

Not a Rigid Framework

Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman, eds. *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives*. Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2012. xx, 290 pp. Includes index. Paper: \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-58958-099-2.

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The authors of this volume's concluding essay argue that "Latter-day Saint theology does not constitute a rigid framework which insists on either an idealist or realist approach to war in the scheme of human existence" (262). It is this room for ambiguity that makes *War and Peace in Our Time* such a valuable contribution, as it highlights the diversity of perspectives on war and peace that can be informed by LDS teachings and history. The contributors range from strict pacifists to advocates of preemptive offensive war—though, as Patrick Mason acknowledges in the introduction, the essays are weighted toward "the peace camp." In particular, the essayists insightfully analyze the morality of war as informed by LDS scripture (and the conditions, if any, under which war is just), assess case studies of violent conflict in Church history, and discuss the attitudes of prominent individual Latter-day Saints toward war and peace. To a lesser extent, the authors also address contemporary Mormons' attitudes on war and overview the concrete realities confronted by LDS national security professionals.

Several of the essays—especially those that seek to articulate interpretations of LDS doctrine on the morality of war based on LDS scripture—come across as overly eisegetical, with omissions or interpretive stretches that belie the ambiguity of Mormon teachings on war and peace. The volume also lacks a systematic discussion of the ways in which fundamental LDS doctrines on such matters as the plan of salvation, the purpose of mortality, and the nature of God and man (as opposed to scriptural accounts of wars or explicit teachings on war) could shape an LDS position on violence and conflict. More attention to complex present-day security issues, such as humanitarian military intervention, likewise would have been worthwhile. Overall, however,

this volume is an instructive contribution that expands, deepens, and refines conversation about questions of war and peace in the LDS tradition.

Scriptural and Doctrinal Analysis

Many of the essays in the volume endeavor to advance specific understandings of LDS doctrine on the morality of war by drawing upon LDS scripture. Some of the essays (especially those by Joshua Madson, Robert A. Rees, F. R. Rick Duran, Gordon Conrad Thomasson, Jesse Samantha Fulcher, and Ron Madson) approach the question from a more or less pacifist orientation. Others seek to occupy some middle ground (J. David Pulsipher and the concluding essay by Henshaw, Hudson, Jensen, Kartchner, and Mattox, as well as the afterword by Richard Bushman). Still others (Morgan Deane and Eric Eliason) offer a defense of preemptive war or war aimed at spreading freedom, which includes, in their views, recent wars waged by the United States.

The scriptural analysis in these essays focuses primarily on narrative interpretation—that is, examining the behavior of scriptural characters during times of war and evaluating the moral implications of that behavior. Many of the essays that adopt this approach assume the actions of the groups or individuals evaluated—particularly the “prophet-generals” in the Book of Mormon—and the assessments of those actions provided in the scriptural text to be morally prescriptive, or at least exemplary.¹ The most explicit departure from this hermeneutical attitude can be found in Joshua Madson’s provocative “Nonviolent Reading of the Book of Mormon.” Madson describes the Book of Mormon as a politically motivated history produced by one faction of a civilization built upon a foundational act—Nephi’s slaying of Laban—that established a myth of violence justification. He argues that the mutual scapegoating in which both Nephites and Lamanites engaged encouraged a pattern of violence that “only reinforce[d their] enemies’ traditions and fail[ed] to address the underlying causes of conflict” (23).²

Beyond discussions of explicit scriptural teachings on war and narrative readings of incidents of war, the essays contain comparatively little exploration of how basic LDS theology might shape Mormon approaches to war and peace. Few of the authors deeply

explore the question that must be asked by anyone, LDS or otherwise, seeking to outline an ethic of war or peace: what, precisely, makes war, violence, and killing morally wrong?³ LDS understandings of the nature of God, the purpose of mortality, the plan of salvation, and the role of agency could all provide rich fundamental material for analysis of the ethics of violence and war. For example, does LDS belief in a corporeal God and an eternally disembodied Satan render the physical body comparatively more sacred and divine and the harm or extermination thereof comparatively more evil and satanic? Conversely, does the fact that Mormon doctrine teaches the possibility of repentance and progression after this mortal life actually make death less victorious and thus killing less morally egregious?

The most direct engagement with such questions can be found in the essay by Henshaw et al., wherein the authors posit that the “great calamity” in LDS theology is not death, but sin. As a corollary, they write that the motive behind a violent action—not the action itself—is where the morality of the action is manifest. A similar perspective is espoused in the essays by Deane and Eliason, who point to the examples of Book of Mormon prophet-generals to suggest that the intent of the heart is of primary importance in determining the morality of a person’s violent actions in war.

Although there is much to recommend this perspective, the emphasis on the sinfulness of the ill-motivated warfarer as the chief tragedy to some extent discounts the temporal suffering inflicted by war, including upon individually guiltless soldiers on both sides of the conflict, their families, and innocent civilians. The gospel of Jesus Christ strongly decries the evils of causing or failing to alleviate temporal suffering—arguably not only because of what such evil signifies about the moral state of the perpetrator’s heart, but also because of the real pain and sorrow inflicted upon the victim. Without appropriately accounting for this factor, quixotic military interventions could be much more easily justified. As Pulsipher’s essay and Bushman’s afterword both note, if a nation is seized with a conviction that its motive is pure and just, righteous fervor could lead it to ignore or downplay the potential for

unforeseen consequences, collateral damage, and long-term instability that often result from violent intervention.

Historical, Biographical, and Cultural Accounts

In addition to the efforts to advance particular understandings of the morality of war, several of the essays also provide a more descriptive account of war and peace issues in Church history and teachings. Robert H. Hellebrand's essay, for example, provides a useful survey of positions adopted by Church leaders toward specific conflicts and war in general since the Joseph Smith era. Fulcher draws upon the example of nonviolent responses to polygamy persecutions during the 1880s as an example of how Mormons can and should act under the threat of violence. And in an in-depth look at the initial years of the Restoration, Mark Ashurst-McGee delivers a refreshingly frank account of the ways in which Joseph Smith's early Zion revelations have led many Mormons to espouse a pessimistic attitude toward the prospect of peace among nations and instead view Zion as a refuge from the wars that will inevitably consume the world prior to the second coming of Christ. In his convincing conclusion, Ashurst-McGee argues, "Any genuinely Mormon pacifist agenda . . . bears the burden of finding a way to come to terms with the worldview and resultant Church mission that pervade the revelations of the religion's founding prophet" (91).

The brief section on historical context in the essay by Henshaw, et al., in contrast, comes across as an exercise in historical apologetics. For example, the authors insist that throughout the history of the early Church—both during the Missouri era and the period of the Utah War—"Latter-day Saints responded violently only when they felt they were under violent attack or under imminent threat" (239). Perhaps the caveat here is in the phrase "they felt," but those two words are insufficient to justify their omission of any references to the historical realities of the Danites' violence, the complexities of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and the bellicose rhetoric employed by leaders such as Brigham Young and Sidney Rigdon, the latter of whom called for a "war of extermination" between the saints and their persecutors if necessary, prior to Governor Boggs's issuance of his infamous extermination order.⁴

Other authors take a more reflective approach to Church history. Ron Madson points to the case study of the behavior of Mormons in Missouri in 1838 as a cautionary tale, arguing that “God’s covenant people [lost] Zion . . . because they rejected His word” (especially as articulated in section 98 of the Doctrine and Covenants) and committed violence against non-Mormons they perceived as threatening (229). Similarly, Jennifer Lindell emphasizes the belligerent turn in Church policies toward Native Americans that occurred in the early 1850s, giving a compelling account of how the Mormon settlers went from viewing Native Americans as Lamanites to be missionized to seeing them as the feared “Other” to be defended against with violence. However, her implication that intensifying notions of racial difference or superiority motivated this rising violence would have benefited from more evidentiary support.⁵

Analyzing later periods in Church history, the biographical essays in the volume give engaging accounts of how three different men—J. Reuben Clark, Hugh Nibley, and Eugene England—wrestled with questions of war and peace. D. Michael Quinn documents the evolution in Clark’s attitudes over time, Boyd Jay Peterson recounts how Nibley’s wartime experiences shaped his perspectives, and Loyd Ericson describes England’s commitment to “effective pacifism.” Quinn, however, could have improved his essay with a deeper discussion of the potential factors motivating the seemingly stark shifts in Clark’s views that he documents. Moreover, as these essays illustrate, Clark, Nibley, and England are all known for their more pacifist orientations. A valuable addition to this section could have looked at Church leaders or scholars who have adopted different postures on matters related to war and peace—for example, Ezra Taft Benson, whose views Peterson presents as a foil to Nibley’s.

On the subject of contemporary Mormon cultural attitudes, Ethan Yorgason’s essay provides an illuminating summary of original research he conducted through interviews with Latter-day Saints in Korea, including both Korean and American citizens. His interviews examined how members related their faith to their attitudes on security issues.⁶ His methods could be fruitfully applied to LDS communities elsewhere, including the general

American Mormon population. Other essays contain anecdotes and allusions to prevailing notions about war and peace among Mormons, including at Brigham Young University. But more systematic research among the broader Mormon population would be useful in measuring attitudes toward war and how they may be informed by LDS theological sources.

Likening to Our Day?

A final question raised and only partially answered in the volume relates to the applicability of LDS scriptural teachings on war to a complex contemporary international and technological security environment. Can lessons about war in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants really be “likened” unto our day? Can the reasoning adopted by leaders and soldiers in the Nephites’ explicitly Christian government, which was led by both ecclesiastical and political-military officials, apply to a pluralistic nation that observes a separation between church and state? Similarly, can revelations received to govern the behavior of early LDS Church members within the context of a federal republic (that admittedly was plagued by mob violence and inconsistent rule of law) apply to countries engaged in an anarchic international system? And how should individual members working in the governments or militaries of modern nation-states, as well as a range of international and nongovernmental organizations, approach these questions?

Rees cites Hugh Nibley in arguing that the Book of Mormon is in fact uniquely applicable to our present-day circumstances. Henshaw et al., however, emphasize the potential pitfalls involved in applying scriptural teachings on war and peace to a complicated modern international setting. They canvass a range of views held by LDS national security professionals on several specific subjects, emphasizing that LDS theology “allows for a wide range of expression of political opinion with respect to security issues and with respect to the more practical matters of security policy implementation” (263). An explanation of the methodology the authors used for collecting and reporting these views would have been beneficial, however, as it was unclear whether the summaries they provided were based on their own informed assump-

tions or actual interviews or conferences with LDS national security professionals.

This volume serves as a helpful springboard for more in-depth conversation among Latter-day Saints on specific topics related to war and peace, including deterrence (conventional and nuclear),⁷ collective security and humanitarian military intervention,⁸ the promotion of political and religious liberty through the use of force (including that aimed at regime change), and conflict avoidance and resolution strategies.⁹ In particular, several of the essays suggest the need for analysis of what LDS doctrinal sources say about the influence of “first level” factors, such as societal inequality and the physical security of women and children, on the likelihood, conduct, and resolution of conflict. As Henshaw et al. write, the “linkage between sin at a lower level of analysis and problems at the national and international levels of analysis” (261) is emphasized by ancient and modern prophets alike and is particularly prominent in the Book of Mormon.

The diversity of LDS thought represented in this volume indicates that Mormon theological resources can inform an array of stances on both these complex concrete issues, as well as broader ethical principles regarding questions of war and peace. Indeed, given the varied and at times contradictory approaches to violence and politics in LDS history and scripture, it is difficult to identify a definitive Mormon paradigm regarding pacifism or just war. Rather than impede the growth of LDS thought on war and peace, however, the lack of such an obvious framework instead provides fertile ground for further discussion and examination of such subjects within the Mormon community.

Notes

1. This approach is particularly pronounced in the essays by Henshaw et al., Deane, and Eliason. However, even some of the more antiwar essays often either omit references to the belligerent actions of these men or seek to justify or reinterpret them in order to fit these examples within their pacifist moral structures. For example, in his essay casting the Book of Mormon as a “comprehensive pacifist injunction,” Duran outlines a useful “conflict-morality grid,” wherein a two-by-two grid is characterized by morality on the vertical axis and conflict on the horizontal axis (64). He then proceeds to identify examples from the Book of Mormon of behavior in each of the four cells. However, Duran’s inter-

pretive argument seems strained when he argues that there are *no* examples of “Cell 1” behavior (moral war) in the Book of Mormon. When the author insists that “the highly moral always avoid conflict” in Book of Mormon narratives (70), the reader is left wondering how he would classify the behavior of the Nephites who defended the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi or the sons of those converted Lamanites who in turn came to the defense of both their people and the Nephites.

2. Similar arguments are also made by Duran, who articulates a holistic vision of the Book of Mormon as a “pacifist manifesto” (57), and Rees, who provides a moving literary-dramatic interpretation of Third Nephi as an “archetypal conflict between the forces of darkness/war and light/peace” (42).

3. Various essayists gave somewhat more attention to this question’s corollary: What, if anything, could ever make killing morally right, or at least permissible? Defense of the lives and religious and civil liberties of oneself and one’s family were the most commonly cited rationales, with several essays pointing to Captain Moroni’s title of liberty speech from the Book of Mormon. Some of the more strictly pacifist essays did not look kindly on such rationales and seemed to argue that there is never any justification for violence.

4. The authors mention the Mountain Meadows massacre in an endnote, referring the reader to the excellent LDS Church–commissioned study by Walker, Turley, and Leonard. However, rather than using the massacre as an example of inexcusable violence perpetrated by a group of Latter-day Saints contrary to the tenets of their faith, as does the study they cite, they instead objectionably herald the incident as an example of how Latter-day Saints “responded violently only when . . . they believed they were under imminent threat” (241). While perhaps true in some general sense, such an excuse belies the evil complexities of the massacre (and of violence and mass atrocities in general), the main event of which was ordered by local Church leaders who felt ensnared in a commitment trap that made them think it necessary to cover up two murders and other violence that had already been visibly perpetrated by white Mormon men (as the study by Walker et al. explains).

5. Lindell suggests that conceptions of Native Americans during the Joseph Smith era were unambiguously positive, omitting any reference to the Book of Mormon’s racially inflected description of latter-day descendants of Lehi as “a dark, a filthy, and a loathsome people” (Mormon 5:15). Such terminology could have reflected preexistent attitudes in Smith’s (and his fellow Mormons’) cultural background, indicating that the racist shift she describes in the early Young era may not have been such a stark reversal from the Smith era. In fact, such language in the

Book of Mormon could have even fanned the flames of the Brigham Young-era racism that she decries. Moreover, it is possible that the shift in racial perceptions she describes was a consequence of the Mormon settlers' heightened sense of threat from Native Americans due to increasing competition for resources, rather than a cause of that heightened competition and violence.

6. Yorgason ultimately concludes that "each person comprehends war and peace in significant measure through their own national background" (113), observing that the Korean Mormon interviewees "did not turn *quickly* to specifically Mormon scriptural war narratives" (108). However, it was not entirely clear that Yorgason fully accounted for each member's degree of identification with the LDS Church (for example, level of activity, intensity of belief, time since conversion, and LDS genealogical heritage). Such a factor could influence, in particular, the likelihood that a member would see Mormonism as relevant to questions of war and peace, and even a member's familiarity with or understanding of LDS teachings on the subject.

7. For instance, Deane gives some examples of the deterrent methods employed by Book of Mormon peoples, though he inappropriately conflates offensive tactics used in the context of an ongoing military conflict (which he highlights in the Book of Mormon's war chapters) with preemptive war and the broader Bush Doctrine. Deane also argues that weapons of mass destruction create an even more compelling justification for preemptive offensive military action than was present in Book of Mormon times. On this same topic, Henshaw et al. summarize several ways in which some LDS national security professionals have reconciled their work in America's nuclear armaments sector with their moral beliefs, including by justifying the U.S. nuclear capacity in defensive deterrent terms.

8. LDS tradition is not without resources for examining this subject, as evident in the Book of Mormon example of Nephites defending the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, whose sons in turn defend the Nephites. (See Alma 27:23; 53:10–12, 16–17.) However, this issue goes largely unaddressed in this volume—particularly by the more pacifist essayists.

9. The implications of the modern military industrial state for civil liberties and collective societal morality could potentially be another topic to analyze in the context of LDS thought and culture, particularly in light of the First Presidency message by Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," published in the *Ensign* in June 1976 and referenced by several of the authors.