

Thieves, Robbers, and War In The Book of Mormon

© Copyright 1999 by Richard G. Grant.
Free use is granted, with attribution, for any non-pecuniary purposes.

Thieves and Robbers — (The Book of Mormon gets it right every time)

In both Greek and Hebrew the words "thief" and "robber" have very unique and different meanings. A thief is an embezzler or pilferer — one who steal by stealth. The robber's way is threat and violence; he is a plunderer who usually joins with others of his kind to prey upon the weak and unprotected. In Hebrew history the robber is a military problem, and may be executed on the spot when caught. The Old Testament translation accurately reflects this difference but the New Testament ignores it. This is clearly evidenced in the Strong's Greek Lexicon where the word *lestes* is defined as "a robber, plunderer, freebooter, brigand (not to be confused with a thief, one who takes property by stealth)." Strong then goes on to acknowledge that in the New Testament this word has been translated "thief" eleven times. Luke 10:30 is a clear example of this carelessness:

And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves (lestes), which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

But, by this ancient definition, you don't "fall among thieves," only amongst robbers.

In the Book of Mormon, this distinction of thief and robber is never confused. Nephi and his brothers are called "robbers" and Laban sends his servants after them to slay them. It's the military that deals with the Gadianton robbers and when the robber leader, Zemnarihah, was caught he was hanged without trial (3 Nephi 4:28).

Why So Much Attention to These Gadianton Robbers?

Surprising value as evidence!

The Gadianton robbers, when out of power, engaged in an almost continuous harassing war with both Nephites and Lamanites. FARMS President, Dr. Daniel Peterson, has recently observed that Mormon's description of these rebellious sieges bears a striking resemblance to what would today be called "gorilla warfare." Peterson notes that the strategies for such warfare have only recently been set down by three modern practitioners of this art: Mao Tse-tung in China, Vo Nguyen Giap in North Vietnam, and Che Guevara of Cuba. Yet, he sees in Helaman and 3 Nephi textbook instances of "both success and failure according to the rules that Giap, and Guevara, and Mao Tse-tung had outlined." Dr. Peterson continues:

And let me tell you something about those rules. Particularly if you look at the end of Helaman and the beginning of 3 Nephi, you see very clearly, the very kinds of things that the theorists were talking about. When the Gadianton robbers start off, they start off as an urban terrorist group really, involved in assassinations. But they eventually have to flee into the mountains and this is typical of guerrilla groups in our own century. And they'll talk at length about how the best places to work are in cities, where you can hide among the urban masses. Or if that doesn't work — as it didn't work for the Gadianton robbers — they then flee into inaccessible territory, almost always

mountains. It was, in all three cases (in China, Vietnam, and Cuba), the mountains into which the guerrillas fled. Then they make lightning raids out of the mountains to attack settled civilizations. But they choose only those times when they can win. They can make a lightning strike, do some damage, then get away. This, of course, irritates the authorities no end. And the authorities then will send troops into the mountains after the guerrillas, but the mountains are the guerrilla's native territory. The guerrilla then chooses the place to fight from. He ambushes the regular troops that come after him. He causes them immense casualties. . .

Eventually the point comes when a guerrilla army needs to start to hold territory though, and this is the really sensitive time in any guerrilla war. Mao Tse-tung called it *regularization*, turning a guerrilla army into a regular army, one that holds territory. Guerrillas don't hold territory; they'll strike and then flee. The object is not to have any casualties or to keep them to a minimum. They want to harass and demoralize, but not to hold territory yet. When they feel themselves strong enough, then they decide to occupy cities, to occupy territory and hold it. But that, of course, exposes them to direct attack. It means that they can't retreat and withdraw; they can't maneuver quite as freely. Here's a problem now identified as "premature regularization," which is when a commander too soon thinks that he's ready to stand up to a regular army. He makes the transition too soon. This can be disastrous, and it was in the case of the Gadianton robbers.

At a certain point (you read this in the Book of Mormon in 3 Nephi 4), the Gadianton robbers come down out of the mountains; they issue an ultimatum to the leaders of the Nephites and tell them to surrender, but the Nephites don't surrender. What they do, under the leadership of a governor named Lachoneus, is withdraw into their cities. They declare a kind of "scorched earth" policy. They destroy or carry away all of the food down in the agricultural areas and they take it and hole up in their fortified cities.

This actually reverses the situation, which is what guerrillas should not allow themselves to be trapped into. What happens now is that the Nephites are in their strongholds. It's the guerrillas, the Gadianton robbers in this case, who are out exposed on the plain, and they can't find any food because none has been left and the crops have been destroyed. So they are forced, at times that are not suitable to them, to attack the Nephites to try to get food, or they are forced to disperse themselves to look for game. But every time they disperse or scatter themselves, the Nephites make lightning raids out of the fortress, out of the city, and attack them. The Nephites now choose the time of attack. What they've done is reversed the situation so the Nephites become, in effect, the guerrillas, and the Gadianton robbers are trying to hold territory. It's a disaster for the Gadianton robbers, and they lose.

Some examples of needed strategy?

Mormon knew his record was not for the edification of his people nor anyone who lived in his day. He, like his son Moroni (Mormon 8:35) knew well the audience he addressed. Can we not reasonably assume the possibility that he saw our need for the martial strategies which he so fully exemplified in his detailed accounts of the Gadianton conflicts. Many would dismiss this military detail as what we should expect to find in the writings of a lifetime soldier and certainly this is a very defensible position. Yet, this was no ordinary military leader and his choice strategic detail seems to be very selective. It may be a mistake for us to read too quickly through these chapters.

Secret combinations — part of the "last-days" problem!

As to the significance of the political intrigue typified by the followers of Gadianton, Moroni has provided very specific detail. In Ether chapter 8, Moroni pauses in his narrative of Jaredite history to say in effect, "Hey, you readers of the last days — pay attention! This is stuff you need to know." He records:

Wherefore, O ye Gentiles, it is wisdom in God that these things should be shown unto you, that thereby ye may repent of your sins, and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above you, which are built up to get power and gain—and the work, yea, even the work of destruction come upon you, yea, even the sword of the

justice of the Eternal God shall fall upon you, to your overthrow and destruction if ye shall suffer these things to be.

Wherefore, the Lord commandeth you, when ye shall see these things come among you that ye shall awake to a sense of your awful situation, because of this secret combination which shall be among you; or wo be unto it, because of the blood of them who have been slain; for they cry from the dust for vengeance upon it, and also upon those who built it up.

For it cometh to pass that whoso buildeth it up seeketh to overthrow the freedom of all lands, nations, and countries; and it bringeth to pass the destruction of all people, for it is built up by the devil, who is the father of all lies; even that same liar who beguiled our first parents, yea, even that same liar who hath caused man to commit murder from the beginning; who hath hardened the hearts of men that they have murdered the prophets, and stoned them, and cast them out from the beginning.

Wherefore, I, Moroni, am commanded to write these things that evil may be done away, and that the time may come that Satan may have no power upon the hearts of the children of men, but that they may be persuaded to do good continually, that they may come unto the fountain of all righteousness and be saved (Ether 8:23-26).⁽¹⁾

Are the Gadianton robbers a type?

These were people who sought to obtain personal gain by inflicting pain. Their way of life was the lie and the abuse of power. When not checked their impact on society was devastating. And many were attracted to their promise of power and wealth.

They used the lie to get political advantage and to avoid detection of evil. We live in a day when many seem to view such lies as justified. Of greatest importance, however, what is our own personal commitment to truth? In the Gadianton robbers the example of sin, as it is so often in scripture, is painted in bold colors and clearly repugnant examples. May this not be intended to help us understand the destination of the road we all sometimes find ourselves walking? Recently we've heard many say, concerning a well publicized indiscretion, "What's wrong with lying to avoid embarrassment? Every body does it!" It seems to me that this view is the Gadianton trailhead. And, I expect that we've all been there. Not too far down this path there will be more lies, lies that are "required" to "protect" from much more than just embarrassment.

Yes, most do stop long before they reach Gadianton's band. They settle in a comfortable camp along the way. But, few are able to completely leave Gadianton's path. Just as the Nephites found it necessary to fight for their freedom from this enemy, so we must maintain constant vigilance against this Gadianton influence in our own lives. For Gadianton it was murder and secret combinations. Isn't this *type* any hurtful act or attempt to take unfair advantage of another which is then compounded by a lie — even any sin which we might attempt to cover with a lie!

What More Can We Learn from these War Chapters

What is our answer to the "conscientious objector"?

There need be little discussion on this one. Just one question: "What would Captain Moroni have to say to the *conscientious* objector?"

And it came to pass that whomsoever of the Amalickiahites that would not enter into a covenant to support the cause of freedom, that they might maintain a free government, he caused to be put to death; and there were but few who denied the covenant of freedom (Alma 46:35).

At the same time, there was another group — they really weren't so much objectors but they were

very "conscientious." These Lamanites, called "the people of Ammon," had made a covenant to never again take up a sword in war. The prophet, Helaman, would not allow them to break their oath, even when Nephite blood would be shed for their defense. Rather, he personally took the leadership of an army made up of the sons of these covenant makers and led them in the successful, even miraculous, defense of their families, their lands, and their freedom.

Another surprise: The Nephite Calendar

John Sorenson, in a study of the Nephite war accounts has found an interesting pattern. Analyzing eighty-five separate accounts of battles, Dr. Sorenson has found that Nephite/Lamanite wars seem to be confined to a specific season. While the timing of many battles cannot be determined from the record, there are forty-eight times when either the Nephite month is specifically identified or where there is sufficient information for a good guess. This represents a significant sample from which a season for war can be discerned. This data suggests that most battle action was concentrated in the eleventh through fourth months. There were no battles recorded in the sixth through ninth months.

So, what significance does this bit of trivia have? In an ancient society two related factors significantly effected the ability to wage war: the availability of the warriors and the weather. In our romanticizing of history we tend to imagine a warrior class who were always prepared to go into battle. However, this would seldom be the case and does not at all fit the Nephite picture. The warriors were the same men who planted and cultivated the crops on which their subsistence depended. The warriors on both sides of these wars would have viewed the planting of their crops as a first priority. You only go out and fight when all your life sustaining chores are done. And you also only go out and fight when the weather dries enough to make the mountainous terrain passable. So, war was a seasonable thing and from a study of this time of war and the known climate of our probable Book of Mormon lands we can begin to postulate a relationship between our calendar and that used by the Nephites.⁽²⁾

Is not war also a type?

In a recent high priest class our lesson was Brigham Young's council regarding self-control. The teacher, as did President Young, counseled against the frequent patterns of anger that are often prevalent, even in the lives of dedicated high priests. One of these good brothers, a man of business and high position, remarked that in the business world anger was sometimes unavoidable. "Business today," he said, "is a war!" Are not the Book of Mormon war chapters a *type* — a *type* of the anger and hostility which we each encounter in life. Moroni would not be an aggressor, but recognized a responsibility to be a defender. He saw this to be a sacred responsibility in which he sought and expected heavenly guidance.

In each of our lives, as we confront those hostilities that are inherent in our mortal experience, can we not learn from Captain Moroni — seek and expect God's help. But don't ask God to make the trial go away. Rather, seek for wisdom to know where to deploy your forces; ask for supplies and reinforcements (knowledge and strength); act with courage, with faith in God's support (open your mouth and start talking, even when you don't know what to say).

Conclusion

For the saints of God, war is an ever present reality — we are engaged in a life or death struggle with the most vicious and cunning of enemies. At stake is much more than physical freedom or mortal life. We are fighting for the spiritual freedom and eternal life of the sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. Of particular concern are those whose mortal existence have been entrusted to our care. We, like the armies of Moroni, must be ever ready to defend our loved ones from the attacks of Satan forces upon our God, our religion, and our families. In this struggle we can all learn much from the faithfulness and resourcefulness Captain Moroni, as he sought the Lord's guidance, anticipated the enemies actions, and prepared for the effective defense of his people.

But, Moroni, the son of Mormon, has made clear that these chapters of war are not mere allegorical representations of the struggle between good and evil. Moroni, who was shown our day, recognized not only a common enemy, but also a familiar methodology. He warned:

Wherefore, O ye Gentiles, it is wisdom in God that these things should be shown unto you, that thereby ye may repent of your sins, and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above you, which are built up to get power and gain — and the work, yea, even the work of destruction come upon you, yea, even the sword of the justice of the Eternal God shall fall upon you, to your overthrow and destruction if ye shall suffer these things to be (Ether 8:23).

The definition of marriage has been challenged and many have volunteered time, money, and influence in the defense of this sacred institution. But, how many have joined in the fight on one of our most important battlefields, our schools. Today, under the guises of tolerance and health education, our children are being taught vile perversions of the most sacred rites of marriage. Further, our heroes and history are being vilified. The sacred is ridiculed. What would Captain Moroni do?

In today's great war the most important battlefield is the home. There is much talk of family values, but even as we talk Satan's influence grows. We invite his emissaries into our living rooms and laugh at their jokes. We are silent when our legislators pass laws that increase his influence in our communities. We may even allow his music and his literature places of prominence in our homes. In a recent meeting, a sister pointed to the attention currently given to environmental issues — the dedication of the environmental watchdogs. Today, any attempt to build anything is greeted with the question, "Where's the environmental impact study?" She proclaimed, "We must follow the environmentalists example! We must demand, 'Where is the family impact study? What is the impact on the family?'" We must also learn to apply this same scrutiny to the activities we promote in our family.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson of the Alma war chapters comes at the very end. I've often wondered if much of the detail of struggle and sacrifice given to us by Mormon wasn't intended to set the scene for the exchange of letters between Moroni and Pahoran which close this account. Remember, Moroni accused Pahoran of neglect and even treachery. He was not at all politically correct or even tactful in his criticism — Moroni went so far as to threaten the life of his commander and chief. Pahoran must have bristled over Moroni's accusation of disloyalty. The passions of righteous indignation must have boiled within him. Yet, Pahoran's response shows no more than a hint of this emotion and it is a model for all who might be wrongfully accused: "And now, in your epistle you have censured me, but it mattereth not; I am not angry, but do rejoice in the greatness of your heart."

Even in war, the Book of Mormon has powerful messages for our day. Yes, Mormon saw our day and knew our struggles. Under the inspiration of our God, he has chosen well those snippets from a thousand year history that give us just what we need to win our latter-day battles with Satan and his hosts.

References:

1. Daniel Peterson, "A Scholar Looks at Evidences of the Book of Mormon," a talk in the FARMS Book of Mormon Lecture Series.
2. John L. Sorenson, *Nephite Culture and Society*, p. 165.