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Duane Boyce

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THE AMMONITES WERE NOT PACIFISTS

Duane Boyce

Abstract: Although it is common to believe that the Ammonites were pacifists, the report of their story demonstrates that this is a mistake. Appreciating the Ammonites' non-pacifism helps us think more clearly about them, and it also explains several features of the text. These are textual elements that surprise us if we assume that the Ammonites were pacifists, but that make perfect sense once we understand that they were not. Moreover, in addition to telling us that the Ammonites were not pacifists, the text also gives us the actual reason the Ammonites came to eschew all conflict — and we learn from this why significant prophetic leaders (from King Benjamin to Alma to Mormon) did not reject the sword in the same way. The text also reveals the intellectual flaw in supposing that the Ammonites' early acts of self-sacrifice set the proper example for all disciples to follow.

The Received View: The Ammonites as Pacifists

The basic story of the Ammonites is familiar. They were a group of Lamanites converted by the sons of Mosiah, who, following their conversion, buried their weapons in the earth, entered a covenant to eschew all conflict, and took upon themselves the name “Anti-Nephi-Lehies.” They subsequently refused to defend themselves when under Lamanite attack and allowed themselves to be slaughtered on two occasions by their Lamanite brethren. Following the second assault, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies emigrated to the Nephite land of Jershon, where the Nephites protected them from further Lamanite attack. At this point they began to be called the “people of Ammon,” which explains why they are commonly referred to simply as “the Ammonites” today.¹

¹ Central passages in understanding the Ammonite story are found in Alma 23, 24, 27, and 53.

It is difficult to find a more compelling instance of repentance, humility, and sustained devotion to the Lord anywhere in scripture. The Ammonites are universally admired and for sound reason.

It is also widely thought that the Ammonites' rejection of war was a total renunciation of conflict as a matter of moral principle. This, of course, is the central tenet of pacifism. It is the view that "participation in and support for war is always impermissible,"² or, as another has put it: "War, for the pacifist, is always wrong."³ It is important to be mindful of this definition since the term "pacifism" is not always applied with rigor. It has been used by some to indicate an attitude as vague as a general abhorrence of violence, by others to capture the fundamental attitude of favoring peace over war in resolving conflict, by others to refer to active efforts to create mechanisms for ensuring a peaceful world, and so forth.

The difficulty with such usages of the term "pacifism" is their conceptual vagueness. It is not always obvious whom they exclude. Indeed, some usages are so attenuated that even prominent Book of Mormon warriors like Captain Moroni, Teancum, Gidgiddoni, Lachoneus, Mormon, and Moroni can qualify as pacifists even though they were highly involved in conflict and led thousands of men into war. That is why applying the term "pacifism" in a conceptually casual way is not particularly useful; doing so rids the idea of all distinctiveness and thus denudes the term itself of meaning.

The standard definition of pacifism, on the other hand — the rejection of all war as a matter of moral principle — has clear conceptual boundaries and thus is of genuine philosophical interest.⁴ And of course it was precisely this view that, it is widely assumed, the Ammonites held, and that is why it has become common to refer to them as pacifists.

2 Martin Ceadel, *Thinking about Peace and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5.

3 Brian Orend, "A Just-War Critique of Realism and Pacifism," *Journal of Philosophical Research*, volume 26 (2001): 455.

4 That is why this definition is emphasized by Ceadel and Orend as well as by Nagel, Anscombe, Narveson, McMahan, and others. See Thomas Nagel, "War and Massacre" in his *Mortal Questions* (Canto Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Elizabeth Anscombe, "War and Murder," in Richard A. Wasserstrom, ed., *War and Morality* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1970), 42–53; Jan Narveson, "Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis," in Richard A. Wasserstrom, ed., *War and Morality* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1970), 63–77; Lawrence Masek, "All's Not Fair in War: How Kant's Just War Theory Refutes War Realism," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 16/2 (2002): 143–54; and Jeff McMahan, "Pacifism and Moral Theory," *Diametros*, 23 (2010): 44–68.

Although the view of the Ammonites-as-pacifists is common, Hugh Nibley has perhaps given the most frequent expression to this outlook. For example, Nibley emphasizes more than once that the Ammonites equated the killing that occurs in war with the act of murder. He believes (1) that the acts of killing reflected upon by the Ammonites were acts they had performed in conventional war, (2) that it was these normal wartime acts that the Ammonites came to see as “pure murder,” and (3) that this was why they came to reject even war of self-defense.⁵ Nibley thus has no hesitation in considering the Ammonites “complete pacifists”⁶ and also has no hesitation in considering the Ammonites’ well-known act of self-sacrifice in the face of aggression “the perfect example of what to do when faced with a conflict: refuse to take up arms.”⁷ So not only were the Ammonites pacifists, but their pacifist response to aggression set the perfect example for all disciples to follow.

All of this makes evident that Nibley’s usage of the term “pacifist” is identical to the characterization set forth above — namely, that “participation in and support for war is always impermissible.” Nibley demonstrates the established sense in which he uses the term “pacifism” by ascribing to the Ammonites the view that there is no difference between the act of murder and the act of killing in war. It is no mere abhorrence of violence or some general preference for peace over war that he has in mind; rather, it is the genuine rejection of all war.

5 See Hugh Nibley, “Last Call: An Apocalyptic Warning from the Book of Mormon,” in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 517; “Freemen and King-men in the Book of Mormon,” in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 356; “Scriptural Perspectives on How to Survive the Calamities of the Last Days,” in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 487; and “The Prophetic Book of Mormon,” in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 466.

6 “Freemen and King-men in the Book of Mormon,” in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 356. See also Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed., ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 295, 296; and Hugh Nibley, “Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, ed. Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 499 (where Nibley refers to them as “conscientious objectors”).

7 This is the summary of Nibley’s view by his official biographer. See Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 221.

Others join Nibley in regarding the Ammonites this way. “Rigorously pacifist”⁸ and “the great pacifist martyrs”⁹ is the way Eugene England refers to them, adding that the Ammonite episode is “the most powerful Book of Mormon teaching of the nonviolent ethic (besides Christ’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’ to the Nephites).”¹⁰ More recently, additional authors have also either stated or assumed the pacifist character of the Ammonites.¹¹ The outlook is held today as strongly as it was when Nibley first wrote decades ago.

It is easy to understand why this view is so common. After all, the Ammonites:

- sorely repented of the killings they had committed prior to their conversion (Alma 24:10, 15);
- permanently buried their weapons following their conversion (Alma 23:7; 24:6–19);
- entered a covenant that they would never stain their swords with blood again, under any circumstances (Alma 24:18; 53:10–15); and
- allowed themselves to be slaughtered on two separate occasions rather than violate this covenant (Alma 24:21–22; 27:2–3).

Such features of the Ammonite record seem to suggest that they held pacifist motivations, and that is why the view has found and maintained currency for decades.

Examining the matter of Ammonite pacifism requires looking into a number of issues, including both pacifism itself and various dimensions regarding war in the Book of Mormon generally. Since all such matters are covered in detail in *Even unto Bloodshed*,¹² and since brevity is a

8 Eugene England, “Hugh Nibley as Cassandra,” *BYU Studies*, 30/4 (1990): 112.

9 Eugene England, “Healing and Making Peace, in the Church and the World,” in Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 9.

10 Eugene England, “Hugh Nibley as Cassandra,” *BYU Studies*, 30/4 (1990): 112.

11 See, for example, essays by J. David Pulsipher, F.R. Rick Duran, Gordon Conrad Thomasson, Loyd Ericson, Eric A. Eliason, and Mark Henshaw et al. in Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman, eds., *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2012).

12 Duane Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2015). For example, while a brief consideration of pacifism was

virtue in essays, I will occasionally refer to sections of that volume where readers can find additional information.

Why the Received View is Mistaken

As mentioned, it has become common to think of the Ammonites as pacifists — as a people who, as a matter of principle, saw all conflict to be morally impermissible. Despite the persistence and ubiquity of this outlook, however, the view is mistaken. While the elements of the record listed above seem to suggest that the Ammonites might have been pacifists, other elements of the text disprove this.

Note, for instance, that although the Ammonites refused to enter war to defend themselves, they willingly permitted the Nephites to protect them through force of arms (Alma 27:22–24; 43:15–22; 53:10, 12). It is difficult to see how they could have allowed this if they had genuinely believed that use of arms was sinful. If the Ammonites thought that self-defense was equivalent to murder, and if they rejected self-defense in order to avoid committing murder in this way, then they would not have been disciples but hypocrites in allowing the Nephites to commit such murders *for* them.

Moreover, 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 (Alma 53:10–13). Only the concerted efforts of Helaman and his brethren — not the self-reflection of the Ammonites themselves — prevented them from fulfilling this desire (Alma 53:12–15). Although the record assures us that the Ammonites loved their Lamanite brethren (Alma 26:31–32), this did not prevent the Ammonites from wanting to enter war against these brethren when the situation seemed to warrant it.

Third, not only did the Ammonites permit the Nephites to kill Lamanites in their place, and not only did they seek to enter the war that was then being waged, but they also provided material support to the Nephite armies in these very military efforts. We are told that “the people of Ammon did give unto the Nephites a large portion of their substance to support their armies” (Alma 43:13; see also Alma 27:24). It is possible, of course, to reject war as a matter of principle and yet to attend to the human needs of soldiers who are so engaged. For instance, one might provide medical assistance to combatants with the motivation of meeting their needs simply as human beings rather than as a way

presented above, a more complete discussion of the definition of pacifism can be found on pages 17–20 of this volume.

of supporting them in their combat efforts. In this sense, one can be compassionately “involved” in war and yet still be morally opposed to it. But there is no reason to think that the Ammonites’ support of Nephite armies fell in this category. They welcomed the Nephites’ use of military means to protect them, and they even had to be talked out of taking up arms to join the fight themselves. Providing “a large portion of their substance to support [Nephite] armies” was in no sense a reluctant “pacifist” involvement. They accepted and supported the Nephites’ military action (action that was murderous, according to Nibley’s view of how they saw the matter), and this is a straightforward and obvious violation of pacifist principles.

Each of these features of the record is important because each is sufficient to demonstrate that the Ammonites were not pacifists. In the standard concept of pacifism (and the way in which Nibley, England, and others employ the term), it is in no sense pacifist to let others kill in our behalf (i.e., to allow them to do for us what we consider immoral and won’t do for ourselves), and it is in no sense pacifist either to want to *join* those protectors in waging war and killing others or to support those protectors in killing in our behalf. All these actions are straightforward contradictions of a complete and principled renunciation of war, and the Ammonites did all three.

It is easy to understand why, on a casual reading, it is common to refer to the Ammonites as pacifists, but it would seem equally easy to understand why this is a fundamental mistake and thus a serious misapplication of the term.

Resolving Obvious Gaps in the Text

Coming to understand that the Ammonites were non-pacifist helps explain four elements of the record that otherwise seem extraordinary.

Helaman’s “Contractual” Appeal to the Ammonites

Remember that when the Ammonites developed a desire to violate their covenant and take up arms to help the Nephites against Lamanite aggression, Helaman interrupted their plans and implored them not to do so (Alma 53:10–15). He feared that “by so doing they should lose their souls” (Alma 53:15). Now this fear was obviously not grounded in a belief that committing acts of violence *per se* would jeopardize the Ammonites’ souls. Had this been the case, Helaman would have feared on these grounds for his own soul as well. But he had no such worry. He was waging war, and he would continue to wage war. This makes obvious

that his fear for the Ammonites rested not on their entering conflict and committing acts of violence as such but on their violation of a *promise*. The text states Helaman's fear simply: the Ammonites "were about to break the oath which they had made" (Alma 53:14).

While the nature of Helaman's argument to the Ammonites is obvious, however — it appeals to their obligation to honor the covenant they had made — this appeal is counterintuitive on a pacifist reading of the Ammonites. After all, if the Ammonites had genuinely been pacifists, the most obvious and persuasive approach for Helaman to take in convincing them not to enter the war would have been to simply remind them of what they already believed: that killing in war is sinful, and even murderous. Since such a reminder from Helaman would have been sufficient, it is surprising that he did nothing like this. Instead, he appealed to the Ammonites explicitly and solely on the basis of their need to honor the covenant they had made, an appeal that was contractual in nature, not pacifist. If we take the Ammonites to have been devoted pacifists this omission by Helaman is surprising.¹³

¹³ One argument someone might make is that Helaman was actually prepared to use both appeals — the contractual *and* the pacifist — but that he didn't need to use the second for one of two reasons: because the first actually assumes the second (that is, the Ammonites entered the contract *because* it was pacifist in character and thus an appeal to the contract was *ipso facto* an appeal to their pacifism) or because appealing to the first simply proved to be sufficient. Another possibility is that Helaman actually did make both appeals but that the record simply fails to record this. However, the discussion below ("Why Arguing from Omission Does Not Succeed") will demonstrate why both possibilities are actually moot. Another argument would be to say that Helaman failed to invoke pacifism because he himself was not a pacifist and thus we should expect him to be loath to adopt the hypocritical stance of appealing to the Ammonites on grounds that he himself rejected. This is not persuasive, however, as Helaman had no reason to be self-conscious about this. Everyone knew that he and all the Nephites were waging war and thus that they were not pacifists. If the Ammonites truly were pacifists, it would have been easy for him to say, "We do not believe that fighting to defend our families and our lives is immoral, but I know you do—so you mustn't fight even if you want to." That is in no sense hypocritical and would have been a natural approach for Helaman to take if the Ammonites were pacifists. No matter how we might try to account for Helaman's approach, if the Ammonites were genuinely pacifists it remains surprising — and conspicuous — that he did not appeal to them on pacifist grounds.

The Ammonites' Failure to Encourage Pacifism in Helaman

Moreover, it is surprising that the Ammonites did not turn the tables on Helaman at this point. It would seem that if the Ammonites believed all killing in war to be murder, then, when Helaman urged them not to fight, the Ammonites would have explained to Helaman that *he* should not be fighting either. If killing in war was equivalent to murder for them, then it was equivalent to murder for him — so it is surprising that there is no report of the Ammonites explaining this to Helaman and urging him to put down his own weapons.

The Absence of a Pacifist Rationale by the Ammonites

Third, and related to these two points, is the peculiarity that the Ammonites never express a pacifist 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 he never states *why* this should be the case. It is common for readers to supply their own explanation and to suppose that the reason is pacifist in character (i.e., the Ammonites considered all killing, even in war, to be murder), but the Ammonites themselves never say this — an absence from the record that is both conspicuous and surprising. If pacifist moral objection had been the actual reason for their rejection of war, we would expect at least *some* mention of this.

The Ammonites' Failure to Encourage Pacifism in their Sons

It is also interesting that the text has no record of the Ammonite elders objecting to the younger generation of Ammonite males entering the war at this time (Alma 53:13–22). It would seem that if these fathers had really thought that all killing in war was murder they would have done everything in their power to prevent their sons from enlisting and thereby prevent them from committing such acts of murder. This would have been by far the most natural course for a group of pacifist fathers to pursue if they genuinely considered all killing in war to be murder. Yet the record suggests nothing like this. This fact is startling on a pacifist interpretation of the Ammonites because it seems to suggest that although the Ammonite elders were eager to maintain their own righteousness, they were not at all eager to maintain the righteousness

of their sons. Though implausible in the extreme, this is the logical consequence of the view.

Why Arguing from Omission Does Not Succeed

All of these features of the text are surprising if we suppose that the Ammonites were pacifists. In none of these circumstances is there a hint that the Ammonites behaved in the way pacifists would behave. Nor is there a hint that Helaman approached them in the way we would expect him to approach a group of pacifists. What we see in these four instances is exactly what we would expect if the Ammonites were *not* pacifists. These features of the record thus simply illustrate what other features have already demonstrated — the Ammonites' non-pacifism. Indeed, these elements of the text can be considered additional evidence for this conclusion.

Now it might seem promising to explain these textual features by arguing from omission. We might say that the Ammonites and Helaman *must* have behaved in the ways referred to above (e.g., the Ammonite elders did actually object to their sons' enlistment in the war, Helaman did actually appeal to the Ammonites on pacifist as well as contractual grounds, and so forth), but that these elements of their behavior are simply not included in the record. Mormon could not incorporate everything, and these gaps in the text are nothing more than illustrations of this editorial reality.

But an argument of this sort is persuasive only if there is no separate validation of the Ammonites' non-pacifism. In that case we could of course appeal to incompleteness in the text to try to explain the surprising absence of these particular expressions of pacifism (though having to do so four times would still feel like grasping). Unfortunately, there *is* separate validation that the Ammonites were not pacifists. This means there is no reason to speculate that these features of the text are a function of incompleteness. Indeed, at this point it seems obvious that these features are not gaps in the record at all. Once we appreciate (on independent grounds) that the Ammonites were not pacifists, it is apparent why there is no report (for example) of the Ammonites urging Helaman not to fight at the same time he was urging them not to fight: since the Ammonites were not pacifists, such urging never happened — and that's why there is no report of it. It is similarly apparent why there is no report of: (1) Helaman's making a pacifist argument to the Ammonites, (2) the Ammonites' offering a pacifist rationale to explain their conduct, or (3) the Ammonites' objecting to the military engagement of their

sons. Because the Ammonites were not pacifists, these events simply never occurred. That's why there is no report of them.

It seems clear, then, that it was not out of editorial necessity that Mormon failed to include the events we would expect in these four cases. He did not include such events for the simple reason that they didn't happen. Imagining otherwise is based entirely on the mistake of supposing that the Ammonites were pacifists when they weren't. The analytical byproduct of this is that there is no need to provide explanations for Mormon's omissions ("Why is this left out?" "Why is there no mention of that?" etc.). There are simply no omissions to explain.

Why Did the Ammonites Refuse to Enter War?

All of this leaves us with an important question. After all, in the pacifist view it is easy to explain why the Ammonites came to eschew war: as a result of their conversion, they came to see all killing, even in war, as murder. Thus, their conversion led to pacifism, and their pacifism *meant* the renunciation of conflict. This is Nibley's logic, and on the surface it seems quite natural and persuasive.

The problem, of course, is that — as we have seen — the Ammonites were not in fact pacifists, and that raises the question of why, if they weren't pacifists, they still eschewed war. Since an attitude of pacifism doesn't explain this, what does? The answer is found in three important features of the text regarding the Ammonites.¹⁴

The Lamanites Waged Numerous Aggressive Wars Against the Nephites

The first important feature of the text is the consistent pattern of Lamanite attack against the Nephites from the very beginning of Lehiite civilization to the time of the missionary labors of the sons of Mosiah. Jacob, for instance, tells us that Nephi himself had to fight to defend his people from Lamanite assault (Jacob 1:10; also 2 Nephi 5:14), and aggressive wars are also reported by Jacob (Jacob 7:24), Enos (Enos 1:20), Jarom (Jarom 1:6–7), Abinadom (Omni 1:10), Amaleki (Omni 1:24), Zeniff (Mosiah 9–10), Limhi (Mosiah 19–21), and Mormon (Words of

14 The Book of Mormon tells us some things about the Ammonites as a group as well as about the Lamanites in general. Since the Ammonites were at least a significant portion of the Lamanite population in size and status (evidence for this conclusion is found in *Even unto Bloodshed*, 281–85), it is plausible to suppose that what the account reveals about the Lamanites in general applies, at least roughly, to the Ammonites themselves.

Mormon 1:13–14) — a record of Lamanite aggression spanning the first four hundred and sixty years or so of Book of Mormon history.

The Lamanites also waged four aggressive wars against the Nephites during the very time the sons of Mosiah were performing their missionary labors among them.¹⁵ Lamanite aggression was therefore not only longstanding but also occurred simultaneously with the missionary efforts of the sons of Mosiah. That those who later became the Ammonites were integrally involved in these attacks is certain. This is mentioned explicitly in the text (e.g., Alma 25:6), and it is similarly evident in view of the preeminent position that King Lamoni's father (a later convert — Alma 22) held among the Lamanites during at least part of the time that the Lamanites were launching these wars.

All this is important because the Nephites did not exhibit a similar pattern of aggression toward the Lamanites.¹⁶ Over the course of their history, the instigation of violence was virtually, if not literally, one-sided.¹⁷

15 A discussion of these wars appears in *Even unto Bloodshed*, 53–55.

16 This is why, as Nibley notices, every Nephite-Lamanite conflict occurs on Nephite lands. See Hugh Nibley, "Warfare and the Book of Mormon," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 294; *Since Cumorah*, 298; and "Freemen and Kingmen," 354. The Nephites fought only when they were being invaded and attacked. There is no instance of their fighting because they were instigating hostilities by invading and attacking others.

17 The account of Zeniff in Mosiah 9 is not a counterinstance to this claim. This is discussed fully in *Even unto Bloodshed*, pp. 60–61 (Note 2). A possible exception to the Nephite pattern of fighting only in defense occurs late in their history when they desired to "go up unto their enemies to battle, and avenge themselves of the blood of their brethren" (Mormon 3:14). The text never records that they acted on this wish, but even if they did, all that follows is that the Nephites instigated hostilities a single time after a thousand years of absorbing aggression. If that changes the ratio of Lamanite-to-Nephite aggression at all, it does so only minutely. A variation of this argument is to identify elements of offensive tactics that the Nephites used in battling the Lamanites and to think that these constitute, or at least approach, examples of conducting offensive war rather than of merely defending themselves. But this argument misconceives the differences between offensive and defensive action — a matter discussed fully in *Even unto Bloodshed* (see especially pp. 191–209 and 244–48, but also 7–15 and 22–31). Another possible counterargument is to say that Nephite dissenters fomented many of the Lamanite aggressions (at least from the Book of Alma forward) and that this implicates the Nephites in aggression. But it is difficult to see what moral principle allows us to blame the Nephites for attacks they suffered at the hands of Nephites whom they had expelled from their society, or, for that matter, from those who had rebelled and removed themselves. By the same logic we would have to blame the Father for

The Lamanites' Aggression was Motivated by Hatred for the Nephites

Accompanying accounts of Lamanite aggression are reports of their longstanding hatred toward the Nephites. Jacob, for example, writes in the earliest days of Lamanite “hatred” for the Nephites and does so while praising them for their superiority to his people (Jacob 3:7). He 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). Over the course of time, Enos, Jarom, Zeniff, Limhi, King Benjamin, and Mormon all speak in identical terms of the Lamanites’ hatred for the Nephites.¹⁸ Mormon’s statement that “the Lamanites were taught to hate the children of Nephi from the beginning” (4 Nephi 1:39) is a perfect summary of what all of these earlier scriptural figures report.

Lamanite hatred of the Nephites was traceable to “the wicked traditions” that they had inherited from their fathers (see Alma 23:3, 24:7). Zeniff’s report to this effect is well known (Mosiah 10:12–17), but he is far from alone. Captain Moroni also explains the Lamanites’ hatred as due to the “tradition of their fathers” (Alma 60:32), and Samuel the Lamanite attributes the Lamanites’ evil in his day to “the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers,” as well (Helaman 15:4). The same theme is seen in Lamoni’s father, the Lamanite king, who not only cited the tradition (Alma 20:10, 13) but also later proclaimed safety for the Nephite missionaries precisely in order that the gospel could be preached and that “his people might be convinced concerning the wicked traditions of their fathers” (Alma 23:3).

The Lamanites’ hatred and their belief in these “wicked traditions” were firmly in place at the time of the sons of Mosiah. The account tells

Lucifer’s aggression against him in the aftermath of Lucifer’s rebellion, both in the pre-earth life and here on earth. In considering the matter of Lamanite vs. Nephite aggression, it is also relevant that the text records no examples of agitators gaining power by stirring the Nephites up to anger and prodding them into war against the Lamanites, whereas there are multiple examples of such dissidents doing exactly that with the Lamanites toward the Nephites (see *Even unto Bloodshed*, pp. 76–77). Finally, it is common to point out the negative stereotypes that Nephites had of the Lamanites and to see ways in which their behavior might have seemed problematic/provocational to them (see Note 19 herein), but that of course does not establish any kind of equivalence between the two peoples. Whatever else it shows, the text is unmistakable in depicting the Lamanites as the military aggressors in every Nephite/Lamanite conflict of which we have record.

18 See, for example: Enos 1:14, 20; Jarom 1:6–7; Mosiah 10:17; and Mosiah 1:14.

us that one of these missionaries' explicit purposes in laboring among the Lamanites was to "cure them of their hatred towards the Nephites" (Mosiah 28:2). Ammon's encounter with Lamoni's father, the king over all the Lamanite land, illustrates the depth of this animosity. Upon seeing his son Lamoni with "this Nephite, who is one of the children of a liar," the king "commanded [Lamoni] that he should slay Ammon with the sword," and when Lamoni refused, the king attempted to slay Ammon himself (Alma 20:10, 14; cf. verses 10–20). Ammon had neither said a word nor performed a single disagreeable action; his status as "one of the children of a liar" was sufficient to justify his death. So the record not only reports but also shows the contempt in which Lamanites held the Nephites and the ease with which they were willing to kill them.

It is no surprise, then, that 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 it is important to note that Ammon tells us this about the Lamanites after he had lived with them for fourteen years and had come to know and to love them in a personal way. This is not an ignorant and prejudiced report made in advance of his mission and without firsthand experience of the Lamanites.

In addition, Mormon includes a description of the Lamanites at this time as

a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people; a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites, and robbing and plundering them; and their hearts were set upon riches, or upon gold and silver, and precious stones; yet they sought to obtain these things by murdering and plundering, that they might not labor for them with their own hands (Alma 17:14).

In sum, prior to their conversion, the Lamanites were a people who for centuries had hated the Nephites, had regularly waged aggressive war to destroy them, had sought to murder the Nephites and actually "delighted in" and "loved" murdering them, and had plundered and robbed the Nephites to gain gold and silver without labor. The story of such aggression and hatred is consistent across prophetic reports and across centuries. Indeed, significant *Lamanite* figures corroborate this picture: the prophet Samuel, for example, as well as Lamoni's father, who actually reigned as the *king* of the Lamanites. And as we will see in the next section, another significant Lamanite — Anti-Nephi-Lehi, the Ammonites' king — also confirms the view of Lamanite conduct as aggressive and murderous in character. Whatever their virtues,

the Lamanites presented over time a consistent pattern of hatred and aggression toward the Nephites — a reality that was acknowledged and reported by the Lamanites themselves.¹⁹

The Lamanites' Aggression was Genuinely Murderous in Character

The Ammonites' Understanding of "Murder." The two features of the text we have looked at so far — the frequency of Lamanite aggression against the Nephites and the hatred that motivated it — help us understand what is meant when the Ammonites' actions are referred to as "murder." This is an expression Anti-Nephi-Lehi uses three separate times over the course of a mere three verses in speaking of the Ammonites' past actions (Alma 24:9–11) and that he repeats another two times thereafter in speaking to Ammon (Alma 27: 6, 8). It is important to attend to this because, according to Nibley's reading of the matter, speaking of murder in this context is just a rhetorical way of claiming that all killing in war is murder. It would be as if Anti-Nephi-Lehi had said to Ammon: "It was wrong for us to fight for our country and to engage you in war. Although we had legitimate reasons for fighting, all killing in war is murder, and because we killed in war, we committed murder. And we are grateful beyond measure for the Lord's goodness in forgiving us of these murders." If we want to claim that all killing in war is murder, and that the Ammonites' attitude proves it, this is how we must take Anti-Nephi-Lehi to be speaking.

19 This is why it is difficult to dismiss Zeniff's account out of hand, even though some have raised questions about it (see, for example, J. Christopher Conkling, "Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 14/1 [2005]: 108–17). It is worth noting that John Sorenson attributes prejudice to some Nephite descriptions of the Lamanites on the grounds that the Book of Mormon recorders were not firsthand witnesses of all that they describe; see Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 1/1 (1992): 26, as well as his *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 90–91. But Sorenson does not mean to extend that explanation to account for reports of Lamanite hatred or of their efforts to destroy the Nephites over the years: these are matters with which the Nephites did, in fact, have firsthand experience and about which multiple Lamanites provided their own confirmation. Dan Belnap has written recently about Nephite stereotypes of the Lamanites and the same point applies in his case. See Dan Belnap, "And it came to pass ...: The Sociopolitical Events in the Book of Mormon Leading to the Eighteenth Year of the Reign of the Judges," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 23 (2014): 132–36.

But it is evident that Anti-Nephi-Lehi is actually saying nothing like this. To appreciate this, recall that the record tells us more than once that the Lamanites delighted in shedding Nephite blood. Far from being reluctant, the Lamanites' killings had in fact been wanton and deliberate, in both large-scale aggressive wars and in smaller-scale marauding and banditry. Furthermore, one of the Lamanites' motives for attacking Nephites was to rob them — to take from them gold and silver so that they would not have to mine it for themselves. And finally, note that in all their conflicts, the Lamanites, not the Nephites, had been the aggressors. So the wars Anti-Nephi-Lehi is speaking of here were not wars involving legitimate disputes that simply escalated out of control, but rather aggressive wars and acts of plunder that were motivated by hatred and that were instigated and pursued in the first instance by the Lamanites themselves.

Such was the moral atmosphere that had existed among the Lamanites, and it is little surprise that Anti-Nephi-Lehi, in hindsight and from the perspective of a changed heart, could see such acts of hate-filled killing as thoroughly murderous in character.

The Nephites' Understanding of "Murder." The Nephites understood the Lamanites' killings to be murderous in exactly the same way. That is how Mormon describes their behavior, for example, telling us that they were "a ferocious people" and "a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites" (Alma 17:14). Moreover, when the Nephites subsequently gave the land of Jershon to the Ammonites for their safety, they did so because of the fear of the Ammonites to take up arms "on account of their many murders and their awful wickedness" (Alma 27:23). It is important to note that the Nephites had themselves been waging battle to defend themselves, and yet they did not consider their own killings to be acts of murder. They used "murder" specifically in regard to the Ammonites, and in exactly the same way that the Ammonites used the term to describe themselves. It refers to acts that are murderous in character, not to ordinary acts committed by combatants during conventional war.

In the end, then, the record seems clear. When the Ammonites repented, they were not repenting of acts of killing that had occurred in war as we normally think of it. They were repenting of aggressive acts that had been motivated by hatred, greed, and a desire for Nephite blood. The acts of killing were, indeed, murderous in nature. Thus, when we read Anti-Nephi-Lehi's speech in context we see that his use of "murder" is not remotely tantamount to a blanket condemnation of all killing in all war. It is a condemnation of the specific character of the killings

that the Ammonites had committed in conditions that were very much unlike conventional war.²⁰

Conclusion: Why the Ammonites Refused to Enter War

The question we began with in this section was why the Ammonites eschewed war if they were not pacifists. The answer is now apparent. The Ammonites were a people who had been motivated by hatred and who had committed murder in both aggressive, large-scale wars and in attempts to plunder gold and silver from the Nephites. Yet despite this history of violence, they had, with difficulty, won forgiveness (Alma 24:10–13). Given the harsh reality of their past and the difficulty of their repentance, it is not surprising that they felt the need to maintain this forgiveness by repudiating not only murder but also anything remotely resembling it. This — not a generalized rejection of war in principle — was their reason for renouncing the shedding of blood. Thus, even in the two instances where the Ammonites allowed themselves to be slaughtered, and in which they appear to resemble pacifist conduct most closely, the resemblance turns out to be superficial because in both cases they were acting from other than pacifist motivations.

The Ammonites' Idiosyncratic Covenant: A Covenant of Penance

Appreciating the nature of the Ammonites' motivation, we can understand more fully the covenant they entered. It seems clear that the covenant was not motivated by pacifism but by the Ammonites' desire to distance themselves from their aggressive and hate-filled past. It was an act of penance. This explains why Helaman would appeal to the Ammonites on nothing more than the basis of this covenant: breaking it would be a violation of the penitential discipline they had imposed on themselves as a token of repentance for their past sins. The penitential nature of this covenant also explains why the Ammonites did not generalize their commitment to others — either to Helaman or to their Nephite protectors generally or even to their own sons. The covenant they entered was peculiar to themselves as a people trying to overcome an aggressive and murderous past. Since such a history did not apply either to the Nephites or to the younger generation of Ammonites,

20. It might be thought that the text's description of Lamanite attitudes and conduct could apply to the general population of Lamanites but not to the Ammonites in particular. The reasons for rejecting this possibility are covered in *Even unto Bloodshed*, 62–63.

neither did the terms of the covenant. That is why the Ammonites did nothing to persuade anyone else to act as they themselves were acting. Indeed, based on the way they actually behaved, we can surmise that if the Ammonites had considered their covenant generalizable to others at all, they would have thought it applicable only to others who were also repentant murderers and who needed to offer the same kind of penance.

The idiosyncratic, penitential nature of the Ammonites' covenant is the most natural explanation for why other Book of Mormon leaders did not follow their example. Mormon is the one who included their story in his account of Nephite history in the first place, yet he did not consider the Ammonites' laying down their arms a prototype to be followed. He behaved nothing like that, nor did he enjoin his people to do so (Mormon 2:23). Nor did the Ammonites' contemporaries consider their actions an example to emulate. These included such significant figures as Alma, Captain Moroni, Lehi, and Helaman — all of whose wartime actions are well known. And we also know that neither Nephi nor Gidgiddoni nor Lachoneus nor the later Moroni would think of the Ammonites as prototypes to follow. The record depicts all of them as righteous and even prophetic leaders, and yet none of them behaved as did the Ammonites.²¹ The same is also true of King Benjamin (Words of Mormon 1:13–14).

All of this is significant, and the quick conclusion to draw from it is the one Nibley and some others draw — namely, that the Ammonites were simply better than others were and that they set the *highest* example.²² But this verdict on the matter could hardly be more mistaken.

21 The wartime acts of Nephi and Moroni are well known, as is their prophetic status (although no scripture specifically designates them this way — on this, one can consult *Even unto Bloodshed*, p. 90, Note 6). Lachoneus and Gidgiddoni are explicitly designated as prophets (3 Nephi 3:19), and their wartime involvement is seen in 3 Nephi 3–4.

22 It is with the Ammonites in mind that Nibley remarks, regarding Book of Mormon wars, that “the good people never fight the bad people; they never fight anybody.” Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed., ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 348. Here Nibley equates what he takes to be Ammonite pacifism with goodness itself, contrasting it with the Nephites and Lamanites generally, whom he routinely designates as “bad.” (For more on this matter specifically, see *Even unto Bloodshed*, 73–85.) Eugene England also sees the Ammonites as establishing “a higher non-violent ethic,” which the Book of Mormon, he says, “makes clear is a higher standard.” “‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’: An Ethics of Non-Violence,” in Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 159. That the Ammonites' non-violence is the more divine and moral approach is also the central argument of J. David Pulsipher,

Everything in the record indicates that these spiritual figures could see what the Ammonites themselves appreciated but that some modern readers don't: the Ammonites' refusal to take up arms was not a rejection of war *per se* but a rejection of war for themselves in their circumstances. Their conduct does not generalize to others because the covenant they entered was penitential and thus idiosyncratic — suited to their status as a people who were trying to overcome a past that included murder. Alma and other prophetic leaders could appreciate this and that is why they did not behave in the same way: they were not repentant murderers. So it is not the case that these prophetic leaders were less than the Ammonites. They behaved differently than the Ammonites because, unlike that population, they did not need to offer penance for murder.

The Ammonites' Departure from Their Own Example

As a final matter, consider the view that the Ammonites' self-prostration in the face of aggression set, according to Nibley, "the perfect example of what to do when faced with a conflict: refuse to take up arms."²³ It is thought one reason for this is that pacifist response of this sort brings others' aggression to an end. This was true the first time the Lamanites attacked the Ammonites, of course (Alma 24:20–27), and this outcome seems to indicate the effectiveness of pacifist conduct. Thus, Eugene England writes that "the sacrifice of these Lamanite pacifists ended violence, while the 'just' wars of the Nephites did not."²⁴ Such desirable results suggest this practical effect as one reason for emulating the Ammonites' example.²⁵

However, while this interpretation of events might seem appealing on the surface, it faces serious textual problems. Recall, for example,

"The Ammonite Conundrum," in Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman, eds., *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2012), 1–12.

23 See again Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2002), 221.

24 Eugene England, "'Thou Shalt Not Kill': An Ethics of Non-Violence," in Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 159.

25 See, for example, J. David Pulsipher, "The Ammonite Conundrum," in Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman, eds., *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2012), 1–12. Nibley, too, considers the Ammonites' self-sacrificing response an effective strategy for ending aggression. See Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed., ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 342.

that after the second attack suffered by the Ammonites (Alma 27:2–3), they never again followed the strategy of self-sacrifice, even though they had opportunity to do so. Indeed, following the second attack, 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 himself did not believe the Ammonites would end aggression in this circumstance 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. As a result, the Ammonites did not sacrifice themselves again, instead emigrating to the land of Jerushon (Alma 27:4–26).

Nor did the Ammonites pursue a strategy of self-sacrifice at the time the younger Ammonites went to war to assist the Nephites avoid destruction (Alma 53). Since this kind of self-sacrifice had worked before and had brought an end to the violence, it is natural to wonder why the Ammonite elders did not act similarly to end the aggression this time and thus prevent their sons from having to enter conflict. If pacifist response to aggression brings aggression to an end, then this was an opportunity for the Ammonites to behave as they had behaved before and to achieve this result once again. It is a conspicuous feature of the record that the Ammonites did nothing like this.

The same issue arises when we consider the Ammonites’ behavior some years after they had relocated to the land of Jerushon and prior to the events of Alma 53. Lamanite assailants sought to invade the land occupied by the Ammonites and yet abandoned their aims because they “were exceedingly afraid of the armies of the Nephites.” The Lamanites turned away, not because of any act of self-sacrifice on the part of the Ammonites themselves but because of the diligent preparation and imposing presence of a well-equipped Nephite army (Alma 43:19, 21–22). Indeed, we have no report that the Ammonites even considered a course of self-sacrifice at this time, and based on everything we have seen, we have no reason to think that they would have considered it.

All of this raises doubts about the actual effectiveness of pacifist response to aggression²⁶ as well as about the imperative of following

26 Eugene England asserts unequivocally that pacifist response brings others’ violence to an end. See, for example, his “Healing and Making Peace, in the Church and the World,” 8–9 and “The Prince of Peace,” 229, both of which are found in Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 1–22 and 223–47, respectively. See also his “‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’: An Ethics

the early example of the Ammonites' self-sacrifice. The claim that we should follow the Ammonites' example seems to lose force when we discover that the Ammonites themselves did not follow it. It seems to lose additional force when we discover that the Lord himself instructed the Ammonites not to pursue that path precisely because he foresaw that doing so would *not* be effective in ending aggression.

Conclusion

Whereas it has long been thought that the Ammonites were pacifists, the record makes clear they were not. Understanding this helps explain various features of the text that are otherwise surprising. Moreover, a close study of the text reveals the actual reason the Ammonites renounced war and entered a covenant to eschew all conflict: doing so was an act of penance — reparation (insofar as such was possible) for a past filled with aggression, violence, and hatred. Appreciating this explains why the Ammonites did not generalize their conduct to others and why multiple prophetic leaders in the Book of Mormon acted differently than the Ammonites: they weren't trying to repent of murder. Finally, the text also reveals the inaptness of adopting the Ammonites' self-sacrifice in Alma 24 as the example for all disciples to follow. It seems unpersuasive to encourage others to follow the Ammonites' example when it is clear even they did not follow it.

None of this subtracts in any way from the unsurpassed righteousness and impressiveness of the Ammonites, of course. We regard their devotion and humility with awe. Indeed, it could not be more obvious that we have many things to learn from the Ammonites. All we have discovered here is that what it means to be a pacifist is not one of them.

Duane Boyce received his academic training in psychology, philosophy, and the clinical treatment of families. He received a Ph.D. from Brigham Young University and conducted his postdoctoral study in developmental psychology at Harvard University. He was a member of the Moral Studies Group at BYU and served on the faculty there. He is a founding

of Non-Violence,” in Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 159, mentioned earlier (Note 24). The same point of view also appears in his “Why Utah Mormons Should Become Democrats,” in Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 102–103. A discussion of the obvious problems with this view appears in *Even unto Bloodshed*, 187–90.

partner of the Arbinger Institute, a worldwide management consulting and educational firm, and is the author or coauthor of five books. He has published academic essays on scriptural topics in BYU Studies, The FARMS Review, Religious Educator, Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture, and the Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture. He is author of the recent book, Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War (Kofford, 2015). Among other callings, he has served as a bishop and a stake president.

