

# Anabaptism, the Book of Mormon, and the Peace Church Option

*Andrew Bolton*

THE BOOK OF MORMON IS CONTROVERSIAL, both in stories of its miraculous origin and in its claims to be scripture, a second witness to the Bible. Evangelical Mennonites, like many Protestants, are likely to be suspicious of extrabiblical scripture. However, Mennonites and Latter Day Saints may be spiritual cousins. A sympathetic comparison of the origins of both movements may illuminate their past and also assist in contemporary living of the gospel of shalom. While scholars from both traditions have established distinctive parallels between sixteenth-century Anabaptists and nineteenth-century Latter Day Saints, what remains to be explored is the presence of Anabaptist themes in the Book of Mormon, a text intimately associated with the founding experiences of Latter Day Saintism. After reviewing the evidence for such themes in the Book of Mormon, I will reflect

---

ANDREW BOLTON, a native of Lancashire, England, and father of Matthew Bolton (see his essay in this issue), coordinates peace and justice ministries for the Community of Christ in Independence, Missouri, where he also teaches "Theology of Peace" for its new seminary. He received a Ph.D. in genetics from the University of Wales and taught high school before embarking on an M.A. program in religion at Park University, Kansas City. His twenty-year interest in historic Anabaptism was sparked there in a study of the history of Christian thought, and he continues to enjoy the fellowship of Mennonite friends in the United Kingdom and the United States. He is the author of *Sermon on the Mount: Foundations for an International Peace Church* (1999) and coauthor, with Colonel David Anderson, of *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship: A Diversity of Callings?* (2003), reviewed in this issue of *DIALOGUE*.

on how Latter Day Saints might more wholeheartedly embrace its criticism of violence.

### PARALLELS BETWEEN ANABAPTISTS AND LATTER DAY SAINTS

Although their origins were separated by three hundred years and the Atlantic Ocean, Anabaptism and Latter Day Saintism have distinct parallels. A number of writers have commented on these parallels, beginning in 1832 with Alexander Campbell, who attacked the Book of Mormon as Anabaptist “tomfoolery” just two years after it was published.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, Mennonite William Juhnke and Mormon Michael Quinn have both written excellent papers describing the parallels between the two movements.<sup>2</sup> John Brooke has also reviewed the Anabaptist influence on the development of Mormon cosmology.<sup>3</sup> Clyde Forsberg recently wrote a comprehensive review of the literature comparing the two movements and reviewing Mormon missionary efforts among the Dunkers around 1841.<sup>4</sup> I have also written on

---

1. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon, with an Examination of the Internal and External Evidences* (Boston, MA: Benjamin Green, 1832). Campbell's restitutionism movement and his personal pacifism represent yet another early nineteenth-century parallel to sixteenth-century Anabaptism. See Richard T. Hughes, “A Comparison of the Restitution Motifs of the Campbells (1809–1830) and the Anabaptists (1524–1560),” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 45 (October 1971): 312–30. Nevertheless, Campbell distanced himself from sixteenth-century Anabaptists, particularly Muensterites. In one debate, he asked, “What have we to do with Anabaptists?” See Harold L. Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1954), 19.

2. William E. Juhnke, “Anabaptism and Mormonism: A Study in Comparative History,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 2 (1982): 38–46; D. Michael Quinn, “Socioreligious Radicalism of the Mormon Church: A Parallel to the Anabaptist,” in *New Views of Mormon History: A Collection of Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington*, eds. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 363–86.

3. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

4. Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., “Are Mormons Anabaptists? The Case of the Mor-

the subject in the context of the Community of Christ's developing peace mission.<sup>5</sup>

What are some of the parallels between Anabaptism and Latter Day Saintism? Both are restitution or restoration movements arising from the left wing of the Reform/Puritan tradition, aiming at restoring the New Testament church in spirit and practice. Beginning with the day of Pentecost and ending with all things in common, Acts 2 is arguably the template of both Anabaptism and Latter Day Saintism. The coming of the Pentecostal Holy Spirit is connected with systems of economic justice for the poor. Anabaptist Hutterianism began as a communal movement in 1528, and its descendants still own farming colonies in the prairie states and provinces of the United States and Canada. Hutterianism is paralleled by the communalism and mutual aid exhibited within early Latter Day Saintism. Both movements emphasize the kingdom of God, where there is no split between faith and life; all of life is sacred. There is also a distinct theology of holiness enabled by close community support and often disciplined rigorously by the ban in Anabaptism and excommunication in early Latter Day Saintism.

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20) is taken seriously by both movements, which are diligently missionary.<sup>6</sup> Both movements practice believer's baptism, and faith and works are important to both traditions. Both are lay movements suspicious of professional clergy, with early Latter Day Saints characterizing the abuses and deceptions of clergy as "priestcraft."

---

mons and Heirs of the Anabaptist Tradition on the American Frontier, c. 1840," in *Radical Reformation Studies: Essays Presented to James M. Stayer*, eds., Werner O. Packull and Geoffrey L. Dipple (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999). Forsberg has a Mormon heritage and significant contact with Hutterians and Mennonites; Mennonite scholar James M. Stayer supervised his Ph.D. work.

5. Andrew Bolton, "Learning from Anabaptism: A Major Peace Tradition," in *Restoration Studies V*, ed. Darlene Caswell (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1993), 13-24. The two largest branches of the original Latter Day Saint movement are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (frequently called Mormon), based in Salt Lake City, Utah, and the Community of Christ (until April 2001 called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), headquartered in Independence, Missouri. The Community of Christ has, since 1984, embarked on a serious peace and justice mission.

6. Darren Blaney, "Anabaptists and the Great Commission," *Anabaptism Today* 30 (2002): 2-8.

Robert Friedman's assertion that Anabaptist theology is not so much explicit as implicit—an existential and a realized Christianity, where Christ is encountered directly—also applies to early Latter Day Saintism.<sup>7</sup>

Both movements experienced conflict with their surrounding societies and suffered a great deal of persecution. Although Latter Day Saints initially chose a pacifistic path, they became increasingly belligerent after 1833 in response to their enemies.<sup>8</sup> During violent conflicts in northern Missouri in 1838, their leaders were nearly executed and were lucky to escape from prison after about six months. The rest of the Mormons fled from the state during the winter of 1838–39 following an extermination order issued by Governor Lilburn H. Boggs.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently Joseph Smith Jr. and his followers founded the city of Nauvoo in Illinois beside the Mississippi River. As converts poured into Nauvoo, including many from Canada and the British Isles, Nauvoo's growth in the early 1840s was second only to Chicago's.

Nauvoo invites comparison with sixteenth-century Anabaptist Muenster in Germany. The five thousand-man Nauvoo Legion led by Lieutenant General Joseph Smith Jr. and the introduction of secret polygamy and other practices resemble Muenster's violence, authoritarianism, and polygamy.<sup>10</sup>

Muenster, in Westphalia, Germany, was a significant exception to Anabaptist pacifism, although its notoriety would define Anabaptism as violent and dangerously heretical for the next three hundred years. Muenster was to

7. Robert Friedman, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald House, 1973).

8. D. Michael Quinn, "National Culture, Personality, and Theocracy in the Early Mormon Culture of Violence," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 22 (2002): 159–86. See also Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 81–86 and appen. 2.

9. A good account of this period has been given by Stephen C. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987).

10. For the development of early Latter Day Saint theocracy under Joseph Smith Jr., see D. Michael Quinn, *Origins of Power*, chaps. 3 and 4. Robert Flanders has written the most comprehensive and critical account of Nauvoo in his *Nauvoo, Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965); see chap. 4 for a review of the Nauvoo Legion. For Emma Smith's perspective on polygamy as the vigorously dissenting wife of Joseph Smith Jr., see Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

be the “New Jerusalem” in the context of the restitution of all things in the last days. An Old Testament rather than New Testament ethic permitted both violence and a kingship modeled after that of King David. Bernhard Rothmann was the leader of the reforming party in Muenster whose efforts enabled the Anabaptists to gain control of the city through elections on February 23, 1534. The subsequent events included the institution of forced rebaptism, the forcible practice of community of goods, the institution of polygamy, and—in response—an immediate siege against the city by the Catholic bishop. In September 1534 Jan van Leiden was proclaimed the “King over the New Israel and over the whole world” and a call was made to other Anabaptists to gather to Muenster. The siege against the city was successful by June 1535, resulting in a two-day blood bath followed by the public torturing and eventual execution of the leaders.<sup>11</sup> In Europe there wasn't any escape to the equivalent of the Salt Lake valley for the Muensterites.

Fortunately for the Mormons, there was. Brigham Young instructed Latter Day Saints to emigrate from Nauvoo to the Great Basin after the assassination of Joseph Smith Jr. in June 1844. However, not all Latter Day Saints embraced the Nauvoo stage of Mormonism or followed Brigham Young. Some, including Joseph Smith Jr.'s widow, Emma, and her children, joined with those that formed the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This was an antipolygamy, nonmilitant, and moderate form of Latter Day Saintism. In 1860 Joseph Smith Jr.'s son, Joseph Smith III, was chosen to lead this group, and he served as prophet for the next fifty-four years. An approximate parallel can be made between Joseph Smith III and Menno Simons, who, after the Muenster debacle, gathered the pacifistic Anabaptists in Holland and northern Germany and began the Mennonite movement. Since 1984, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has sought to develop a comprehensive peace and justice mission. On April 6, 2001, this organization adopted a new name, Community of Christ, and now has a presence in over fifty nations with a membership of about one quarter of a million. Its international headquarters is in Independence, Missouri.

How can these parallels between Anabaptism and Latter Day

---

11. C. Arnold Synder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 145–50, 205–207. Synder argues that the Anabaptist movement had a number of separate beginnings, some of which were militant and some pacifist. The pacifistic groups survived.

Saintism be explained? Anabaptism arose on the left wing of the Reformation that began in Zurich in the 1520s. Three centuries later, Mormonism arose on the left wing of Puritan America, albeit in a highly sectarian context. The genes of Anabaptism can likewise be followed through the offspring of John Smyth's congregation and its association with Mennonites in Amsterdam in the early 1600s. From this congregation came Thomas Helwys, founder of the English Baptists, and John Robinson of *Mayflower* fame.<sup>12</sup> Quakers—who could be described as Anabaptists of the heart and life without the ritual of baptism—founded the colony of Pennsylvania and encouraged Mennonites and Dunkers, with their similar peace witness, to settle there in significant numbers.<sup>13</sup>

The connection between Anabaptism and Mormonism becomes even more evident when one examines the religious background of the Three and Eight Witnesses who testified to the truth of the Book of Mormon and whose accounts have appeared in every edition including the first. Five of these eleven witnesses were from the Whitmer family, who came from Pennsylvanian Mennonite stock and had Mennonite social relationships.<sup>14</sup> It was in the Whitmer home where Smith completed the translation of the Book of Mormon. Witnesses Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery, Joseph's cousin and one of his scribes, both married into the

12. James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991).

13. James R. Coggins and Carol M. Hunter, *The Missing Peace: The Search for Nonviolent Alternatives in United States History* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 54–56. See also John H. Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace and Revolution* (Goshen, IN: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1981); see chap. 13, "Quakerism in Early America: The Holy Experiment."

14. The Whitmers, of German extraction, were raised in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in a Mennonite environment, according to Ronald E. Romig, Community of Christ archivist, who gave me notes on the Whitmers as well as the following reference: Horatio Gates Spafford, *Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Albany, 1813), 187. Whitmer is a common Mennonite name, according to Jim Juhnke of Bethel College, Kansas (e-mail, December 17, 2001; also Steve M. Nolt, Goshen College, Indiana, e-mail, January 28, 2002). Although there is no documentation of a Mennonite baptism, the family was of Mennonite descent and had Mennonite in-laws and social ties. Steve M. Nolt, e-mail, February 5, 2002. Nolt cites Richard W. Davis, *Emigrants, Refugees, and Prisoners*, vol. 2 (Provo, UT: Author, 1997), 421–22.

In 1808, the Whitmer family moved to Fayette, in Seneca County, New

Whitmer family. Another witness, Martin Harris, and his wife were Quakers, although he was not satisfied with that faith.<sup>15</sup> The Smith family also had Quaker neighbors. When the Smiths were losing their farm, a Quaker neighbor negotiated a friendly buy-out that let them continue to live on the farm for another three years.<sup>16</sup> Three Smiths were also Book of Mormon witnesses. Thus, all eleven witnesses, as well as Joseph Smith Jr., had some kind of personal Mennonite or Quaker association.

Books on Quakers and Mennonites were available to Joseph Smith Jr. in the library in Manchester, New York, five miles from the Smith home in Palmyra. The holdings there included a two-volume

---

York, twenty-six miles from Palmyra, where the Joseph Smith family moved in 1816. In Fayette, the Whitmers found neighbors also “principally of German extract, who came from Pennsylvania.” According to the German Rev. Diedrich Willers, their Reformed congregation pastor, the Whitmers had previously belonged to a Mennonite congregation, among others. See D. Michael Quinn, ed., “The First Months of Mormonism: A Contemporary View by Rev. Diedrich Willers,” *New York History* 54 (1973): 333.

David Whitmer left the Latter Day Saint movement during the violence of 1838 in northern Missouri, along with his brother John and other moderates. They were driven out by the militant Danites. Although he participated in retaliatory violence in Missouri in 1833, David Whitmer appears to have later regretted it. Toward the end of his life, he argued against Mormon theocracy and militarism and for a Mennonite-like church polity and pacifism. See David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO, 1887). Most Book of Mormon witnesses left the movement or were excommunicated (some were later reinstated), but all appear to have maintained their testimony of the truth of the Book of Mormon. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1987). However, note the reservations made by Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), chap. 6.

15. Martin Harris explored other faiths before becoming a Mormon. See G. W. Stoddard, Statement, November 28, 1833, in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 2:29. In 1808, Martin Harris married his first cousin Lucy, who was also “a Quakeress of positive qualities” (2:34). Lucy Harris’s brother, Peter, also lived near Palmyra during the 1820s where he became a Quaker minister (2:31).

16. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 171, 365–72.

work on William Penn, a three-volume work on Quakerism, and the *Memoirs of George Fox*. The lending library in Palmyra might also have had such works. Finally, Smith owned a copy of Mosheim's *Ecclesiastical History* and could have become aware of the Anabaptist story from this source.<sup>17</sup>

Admittedly, documenting possible Mennonite or Quaker influences on Smith does not prove that they were dominant in Joseph's mind during the period he worked on the Book of Mormon. Nonetheless, Anabaptist and Quaker themes were available and were contending perspectives among the other theologies in the "burned-over district" in which Smith was raised.<sup>18</sup>

### ANABAPTIST THEMES IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

I will consider next how Anabaptist and peace church themes play out in the narrative of the Book of Mormon. Specifically, I will examine the themes of believer's baptism, questions of the sword, mutual aid and community, salvation, grace, and works, keeping the commandments of Jesus, and church order and discipline.

#### *Believer's Baptism*

Anabaptist means "rebaptizer." Anabaptists followed the principle of believer's baptism and were highly critical of infant baptism as practiced by Catholics, Lutherans, and the Reformers in Zurich and later Geneva. Believer's baptism is also a key theme throughout the Book of Mormon. Soon after leaving Jerusalem (600-592 B.C.), Lehi had a vision in which the future Messiah set an example by being baptized by John (I Nephi 3:11;

---

17. Robert Paul, "Joseph Smith and the Manchester (New York) Library," *BYU Studies* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1982): 333-56. See also Kenneth W. Godfrey, "A Note on the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute," *BYU Studies* 14 (Spring 1974): 386-89. Joseph Smith Jr. donated one volume, which number is unknown, of Mosheim's six-volume *Ecclesiastical History* to the Nauvoo Library. Mosheim, a Dutch scholar, included an excellent and generally sympathetic account of Anabaptism and Mennonite history. John Laurence Mosheim, *An Ecclesiastical History Ancient and Modern*, trans. Archibald MacLaine (London, 1826), 379-421.

18. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950), 3-17.

LDS 10:9).<sup>19</sup> Repentance and baptism are the way to receive the atonement suffered for the sins of all by the Holy One of Israel (II Nephi 6:45–48; LDS 9:23). Generations later, the prophet Abinadi was burned at the stake for proclaiming the coming incarnation of God in the humanity of Jesus Christ (Mosiah 8:28–9:27; LDS 15:1–17:20). Abinadi did not die in vain for his high Christology: Alma, a priest who attended the trial of Abinadi, repented in response to the martyr's witness and began to secretly teach Abinadi's message to the people. As his followers gathered in secret in the wilderness by the waters of Mormon, Alma asked:

If you are desirous to come into the fold of God and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens that they may be light, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times, and in all things, and in all places that you may be in, even until death, that you may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that you may have eternal life; I say to you, If this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that you have entered into a covenant with him that you will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you? (Mosiah 9:39–41; LDS 18:8–10)

The people responded: "This is the desire of our hearts." Alma then immersed himself with the first candidate, Helam. Here are echoes of those first Anabaptists, Conrad Grebel and George Blaurock, who baptized each other in Zurich in January 1525 and began an underground believers' church.<sup>20</sup> This scene was replayed when Joseph Smith Jr. and Oliver Cowdery baptized each other in May 1829 during the writing of the Book of Mormon.<sup>21</sup>

Nearly two centuries later, Jesus appeared on the American continent following his crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem and taught

---

19. Editions of the Book of Mormon published by the Community of Christ and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Utah Mormons) use different systems of chapters and verses but the same book titles. I give the Community of Christ reference, followed by the LDS edition. I am using the 1966 revised authorized Community of Christ edition, which modestly updates sentence structure and punctuation.

20. C. Arnold Synder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 54.

21. *Times and Seasons*, 3, no. 19 (1 August 1842): 865–66. See also *The His-*

the ritual of baptism by immersion with a trinitarian formula so that there would not be more conflict about the details of the ordinance (III Nephi 5:22–29; LDS 11:21–28).

At the end of the Book of Mormon, in Mormon's final message to his son, Moroni, he thoroughly condemned the practice of infant baptism:

Little children cannot repent; wherefore it is awful wickedness to deny the pure mercies of God to them, for they are all alive in him because of his mercy. And he that says little children need baptism denies the mercies of Christ, and sets at naught the atonement of him and the power of his redemption. (Moroni 8:20–21; LDS 8:19–20)

### *The Question of the Sword*

The legitimacy of the sword is a major question throughout the Book of Mormon narrative.<sup>22</sup> Two myths about violence in Western culture are relevant to this discussion. The best known and most influential myth is that violence saves and is redemptive in the hands of the righteous. The second and less well known myth is that violence is inevitably destructive no matter how “right” it appears to be; violence begets violence in a devastating and ongoing spiral.

This second myth may be truest to the gospel. Here the work of New Testament scholar Walter Wink is particularly important. Wink contrasts brilliantly the endemic violence of the Babylonian creation myth—the “myth of redemptive violence”—with the gentle creation story of Genesis. Violence enters the Genesis account only through the Fall; violence is not endemic or unavoidably implicit in the biblical view of creation as it is in the Babylonian creation myth.<sup>23</sup> When we come to the Gospels, the evil of human violence in the service of empire is revealed in all its shocking brutality in the crucifixion of Jesus. The response of Jesus is not violent re-

---

*tory of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 8 vols. (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1951), 1:34–37.

22. For a fuller account, see Andrew Bolton, “Is the Book of Mormon an Asset or Liability for a Becoming Peace Church?” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 19 (1999): 29–42.

23. Walter Wink contrasts the concept of the “myth of redemptive violence” with the myth that violence is destructive in *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and*

taliation but rather the words, "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (NRSV Luke 23:34). Jesus breaks the spiral of violence without giving up on the pursuit of justice evidenced in the cleansing of the temple a few days earlier when he upset the tables of the money-changers exploiting the pious faithful.

These two story lines—"violence by the righteous saves" and "violence is inevitably destructive"—have contended with each other throughout U.S. history. The violent revolutionary ideology of 1776, for instance, was in tension with pacifistic Quaker Pennsylvania. However, the myth of redemptive violence is the one which dominates Western consciousness. Just see the movies or watch children's cartoons or review the teachings of Christianity after Constantine became the first Christian emperor in 312 A.D. The Mennonite position that the sword is "outside the perfection of Christ"<sup>24</sup> is a minority perspective despite its claim of fidelity to the truth about violence implicit in the revelation of Christ and held to by the pacifistic Christian church in the first three centuries before Constantine.

The myth of redemptive violence dominates the Book of Mormon story. Violence, when commanded by God and used by the righteous, is portrayed as justified. Both Puritanism and the rationale of the American Revolution support this justification. Yet the witness of Quaker and Mennonite Pennsylvania is also present in the Book of Mormon story, subtly and progressively questioning the legitimacy of violence as the narrative develops.

The Book of Mormon begins unpromisingly for the pacifist. Nephi in the first few pages of the Book of Mormon is justified by the Spirit in killing Laban to obtain the brass plates so that the family can have their genealogy and the scriptures to take with them to their promised land. After two unsuccessful attempts to obtain these materials, and after being robbed and threatened by Laban in the process, Nephi discovers Laban drunk. He is "constrained by the Spirit" to kill Laban by his own sword. Nephi shrinks from this task, but eventually obeys (I Nephi 1:110–120; LDS 4:10–18).

---

*Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992): 13–31.

24. Based on the quotation, "The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ," from John H. Yoder, trans. and ed., *The Schleithem Confession* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977), 14.

Following this horrendous beginning, much of the Book of Mormon narrative includes accounts of wars and rumors of wars. A just war theology with revolutionary American undertones is articulated in Alma, in the middle of the Book of Mormon, and is the dominant melody in this part of the narrative:

Nevertheless, the Nephites were inspired by a better cause; for they were not fighting for monarchy nor power. But they were fighting for their home, and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all, and for their rites of worship and their church. And they were doing that which they felt was the duty which they owed to their God; for the Lord had said to them, and also to their fathers, "Inasmuch as ye are not guilty of the first offence, neither the second, ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies. (Alma 20:50-51; LDS 43:45-46)

In other words, one should turn the other cheek twice, but on the third offense, one may retaliate. This instruction keeps the letter of the Sermon on the Mount but not the spirit of it.

A few chapters earlier in Alma, however, tell another story of some Lamanites who were responsive to the missionary work of Nephites Ammon and Aaron. After being initially imprisoned for preaching, Ammon and Aaron were released and found favor with both King Lamoni and his people. Many Lamanites were converted. One fruit of this conversion was that they buried their weapons of war and "covenant[ed] with God, that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives" (Alma 14:44; LDS 24:18). Shortly afterward, this resolve was put to the test by fellow Lamanites who resented their conversion and began to attack them. The converted Lamanites prostrated themselves on the ground and prayed, offering no resistance at all. One thousand and five were killed, but the slaying Lamanites could not continue in the face of such pacifism. They threw down their weapons and over a thousand were converted (Alma 14:48-54; LDS 24:20-26). Ammon later declared:

Now, behold, I say to you, Has there been so great love in all the land? Behold I tell you, There has not, even among the Nephites. For behold, they would take up arms against their brethren; they would not suffer themselves to be slain. (Alma 14:119-121; LDS 26:33-34)

Thus, within a few chapters of Alma, nonresistance confronts just war, early Christian Tertullian challenges St. Augustine, Anabaptism/Quakerism confronts Puritanism, and early Pennsylvania questions the rest of the young republic. How is this tension resolved?

With the coming of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, the narrative passes from "Old Testament" to "New Testament," from the law of Moses to first-hand experience of Jesus, including physically touching him. The first teaching of Jesus includes a reworked but still fully radical Matthean Sermon on the Mount, including the concepts of nonresistance and loving one's enemies (III Nephi 5:84-85, 89-92; LDS 12:38-39, 43-48). The Sermon on the Mount has been part of the inner canon of both Mennonites and Quakers from the beginning. Latter Day Saints have it twice in their canon of scripture.

In an account with clear echoes of Acts 2, the response of the people is, for over two hundred years, to live in peace and hold all things common through repentant, faithful lives empowered by the Holy Ghost. This idyll is portrayed as normative Christianity, made possible because of the "love of God which dwelt in the hearts of the people" (IV Nephi 1:17; LDS 1:15). As previously noted, Hutterians are the communal expression of Anabaptism, and no Hutterian community could be pictured as more fulfilled than in IV Nephi. There are also echoes here of the Quaker Holy Experiment in Pennsylvania, where pacifists ran a colony for nearly eighty years, from the 1680s to 1756. When this golden age of the Nephites begins to dissolve, with the less righteous persecuting the faithful remnant, nonresistance still operates: "And they smote the people of Jesus; but the people of Jesus did not smite again" (IV Nephi 1:37; LDS 1:34).

As the fall continues and apostasy deepens, violence and inequality increase in the Book of Mormon. The story is then told of Mormon, abridger of the thousand-year record, who serves his people as a general. A parallel to the Constantine/Augustine shift is played out with tragic results. At one point, Mormon obeyed an implicit just war ethic, refusing to continue as military leader because of his army's atrocities (Mormon 1:76-81; LDS 3:11-16). Then as the tragedy deepened, Mormon goes back to help them, although it is without hope (Mormon 2:25-27; LDS Mormon 4:23-5:2). In the end, he and his people were completely destroyed, except for his son Moroni, as guardian of the plates and the historian (Mormon 2:26-4:4; LDS 5:1-8:4).

During the years before his own death, Moroni added another history to the violent tragedy of his people. This account was of the Jaredites, an earlier group who had migrated to the Americas 3,000-2,000 B.C. Completely misplaced chronologically, it appears that Moroni added the Jaredite story as an appendix to reinforce the theme of destructive vio-

lence by an unrepentant, disbelieving people. Despite prophetic warnings, the Jaredite civilization ended with even greater tragedy—the destruction of both sides (Ether 5–6; LDS 12–15).

Thus, the golden age of the Nephites in IV Nephi is a positive utopian story followed immediately by two accounts of negative utopias in Mormon and Ether. The message is clear: Live according to the words of Christ and you will be blessed by equality and peace. Refuse the words of Christ and you will destroy yourselves through a descent into violence. This conclusion has chilling prophetic relevance today. The Book of Mormon ends with a radical critique of the myth of redemptive violence and the spiral of violence it engenders. In the end, the terrible destructiveness of the sword is fully revealed. Whether Mormon is a genuine historical personage or a literary cover for Joseph Smith Jr., the result is the same.

Finally, from the preface onward, the Book of Mormon consistently speaks up for both Jews and native peoples. Both are God's people who are to be blessed by the Gentiles, not cursed or hated, for "I, the Lord have not forgotten my people" (II Nephi 12:47–52; LDS 29:4–5). The Gentiles cannot be superior; their Christianity is also fallen, and they stand in equal need of restoration. Jews, Gentiles, and native peoples will all be saved together by the mighty acts of God, and they will learn from each other. There is thus no support for genocide in the Book of Mormon. It is a pro-Semitic, pro-native-people book.

#### *Mutual Aid and Community*

Both Anabaptism and the Book of Mormon see the covenant of baptism with vertical and horizontal dimensions. The believer covenants with brothers, sisters, and with God. The baptismal challenge of Alma cited earlier begins: "If you are desirous to come into the fold of God and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens that they may be light, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 9:39–40; LDS 18:8–9).

Many passages speak of mutual aid and concern for the poor. For example, Alma alludes to them in remarks following the baptisms in the wilderness:

Again, Alma commanded that the people of the church should impart of their substance, everyone according to that which he had. If he had more abundantly, he should impart more abundantly; and of him that had but little, but little should be required; and to him that had not should be

given. Thus they should impart of their substance of their own free will and good desires towards God . . . to every needy, naked soul. (Mosiah 9:60–62; LDS 18:27–28)

Religion that betrays the poor is also condemned, especially priestcraft—paid clergy who prosper, ignore the poor, and do not teach the gospel fully (II Nephi 11:90–91, 106–113; LDS 26:20, 29–33). Rather, those who serve as ministers should humbly labor with their own hands (Mosiah 9:59; LDS 18:26). There is also a clear warning against encroaching capitalism and individualism. The teaching that “every man prospered according to his genius and every man conquered according to his strength” is condemned (Alma 16:18; LDS 30:17).

The climax of the Book of Mormon, the already mentioned golden age, begins with the inauguration of all things in common:

And as many as came . . . and truly repented of their sins were baptized in the name of Jesus; and they also received the Holy Ghost . . . and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man dealt justly with one another. And they had all things common among them, therefore they were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free and partakers of the heavenly gift. (IV Nephi 1:2–4; LDS 1:1–3)

Here is a reworking of Acts 2 in a New World setting. This utopian state lasts for nearly two hundred years, which suggests that it is normative Christianity. As historian Nathan Hatch of Notre Dame University argues, the Book of Mormon “is a document of profound social protest, an impassioned manifesto by a hostile outsider against the smug complacency of those in power and the reality of social distinctions based on wealth, class, and education.”<sup>25</sup> There is no ambiguity anywhere in the Book of Mormon about economic justice. It is essential for any real peace.

#### *Salvation, Grace, and Works*

The Book of Mormon is thoroughly Arminian: Christ’s atonement enables all humans to be “free to choose liberty and eternal life through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according

---

25. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 115–16. For a comparison of IV Nephi with Acts 2, see Andrew Bolton, “Realized and Fallen Zion: A Look at the Nineteenth-Century Context of IV Nephi,” in *Theologies of Scripture*, eds. Don H. Compier and Shandra Newcom-Wolsey (Independence, MO: Graceland Press, 2002), 54–70.

to the captivity and power of the devil" (II Nephi 1:120; LDS 2:27). Justification is dependent entirely on the unmerited love of God through the atonement of Christ whose "mercy . . . overpowers justice and brings about means to men that they may have faith unto repentance" (Alma 16:216; LDS 34:15). Sanctification, however, requires both grace and works:

Come to Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and if you shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace you may be perfect in Christ. (Moroni 10:29; LDS 10:32)

#### *Keeping the Commandments of Jesus*

Richard Hughes points out that early Anabaptist leaders Dirk Philips and Balthasar Hubmaier stressed the importance of keeping the commandments of God.<sup>26</sup> For instance, Philips stated that one of the ordinances "which Christ has instituted for his congregation is the keeping of all his commandments."<sup>27</sup> This understanding is based on Jesus's words in the Great Commission to teach the newly made and newly baptized disciples "to obey every thing that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). A similar emphasis on keeping the commandments of God is found in the Book of Mormon. For example, Abinadi at his trial argues for the importance of keeping the commandments and restates the Decalogue to his accusers, asking if they have taught and kept it (Mosiah 7:94–8:2; LDS 12:33–13:26). Also, Alma says in counsel to his son Shiblon that "inasmuch as you shall keep the commandments of God you shall prosper in the land" (Alma 18:1; LDS 36:1). The communion prayer on the bread states that disciples promise among other things to keep Christ's commandments, "that they may always have his Spirit" (Moroni 4:4; LDS 4:3). There is no antinomianism in the early mainstream of either tradition; the fruit of genuine faith is the fulfillment of the moral law of the kingdom.

#### *Church Order and Discipline*

Church discipline, a key Anabaptist practice, was also practiced among the baptized in the Book of Mormon (Alma 4:3–4; LDS 6:3–4). At the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni 2–6 provides clear guidelines for

---

26. Hughes, "Comparison of the Restitution Motifs," 320.

27. Philips, "The Church of God," in *ibid.*, 230.

the ordination of elders, priests, and teachers, for the prayers of blessing on the bread and wine for communion, and for faith and repentance leading to baptism. The church is to meet often. Of church discipline, the following is written:

They were strict to observe that there should be no iniquity among them; and whoever was found to commit iniquity, and three witnesses of the church condemned him before the elders, and if they repented not and confessed not, their names were blotted out, and they were not numbered among the people of Christ; but as often as they repented and sought forgiveness with real intent, they were forgiven. (Moroni 6:7–8; LDS same)

### *The Significance of Anabaptist Themes*

Believer's baptism means that birth in one's nation is not the final loyalty. Patriotism is not enough; the freely chosen international fellowship of those who follow Jesus is the ultimate commitment of those reborn of water and spirit. Mutual aid should be given in the spirit of Acts 2, a cooperative sharing so that no one is in need. Justification by grace reminds us that God loves us even when we are God's enemies. Sanctification through grace and works indicates the importance of full conversion, of being remade in the pattern of Jesus. To this end, taking seriously the commandments of Jesus and church discipline is important. The abandonment of the sword, of violence, is perhaps a critical test of genuine conversion, the true measure of an authentic follower of the crucified Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Is the Book of Mormon a Latter Day Anabaptist text? An initial survey suggests it might be, although it would be helpful to have sympathetic Mennonite scholars make their own judgments after studying the text. I have argued that clear Anabaptist themes appear in the Book of Mormon, set in an idealized projection of radical left-wing Protestantism in an ancient American story spanning a thousand years. Whether the Book of Mormon is read as genuine ancient history or as a mythical parable with an early nineteenth-century context and authorship, its story enables the seeker to imagine a new kind of future—the peaceable kingdom of God on earth through faith in Christ and acting on the Sermon on the Mount. Hope for a new world begins through inspired imagination of its possibility. The Book of Mormon story is arguably a sacrament for the

coming of the kingdom of God here and now, through faith in Christ and repentance from the fallen systems of this world.

The Book of Mormon could also be characterized as the prophetic peak of Joseph Smith's ministry; he was just twenty-four years old when it was published in March, a few days before the organization of the Church on April 6, 1830. Initially Smith seemed to follow its teachings, along with those of the New Testament, by responding to violence through turning the other cheek. His followers imitated his example. Tragically, Joseph descended into a legitimation of violence from 1833 forward.<sup>28</sup> Campbellite preacher Sidney Rigdon joined Smith in 1830, becoming a close associate. Rigdon brought with him a strong restitutionism and the example of Alexander Campbell, who was a convinced pacifist from his New Testament primitivism.<sup>29</sup> Rigdon could have decisively reinforced Smith's initial pacifism, but he became a bellicose advocate of justified violence in response to Latter Day Saint persecution, perhaps because his own treatment at the hands of the mob debilitated an already unstable mind.<sup>30</sup> Along with Rigdon, Jesse Gause was also ordained Smith's counselor on March 8, 1832. Gause, ten years Rigdon's senior, had been a convinced Quaker for twenty-three years and a Shaker for three years before joining the Latter Day Saints. Perhaps his influence would have supported Smith's and Rigdon's initial

---

28. LeSueur, *The 1838 Mormon War in Missouri*. Quinn, "National Culture, Personality, and Theocracy," does an excellent job of tracing Smith's journey of pacifism and violence in its early nineteenth-century cultural context.

29. Linger, *Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell*, chaps. 1, 2, 15. See also David Edwin Harrell Jr., *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866* (Nashville, TN: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), chap. 5; and Alexander Campbell's *Popular Lectures and Addresses: No. XV (1886) Address on War*, downloaded October 2003 from [www.mun.ca.rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/pla/PLA15.htm](http://www.mun.ca.rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/pla/PLA15.htm).

30. Rigdon's mental stability was not helped by a fall as a seven-year-old from a horse or when he was dragged by his heels by a Campbellite mob over frozen ground on the night of March 24, 1832 in Kirtland, Ohio, before being tarred and feathered. Smith had the same treatment but was not badly hurt. Rigdon took several days to recover. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 115-16.

pacifism through later and more difficult provocations, but by December 1832, Gause had left the Church.<sup>31</sup>

Smith is in the tradition of sixteenth-century Anabaptist Melchior Hoffman, a last-days' visionary, dreamer, and publisher of extrabiblical prophecy. Hoffman opened the door for Jan Matthijs, Jan Van Leiden, and Bernhard Rothman, who in Muenster, 1534–35, turned to the Old Testament to justify both sword and polygamy.<sup>32</sup> In a strikingly unfortunate parallel in Nauvoo, Smith was able to justify in the early 1840s a five thousand-man armed militia and the secret practice of polygamy, although polygamy is condemned three times in the Book of Mormon (Jacob 2:33–38, 55–56; LDS 2:24–29, 3:5–6; Mosiah 7:1–10; LDS 11:1–7; Ether 4:48; LDS 10:5). Militarism can indeed lead to more extreme forms of patriarchy, and women are the ones who are threatened and suffer the most from violence.

The struggle between nonresistance and just war, early Quaker Pennsylvania and the revolutionary republic, was clearly in the soul of young Joseph as he wrote/translated the Book of Mormon. In the Book of Mormon narrative, Jesus wins, but the myth of redemptive violence was not fully vanquished in Joseph's heart. In the end, Smith was first of all American rather than Anabaptist, and his violent response to the violence of his culture finally captured him in Nauvoo, the Mormon Latter Day Muenster. His assassination on June 27, 1844, was a sad but perhaps inevitable end. Those who live by the sword shall indeed die by the sword (Matt. 26:52). Though Smith saw the promised land of nonviolent Zion, like Moses he could not live in it. Moses was still caught by Egypt, and Smith was still caught by his violent American culture.

For new generations there are new possibilities, including the peace church option. Paralleling Menno Simons, Joseph Smith III, son of the Prophet, led the Reorganization in a moderate, nonmilitant Latter Day Saintism that today has evolved into a movement with a new name, Community of Christ. The Community of Christ seeks to be an international, multiracial people who continue to affirm the equality of women and who now more intentionally seek to pursue peace, reconciliation, and healing of the spirit. Some want the Community of Christ to repentantly

---

31. D. Michael Quinn, "Jesse Gause: Joseph Smith's Little-Known Counselor," *BYU Studies* 4 (Fall 1983): 487–93.

32. Synder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 165–72.

join the historic peace churches. Others, perhaps caught by the myth of redemptive violence clothed in patriotism, are resistant.<sup>33</sup> Yet Anabaptist themes in the founding scripture of the Book of Mormon may still help all Latter Day Saints more fully find the way of Jesus. After all, Jesus is portrayed in its pages preaching the Matthean Sermon on the Mount with nearly two hundred years of peace and equity as the result. The fact that the Sermon on the Mount appears twice in our expanded canon of scriptures means that Latter Day Saints should take it twice as seriously as other Christians. Finally, continuing dialogue between Mennonites and Latter Day Saints might help draw us toward a more courageously nonviolent pursuit of justice in the light of the cross. Restorationism is not a set of final conclusions drawn in the nineteenth century; it is rather a method of always returning to Jesus of Nazareth. The peace church option is still before us.

---

33. I argue for using the peace churches as an example of what the Community of Christ should become, while Scott Jobe argues from a U.S. military career perspective. See Bolton, "Learning from Anabaptism"; Bolton, "Developing a Theology of Peace: Tough Questions and Hard Decisions," and Scott A. Jobe, "United States Military Chaplaincy: A Peaceful Vocation with RLDS Historical/Theological Precedents," all in Joni Wilson and Ruth Ann Woods, eds., *Restoration Studies VII* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1998), 13-19, 47-59. See also Scott A. Jobe, "A Church That Pursues Peace: Learning to Support Those with Different Ideas of Peace," *Saints Herald* (March 1997): 102-103. For a text which promotes discussion over five possible positions on war and peace within the Christian and Community of Christ traditions, see David Anderson and Andrew Bolton, *Military Service, Pacifism, and Discipleship: A Diversity of Callings?* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 2003).