

Wars of Preemption, Wars of Revenge

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AMERICANS MAY BE ON THE EVE of a preemptive attack on a foreign country, ostensibly to protect ourselves from potential future attacks. Our nemesis, Saddam Hussein, is known to be evil, having gassed his own countrymen in the past. If he develops weapons of mass destruction, so the rationale goes, he may decide to unleash them upon us or unscrupulously supply such weapons to terrorists who will do so. Congress has authorized the president to use force if he deems this necessary. Many Mormons, being politically conservative, may well support this impending preemptive war. The members of both houses of Congress who are Mormon are squarely behind this dramatic turn in policy. It surprises me that I have heard so little said among Latter-day Saints about two very clear and very relevant stories in the Book of Mormon. I think it is well to contemplate the meaning of these stories and to evaluate our present situation in light of the book which Joseph Smith taught is "the most correct book on earth."

The first story is that of the young prophet and general Mormon who led the Nephites in battle against the Lamanites in the last days of the Nephite nation. After he had headed the Nephite army for 34 years, an ominous turning point arose for the Nephites. The Lamanites wrote to Mormon, warning him they were coming down to destroy the Nephite people. However, in a battle outside of the city of Desolation, the Nephites managed to win a major victory and drove the Lamanites out of their lands. Two years later the Lamanites "did come down again to battle, and we did beat them again, and did slay a great number of them, and their dead were cast into the sea (Mormon 3: 5-8).

Unfortunately, according to scripture, the Nephites did not thank the Lord for this victory. Rather, they took a different course:

And now, because of this great thing which my people, the Nephites, had done, they began to boast in their own strength, and began to swear before

the heavens that they would avenge themselves of the blood of their brethren who had been slain by their enemies. And they did swear by the heavens, and also by the throne of God, that they would go up to battle against their enemies, and would cut them off from the face of the land.

And it came to pass that I, Mormon, did utterly refuse from this time forth to be a commander and a leader of this people, because of their wickedness and abomination. Behold, I had led them, notwithstanding their wickedness I had led them many times to battle, and had loved them, according to the love of God which was in me, with all my heart; and my soul had been poured out in prayer unto my God all day long for them; nevertheless, it was without faith, because of the hardness of their hearts.

And thrice have I delivered them out of the hands of their enemies, and they have repented not of their sins. And when they had sworn by all that had been forbidden them by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that they would go up unto their enemies to battle, and avenge themselves of the blood of their brethren, behold the voice of the Lord came unto me saying: Vengeance is mine, and I will repay; because this people repented not after I had delivered them, behold, they shall be cut off from the face of the earth (Mormon 3: 19-15).

After leading his people, who were far from righteous, for 36 years, what was the straw that broke the camel's back for Mormon? His people decided to take the war to the Lamanites, for purposes of revenge.

The second story is even more to the point for our time. Sixteen years before the coming of Christ, the Nephites were under continual harassment by the Gadianton Robbers. The chief of these robbers, Giddianhi, sent a letter to the governor of the Nephites at that time, Lachoneus. The letter is offensive, in an entertaining way, and so I share it with you:

Lachoneus, most noble and chief governor of the land, behold, I write this epistle unto you, and do give unto you exceeding great praise because of your firmness, and also the firmness of your people, in maintaining that which you suppose to be your right and liberty; yea, ye do stand well, as if ye were supported by the hand of a god, in the defense of your liberty, and your property, and your country, or that which ye do call so. And it seemeth a pity unto me, most noble Lachoneus, that ye should be so foolish and vain as to suppose that ye can stand against so many brave men who are at my command, who do now at this time stand in their arms, and do await with great anxiety for the word—Go down upon the Nephites and destroy them. And I, knowing of their unconquerable spirit, having proved them in the field of battle, and knowing of their everlasting hatred towards you because of the many wrongs which ye have done unto them, therefore if they should come down against you they would visit you with utter destruction. Therefore I have written this epistle, sealing it with my own hand, feeling for your welfare, because of your firmness in that which ye believe to be right, and your noble spirit in the field of battle.

Therefore I write unto you, desiring that ye would yield up unto this my people, your cities, your lands, and your possessions, rather than that they should visit you with the sword and that destruction should come upon you. Or in other words, yield yourselves up unto us, and unite with us and become acquainted with our secret works, and become our brethren that ye may be like unto us—not our slaves, but our brethren and partners in all of our substance. And behold, I swear unto you, if ye will do this, with an oath, that ye shall not be destroyed; but if ye will not do this, I swear unto you with an oath, that on the morrow month I will command that my armies shall come down against you, and they shall not stay their hand, and shall let fall the sword upon you even until ye shall become extinct (3 Nephi 3: 2-8).

And with a few more such pleasantries, he closes his letter. The message is pretty clear: give up all you own, and you will live; resist, and you will be destroyed.

Lachoneus, being a “just man,” told his people to call on the Lord and prepare for a siege. Being a prophet as well, he called them to repentance. They got busy preparing their defenses (3 Nephi 3:12-16). We are not told if they repented. The chief of the army at that time was the seldom-quoted prophet Gidgiddoni:

Now it was the custom among the Nephites to appoint for their chief captains, (save it were in times of wickedness) some one that had the spirit of revelation and also prophecy; therefore, this Gidgiddoni was a great prophet among them, as also was the chief judge (3 Nephi 3:19).

Now the people said unto Gidgiddoni: Pray unto the Lord, and let us go up into the mountains and into the wilderness, that we may fall upon the robbers and destroy them in their own lands. But Gidgiddoni saith unto them: The Lord forbid; for if we should go up against them the Lord would deliver us into their hands; therefore we will prepare ourselves in the center of our lands, and we will gather all of our armies together, and we will not go against them, but we will wait until they shall come against us; therefore, as the Lord liveth, if we do this he will deliver them into our hands (3 Nephi 3: 20-21).

From these stories it is clear that Mormons have unambiguous guidance for precisely these times. Two Book of Mormon prophets refused to take the war to their enemies, even when faced with direct and unambiguous threats from very evil men backed by armies of wicked thieves and killers. The Lord expressly prohibits wars of preemption and wars of revenge. Of course, no one confuses our political leaders with prophets or the American populace with the righteous Nephites of Gidgiddoni’s day. We might, in fact, feel more connected to the Nephites of Mormon’s day. They did take war to the threatening, bellicose Lamanites. But then again, we all know how well that particular preemptive campaign turned out.