Laura Harris Hales: 00:43 Hello. This is Laura Harris Hales. I’m here today with David Pulsipher, celebrating our 100th episode of Latter-day Saint Perspectives Podcast. Welcome, David. Glad to have you here.

David Pulsipher: 00:57 Thank you for having me.

Laura Harris Hales: 00:59 Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

David Pulsipher: 01:03 I’m a product of Utah. I went to Brigham Young University and also to the University of Minnesota for my doctoral degree in American Studies, and I’ve been teaching at BYU–Idaho for the last 21 years.

Laura Harris Hales: 01:21 I was talking to Patrick Mason a couple weeks ago and he was telling me about an exciting project you’re working on. Do you want to talk about that?

David Pulsipher: 01:29 Yes. This is an ongoing project that Patrick and I have been working on since, well, we first dreamed it up in 2011. So, we’re going on seven years now. We hope that eventually this will actually get completed. He and I have been working on an attempt to define a Latter-day Saint theology of peace and nonviolence. That’s been a really richly-rewarding collaboration. Much of what I do has grown out of that collaborative effort.

Laura Harris Hales: 01:59 Our discussion today is based on your award-winning paper that I heard you deliver a couple months ago at Utah State University for the Book of Mormon Studies Conference, “The Myth of Redemptive Violence: The Book of Mormon’s Subtle and Overlooked Critique.” And I just have to tell you, you blew me out of the water. I’ve never been in a presentation where someone just showed pictures and no words on their PowerPoints, and that was so incredible and so emotion-filled to look at those pictures as you were talking about violence. One image in particular that we’ll talk about later, I’ve thought about a lot. It’s really made me want to go back to the Book of Mormon and look at it with a different eye, which is probably what one of your goals was in writing this paper was.

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David Pulsipher: 02:57 Well, that’s exactly the goal, so I’m glad to hear that. It was a real pleasure to write it. And when I do my presentations, I like to add a lot of visuals because if the argument isn’t sound, at least people have nice, pretty things to look at.

Laura Harris Hales: 03:10 Good strategy. We often talk about the Book of Mormon having plain and precious truths in it, but in the last 20–30 years, we’ve had a lot of scholarship that’s taken a deep dive into Book of Mormon. We’re seeing that it’s a lot more complex than just being plain and precious.

David Pulsipher: 03:32 The thing that is most clear about the Book of Mormon is that it centers us on Jesus Christ, and it is as its subtitle says, “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.” Its clarity in regards to who Christ is and His role as our Savior and Redeemer, I think, clarifies so much confusion in terms of what’s maybe not as clear in other elements of Christianity. In that respect, I think the Book of Mormon is very plain and very precious, but there’s so much depth to it that we have not yet fully explored.

Laura Harris Hales: 04:14 What then do you think is one of the most misunderstood parts of the narrative?

David Pulsipher: 04:19 Well, I think that’s where the Book of Mormon gets complex. When it comes to just simple, plain teachings about Jesus Christ, it’s easy to understand the words of the Nephites and easy to understand the words of Alma, Amulek, Benjamin, and then, of course, the words of the Savior Himself when He appears in the 11th chapter of Third Nephi. But when it comes to so many other truths in the Book of Mormon, they have to be inferred from the text, from the narrative. I think the narrative, in particular, is a very complex narrative, and drawing lessons out of it becomes a very complex process. In particular, a Book of Mormon that is filled with scenes of battles and conflict, violence, the lessons regarding violence and conflict are often easy to miss because they are explicitly called out for us. We have to read the text and the narrative closely and look for the patterns in the story to understand what the text is actually trying to teach us about violence.

Laura Harris Hales: 05:33 Do you think, in a way, we’re a little bit dismissive of the violence? I know I heard growing up a lot that Mormon was a warrior. He loved those war chapters, and that’s why he put them in. That’s why they’re there. And when we get to the war chapters, we’re like, “Oh, okay. Battle this, battle that. Let’s go on.”

David Pulsipher: 05:55 I think it’s very easy to be dismissive of them, and there’s a number of people who have tried to point out a number of very, I think, reasonable ways of making the wars metaphorical about our own spiritual struggles, and that makes them relevant to us in terms of how we protect ourselves spiritually, how we defend our families from the potential onslaughts of evil and temptation. But then I think it is easy to just simply dismiss them as something that a warrior or historian is interested in and included for what appears to be no particularly relevant purpose. I think if we read them a little more closely, we will see they’re trying to teach us something about violence itself. That’s why I would encourage us to pay closer attention to what the violence is doing in the text.
and what it’s teaching us about our own world, which is also filled with violence—if not always directly often indirectly in terms of our media and the stories that we tell.

I think sometimes we can be dismissive of it, not because we think Mormon just threw in a bunch of war chapters for us, but we dismiss it because we’re just so surrounded with it ourselves that we think, “Oh, same old, same old.” We’ve seen this story before—know how it ends, know what’s going on, know who the good guys are, who the bad guys are. We know which violence is good, which violence is bad. And we think we can sort it out fairly easily, when in fact, I think it’s a much more complex thing to sort out.

Laura Harris Hales: 07:31 I don’t think we have any cultural connection with it either. It seems just so “out there” compared to our personal experiences. We mentioned before how, in the last 30 years, we’ve had so much scholarship on the Book of Mormon. Outside of the work that you and Patrick are doing, how much has been done on the violence in the Book of Mormon and what it’s actually supposed to be telling us?

David Pulsipher: 07:58 Well, there’s been a surprising amount of work on warfare in the Book of Mormon, but most of it has been looking at the tactics of the generals? What’s the timing of the battles? How do the strategies fit within ancient forms of warfare? Often the battles are used as ways of demonstrating the historicity of the book. These battles are similar to these types of ancient battles as well. We become interested in the battles for the sake of the battles themselves. We become interested in the battles as evidence of interesting connections to the Old Testament and so on, but we don’t actually look at violence generally.

Now, there are a few people who have. Most of the people who are looking at the violence more broadly have a tendency to divide into two camps. Those who see the text as a text that is condemning violence generally see the violence in the text as a warning to us, and they see the violence as the depravity that often happens in the violence as evidence of why violence is wrong and is evil. Then you have the other side, which sees the text as essentially a manifesto for just warfare and for the necessity of violence in defending families and faith. And those two groups tend to talk at each other as, “Is the book a pacifist manifesto or a just war manifesto?” Most of them are not looking at it very carefully for perhaps other lessons that might be drawn from it rather than just violence, good or bad.

Laura Harris Hales: 09:51 What you’re saying is that they’ve concentrated on one element of the violence, and they’ve not necessarily covered the whole narrative of what’s happening because they’re so focused on this one little aspect of the violence. Can you give us some examples of that?

David Pulsipher: 10:12 I think that we have a tendency to read the violence in the Book of Mormon as justifying. Our modern assumption is that violence is something that works and that it’s necessary, that’s it’s fundamentally, what I would call, redemptive, meaning it saves people. It saves people from their enemies, and it saves society by laying a foundation where peace can be established. We live in a world where that essence is shown in all of our movies in terms of: once the bad guy is dispatched
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through violence, then peace reigns and people are saved. And so, we have a tendency to see violence as something that is fundamentally redemptive and saving, and we bring that to the text. When we read the text, we just assume that that’s what the text is teaching us as well, that the text is teaching us that violence saves.

This becomes particularly easy for us to do because it seems, as we read, that God is constantly intervening in the violence and helping what we would just shorthand call the “good guys,” and that He is punishing bad guys through the good guys’ violence. We have the tendency to read that and say, “This reinforces what I believe, which is violence works. If it didn’t work, God wouldn’t help. Therefore, because God is intervening so often in the text according to the narration, it must mean that violence is the answer to whatever threat we may be facing.”

Laura Harris Hales: 11:50 I think a good way to picture what you’re saying is to bring up one of the visuals that you used in your PowerPoint, a picture that everybody is familiar with. It is Captain Moroni standing there with the Title of Liberty surrounded by his soldiers holding arrows. We’ve always thought that was a glorious scene. Here’s this man, carried up by God to do righteous battle. But you kind of twisted that in your PowerPoint. Do you want to share that with our listeners?

David Pulsipher: 12:26 Sure. It’s an image that I placed next to it, which is a modern rendition of the Arnold Friberg painting, which everyone is fairly familiar with, especially since it was a part of the official Book of Mormon for many, many years. The image is of a modern-day American soldier in exactly the same stance as Moroni. But instead of being surrounded by what in the original appears to be an audience of likely men holding up their swords in kind of a pledge to fight, instead of swords poking up, it’s automatic rifles. And the flag, instead of being the flag of the Title of Liberty, is the American flag, although there is also a smaller flag underneath it that has the words of the Title of Liberty on it. It contains modern soldiers drawn in comic book style and was one that I found circulating on the internet.

Laura Harris Hales: 13:28 It’s quite shocking and moving. It makes you think about it a lot because the cartoon version isn’t … There’s nothing wonderful about that image of that American soldier, militia man, standing there with those automatic machine guns. You’re like, “Oh, wait. What am I celebrating here?”

David Pulsipher: 13:50 Well, it is fascinating because many people do look at that and see that as wonderful. They see that as a great celebration of what a modern-day Moroni would look like, and that is the image they have of Moroni. It’s the image that they have, perhaps, of themselves as defenders of liberty in the same vein as Moroni and that kind of quasi-military approach to defense. Our image of Moroni has been deeply shaped by that image. Our sense of who Moroni is has been deeply shaped by Friberg’s painting, and then that sense of who Moroni is has deeply shaped how we think of violence in the modern era and in particular violence that is used in defense of essential liberties and families and faith, which, of course, is what Moroni is defending with his efforts in the Title of Liberty.
Laura Harris Hales: 14:54 But there’s more to it, and that’s what your article gets to. The Book of Mormon is not always as overt in its message as we’d like it to be, so how do you suggest we approach a nonviolent look at the Book of Mormon?

David Pulsipher: 15:16 As I have argued in the paper, I think the Book of Mormon narrative is like a very intricate tapestry in that when we look at it, we can very easily look at it and see only the things that we want to see. We tend to bring our own biases to the patterns, and then those patterns that we have biases to see will emerge out of them. I think the Book of Mormon narrative is actually plainer than we sometimes give it credit for, but we are blind to it because our own attitudes and biases about violence tend to shape the text for us instead of letting the patterns emerge out of the text naturally.

We need some way of refocusing and being able to see the patterns more clearly. My sense is that is provided for us already, particularly in the Doctrine and Covenants Section 98. This Doctrine and Covenants revelation given in August of 1832 provides the most comprehensive and explicit description of what I’m calling the rules of engagement when it comes to violence. I don’t know of another place in all of the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon that goes into the same depth of description regarding what the ethics of violence should be for disciples of Jesus Christ. If we take the 98th section of the Doctrine and Covenants and apply it as a way of understanding the violence going on in the Book of Mormon, then the patterns start to sort themselves out a little more clearly for us.

Laura Harris Hales: 17:01 What kind of things did you find in D&C 98 as you were examining it?

David Pulsipher: 17:07 D&C 98 has this remarkable description of violence at several different levels—at the personal level and even at the societal level—in which the Lord lays out the rules. And the rules are essentially this: we must bear patiently the abuses of our enemies, and after three times of being smitten by our enemies, then, according to the revelation, we are justified in striking back, but only after three times and after warning the person who is coming against us. The fascinating part of it is that that has been well-known for a long time, and people cite it all the time as evidence that violence is justified. And it certainly is, according to the revelation. But the revelation goes further in saying that, not only is that an option, but it says, “If thou wilt spare him,” meaning the enemy, “thou shalt be rewarded for thy righteousness, and also thy children and thy children’s children until the third and fourth generation.” That’s an interesting promise because the Lord has just said that if your enemy comes against you or your children or your children’s children till the third and fourth generation. This phrase, “third and fourth generation,” shows up repeatedly in the revelation. In essence, the Lord is saying, “If you strike back, I will help you till the third and fourth generation, but if you spare the enemy, then I will bless you until the third and fourth generation.”

David Pulsipher: 19:01 What we miss sometimes is that the Lord is basically telling us we have a choice: “Do you want my help in striking back for three or four generations, or do want to be blessed for three or four generations?” If you start to think about it very long, you begin to realize that that choice is really a choice between one good thing, the Lord’s help in a violent conflict, and a better thing, which is to be blessed. If we choose the violent retaliation, we may, in essence, be dooming our
children to needing the Lord’s help for three or four generations because most violence tends to come back and create cycles of retaliation and conflict which would require long-term assistance.

On the other hand, we could choose to spare or to forgive or to absorb the violence, and thereby be blessed, ourselves and for our children to be blessed, for three or four generations. They’re not exactly equal, and that, to me, is the fascinating lens. Because once we start saying, “Okay. If violence is a choice and it’s not required by the Lord, that He is, in essence, saying, ‘I will help you, or I will fight, or I will bless you in some other way,’ then if we apply that to the Book of Mormon, we can say, as different important characters in the Book of Mormon make different choices regarding violence, does that play out? Do we see blessings to the third and fourth generation, or do we see assistance from the Lord to the third and fourth generation, but also conflict into the third and fourth generation?” I think the Book of Mormon shows us that that’s exactly what happens. The characters who choose violence do get the Lord’s assistance, but they also end up creating cycles of violence that, in some ways, go on for much longer than three or four generations. Of course, each generation makes that choice. They push that horizon further and further out.

Laura Harris Hales: 21:01 Can you give us an example from the text?

David Pulsipher: 21:04 Probably the most well-known is Nephi, the very first prophet in the Book of Mormon, who tells the story of killing Laban. The way he tells the story, he says, “I was constrained by the spirit to do this.” If we just read that too quickly, and if we don’t read it in line with Doctrine and Covenants 98, then that sense of requirement comes in. When we do read Section 98, the most fascinating line to me is that immediately after laying out the two choices, the voice of the Lord says, “Behold, this is the law I gave unto my servant Nephi.” He singles him out. And in singling him out, He seems to be making a very important comment on the way Nephi had told his story. What that seems to be revealing is that Nephi may not have told the entire story here, that maybe, in fact, he did have a choice. He had a choice to spare Laban—to get the plates without having to decapitate him. In his killing of Laban, he is justified according to the principles of Section 98, but killing Laban and then taking the sword and taking that with him into the wilderness is kind of, in some ways, symbolic of that choice that he made. He then creates a context in many ways in which his children will live by that sword for generations to come, and we see that play itself out as he uses that sword then in his conflict with his brothers and as he makes replicas of it for his children to use against the children of his brothers. They, as we all know, become the principal antagonists to one another over the course of the text.

Laura Harris Hales: 23:00 You realize that’s going to be a radical reading for some people listening to this podcast. It is a rethinking of that story.

I was fascinated by your discussion about the sword of Laban being part of Nephite material culture. It almost became a sacred relic, this weapon of violence. Do you want to speak to that?
David Pulsipher: 23:26 Again, the narrative here is fascinating. Nephi doesn’t tell us that he takes the sword. He mentions only that he carries the brass plates with him into the wilderness to his father, Lehi, and that he takes Zoram. He says, “We take the plates, and we take Zoram, and we return to my father.” We don’t know that he also has the sword with him until the family splits up. Nephi flees into the wilderness and then he begins fashioning replicas of the sword of Laban, and it’s at that point in the narrative that Nephi lets us know. For some reason, he doesn’t want us to know or doesn’t feel confident to let us know that he’s taken the sword until later. But then at that point, now that the family has broken up and the sword becomes, for Nephi, the way that he’s going to resist his brothers’ aggressions and keep his people protected, that sword becomes a sacred relic of sorts and is passed from generation to generation.

We know that Benjamin uses Laban’s sword to fight the Lamanites, and we know that it’s passed on. Of course, we also know from Joseph Smith that it becomes a part of what is in the Hill Cumorah when he goes to get the plates, and it is shown to the three witnesses. This is an interesting emblem because it seems to represent, along with the record, in some ways, the two choices: the choices of the word and the choice of the sword. Maybe God is saying to us that we have that same choice today. Will we live by the word or we live by the sword? The Nephites lived by both, and they tended to emphasize one or the other at different times in their histories. The way the sword becomes an important part of the Nephite inheritance is a fascinating part of the record.

Laura Harris Hales: 25:24 I love that interpretation because traditionally we have thought of the sword of Laban as representing God sparing His people. Both Paul and Moroni talk about a more excellent way for Nephi. What would have been a better choice in your mind?

David Pulsipher: 25:47 Well, this is using counterfactual history, which is always dangerous. We don’t know exactly what would have happened if Nephi had chosen a different way. Many people try to justify Nephi’s violence by saying there was no other way, that if he had not killed Laban, then all sorts of horrible things would have happened. Of course, that’s speculative as well. We don’t know. It is certain that in killing Laban, Nephi is enacting violence in a way that will make it impossible for his family ever to return from the wilderness, and they are, in some ways, forced now to remain permanently at large. The question is, “What might have happened if he had not?”

We can speculate in several different veins. Might he have tied up Laban, left him in a closet somewhere, and spared his life and still managed to get the plates and return to his father? There are all sorts of ways in which Nephi might have spared Laban. Maybe there was even a nonviolent way, a way of love and charity, which is, of course, what Paul’s talking about when he talks about “a more excellent way.” Is there a way that Nephi could have used that and had Laban voluntarily surrender the plates to him and won him over somehow? Laban certainly seems to be a difficult person. But that possibility is not beyond speculation if we’re going to speculate.

David Pulsipher: 27:23 There are all sorts of ways in which sparing Laban in varying degrees might have left Nephi with a much less traumatic legacy than he certainly seems to be grappling with even
when he’s writing decades later. Certainly, according to Section 98 alternate choices would have qualified him for blessings—himself, his children, and his children’s children—that might have reverberated through the generations. Maybe in learning how to spare Laban, he learned how to work more effectively with his equally difficult brothers. That might have effected a reconciliation there that would have kept the family together, at least for another generation or two before somebody else split them up. We don’t know, but Section 98 has that tantalizing hint that there was another way for Nephi, and that that other way carried with it blessings that were multi-generational.

Laura Harris Hales: 28:24 I’ve thought about this example from your article quite a bit because, going back to this misreading of the Book of Mormon, I think we misread that as the Lord will make us do things sometimes that seem wrong, but they’re right if the Lord tells us to do them even though we intuitively know they are wrong. We’ve all read the story, and we’re like, “How can this be right?”

David Pulsipher: 28:55 Well, and that’s where I think that our instincts are right when we read it. The idea that the Lord would require this bloody deed of His son, especially when it involves the violence of one of His children against another of His children, seems to be incongruous with our sense of who God is. The best comparative example is probably the story of Abraham and Isaac and the requirement to sacrifice Isaac. But of course, the difference between those two stories is that in Abraham’s case—

Laura Harris Hales: 29:34 There’s a ram in the thicket.

David Pulsipher: 29:35 —there’s a ram in the thicket. He’s not required to go through with it; whereas, Nephi is. We can, I suppose, approach the story saying, “Well, Laban deserves it in a way that Isaac doesn’t.” But how do we gauge that ourselves? This is where I think Grant Hardy has done us a good service; He’s demonstrated that Nephi is a really masterful storyteller, and one of the things he’s masterful at is avoiding some really difficult moments. So, the moment that he returns to Lehi with the plates, Grant Hardy does a fantastic job of demonstrating how in telling the story, Nephi avoids the whole problem of how Lehi actually responded to Nephi’s report of what he had done. We never really find out how Lehi feels about the fact that his son has killed a man. The way he tells the story avoids that difficulty. I suspect that in his telling of the story of coming upon Laban in the streets that he’s also, in this case, avoiding a certain unpleasant truth, which the Lord supplies for us in Section 98. There was another choice and a lot of what happened here Nephi has to kind of own as his own choice. Nephi would prefer to think of it as, “Someone else made me do this,” when in fact, he made a choice. A perfectly justified, and, therefore, righteous choice I should emphasize, but—

Laura Harris Hales: 31:16 But not one that didn’t have ramifications is your point. Right?

David Pulsipher: 31:19 Exactly. As good of a choice as that was, it was not the best choice that might have been made in that situation. In other words, there was a choice that carried even higher blessings and righteousness attached to it according to Section 98. Nephi here seems to be avoiding telling us
that part of the story. I think our instincts tell us that we don’t have the whole story here, and that’s why we recoil a bit when we get to it.

Laura Harris Hales: 31:49 We have D&C 98. Have you found any other tools that listeners can use as a lens when reading the Book of Mormon?

David Pulsipher: 31:59 I think D&C 98 is the most important lens. And because it connects it to Nephi, it becomes a really good lens for us to interpret the Book of Mormon. But there is another lens as well, and that’s within the book itself. There are actually two places in the Book of Mormon that I think we have to look at as ways of helping us interpret the text. One of them is in Alma Chapter 48, which is right in the middle of Mormon’s soaring praise of Captain Moroni; he gives well-deserved praise for Moroni’s righteousness and desires to preserve his people. And in the middle of that, he mentions that the Nephites had been taught certain things about how to approach violence. And so, it gives us a window into how the Nephites saw their options. We know from Section 98 that they have options. And when it comes to which option to take, Alma 48 gives us this line, “The Nephites believed that if they were faithful in keeping the commandments of God, that He would prosper them in the land; yea, warn them to flee or to prepare for war according to their danger. And also, that God would make it known unto them whether they should go to defend themselves against their enemies, and by so doing, the Lord would deliver them.” The Nephites have deep faith in God’s ability to deliver them, and they believe that will come in generally one of two ways. He will either warn them to flee, or He will warn them to prepare for war.

David Pulsipher: 33:39 What I think we miss about this lens is that we don’t go back to the text and say, “How many times does God do each of these things? How many times in the text do we find him explicitly warning people to flee, and how many times in the text do we find him explicitly warning them to prepare for war?” The surprising thing when we begin that kind of analysis is that we find that God warns people to flee six, maybe even seven, times depending on how you read the text. There are very explicit warnings to groups to flee: from Lehi to Nephi to the first Mosiah, to the people of Alma in the land of Helam, to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, and with Omer in the Book of Ether. All of them are warned to flee.

If you look for a moment for where God says in the text, “Prepare for war,” you can’t find one place. And that, to me, was one of the most surprising things, was as I went back and tried to compare them, I couldn’t find a moment where the Lords says, “There’s danger coming; prepare for war.” We do find lots of instances in which God helps the Nephites in a war, but it’s always a war that they have already started or has been brought upon them. They’re never warned to prepare for war beforehand. So, that’s another lens that we can use to look at. What does that mean then if the text itself shows God constantly warning people to flee and never warning them to prepare to kill?

Laura Harris Hales: 35:17 What conclusions have you come to about God’s attitude toward war through these comparisons?
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**David Pulsipher:** 35:24 Well, looking at that, it seems to me that Doctrine and Covenants 98 bares out. God will help people who choose justified self-defense. Examples of divine help in the narrative demonstrate that God fulfills that promise. He comes to the aid of these armies over and over and over again.

**Laura Harris Hales:** 35:45 There’s a reason that people use violence. They learn very early on the playground that it is ultimately quite an effective tool. How does the Book of Mormon address the arguments that violence is the only strategy that ultimately works?

**David Pulsipher:** 36:04 Well, there’s two ways in which the Book of Mormon demonstrates the effectiveness of violence and the effectiveness of other strategies. One of them is in the short-term. There are many examples of the short-term effectiveness of war. Moroni does protect his Nephite community. Benjamin protects his Nephite community. Nephi protects his Nephite community. Right? Each of these warrior prophets use violence in the form, usually, of armies to protect their people.

And yet, we also have examples of the short-term effectiveness of nonviolent techniques. The frequent examples of flight in the Book of Mormon demonstrate that flight is an effective tool to protect people. In addition to that, we have examples of loving confrontation, actually, which is very effective. One of my favorite examples is the beloved story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehis. We talk a lot about the burying of their swords, and we talk about the way in which they go out and meet their enemies on the battlefield and convert those enemies through their deaths. One of the things we often fail to notice is how they go out to meet their enemies. They don’t just wait for them. They don’t wait in their homes and cower to be slaughtered. They go out and confront them in a very brave, fearless sort of way. It’s that fearlessness, it’s that confrontational part of it, that actually makes what they do quite effective. If they had cowered in their homes, they probably wouldn’t have had the same effect on their enemies as they did by going out and very bravely meeting them without any weapons.

**David Pulsipher:** 37:54 The other things we have failed to highlight many times is the fact that their strategy actually protects their community. They go out and throw their bodies as shields to their families, and in doing that, they stop the violence. The Lamanites stop, and even the hard-hearted Amalekites and Amulonites who are not converted stopped their violence. That is a really salient point that the nonviolence works. Although they lose 1,005, it’s one of the lowest casualty rates recorded in the Book of Mormon. Moroni’s armies commonly lost thousands of people in battles, and here, the Anti-Nephi-Lehis protect their community with losing only 1,000. As Mormon points out, all of them were righteous. All of them go to heaven. Nobody goes to hell that day. None of the attackers die. All of the movement is towards God. It’s a remarkable moment.

Even though that’s probably the most remarkable example, there’s actually other examples of unarmed confrontation. The people of Limhi go out and meet their attackers at one point without weapons, and the attackers are pacified, it says, towards them, and they had compassion upon them. Alma in the land of Helam goes out to meet the invading Lamanite army also without weapons. Even the priests of Noah put their wives forward to convince their Lamanite brothers not to attack. We have multiple examples.
instances in the Book of Mormon where people are using, not just flight, but actual compassionate confrontation that, in one way or another, stops the attack.

David Pulsipher: 39:50 Those are all short-term examples. We also have long-term examples of the effectiveness of violence versus other strategies. One of the things that, to me, is striking is that although Moroni protects his people, he doesn’t ever establish lasting peace. There’s always going to be a war a few years later, and another war a few years after that, and another war a few years after that. Violence is effective, but it seems to be only temporarily effective. The only kind of peace that seems to be maintainable peace is peace that’s done through other means. It’s not achieved through violent self-defense. It’s achieved through, usually, some pretty remarkable nonviolent invaders like the sons of Mosiah going deep into Lamanite territory.

Laura Harris Hales: 40:43 I love the phrase you used, “A special forces unit.”

David Pulsipher: 40:47 Yeah. These are a nonviolent, special forces unit. They are invaders in the political implications of what they’re doing. It shouldn’t be overlooked. These are the sons of the king. These are the Nephite princes, and they are invading Lamanite territory—but they’re invading with love. They’re invading with selfless service, and they are consecrating themselves to the Lamanite people in a way that wins many of their hearts, and in the end, effects a permanent reconciliation between that group of Lamanites and the Nephite communities. They become ultimately integrated into the Nephite community.

That’s, of course, a fantastic example. But one of my favorite examples is later than that where the Lamanites, under the inspiration of some Nephite dissenters, invade Nephite territory and take almost the entire territory from the Nephite people. They drive them all the way up to the land of Bountiful. They take over the land of Zarahemla. They took over everything. Moronihah, the son of Moroni, using the full resources of the state and the military claws back year after year. He whittles away at that invasion, that occupied territory, and gets about half the territory back, and then he can’t get any further, and he gives up. He says, “We can’t do any more than this.” And it’s at that moment in the text that we get to unarmed invaders again.

David Pulsipher: 42:21 This time, Nephi and Lehi, the brothers, go first to the occupied territories in Zarahemla, convert 8,000 people, then they go deep into traditional Lamanite land to the land of Nephi, and they are captured. They allow themselves to be abused, and then this miraculous moment in the prison happens with the pillars of fire and the quiet voice, as if it was a whisper coming from heaven. This remarkable love and spirit that they bring with them into the territory effects this amazing conversion. And out of that, the Lamanites go forth. This is one of those moments in the text where I just cry out for more detail. In one verse, it says they return all the lands to the Nephites, and there’s got to be a fantastic story behind all of that. Two unarmed invaders accomplished what years, even generations, of conflict couldn’t do. And from that point on, the Lamanites and the Nephites are never at war with one another until long after the time of Christ’s visit. The conflict after that shifts to the Gadianton Robbers; the Lamanites and the Nephites never go to war again. It is a permanent
reconciliation between these two communities, and it’s accomplished by two people without any weapons.

**Laura Harris Hales:** 43:47 How effective were violent measures against the Gadianton Robbers that you just mentioned?

**David Pulsipher:** 43:52 Well that, again, is fascinating because the story seems to show us over and over again comparisons. We get the comparison of Moroni’s very valiant and justified violence and the way he protects his community, but we see that it’s only temporary. Then we see these long-term effects by these unarmed invaders, and then we get a similar kind of comparison that goes on with the Gadianton Robbers. We see repeated efforts to go up into the hills and take the war to them. Almost every example of that is a failure. They get driven out of the mountains, they get driven back into their lands, and the Gadianton Robbers are as strong as ever. In the two examples in which the Gadianton Robbers are actually destroyed, they’re destroyed not because they are annihilated. They’re destroyed because they are essentially transformed from enemies into friends, and it’s done through conversion. Both the Lamanites and the Nephites do it, and they do it at separate moments in the text. But each of them do it, and in both cases, they eliminate the threat by transforming the threat into something that’s friendly to them.

**Laura Harris Hales:** 45:15 Baptize your enemies. Don’t beat them up.

**David Pulsipher:** 45:18 Exactly. The military efforts don’t work, but the conversion efforts do, and they effect a much more long-term and ultimately sustainable kind of peace. Although with the Gadianton Robbers, they’re constantly reinventing themselves or being reinvented by others.

**Laura Harris Hales:** 45:40 When Christ visits the Nephites, does he speak about violence?

**David Pulsipher:** 45:46 Well, yes, as a matter of fact. He speaks very directly about violence. We get that in His sermon at the temple, as we call it, which is a restatement of Christ’s sermon on the mount from Matthew or the sermon on the plain from Luke. In all three cases, He says the same thing. He does that wonderful job of giving the old law, which is the righteous law, and the new law, or the higher law, the lesser and the higher. In the old law, it was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And in the new law, it is not that. It’s turn the other cheek. Go another mile. And instead of hating enemies, it is loving them. Do good to them that hate you. That very direct command is, I believe, part of what Nephi was saying when Christ comes. “He will tell you what to do, and you should listen to what He tells you to do. Don’t harden your hearts when He fulfills the law, but be prepared for the new law.” That new law has, in many ways, already been lived by people like the Anti-Nephi-Lehis, but now, Christ institutes it in a much more formal way, and His disciples take that. They seem to take it very much to heart and they create a world in which there is no contention, in which they love their enemies.
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We aren’t given the details of how that all plays out, but Fourth Nephi talks about the love of God being in their hearts and that sense of love. And I think by “that love,” we mean a very active, confrontational kind of love like the Anti-Nehi-Lehis. That kind of love transforms their society into a world in which there is no more war, which lasts for 200 years. It’s remarkable. It’s built upon these precepts. It isn’t just built only on the remarkable person of Jesus Christ and His appearance, but it’s built upon the actual precepts that He then leaves with them and which they implement into their society.

Laura Harris Hales: 47:58 David, through your research, what have you found to be the nonviolent message of the Book of Mormon?

David Pulsipher: 48:06 I think if I were to summarize the overall message in terms of what the Book of Mormon is saying about violence, it’s that violence may be a justified choice for self-defense. I think the Book of Mormon is pretty clear on that. But—it’s the but that we often miss in the story—exerting love and even a violence-absorbing and self-sacrificing kind of love, which is, of course, the example that Jesus Christ gives, even all of this in the face of menacing threats will accomplish much more than justified violence will accomplish. I think that’s the essence of the Book of Mormon narrative. Violence may be justified, but love is the better way.

Laura Harris Hales: 49:02 Thank you so much for sharing your insights with us today. What are your plans for this paper?

David Pulsipher: 49:09 Right now I’m revising it in the hopes of having it published in some venue somewhere, one form or another, and—

Laura Harris Hales: 49:16 And then you’ll let us know, so we can post it on our website.

David Pulsipher: 49:20 I will be happy to let you know if that happens in the future.

Laura Harris Hales: 49:24 That would be great.

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