes the situation will call for active defense.

Such declarations from the Lord and others do not themselves tell us how frequently such circumstances arise, of course, or exactly what form they might take. They do appear to tell us, however, that such circumstances occur — which would seem to indicate that nonviolent conduct is *not* always the higher, more righteous choice. If it were, it is hard to see how the Lord could ever command the opposite — and He does.

In all cases, it is only defensive violence that, when necessary, is commanded by the Lord; aggression is prohibited. This expresses a moral reality that we all recognize, at least tacitly — namely, that a fundamental moral distinction exists between acts of aggression and acts of self-defense, even though both might involve violence. This moral distinction is critical. It means that although all life is precious, it does not follow that all acts that jeopardize life are morally equivalent. No one, for example, would compare the conduct of a victim — who, say, is merely defending himself from being murdered — with the conduct of the aggressor who is attempting to murder him. Both might be acting violently, but morally speaking, their acts are not remotely the same. Aggressors are *violating* the rights of their victims, whereas victims — when all they do is fight back to defend themselves — are only *defending* certain rights. Thus, although both might be committing violent acts, their acts are not morally comparable. As I have pointed out in a different context, it can help to think of all this in terms of simple mistreatment. When aggressors attack their victims, it is obvious that

20. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 168.

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? In other words, although sanctity exists in all life, and that all, therefore, have a right to be free from violence, those who *seek* violence — who aggressively attack others — forfeit that right. No one does wrong in simply defending themselves from those who are attacking them.²¹

Appreciating that the Lord actually commands active self-defense on occasion is important to our understanding. It also demonstrates why it is no surprise when Helaman, in speaking of Nephites who had been killed in defending against Lamanite aggression, declared that these soldiers had died “*in the cause ... of their God*” (Alma 56:11). According to Helaman, successor to Alma₂ and the Nephites’ prophetic figure at the time, these men had not been lost in military action that was merely justified and approved by God, but in military action that was the very *cause* of God. This statement by Helaman contradicts the point of view expressed in the “other lens” theory of conflict, but it seems to be a direct expression of the repeated and consistent point of view expressed in the Book of Mormon itself.

God’s Choices

In the context of considering what the Lord commands regarding His people’s conduct, it is also useful to consider the Lord’s own behavior. If nonviolent action is always the highest and best option, does this apply to Him as well?

Although Pulsipher wants to restrict his attention to mortals and not to God’s actions,²² he does notice this issue for his theory and addresses it briefly in a footnote — and his conclusion is surprising to say the least. As an instance of the Lord’s violence, he notes that in Third Nephi the Lord “wiped out a significant portion of the population prior to Christ’s visit.” Tying this incident into his reading of particular verses in D&C 98 (a matter that will be discussed shortly), he then adds that “the violence is clearly justified — but not necessarily required or redemptive — and is characterized as a choice for which God takes complete responsibility.”

21. See Duane Boyce, “Captain Moroni and the Sermon on the Mount: Resolving a Scriptural Tension,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 127–62. Much more on the topic, including the concept of forfeiture, appears in *EUB*, 20–31.

22. See Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 163n2.

He then remarks that “God openly acknowledges this decision and fully accepts its consequences.”²³

The upshot, in other words, is that God chose the “justified” option in this situation — not the “redemptive” and more blessed option — and that He takes full responsibility for doing so. And this, of course, is just a longer way of saying that God chose the lesser of the options before Him. This is evident, not only because that choice is identified as merely “justified” — which is Pulsipher’s explicit term for referring to the lesser, violent option²⁴ — but also because there would be no reason to say that God “takes complete responsibility” and “fully accepts its consequences” if He were *not* seen as choosing the lesser option.²⁵

On the face of it, this clearly seems to be a problem; and it is compounded by noticing that the episode in Third Nephi is far from the Lord’s only recorded act of violence. From the destruction at the time of Noah (Gen. 7:13; Moses 7:34, 43), to the ruin He will visit on the wicked incident to His Second Coming,²⁶ and including multiple episodes in between,²⁷ the scriptures speak of numerous instances of the Lord acting violently. According to the remarks made about Third Nephi, all of these must *also* be examples of the Lord’s choosing the lesser of the options before Him. And all of this, then, entails the overall conclusion that *God simply does not always choose what is best*. Moreover, it *also* follows that since *we* know what is best (because the “other lens” theory tells us), we are in a position to identify where God Himself has not chosen it, and thus where He could have done better.²⁸

23. Ibid., 177–78n24.

24. See the upcoming discussion in the section “Doctrine and Covenants 98:23–31.”

25. Although Pulsipher states that the Lord’s choice in this situation is “not necessarily” redemptive, this would seem to be an illegitimate qualifier. One of the reasons nonviolent action is purported to be superior to violent action in the first place is precisely because violent action is *not* redemptive in character while nonviolent action is. It seems inconsistent, then, to say that in this particular case it was *not necessarily* redemptive; by definition, as an act of violence, it *could not have been* redemptive. Pulsipher seems to be trying to mitigate the logical conclusion of his argument by saying “not necessarily,” but, because of his own definition, it is hard to see how the attempt can succeed.

26. 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.

27. See, for example: Genesis 19:24–29; Exodus 9, 12, 14; John 2:14–17; Matthew 21:12–13; Jacob 7:15–20; Alma 19:21–23; Alma 33:10.

28. It might be argued by some that we cannot be certain of the veracity of every scriptural report, including those regarding the Lord, and thus that we should be

This is an unwelcome outcome, to be sure. Nevertheless, it is what the theory entails when taken to its logical conclusion. A different approach would be to say that the standard is simply different for God than it is for mortals. It is natural to reason that (1) since God, being both holy and omniscient, always chooses what is best, and (2) since He does not always choose the nonviolent option, then (3) the nonviolent option *cannot always be* what is best. Indeed, when God chooses violence, it must be because that is *exactly* the best, most holy response in the situation — otherwise, He simply would not choose it. This is an obvious argument, and Pulsipher could make something like it in the context of his theory about mortals. He does not do this, however. Instead, in his commitment to seeing nonviolence as always the highest and best choice, he is willing to entertain the idea that even God does not always choose what would be best for Him to choose.

The difficulties do not end there, however. To see this, let's suppose Pulsipher reconsidered the matter and decided that God, being both holy and omniscient, does always choose what is best. Although that would seem to make sense, the problem is that this recognition actually undermines his entire “other lens” theory. Indeed, it simply underscores what we saw previously regarding the Lord's instructions: He also always instructs what is best. In other words: (1) since God, being both holy and omniscient, always chooses what is best, this means that (2) He also always instructs what is best; and (3) since, as we saw in the previous section, He does not always instruct mortals to choose the nonviolent option, then (4) the nonviolent option *cannot always be* what is best. Indeed, when God instructs His people to use violence, it must be because that is *exactly* the best, most holy response available — otherwise, He simply would not direct it ... and He does.

Thinking about the central idea of this “other lens” approach, then — i.e., that nonviolent response is always the higher, more blessed option — is a valuable way to clarify our thinking, because doing so seems clearly to demonstrate that the idea cannot be true. Because the Lord actually presupposes that violence is necessary in some situations, and also straightforwardly prescribes it for those times, it seems clear that nonviolence is *not* always the higher, more blessed option. In other words,

careful in applying much weight to these reports of His violence. The demerits of this kind of view, at least in one specific context regarding war in the Book of Mormon, are addressed in *EUB*, 115–25. This matter is not a concern in looking at Pulsipher's theory, however, since he never expresses skepticism about the trustworthiness of scriptural reports. That is not an issue he raises.

sometimes nonviolent response is the highest and best option, while at other times violent response is the highest and best option. Indeed, these latter cases present circumstances in which military defense is the very “*cause*” of the Lord. For both mortals and God, different situations call for different responses. That is what the scriptures clearly seem to show us — which tells us that nonviolent response cannot invariably be the highest and best option.²⁹

Now, if the only concern were to accept or reject this overall “other lens” theory, it would be possible to leave the matter there. The theory can be set aside. Nevertheless, there are additional arguments appearing in Pulsipher’s presentation that are said to support the theory — arguments based on: particular verses in Doctrine and Covenants 98; the purported effectiveness of nonviolent action in achieving peace; patterns of flight in the Book of Mormon in situations of threat; and the role of “moral imagination” in the ability to embrace nonviolent approaches to conflict. It is valuable to consider these additional arguments as well because none of them actually succeeds — and seeing why they do not succeed can help clarify our thinking about war even further.

Doctrine and Covenants 98:23–31

In developing his “other lens” theory, Pulsipher sees certain verses in D&C 98 as key in thinking about Book of Mormon wars. Drawing from the section’s discussion, in vv. 23–31, of trespasses, smittings, bearing patiently, suffering offense three times, and so forth, Pulsipher concludes that although violent defense is justified, it is never required. Mortals are permitted to choose between a justified and blessed option (such as violent defense) on one hand, and a higher, “more blessed” option (i.e., nonviolent conduct, such as continuing to “bear patiently”), on the other.

29. This recognition is relevant to Pulsipher’s assertion that God will grant us the ability to see what we *want* to see in the text: if we want to see a record full of divinely justified violence, God will grant it; and if we want to see a record showing patterns of “more blessed” conduct, he will grant that (Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 183). This proposition, though, is based on the assumption that the distinction between “blessed” and “more blessed” options exists in the first place. We have seen, though, that the record actually seems to show that it doesn’t: different responses are right for different circumstances. If we see something contrary to this in the text, therefore, it is difficult to see how God can be the one granting it.

“A Commandment”

However, appealing to Section 98 creates a number of challenges for this “other lens” view. For example, after specifying certain conditions that must be met, the Lord says He will actually give His people “a commandment, and justify them in going out to battle” (v. 36). An earlier verse also presupposes that there are times when the Lord will actually “command” going to battle (v. 33). This appears to indicate what we saw earlier — namely, that going to battle is not necessarily something lesser: it is difficult to understand how it can really be the less-blessed option when the Lord is *commanding* it.

Questionable Application to Book of Mormon Wars

A more general difficulty arises when trying to apply Pulsipher’s interpretation of vv. 23–31 to Book of Mormon wars. He begins by quoting vv. 28–31, where the Lord’s comments are based on the concept of “smiting” that He introduced in vv. 23–26. The idea is that if we patiently bear a smiting three times, without reviling or seeking revenge, the Lord will greatly reward us; these three testimonies, however, will nevertheless stand against that enemy. Then, if our enemy escapes God’s vengeance for these smitings — so that “he be not brought into judgment before me” — the enemy is to be warned in the name of the Lord “that he come no more upon you, neither upon your family ... unto the third and fourth generation” (v. 28). At that point, if this enemy does come upon our family at any time unto the third and fourth generation, then, the Lord says: “I have delivered thine enemy into thine hands.” If we spare him, we will be blessed, but we are nevertheless “justified” if we do not (v. 31).

This set of verses is said to teach that we face a choice in situations of violence: we can either respond with violence of our own (which is “justified”), or we can respond without violence and spare our enemy (which is “rewarded”). One act is approved, whereas the other is actually rewarded; nevertheless, we get to choose. This framework is then applied to all situations of threat and violence in the Book of Mormon. The conclusion is that Nephite leaders were certainly righteous and justified when they chose to respond to aggression with violent defense (such acts were “blessed”), but that when they chose to respond without violence their actions were “more blessed.” Nevertheless, the choice was theirs.

Now the first thing we might notice about this presentation is that this emphasis on mortals’ choice is not easy to square with the Lord’s statements elsewhere in this section (and mentioned previously) that

there are times when He will actually command going to battle. Such language works against the idea that going to battle is always mortals’ choice.

The difficulty continues when we try to apply Pulsipher’s approach specifically to Book of Mormon wars — an application that he explicitly wants to make. Note, for instance, that these verses in Section 98 describe the offense that one suffers as a “smiting.” Now, we do not know exactly what that means, but we do know it is something that we can “bear patiently,” and that a wrong response to it would simply be to “revile” against our enemy. But this does not sound like the kind of attacks we observe in Book of Mormon conflicts. The Lamanites’ large-scale invasions, which were meant to murder the Nephites and to overthrow their society, do not seem best described as a “smiting.” They were attacks that included the massacre of Nephites, including the killing of women and children. (The nature and extent of Lamanite aggression is discussed in the upcoming section, “The Sons of Mosiah.”) Nor does it seem likely — if the Lord actually had such large-scale, lethal aggression in mind — that He would specifically prohibit *reviling* as a response to it. That is not the reaction people would have to being killed, or to seeing their loved ones being killed, so why would the Lord prohibit a response that people would not even have? Such considerations clearly seem to indicate that, contrary to what the “other lens” approach assumes, the Lord was not actually contemplating these large-scale Book of Mormon conflicts when speaking in vv. 23–31.

This problem is amplified by the Lord’s command in these verses that a “smiting” is also to be borne patiently three separate times. If we think this applies straightforwardly to Book of Mormon wars, then a “smiting” would likely indicate something like an actual attack — which, if so, would seem to mean that the Nephites were required to bear such assaults (including, again, the killing of women and children at times) three separate times (and without reviling along the way) before responding — either by defending themselves against their attackers, or by sparing them. But if that were the case, it is hard to see how the Lamanites could *fail* to murder and overthrow the Nephites. Indeed, if the Nephites could not defend themselves until after at least three attacks, it is hard to see why three attacks would even be necessary: a single sustained assault would suffice to murder many and to take over the society — all while the Nephites waited patiently for a second and third attack.³⁰

30. We might be tempted to think that the Lamanites would have simply abandoned their aggression in the face of such non-response from the Nephites.

This, too, would seem to indicate that the verses Pulsipher focuses on in Section 98 are not, as he thinks, actually speaking about what we see in Book of Mormon wars. On the face of it, at least, it appears that if they were, they would essentially be describing how Nephite society should respond after it has been effectively liquidated and no longer even exists.³¹

In multiple ways, then, this particular appeal to Section 98, based on vv. 23–31, does not appear to support the “other lens” approach to Book of Mormon conflicts. Not only do other statements in that section (regarding the Lord’s commands) appear to contradict the claims of the approach, but these verses also appear to presuppose circumstances that are different from those found in Book of Mormon conflicts in the first place.

In light of all this, it is worth noting that D&C 98, in general, poses challenges in trying to understand and apply its various statements to any and all conflict situations. This seems apparent from this discussion of vv. 23–31 — and it is actually compounded in vv. 32–36. Here the terms and context seem to shift dramatically. Unlike in vv. 23–31, for

However, although the Ammonite episode, for example, seems to demonstrate exactly that kind of outcome, the matter is actually not this simple. As will be seen in an upcoming section, and in Appendix A, not only was the Ammonites’ attitude toward aggression far more nuanced than simply a commitment to bear such assault patiently, but their approach also did not bring aggression to an end.

31. These verses do, of course, appear to apply to offenses that occur on a smaller scale. For example, in v. 32 the Lord states that what He has just described in vv. 23–31 is the law He had given to Nephi (and other ancient leaders), and, indeed, these verses seem to apply quite naturally to Nephi’s experiences with Laman and Lemuel. The passage locates the idea of offense or mistreatment (“smiting”) specifically at the individual or family level, for example, and it also identifies the mistreatment as something that can, and should, be borne patiently three times. Consistent with such conditions, we observe Laman and Lemuel beating Nephi with a rod, tying him in the wilderness (intending to leave him to die), stating their desire to kill him, threatening to throw him into the sea, binding him on the ship, and seeking, again, to kill him (see 1 Nephi 3:28–29; 7:16–21; 16:37–39; 17:48–55; 18:11–21; 2 Nephi 5:1–4, 19). The Lord protected Nephi throughout — he was never in any imminent jeopardy of losing his life — but Nephi suffered from their mistreatment nonetheless. Yet in none of these episodes did Nephi revile against his brothers or seek revenge; instead, he forgave them and moved forward. Pulsipher’s focus on vv. 23–31 would therefore seem appropriate if he were talking about Nephi and his brothers. Unfortunately, he is not. Instead, he assumes that these verses apply seamlessly to the large-scale wars that are reported in the Book of Mormon, and, as the discussion in this section indicates, that assumption seems to encounter serious textual and logical obstacles.

example, the text here does not speak in terms of “you” or “your family,” but instead of whole *nations*. And there is no mention of a people actually needing to be smitten three times in some way by an aggressor nation (and needing to bear it patiently each time), but instead of that nation simply “*proclaiming*” war and of the aggressed people lifting a standard of peace three times in response. That seems to be very different in context and scale, and even in detail, from what we see outlined in vv. 23–31 (and that, as seen in note 31, appears to apply so neatly to Nephi and his brothers). And because of this shift in context, scale, and detail, it is difficult to tell if the various elements in all of these verses (23–31 and 32–36) are to be combined into a single standard that applies to all situations and scales, or if they actually identify different standards that apply to *different* situations and scales. The second interpretation seems convincing to me, but it is difficult to imagine achieving anything like universal agreement on this. In any event, similar shifts in meaning and context continue throughout the section. As a result, D&C 98, in general, poses challenges in determining how best to understand and apply its various statements.³²

Nonviolent Response: The Issue of Effectiveness

A pervasive theme in Pulsipher’s “other lens” approach is the purported *effectiveness* of nonviolent options in dealing with aggression. We are told, for instance, that while armed defense can produce “periodic peace,” nonviolent options have the capacity “to protect families and communities in the long term,” and that they are “more effective.”³³ It is said that such effectiveness is evident in the case of the Ammonites, the Sons of Mosiah, Nephi and Lehi (of Helaman 5), two instances with the Gadianton robbers, and the widespread peace following the Lord’s appearance and teaching in Third Nephi.³⁴ Through these historical episodes, “the narrative extols the long-term peace” that such methods achieve.³⁵ Expressions of the “higher law,” such nonviolent approaches are thus described as “more efficacious,”³⁶ and as “effective in achieving enduring peace.”³⁷

32. Some of these challenges are identified and discussed in *EUB*, 250–55. Related matters also appear there on pages 156–64.

33. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 178, 179, 183.

34. For discussions of these episodes, see *ibid.*, 175–78.

35. *Ibid.*, 178.

36. *Ibid.*, 177, 179.

37. *Ibid.*, 177.

All of this is highly appealing, of course, and I imagine that those who think seriously about these issues would certainly like it to be true. Considering these cases serves to sharpen our thinking — which is important — but, unfortunately, doing so also seems to show the claim to be mistaken. Let's look at the examples to see why.

The Ammonites

In addition to the seven examples addressed earlier,³⁸ the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, or Ammonites, of Alma 24 are also included as an example of the “more blessed” way.³⁹ Their self-sacrifice in submitting to their Lamanite attackers is emphasized as an example of such nonviolent methods. It is also said that their conduct illustrates the effectiveness of a peaceful approach to conflict in contrast to a resort to arms. As mentioned earlier, the “other lens” theory sees nonviolent approaches as universally more effective than active self-defense, and the Ammonites are presented as a prime example of this. Through episodes like theirs, again, “the narrative extols the long-term peace” that such strategies achieve.⁴⁰

In approaching this topic, it is important to understand at the outset that the Ammonites did not, as a matter of course, actually choose the higher, “more blessed” option of nonviolence in all of their approaches to conflict. This might seem surprising, but they were not, as is sometimes thought, actually opposed to all violence as a matter of principle. (They actively provided material support to the Nephites' military actions, for example (Alma 43:13; 56:27).) However, for those who are accustomed to thinking of the Ammonites differently, and who are interested in the issue, a more detailed discussion of this subject appears in Appendix A. For present purposes, I will take the Ammonites' non-pacifist attitude as understood and focus specifically on the issue of the effectiveness of nonviolent response as it appears in their case.

On the surface, of course, it actually seems obvious that the account we have of the Ammonites demonstrates the effectiveness of nonviolence — and in their case, of complete self-sacrifice — in ending conflict. The well-known outcome of the Lamanites' first attack on them (Alma 24:20–27) clearly seems to display this.

The difficulty, though, is that subsequent elements of the text undermine this conclusion. For example, the text shows us that after abandoning their assault on the Ammonites in Alma 24, the Lamanites

38. See “Mistaken Examples” in the section, “Another Lens.”

39. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 175–76.

40. *Ibid.*, 178.

simply turned their attention to other targets: destroying the city of Ammonihah and, under the governance of a Nephite dissenter, killing other Lamanite believers (Alma 25:1–7). Thus, although the conflict ended for the Ammonites themselves in prostrating themselves before their enemies, the aggression did not *actually* end but merely turned in another direction.⁴¹

Now, in light of this outcome, it might be tempting to think that if only these others had behaved the same way the Ammonites did, then all conflict *would* have ended — and it is merely because they did not behave that way that the aggression continued.

The problem with this idea, however, is that the Ammonite story itself tells us that this is not the case. Remember that after the second attack upon the Ammonites (Alma 27:2–3), the Lord Himself instructed the Ammonites to leave their lands for safety, observing that they would face further assault and “perish” if they remained (Alma 27:11–12). This makes it clear that the Lord knew the Ammonites would not end aggression by prostrating themselves in front of their enemies. Indeed, He instructed them not to do so precisely because He foresaw that such conduct would *not* end the aggression against them.

The record shows quite clearly that this was the case. The Lamanites sought to attack the Ammonites on a third occasion, for example, and they turned away only because of the presence of a well-equipped Nephite army (Alma 43:11–22). Thwarted in this effort, the Lamanites then simply turned their aggression toward other targets (v. 22), just as they had after their first attack. In addition, along with the Nephites generally, the Ammonites were then protected throughout the long war both by the Nephite army in general and by their own sons in that army.

The story of the Ammonites, then, does not actually support the claim that nonviolent response is effective in ending conflict, much less that it is more effective than active defense. And the Ammonites themselves knew this. Keep in mind that after they emigrated to the land of Jershon, they never again followed the strategy of self-sacrifice, even though they had further opportunities to do so. In the third attack mentioned previously, for instance, the Lamanites were turned away because the Ammonites were protected by a Nephite army. We have no report that the Ammonites even considered a course of self-sacrifice

41. That this aggression did not actually end, but was “redirected” toward others, is mentioned in a footnote (ibid., 176n21). The body of the paper itself, however, overlooks this and says that the aggressors were convinced “to abandon their deadly designs” (ibid., 176) — which they did not actually do.

at this time — although that is exactly what we would expect if they believed that doing so was really the most effective way to end conflict.

Perhaps most revealingly, the Ammonites did not pursue a strategy of self-sacrifice even when their own sons went to war to assist the Nephites' defense (Alma 53). If the Ammonites had considered this strategy to be so effective in ending conflict, surely the chance to spare their sons' entrance into war would have been the time to use it. If they felt they could bring the war to an end — thereby saving their sons' lives — why wouldn't they? Yet they did nothing like this.

On multiple occasions, then, even when they had the opportunity to do so, the Ammonites did not follow a strategy of self-sacrifice. They patterned themselves after what the Lord had told them following the second attack — namely, that doing so would actually *not* cease the aggression against them.

The Ammonite story, then, does not lend support to the “other lens” theory. The record shows (as seen in Appendix A) that the Ammonites did not, as a matter of course, actually choose the “higher, more blessed” option (which indicates that they, at least, did not believe it necessarily *was* the higher, more blessed option.)

Their story also does not support the claim that nonviolent response is effective in bringing conflict to an end. If that were true, then: their attackers (in Alma 24) would not have simply turned their aggression toward others, as they did; the Lamanites would not have attacked the Ammonites a second time, as they did (in Alma 27); they would not have attempted to attack the Ammonites a third time, as they did (in Alma 43); the Ammonites would not have needed protection throughout the long war, both by the Nephite army and by their own sons, as they did; and, most tellingly, if it were true that nonviolent response is effective in bringing conflict to an end, the Lord would not have said that it would *not* do so for the Ammonites, as He did.

In the end, not only does the Ammonite story in general disconfirm the claim that nonviolent response is effective in ending aggression, but the Lord Himself straightforwardly disconfirms it as well.

Nephi and Lehi, the Gadianton Robbers, and Third Nephi

Pulsipher also appeals to additional episodes that are thought to demonstrate the effectiveness of non-violent approaches. They are: (1) the miraculous events surrounding the missionary efforts of Nephi and Lehi — a success in conversion that actually led to the return of captured Nephite lands that the Nephites had been unable to retake by force

(Helaman 5); (2) the similarly miraculous conversion of the Gadianton robbers in Helaman (Helaman 6:37); (3) the similar instance with the Gadianton robbers in Third Nephi (3 Nephi 5:4–6); and (4) the universal conversion and lasting peace that followed the Lord's appearance to the Nephites and His teachings on that occasion (3 Nephi and 4 Nephi).

These four missionary successes in establishing peace are presented as a contrast to the merely partial successes that had been achieved through armed conflict and are therefore taken as evidence of the greater effectiveness of the nonviolent approach.

These episodes are miraculous spiritual triumphs that should be celebrated, to be sure, but, in the end, they do not actually justify drawing this conclusion. There are two reasons for this.

Inaccurate Examples

In the first place, two of the examples do not actually reflect what they might appear to reflect. Think of the conversion of the Gadianton robbers appearing in Third Nephi (3 Nephi 5:4–6). This conversion occurred among particular robbers who, after much war (described in 3 Nephi 4), had actually been taken as prisoners of war. That was the setting in which they were taught the gospel. Their account is not an example of missionary work in which aggressors were converted in their own habitat by intrepid missionaries who had trudged there to teach them. As the record spells out, it is actually an example of missionary work among aggressors: (1) whose fellow aggressors had been killed in a series of wars by the thousands (one of these wars constituted the greatest number of dead in Lehiite history; see 3 Nephi 4:11); (2) whose leader had been executed by hanging following their eventual defeat; (3) who themselves had been defeated in war and imprisoned; and (4) whose fellow prisoners — persisting in their evil desires and refusing to enter a covenant of peace — were also killed (the record says "punished," but that likely meant "executed").

This episode of missionary work, then, is not the straightforward example of the nonviolent, peaceful approach that it might appear to be on the surface. Not only were many of the aggressors killed to begin with, but even many who were taken as prisoners were still not converted by the preaching they received, and they too were killed. It cannot really be said of this episode, then, that peace was achieved through the means of simply teaching the gospel.

The experience of the Lord's appearance to the Nephites is no different. It is useful to remember that that appearance, and the Savior's teachings

on this occasion, were preceded by the Lord's destruction of thousands of the wicked (3 Nephi 9:1-12). This included not only Nephites, but also Lamanites and followers of Gadianton (the cities mentioned in vv. 9 and 10 would seem to make this clear) — and, obviously, such clearing of the field dramatically improved the prospects for missionary success. So even this episode of teaching is not divorced from preceding acts — this time, divine acts — of violence toward the wicked. It is misleading, therefore, to be told that in the wake of this teaching experience, the disciples “eliminate all human violence” and that “there is no violence in the land — not even justified violence.”⁴² The reality is that the Lord actually committed a lot of violence to help make this possible.

It cannot really be said of this episode, either, then, that peace was achieved through the means of simply teaching the gospel. The Lord's widespread violence toward the wicked was actually central to the missionary success and peace that followed.

Invalid Generalization

But there is a second difficulty. The difficulty is that all of these episodes are actually anomalies as missionary experiences go; and, as anomalies, we cannot simply generalize from them to conclude that all missionary efforts would achieve such results. Even the sons of Mosiah did not achieve the level of success we see in these cases, for example — much less anyone else. It is hardly the norm, after all, for the Lord (as He did in Third Nephi) to drastically thin the field — destroying thousands of the wicked ahead of time — as a prelude to the launching of a major missionary effort.

Moreover, missionary success is far from guaranteed even when attended by significant miraculous events. The voice of the Lord, visitation by an angel, and multiple significant miracles were not enough to convert Laman and Lemuel, for example. Nor were the numerous miracles and signs prior to the Lord's birth — and concurrent with it — enough to convert, and to keep converted, many of the Nephites living at that time (Helaman 16:14–23; 3 Nephi 2:1–3). And even the Lord's own earthly ministry — performed “in power and great glory” and filled with miracles⁴³ — was not enough to convert the scribes and Pharisees and the mob that called out for His death. All of these situations exemplified sustained, powerful, and miraculous teaching of the gospel, and yet

42. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 178.

43. “In power and great glory” is how Nephi describes the Savior's ministry (1 Nephi 11:28).

none of them succeeded in sustained conversion and the end of conflict. Aggression occurred anyway.

What the episodes of Nephi and Lehi, the Gadianton robbers, and Third Nephi actually seem to demonstrate is simply what *EUB* emphasizes — namely, that the first duty of a gospel-based society is to attempt to bring its enemies to Christ. That is first. But it does not follow from this that it is always, or even often, sufficient. It was sufficient in a couple of dramatic episodes in Book of Mormon history, but that is exactly why they are anomalous: it was *not* sufficient in far more historical cases. Even one case regarding the Gadianton robbers, and the success following the Lord's visit in Third Nephi — though still anomalous — still do not show that teaching the gospel is *sufficient*. What the text actually appears to show — and quite clearly — is that it is not.

The Sons of Mosiah

The sons of Mosiah are also offered as an example of the effectiveness of peaceful approaches, in general, to ending conflict. Their story seems a natural one to raise, and it is important to consider because, on the surface at least, it appears to support the idea (1) that there is a clear-cut distinction between a nonviolent approach, like doing missionary work, and the violent approach of engaging in active self-defense; and (2) that the nonviolent approach is the more effective of the two ways.

What their story actually shows, however, is that it is not this simple.

Lamanite Aggression and Hatred

To see this, remember that the Lamanites launched wars against the Nephites during the entire time the sons of Mosiah were laboring among them⁴⁴ — and in at least some of these wars, these assailants included those who had actually been taught by the sons of Mosiah.⁴⁵ Thus, while

44. The sons of Mosiah embarked on their mission in the first year of the reign of the judges and continued for fourteen years (Alma 17:4, 6). The first war during that fourteen-year period occurred in the fifth year (Alma 2) and the second, "not many days after" (Alma 3:20). The third war occurred six years later (Alma 16:1), and we are told of another attack "in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges" (Alma 16:12). The text thus reports four wars launched by the Lamanites during the missionary labors of the sons of Mosiah.

45. That those who became converted were involved in at least some of these attacks is certain. The text tells us that many Lamanites, after having suffered the losses and tribulations of war, began to remember what they had been taught by Aaron and other missionaries, and this led to their conversion (Alma 25:6). In addition, King Lamoni's father — who became converted — held a position of

it is true that these sons' missionary labors were successful, it is also true that their loved ones back home were simultaneously suffering attack and death from those very Lamanites. The Nephites had to defend their lives and their society *despite* these sons' missionary labors.

Note also that the missionary success of the sons of Mosiah — while significant and even miraculous — was still only partial. While they converted thousands, there were also thousands they did not convert — and such belligerents continued unabated in their aggression against the Nephites and the new converts (see Alma 24, 25, 27, 28).

Such features of the record demonstrate that it was not merely an idle command when the Lord instructed the Nephites to defend themselves when necessary; the Nephites *needed* to defend themselves from Lamanite attack — and this appears to have been true regardless of missionary efforts to convert them. This is a crucial point. The record speaks of Nephite efforts to “restore the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth” and reports that they did so “diligently” (see Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:11–14, 20). Enos describes his own “many long strugglings” in prayer for the Lamanites and of his desire that “they might be brought unto salvation” (Enos 1:11–13). He also speaks of “*our* strugglings” to restore them “to the true faith” (Enos 1:14), indicating that he was not alone in his efforts to reach the Lamanites. Indeed, he reports that the people of Nephi *in general* sought “diligently” to restore the Lamanites to faith in God (Enos 1:20). And one group of Nephites found themselves “filled with pain and anguish” for the welfare of the Lamanites' souls (Mosiah 25:11).

The problem is that reaching the Lamanites always appears to have been an uphill battle. Keep in mind that they were prone to attack and to wage war against the Nephites from the very beginning. Jacob tells us that 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 (Words of Mormon 1:13–14). This is a record of aggression starting centuries before the detailed reports we get in Alma₂'s time and spanning the first four hundred and sixty years or so of Book of Mormon history.

preeminence among the Lamanites during at least part of the time the Lamanites were launching these wars (Alma 20:8; 22:1). His position would obviously have guaranteed involvement in the aggression.

We also know that Lamanite aggression was fueled by their hatred of the Nephites. Jacob, for example, writes in the earliest days of Lamanite "hatred" and also reports that the Lamanites "delighted in wars and bloodshed," that they "had an eternal hatred against us," and sought "by the power of their arms to destroy us continually" (Jacob 7:24). Later, Enos speaks of the Lamanites' "wrath" and of their desire to "destroy our records and us" (Enos 1:14). He also reports that "their hatred was fixed" and that they "were continually seeking to destroy us" (Enos 1:20).

Years later Jarom reports that the Lamanites "loved murder" (Jarom 1:6), and a hundred and twenty years after that Zeniff describes the Lamanites as having an "eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi," and reports that they "taught their children that they should hate" the Nephites and "do all they could to destroy them" (Mosiah 10:17). King Benjamin also speaks of the Lamanites' "hatred" toward the Nephites (Mosiah 1:14), and Mormon corroborates the account, reporting that "the Lamanites were taught to hate the children of Nephi from the beginning" (4 Ne. 1:39). Indeed, the record tells us that one of the explicit purposes of the sons of Mosiah in laboring among the Lamanites was "to cure them of their hatred toward the Nephites" (Mosiah 28:2). Ammon himself tells us that the Lamanites, prior to their conversion, were "racked with hatred against us" and were "in the darkest abyss" and in "the pains of hell" (Alma 26:9, 3, 13). And he reports this *after* he had lived with them for fourteen years and thus was intimately acquainted with their attitudes and cultural practices.

Such hatred of the Nephites led to extreme aggression. Mormon reports of one sustained Lamanite assault that it resulted in a "great slaughter" of the Nephites — a slaughter that included "women, and children" (Helaman 1:27). 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). Indeed, this was one of the Lamanites' explicit aims — to "slay and massacre" the Nephites (Alma 49:7). One Lamanite leader (a Nephite dissenter who joined the Lamanites and fueled 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).

All of this would appear to make clear that the Nephites did not face a simple choice between teaching the gospel and taking up arms to defend themselves. They tried to teach the gospel and *still* had to take up arms to defend themselves. Both Jacob and Enos observed that efforts in their day to teach the Lamanites were “vain” (Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:20), and nothing in the record suggests that the Lamanites became easier to teach as time went on.

Ammon

This combination of missionary work and violence is evident even in the personal story of Ammon. Although, with the other sons of Mosiah, Ammon embarked on his mission with a desire to share the gospel, that did not stop him from wielding a sword and killing enemies when circumstances became threatening, and defense was required. He did nothing close to teaching the gospel at the waters of Sebus, for example, but instead killed some of the plunderers and permanently maimed others — and would have caused even greater damage had they not begun “to flee before him” (Alma 17:26–39). And Ammon later threatened to kill the father of King Lamoni *twice*, first in self-defense and then in order to extract a promise from him (Alma 20:7–28).

Such features of the record caution us against thinking that life with aggressive neighbors offers us two simple and discrete alternatives: either engage in violent self-defense or pursue a nonviolent path, such as missionary work (a path that will also be more effective). Pulsipher treats the sons of Mosiah as if that is what they show, but the reality appears to be far more complex. Not only did the Nephites have to defend themselves during the whole time the sons of Mosiah were on their mission (which Ammon also had to do — and also while he was *on* his mission), but they had to do so afterward as well. Though miraculously successful, the sons of Mosiah did not convert everyone, and they did not actually bring aggression to an end. At the time of the sons of Mosiah (and at other times throughout their history, evidently) the Nephites did both simultaneously. And the same was true of Ammon personally. He was on a mission, but that mission included both teaching the gospel *and* taking up the sword when necessary.

The record thus seems to belie any notion that if, rather than defending themselves (the “blessed” option), the Nephites had only done missionary work like the sons of Mosiah did (a “more blessed,” nonviolent option), they could have converted their enemies and eliminated the need for self-defense altogether. The record demonstrates that this was

not the case and that there was actually an important place for both. In the end, the sons of Mosiah do not appear to support the “other lens” theory.

A Final Consideration: Teaching the Gospel

The episodes we have looked at, then — from the Ammonites to the sons of Mosiah — do *not* appear, in reality, to demonstrate that nonviolent approaches to conflict are effective in ending aggression.

To amplify this point, consider just the matter of teaching the gospel as a way of stopping conflict. If such teaching were sufficient to do so — to bring about general conversion and peace — then it is difficult to see why the Lord would *ever* destroy populations. He did this both at the time of Noah and in the aftermath of His crucifixion, and He will do so again at His Second Coming. But if mere teaching were sufficient to bring about conversion and peace, it seems that He would simply do more of *that*, not destroy people. Moreover, if such teaching were sufficient, it is also difficult to see why there was ever a war in heaven, or why the Savior’s teaching resulted in mob action against Him. And on and on. The list is lengthy.

It is true that if missionary work could, in fact, always achieve such success, then preaching the gospel would not just be our first obligation toward our enemies but would indeed be our *only* obligation. No other type of defense would ever be necessary. Unfortunately, preaching the gospel rarely *is* sufficient. And this means that while doing so still remains our first duty, unfortunately it is seldom our last or only duty.

This would appear to be why the Nephites were taught never to raise the sword “except it were necessary to preserve their lives” (Alma 48:14) — a contingency that presupposes there *would* be occasions when raising the sword would be necessary to preserve their lives. As seen earlier, that seems to be the consistent message of the Book of Mormon. Regrettably, nonviolent strategies, including teaching the gospel, do not automatically bring conflict to an end. Everyone would no doubt like that to be true, but the scriptural verdict, unfortunately, is that it is not.

Patterns of Fleeing

In discussing nonviolent response to conflict, Pulsipher also, understandably, emphasizes “fleeing” as a valuable and effective option in the face of threat. We are told that the record includes multiple instances of this strategy: Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem at the very beginning of the record (1 Nephi 2:1–4); Nephi’s fleeing from Laman

and Lemuel once they arrive in the new land (2 Nephi 5:5–8); Omer, from the Book of Ether, who departed with his family when his kingdom faced overthrow (Ether 9:1–3); Mosiah₁'s leaving the land of Nephi with those who would follow him (Omni 1:12); Alma₁, with his small band of believers, who fled the land of Nephi (the part occupied by the Nephites and ruled over by King Noah) (Mosiah 18; 23:1–3); and Alma₁, again, who fled with his band after their settlement had been occupied by a Lamanite army (Mosiah 24:16–25).

Each of these actions was directed by the Lord and, in each case, fleeing proved to be an effective strategy.⁴⁶ The examples are thus presented as contrasts to just-war theory, including as it is formulated in *EUB*. This application is useful because it permits clarification, again, that this proposed contrast is actually a mistake. In reality, rather than contradicting the principles outlined in *EUB*, all of these parties did exactly what that framework would direct. The situation is the same as with the seven episodes discussed earlier.⁴⁷

A Faulty Comparison

More importantly, these examples also do not contradict what other Book of Mormon figures did when they engaged in large-scale defensive war. We might think of King Benjamin and Alma₂, to name two. On the “other lens” view, the examples listed previously — Nephi fleeing from Laman and Lemuel, Alma₁ escaping occupation by a Lamanite army, etc. — are examples of choosing the “more blessed,” nonviolent option in their circumstances. This entails, then, that we must see figures like King Benjamin and Alma₂ as examples of choosing the lesser, violent option in their circumstances.⁴⁸ Moreover, we are told that the success of these “flight” examples “clearly demonstrates that this standard [of preserving lives] can be achieved without shedding blood.”⁴⁹ The two sets of leaders thus serve as a contrast: one set preserves lives by simply leaving the situation (an action that sheds no blood), the other by engaging in defense (which ends up shedding a lot of blood). This, according to Pulsipher’s

46. This is presumably true in Mosiah’s case, even though the record is brief and does not tell us exactly why he left. That he was “warned” suggests threat of some kind, however.

47. See “Mistaken Examples” in the section, “Another Lens’.”

48. King Benjamin’s wartime involvement is described briefly in Words of Mormon 1:13–14. The direct involvement of Alma₂ in war is chronicled in Alma 2 and mentioned in Alma 3. His involvement in helping the Nephites wage defensive war is also clear in Alma 16:5–8 and 43:23–24.

49. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 173.

view, would thus seem to present a clear contrast between leaders who choose the higher, nonviolent path, and leaders who choose the lesser, violent path.

The difficulty with this kind of comparison, though, is that these two sets of leaders faced importantly different circumstances — which makes any kind of direct comparison between them dubious.

To see this, consider, first, the matter of logistics. In the episodes regarding Lehi, Nephi, Omer, and Alma₁ (twice), the numbers involved were exceedingly small: Lehi and his family, Omer and his family, Alma₁ and his small band, and so on. And it would seem to be precisely these small numbers that made flight a possibility for them: such small groups can move quickly, and they do not face insurmountable logistical issues in doing so. But this was not the case for other Nephite leaders, like King Benjamin and Alma₂, who led *exponentially* larger populations. They could not move without being noticed, much less move quickly — or even *organize* a move quickly. Because they would have had to move tens of thousands, flight was not even a possibility for them. It would seem a mistake, then, to compare them to groups that *could* flee, and to conclude from this that they just chose the lesser option.⁵⁰

Second, because of their small numbers, in most of these cases the parties were also vastly outnumbered by their antagonists.⁵¹ They would

50. This is why even Mosiah₁'s flight from the land of Nephi does not serve as an apt comparison to these later populations. We know less about the size of this group than we do about Lehi's, Nephi's, Omer's, and Alma₁'s (twice), but we do know that they were a small enough minority that they were under serious threat from the larger population of Nephites and were therefore warned to flee from them. We also know that they later joined the people of Zarahemla, a population that was “exceedingly numerous” (Omni 1:17). It was only after this, and a generation later, that we get our first report of “many thousands” of Lamanites being slain in battle (Words of Mormon 1:14). When we reach Alma₂'s time, we begin to get reports that the total number of those slain in battle numbered in the “tens of thousands,” and also as too numerous to count (Alma 28:2; 3:1; 44:21); and by Mormon's time, the text speaks of the slain in the hundreds of thousands (Mormon 6:10–15). All of this tells us that Mosiah₁'s group — whatever its actual size — was certainly small in comparison to these later populations. And *this* tells us that just as with the examples of Lehi, Nephi, Omer, and Alma₁, it seems a mistake to compare episodes regarding these exponentially larger populations to Mosiah₁'s case, and to conclude from this that those populations just chose the lesser option.

51. The only possible exception, because we have no idea of the numbers, is the case of Nephi fleeing from Laman and Lemuel with his family and others who would follow him. Although we cannot be certain, this might have been due wholly to the logistical possibility of doing so, unrelated to relative numbers.

have had no chance of surviving, much less winning, if they had tried to preserve their rights to life and their way of life by military means. This is completely different from other cases in the Book of Mormon, however. In addition to being physically unable to simply flee the situation, these populations, being much larger, also enjoyed much better chances of prevailing in defense of their lives and their way of life. Indeed, they actually did succeed in ultimately repelling repeated Lamanite invasions — a type of success that was impossible for figures like Lehi and Alma₁.

Finally, in the case of Lehi and of the two episodes with Alma₁, the parties were already embedded within a much larger enemy population, and, for all practical purposes, escape was the *only* possible strategy for them. They could do nothing else. This was far from the case in other Book of Mormon examples, however. In these numerous cases every conflict occurred on *Nephite* lands. The Nephites were settled in their homes, and on their own lands, and it was there that the Lamanites attacked them. Far from taking initiative to escape from an enemy that held them in its own territory, the Nephites found themselves merely trying to prevent the Lamanites from coming into *Nephite* lands and killing them.

In the end, then, it seems unjustified to compare the flight strategies of Lehi, Nephi, Alma₁, and so forth, to the military strategies of other leaders in the Book of Mormon — leaders like King Benjamin and Alma₂. There are significant reasons to conclude that their actions were not the same simply because, in relevant and important ways, their circumstances were not the same.⁵²

52. It is worth noting that the “other lens” article briefly acknowledges logistical issues with flight, remarking in one place: “Even when flight is logistically impractical — as it would be with an extensive and settled population — there are other nonviolent strategies for self-preservation that effectively draw upon the powers of heaven” (Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 174). This seems to be a reference to something like the self-sacrificial strategy of the Ammonites — the problems with which have already been noted. It could also be a reference to something like the pacifying strategy of King Limhi, who, after initially succeeding against a Lamanite attack, learned *why* the Lamanites were attacking. This led to new information and, armed with this intelligence, Limhi was able to pacify the captured Lamanite king, who was then able to pacify his army (Mosiah 20). But this is not comparable to the circumstances of the large-scale wars we see elsewhere in the Book of Mormon. In those cases, the Lamanites were not attacking because some subset of the Nephites had seriously aggressed against them — a situation that could be settled by both sides recognizing this and the Lamanites being pacified as a result. Rather, as seen earlier, these wars were motivated by a generalized hatred of the Nephites, often instigated by Nephite-hating dissidents. In these situations,

Warnings to Flee

Pulsipher also draws attention to the statement that God would “warn [the Nephites] to flee, or to prepare for war; and also, that God would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies” (Alma 48:15–16). He points out, however, that while the text shows the Lord warning people to flee five times, there is no instance of His warning them to prepare for war.⁵³ This is then taken as evidence that going to war is strictly a human decision: God never actually directs preparation for war, but only helps mortals in their fight after they have already decided on that path. Building on the reading of D&C 98:23–31 discussed earlier, the idea is that there are two acceptable responses in the face of violence — violent, and nonviolent (“blessed,” and “more blessed”) — and that the Lord lets mortals decide between them. God will give His people what they desire: He will help them fight if that is what they choose, but it is their choice, not His.⁵⁴ That, it is said, is why we see multiple examples of warning to flee, but no examples of warning to prepare for war. Thus, God “directs only nonviolent options, such as flight ... at least when given a chance to weigh in beforehand.”⁵⁵ This, then, is evidence that nonviolence is always the higher, more blessed option: it is what the Lord always chooses when mortals give Him the chance to weigh in.

Although this direction could seem promising at first glance, there are difficulties that appear to make it untenable. The most important of these is that we have already seen that nonviolence is *not* always the higher, more blessed option. As described previously (in the section, “The Central Idea of the ‘Other Lens’ Approach”), other features of the scriptural record clearly seem to demonstrate this. Indeed, the text actually appears to show that the highest and best option in any given circumstance depends on the *nature* of the circumstances.⁵⁶ Whatever we see in the text about the ratio of different types of warnings, therefore,

there were no aggressive subsets and no new information that could thus pacify the Lamanites’ anger toward the Nephites as a whole. Such situations thus seem completely different from a case like Limhi’s, and trying to draw a contrast between these leaders’ actions and Limhi’s would thus seem to be mistaken.

53. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 172 (also 171).

54. *Ibid.*, 179.

55. *Ibid.*, 172.

56. This, as seen earlier, is evident even in the passage about warning itself, where the Lord says that he will warn the Nephites in different ways (including to prepare for war) “*according to their danger*” (Alma 48:15). Even here it seems clear that the Lord sees that different circumstances call for different responses.

is actually extraneous to the larger claim about nonviolence always being the higher, more blessed option — because we already know this larger claim is mistaken.

But even if we did not already know this, the claim that the Lord — when given the chance to weigh in — always gives warnings to flee (or something like it), seems to be inaccurate anyway.

In the first place, it is useful to remember the Lord’s explicit revelation to Captain Moroni that if the Nephite governors (who were aligning themselves with the Lamanite invaders) did not repent, “ye shall go up to battle against them” (Alma 60:33). This would seem to be a clear instance of exactly what the “other lens” approach tells us never happens.

But this is far from the only difficulty. After all, this assertion about the text means that the Lord would have warned the Nephites in this way *if only they had let Him weigh in*. When they engaged in defensive war instead, then — because, according to Pulsipher, the Lord *would always give such direction if He could* — it follows that they did so either because (1) the Lord was just not quick enough with His warnings — the Nephites beat Him to the punch every time, and thus He was not given a chance to weigh in; or (2) they were simply not *open* to His warnings, and that’s why He was not given a chance to weigh in.

The first option seems to be ruled out on the face of it; it is difficult to imagine that the Lord could be slow in giving warnings He wanted to give. And the second option also seems to be ruled out, at least in multiple obvious cases. Think of Alma₂, for example, who had seen God and angels and who was specifically described as “holy” by an angel (Mosiah 27:10–17; Alma 36:5–22; Alma 10:8–9), and of King Benjamin who was similarly described as “holy” by Mormon (Words of Mormon 1:17). Holy men are open, not closed, to hearing the messages of the Lord — their very *nature* is to “give the Lord a chance to weigh in” — which means that when King Benjamin and Alma₂ went to war (and they did⁵⁷) it could not have been because they were not open to the Lord’s direction. They were *supremely* open to His direction. And this means that the Lord clearly did not warn them to flee (or something like it) when they faced danger. According to Pulsipher, that is what the Lord would always direct if He could — and with King Benjamin and Alma₂ He clearly could. When these leaders actively defended against Lamanite

57. As mentioned earlier (in note 48), Alma₂ actively led war efforts, as seen in Alma 2 and 3, and later materially helped the Nephite defense even though he had by this time largely confined himself to spiritual teaching (Alma 16:5–8; 43:23–24). King Benjamin’s leadership in war is made clear in Words of Mormon 1:13–14.

aggression *instead*, therefore, it seems that it had to be because the Lord did *not* give them such direction. King Benjamin and Alma₂ thus appear to be clear counterinstances to Pulsipher’s claim.

The same seems true of Nephi. He is listed by Pulsipher as someone who was warned to flee, and who did (2 Nephi 5:1–7). The problem, though, is that this was a single incident. *Following* that episode, Nephi subsequently made “many swords” to defend against aggression (2 Nephi 5:14), and he actually “wielded the sword of Laban” in such defense (Jacob 1:9). Like King Benjamin and Alma₂, Nephi was also preeminently refined in his spiritual devotion and capacity — his very *nature* was to “give the Lord a chance to weigh in.” And this means that in his case, too, the Lord clearly did not warn him to flee when he faced danger in these later circumstances. Again, according to the “other lens” view, that is what the Lord would always direct if he could — and with Nephi it seems obvious that he could. When Nephi defended his people militarily instead, therefore, it seems that it had to be because the Lord simply did not give him such direction. Just as with King Benjamin and Alma₂, Nephi thus appears to be a straightforward counterinstance to the “other lens” claim about what direction the Lord would “only” give to His people.

All three of these examples, then, appear to illustrate the same reality: since, according to Pulsipher, the Lord would always give direction to flee if mortals let Him, it follows that if the Lord *had* told these prophetic leaders to flee, they would have; therefore, since they did *not* flee, it follows that He did not *tell* them to flee.⁵⁸ And the same, so it would seem, could be said of later prophetic figures like Lachoneus, Gidgiddoni, Mormon, and Moroni.⁵⁹

It appears to be a mistake, then, to say that the Lord would always have directed nonviolent options if He had only been given the chance. It is difficult to see how that could be true. If it were, then, just as with Omer and Alma₁, that is what He would have directed King Benjamin,

58. Those acquainted with logic as a discipline will recognize this reasoning as a straightforward instance of the inferential rule in propositional logic known as *modus tollens*: If p, then q; not-q; therefore, not-p. It is thus a clear demonstration (i.e., in logical terms, it is both valid and sound) that the claim about the Lord’s warnings — namely, that he would always have directed nonviolent options if he had only been given the chance — is mistaken.

59. That Lachoneus and Gidgiddoni were prophetic figures is made clear in 3 Nephi 3:16, 19.

Alma₂, Nephi, and other prophets to do — and it seems clear that He didn't.⁶⁰

This is also evident from the fact (as seen earlier) that the Lord had already given the Nephites a general, standing command to defend themselves.⁶¹ It seems inconsistent to imagine that God would never give a command to the Nephites to defend themselves when He had already given them a *general* command to do exactly that. Indeed, in the cases of King Benjamin, Alma₂, and Nephi it seems clear that the Lord either gave them direct instruction to defend themselves or that they acted under this general command to do so. What seems evident He did *not* do, however, was instruct them to flee (or execute some other non-violent option). That is what Pulsipher's claim requires, but it appears clear from the text that that is not what happened.

It also seems worth noting that it is actually insignificant, in any event, that the Lord warned the people in these episodes (those regarding Lehi, Omer, Mosiah₁, etc.) to flee from their enemies. Flight was the only genuine option for them, after all, so it does not seem surprising that that is what the Lord directed. It is exactly what just-war theory in general, and *EUB* in particular, would direct as well. Nor are these warnings to flee significant when compared to other actions in the Book of Mormon. Since, as already seen, their situations are dissimilar in relevant and important ways, no significance can really be attached to the difference between the "flight" actions of some leaders and the "fight" actions of others. Upon examination, that turns out to be an unsound comparison.⁶²

60. The same could plausibly be said (to name only two other instances) of the supremely righteous Lamanites of Third Nephi who, combined with the Nephites, faced dire threat from the Gadianton robbers (3 Nephi 2:11–16), and of the two thousand stripling warriors who followed Helaman in waging defensive war against the invading Lamanites (Alma 53, 56–58). In both cases they were guided by prophetic leaders who were open to the Lord's direction (those in Third Nephi by Lachoneus, in all likelihood, and the Ammonite sons by Helaman, high priest over the Church), and yet in both cases they, too, engaged in war. These incidents, therefore (just as with the cases of King Benjamin, Alma₂, and Nephi), indicate, contrary to Pulsipher's claim, that the Lord did *not* instruct them to flee when given the chance.

61. See "The Lord's Instructions" in the section, "The Central Idea of the 'Other Lens' Approach."

62. An additional problem with the observation that the text contains no explicit directions to engage in war is that no attempt is made to understand *why* this might be so. Instead, it is simply concluded that the Lord must never have done this. But, even aside from the matters we have already discussed, this is too hasty

The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is mentioned only briefly in Pulsipher's article, with the remark that its teachings "can be interpreted as a straightforward prohibition against engaging in defensive violence."⁶³ In this spirit, reference is also made to another author who, in contrast to *EUB*, argues that the Savior's teachings in Third Nephi are "corrective teachings" that denounce "all sacrificial violence, including war," and that portray the "abandonment of war as the quintessential Christian act."⁶⁴

The Sermon on the Mount (as found both in the New Testament and in Third Nephi) is a critical document in any discussion of war, of course. It does not seem obvious, though, that a treatment as cursory as Pulsipher's is sufficient to support the idea that the Sermon can be seen as a straightforward prohibition of defensive violence. More in-depth examination (including in *EUB*) would appear to show that this is not the case.⁶⁵ Such analysis is too lengthy to simply repeat here, but central elements of the inquiry can nevertheless be summarized as follows.

First, the Sermon cannot be reduced to a set of prescriptions about our outward behavior (e.g., turning the other cheek, going a second mile, etc.); the Sermon actually appears to be about a certain *state of heart*.

Second, toward the Lord, this state of heart seems to be characterized by a responsiveness to His Spirit and a humility and earnestness in trying to follow Him. Toward others, it seems to be characterized by charity and unselfishness — by an attitude of patience and longsuffering rather than of spitefulness and vengeance.

Third, we can have, and are expected to have, this state of heart even in situations of violence.

a conclusion. Reasonable explanations for this feature of the record are discussed briefly in Appendix B.

63. Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 167.

64. Madson, "A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon," 15, 24–26, quoted in Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 167. Madson does not base his anti-violence theory of the Book of Mormon on the Sermon on the Mount, but uses another passage in Third Nephi to see the Lord as condemning all violence, including war. *EUB* devotes two chapters (8–9) to showing why Madson's views are mistaken.

65. *EUB* devotes a full chapter to examining the Sermon on the Mount (Chapter 14). A more recent article covers the matter somewhat differently, and specifically with regard to Captain Moroni. See Duane Boyce, "Captain Moroni and the Sermon on the Mount: Resolving a Scriptural Tension," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 127–62. The summary here is derived from the latter source.

Fourth, in its perfection, this state of heart was possessed by the Lord when he: caused the flood in Noah’s day; overthrew tables and drove money changers from the temple in His own day; destroyed whole cities in the Americas following His crucifixion; slew a Lamanite who was intending to kill Ammon; and so forth.⁶⁶

Fifth, with less perfection, but still highly impressive, this state of heart was possessed by King Benjamin, Alma₂, Mormon, and others when defending their people’s lives from attack. Possessing this state of heart, they conducted their defense in surprising ways — ways that, given their circumstances, were completely consistent with the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, and that even displayed them.

In sum, when combined with the complete perspective of all other scriptures, the Sermon on the Mount seems to teach that people can, and should, love their enemies even when defending themselves against such enemies’ efforts to destroy them. The message, it seems to show, is not that defense is prohibited, as the “other lens” view postulates; instead, the message appears to be that when such defense is necessary, it still must be conducted with the condition of heart required by the Sermon on the Mount.

“Lack of Moral Imagination”

Along the way, the “other lens” article also poses the question: “Why do some of the text’s best individuals and societies not choose the ‘more blessed’ nonviolent protective options more often?” Put differently: “If nonviolent confrontational love is really more effective and more redemptive, why do these notable figures seem to not choose it?”⁶⁷

That is the natural question for Pulsipher to ask, of course. He believes he has shown that nonviolence is always the highest and best option (*and* that it is effective in ending aggression), and, since all that is so, it is puzzling that prophetic leaders such as Nephi, Alma₂, King Benjamin, and Mormon would so often choose military defense instead. What can explain their choosing the lesser option so frequently?

A Moot Question

It seems evident by now, however, that this is actually a faulty question. The military actions of these prophetic leaders present a puzzle only on the assumption that nonviolent methods *are* always morally higher and

66. For more examples of the Lord exercising violence, including in the future, see notes 26 and 27.

67. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 179.

more effective. But an earlier section (“The Central Idea of the ‘Other Lens’ Approach”) has already shown that nonviolence is *not* always the highest and best option, and another section (“Nonviolent Response: The Issue of Effectiveness”) has shown that it is also not always the more effective path. The assumption behind the question clearly appears to be mistaken, therefore, and once we recognize this — i.e., that nonviolent methods are *not* always higher and more effective — the question of why leaders did not always choose such methods does not even arise. There is really no puzzle to solve, and thus the question simply seems to be moot.

However, because Pulsipher does not see that his central assumption is mistaken, and therefore that his question is actually moot, he follows the question through and tries to offer answers for why prophetic leaders would choose what he believes is the “lesser” option. One of these is that such leaders actually lacked the “moral imagination” to conceive new ways of responding to aggression. Implementing such strategies “requires a significantly higher degree of faith and fearlessness,” and what is needed is “the capacity of individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a web of relationship even with their enemies.”⁶⁸

Now, even putting aside that the question is moot to begin with, the difficulty is that, even if it *weren't* moot, the Book of Mormon still would not seem to support this answer. The text reports one group of Nephites, for example, who found themselves “filled with pain and anguish” for the welfare of the Lamanites’ souls (Mosiah 25:11). And later we are told that the Nephites were “sorry” to battle the Lamanites, not only because they regretted having to shed blood at all but also because they worried for the Lamanites’ souls (Alma 48:23). The Nephites also provided land for the converted Lamanites (the Anti-Nephi-Lehies) to settle on, in order to protect them (Alma 27:22–23), and thereafter defended them from attack over the war’s long duration. Later, as they conquered armies of the invading Lamanites, the Nephites also allowed those who would enter a covenant of peace to depart the battlefield in peace and simply join the Ammonites (Alma 62:14–17, 19–28). We have also seen reports of the Nephites “diligently” seeking to restore the Lamanites to faith in God.⁶⁹ And Enos, Mormon, and Moroni — all of whom experienced repeated aggression from the Lamanites — were nevertheless motivated

68. John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ix, quoted in Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 180.

69. See “Lamanite Aggression and Hatred” in the section, “The Sons of Mosiah.”

to make and preserve sacred records *specifically in order to bless them*.⁷⁰ Moroni's situation is particularly poignant. The text reports that following the final destruction at Cumorah, the surviving Nephites were hunted by the Lamanites until they were all destroyed (Mormon. 8:2) and that Moroni wandered where he could in order to preserve his life (Moroni 1:1–3). And yet, despite the Lamanites' destruction of his whole people, their killing of his father, and their ongoing threat to kill Moroni if they found him, Moroni's last words were written to "*my brethren, the Lamanites,*" imploring them to "come unto Christ" and to be "sanctified in Christ by the grace of God" (Moroni 10:1, 32–33). Indeed, Moroni reports that preservation of the records and the desire for the Lamanites to learn of Christ was "according to the prayers of *all* the saints" who had dwelt in the land (Mormon 9:36).

Such a record makes it difficult to argue that Nephite prophetic leaders, and others, would have trouble imagining themselves "in a web of relationship even with their enemies."

The same is true regarding the idea that nonviolent options require "a significantly higher degree of faith and fearlessness" — qualities that, according to the "other lens" view, it must be supposed that Nephite leaders did not possess. But we need look no further than Nephi to see the enormous implausibility of this claim. Although Nephi clearly engaged in violent defense of his people, few matters in the scriptural record are more evident than his immense spiritual stature.⁷¹ It would

70. See Enos 1:11–17; Words of Mormon 1:6–8; Moroni 1:4; 10:1; and the Title Page.

71. To fully appreciate this, remember that Nephi's manifestations (that we know about) included unprecedented personal interaction with the "Spirit of the Lord" (which presumably was the Holy Ghost), seeing in vision the future events of the Savior's birth, life, and death (1 Ne. 11:1–33), the future of Nephite, Lamanite, and Gentile peoples on the promised land (1 Ne. 12–14; 2 Ne. 26:2–22), and the numerous matters pertaining both to this earth and to celestial life seen by John the Revelator (1 Ne. 14:18–30; 2 Ne. 4:23, 25). In addition, the Lord appeared to him personally (2 Ne. 11:3); he was taken to high mountains and shown things "too great for man" (2 Ne. 4:25); he entertained angels (2 Ne. 4:24); he held conversation with the Father and the Son (2 Ne. 31:10–15); and he both prophesied at length and spoke the words of the Lord (2 Ne. 25–26, 28–30). And the record displays his suffering all manner of hardship and persecution throughout, risking death more than once, and fulfilling his charge faithfully and to the letter. We share in his laboring through a desert wilderness, crossing the sea in a ship he constructed in accordance with visions from the Lord, and establishing a new civilization. And we also see him penning a record of it all that brims with the Spirit and that bears a witness of the Lord and of His divinity that is unsurpassed in all scripture.

seem implausible on its face that, in order to choose the higher, more righteous option, Nephi just needed "a significantly higher degree of faith and fearlessness."

(And notice, too, that since (according to this theory) God also at times chooses the lesser option, this line of thinking would seem to force the conclusion that even He does not have the moral imagination or the faith and fearlessness necessary to choose the nonviolent option. We are thus left with a situation in which not only does Nephi lack sufficient faith and moral imagination, but so does God.)

As mentioned earlier, then, even if the question were not moot to begin with, appealing to insufficient moral imagination and insufficient faith to explain leaders' actions would still seem to fail on scriptural and logical grounds alone.

Conclusion

A recent effort to think about war from an LDS perspective proposes "another lens" through which to see the Book of Mormon. It concludes that the text displays two righteous approaches to conflict: a violent approach that is justified and therefore "blessed;" and a nonviolent approach that is higher than this and therefore "more blessed" — and that, in addition, is actually effective in ending conflict.

Although any voice that emphasizes peaceful efforts to resolve conflict is always to be happily received — particularly in a world that so often resorts to violence — this "other lens" approach ultimately does not succeed. It attempts in many ways to support its claim regarding nonviolent response to conflict, but examination shows all of them, ultimately, to fall short. The view does not appear to match what the scriptural record shows us.⁷² Examining its various strands, however,

72. This is the place to point out that this "other lens" approach derives the language of "blessed" and "more blessed" from the incident in Third Nephi where nine of the disciples desire to return to the Lord "speedily" at the time of their deaths, and three desire to remain on earth. The Lord tells the former that they are "blessed" and the latter that they are "more blessed" (3 Nephi 28:1–7). That such concepts applied to these disciples does not mean they apply anywhere else, however. The concepts provide a nice way of capturing the central idea of this theory — namely, that violent methods of dealing with aggression are clearly justified, but that nonviolent methods are always better — but they do not constitute anything like evidence that this central idea is *true*. In fact, the record seems clearly to show that it is not. Thus, while the descriptions "blessed" and "more blessed" applied to the twelve Nephite disciples, it appears evident that they do not apply in a blanket way to these two ways of responding to aggression. What the record actually seems

still permits readers to clarify and refine their thinking on a vital topic, and that is important in its own right.

In the end, it seems evident that the scriptural record does not condemn all violence, as pacifists are prone to think. And, despite what the “other lens” theory earnestly tries to show, neither does it appear to identify nonviolent approaches as always *better* than violent approaches. It is true that our highest duty is to teach the gospel to those who might be our enemies, and to vigorously seek peace in all situations of conflict; but it also seems clear that that will not always be sufficient. Thus, while the scriptures seem to show that sometimes nonviolent response is the right answer to aggression, sometimes (although it must always be a final resort) violent response is the right answer to aggression — and when it is, according to Helaman and the Lord’s own words, it is actually the “cause” of God. The right course of action in situations of aggression, then, appears to vary, depending on the totality of the circumstances. There are important principles that guide all this (all of which are essential and cannot be overlooked), but that, in essence, is what the scriptural record, and the Book of Mormon in particular, seems to show us.

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Appendix A: The Ammonites’ Attitude⁷³

A number of elements of the Ammonite story are often overlooked, yet they are crucial in understanding this people’s attitude toward war.

to show is that sometimes nonviolence is the best way to respond, and sometimes defensive violence is the best way to respond. Neither is best all the time, and neither, so it would appear, can therefore be simply labeled, invariably, as “blessed” or “more blessed.”

73. The discussion that follows is a highly condensed version of much more detailed presentations on this topic in other publications. The longest discussion

Acceptance and Support of Violent Defense

It is commonly thought that the Ammonites were opposed to violence as a matter of principle. Four features of the record show this conclusion to be a mistake, however.

First, recall that although the Ammonites refused to enter war to defend themselves, they were perfectly willing to have the Nephites take up arms to defend them. They were not personally willing to kill, but they were willing to have the Nephites kill for them (Alma 27:22–24; 43:15–22; 53:10, 12). Second, not only did the Ammonites willingly permit the Nephites to kill for them, but they also provided material support to the Nephite armies in these very military efforts (Alma 43:13; 56:27; see also Alma 27:24). Third, the Ammonites reached a point at which they actually *wanted* to take up arms and assist the Nephites in active defense of their liberty and their lives, and only the concerted efforts of Helaman and his brethren prevented them from fulfilling this desire (Alma 53:10–15). (Ammon reports that the Ammonites were motivated by love of their brethren in refusing to take up arms against them (Alma 26:31–32), but that did not keep them from wanting to do so when circumstances seemed to require it.) Finally, the text also has no record of the Ammonite elders objecting to the younger generation of Ammonites entering the war at this time (Alma 53:13–22) — which indicates that the Ammonites were not only willing to permit the Nephites to kill in their stead but were willing to permit their sons to kill in their stead as well. This is indicated not only by the absence of any objection in the text, but also by the fact that in materially supporting the Nephite armies in their military efforts (the second point above), the Ammonites were simultaneously providing the same support to their sons.

Such features of the text are significant because none of them represents how people opposed to violence in principle would actually behave. Indeed, their behavior in actively supporting others’ war efforts,

appears in *EUB*, Chapters 4–5 and Appendix 1. Other presentations, each from a somewhat different angle, are Duane Boyce, “The Ammonites Were not Pacifists,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 20 (2016): 293–313, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-ammonites-were-not-pacifists/>; and Duane Boyce, “Were the Ammonites Pacifists?” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*, 18, no.1 (2009): 32–47. These sources, particularly *EUB*, should be consulted for a full presentation of the argument. It is also worth mentioning that this “other lens” approach is not the only one that appears to be mistaken in its treatment of the Ammonites. The best-known examples are Hugh Nibley and Eugene England, whose claims about pacifism in general, and the Ammonites in particular, are treated in *EUB*, chapters 4–7, and 11–12, respectively.

including their own sons', explicitly contradicts the idea that they considered unarmed confrontation the only, or even best way to approach others' aggression in every circumstance. This means the Ammonites did not, as the "other lens" theory claims, actually choose what it calls the higher, more blessed option. They actually did the opposite, willingly supporting the war effort, including their own sons' involvement in it.

Holes in the Text

It is also important to recognize that seeing the Ammonites as opposed to all violence in principle also creates large holes in the text. Note, for instance, that when Helaman urged the Ammonites not to take up arms, he did not appeal to such a principle to persuade them, but merely reminded them of the covenant they had made (Alma 53:10–15). This is surprising if the Ammonites actually held anti-violence principles, since, if so, it seems likely that Helaman would have appealed to such principles prominently — or at least *once* — in trying to persuade them; but there is no record that he ever did.

It also seems significant that in hearing Helaman's appeal, the Ammonites did not turn the tables on him and discourage *him* from continuing to take up arms. After all, if they believed that all killing in war was morally wrong, then they had to believe it was morally wrong for him — so, if that is the case, it is surprising that there is no report of the Ammonites explaining this to Helaman and urging him to put down his *own* weapons of war. What we see instead is their actual support of Helaman — and the Nephites generally — in waging war.

Third, and related to these two points, it seems significant that there is no record of the Ammonites ever actually expressing an anti-violence explanation for their rejection of war. They never state the general proposition that all killing in war is morally wrong and that all war is therefore impermissible. Of course, the Ammonite king voiced his worry that "perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God" (Alma 24:13), but, other than referring to their past conduct as "murder," there is no record of him stating *why* this should be the case. It is common for readers to supply their own explanation and to suppose that the reason is anti-violence in character (i.e., the Ammonites simply considered *all* killing, even in war, to be morally wrong), but the Ammonites themselves never say this. This is an absence from the record that is both conspicuous and surprising: if anti-violence principles had

been the actual reason for their rejection of war, we would expect at least some mention of this — but we never get it.

All of these absences from the record are surprising if the Ammonites actually held anti-violence principles. Once we recognize that they did not hold such principles, however (as seems clear from the previous section), then these absences are exactly what we would expect. In other words, the reason there is no account of Helaman appealing to anti-violence principles to persuade the Ammonites, or of the Ammonites trying to persuade Helaman himself to stop fighting on the basis of such principles — and so forth — appears to be precisely because they did not *hold* such principles. This is why we cannot say that such absences are simply editorial omissions from the record (i.e., that it was impossible for Mormon to include everything, and that’s why they are missing). Once we recognize that the Ammonites did not hold these principles in the first place, it seems clear that these elements fail to appear in the record, not because they were omitted, but because they simply didn’t happen.

The Ammonites’ Motivation

The natural next question, of course, is why, if they were not actually opposed to violence in principle, the Ammonites refused to take up arms and personally enter war. The best explanation for this is that their covenant with God was an act of penance for the aggressive killings they had committed in the past. They had participated in the Lamanites’ repeated aggression against the Nephites — resulting in the deaths of many thousands — and, far from innocent or benign in any way, those assaults had been explicitly motivated by hatred of the Nephites. Indeed, we are told that the Lamanites at this time “delighted in murdering the Nephites” and that they even sought to rob the Nephites of their possessions by “murdering and plundering” them (Alma 17:14). Despite such aggressive conduct, however, through their deep repentance the Ammonites had managed to obtain forgiveness. It is not surprising, therefore, that they would feel the need to maintain this divine absolution — and distance themselves from their aggressive and hate-filled history — by repudiating killing altogether. All things considered, it seems clear that doing so was an act of penance *for* that history.

Appendix B: The Relative Absence of Directions to Engage in War

One reasonable explanation for why we do not see explicit warnings to prepare for war in the Book of Mormon is that this absence is simply

an artifact of record-keeping in general and of abridgments in particular: *most* historical occurrences are not recorded. It is evident, for example — because the text explicitly tells us — that the Nephites *believed* the Lord would warn them to prepare for defense, just as they believed He would both warn them to flee and direct them where to go to conduct their defense. The record tells us of experiences with the last two, of course — which makes it implausible to imagine that they would believe the first if they did not also have experience with *it*. That they believed all three, and that the three are mingled together as they are, makes it likely that they actually had experience with all three, whether the record spells it out explicitly or not.

Another likelihood is that this relative absence also reflects the nature of the wars experienced by the Nephites. Keep in mind that the most lengthy and detailed description of war in the Book of Mormon appears over the course of sixteen chapters (Alma 47–62). Given such detail, it might seem peculiar that we do not see warnings — even multiple warnings — to prepare for war over this large section. The problem, though, is that these chapters are actually describing a single war — one that lasted more than a decade. (It began toward the end of the nineteenth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 48: 21) and continued until the end of the thirty-first year (Alma 62:39).) During that time the Nephites were under constant threat from the Lamanites, and they knew it: in a general sense, at least, they were in a defensive posture the whole time. This, of course, made multiple specific warnings from the Lord unnecessary, so it is not surprising that we do not see them: their absence is exactly what we would expect. Indeed, from the very beginning, based on his personal experience with Amalickiah, Captain Moroni “knew that he would stir up the Lamanites to anger against them, and cause them to come to battle against them” (Alms 46:30) — which, of course, is exactly what happened. Indeed, we are told that Moroni did not *stop* preparing to defend his people against the Lamanites (Alma 50:1). In short, in the circumstances of this long war, at least, the Nephites apparently did not need multiple warnings from the Lord to tell them something they already knew.

There could be other reasons for the absence of such warnings, as well, of course. What already appears evident at this point, though, is that whatever the reason, the absence of such warnings is not evidence that nonviolent response is simply the higher, more blessed option; we know this because (as seen in the section, “The Central Idea of the ‘Other Lens’ Approach”) we already appreciate that nonviolence is *not* always the higher, more blessed option.