Introduction

Since the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, a cottage industry of scholarship has emerged that explores the "dark alliance between religion and violence."[1] The conversation about religion and violence has become more balanced in recent years by an increased recognition that religion also fuels a powerful strain of peacebuilding, and that a "new breed of religious peacemakers presents a plausible opportunity to advance the cause of peace and stability in many troubled regions."[2] In this outpouring of scholarship and public discussion, however, the religion commonly called Mormonism, begun by nineteenth-century American prophet Joseph Smith, has been curiously absent.[3] *Mormonism and Violence* seeks to orient readers to how this unique strain of American – and now global – religion has engaged the problem of violence over the past two centuries.

Joseph Smith and a small group of followers founded the Church of Christ in upstate New York in 1830; within a few years the body of believers changed its name to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The church now claims over 16 million adherents worldwide, meaning there are more Latter-day Saints than Jews around the globe.[4] As a young seeker, Joseph Smith was dissatisfied with the competing Christian denominations in his community. Through a series of heavenly visions he came to believe that true Christianity was lost to the earth and needed to be restored, and that he had been chosen by God as the prophet who would lead that restoration. The hallmark of Smith's early prophetic career was the production of the Book of Mormon, which he claimed to have translated from a record written by prophets in the ancient Americas. Believers immediately saw the book of scripture as a sign that God had initiated a new age of revelations and miracles.

[1] Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, xi.
[2] Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred*, 7.
[3] See Juergensmeyer, Kitts, and Jerryson, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*; Omer, Appleby, and Little, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*.
[4] See Mason, *What Is Mormonism?*

Joseph Smith's aim was to mend the fracture that had historically plagued Christianity, but his new church only added to the spiritual cacophony that characterized nineteenth-century America.[5] When Smith received a revelation for his followers to gather to centralized utopian communities they called "Zion," the movement took on social and political dimensions that antagonized other local settlers. Mormonism was thus forged in a crucible of religious and cultural conflict with its neighbors, an agonistic dynamic that would only accelerate when, toward the end of his life, Smith introduced more controversial teachings and practices such as theocracy and polygamy. Smith prophesied that his church, which he understood to be a proxy for the kingdom of God on earth, would be like a stone that rolls forward "until it has filled the whole earth" and all its "enemies may be subdued."[6] The prophet's audacious claims warmed his followers' hearts but only fueled his critics' suspicions regarding the religion's world-conquering ambitions.

Mormonism has not escaped the cancer of violence that has plagued virtually every religion. Latter-day Saints have generally pursued lives of piety, decency, and neighborliness. But like the devout of every stripe, some Saints have also used their religion to justify and perpetrate deadly violence. They have done so in God's name and believing that they were accomplishing his will. But the same resources that have led some Latter-day Saints to violence – their scriptures, theology, leaders, and history – have inspired others to reject violence altogether and pursue a more peaceable way. In one revelation to Joseph Smith, God enjoins his people to "renounce war and proclaim peace."[7] In another revelation, from which the subtitle for this Element is taken, God informs the elders of the church that, because he will protect them, they are not required "to fight the battles of Zion."[8] By the late nineteenth century, Latter-day Saint leaders had repudiated violence as a live option for believers except when sanctioned by the state.

My analysis of Mormonism and violence is shaped by the theoretical framework established in Scott Appleby's book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Appleby argues that it is erroneous to

[5] See Barlow, "To Mend a Fractured Reality."   [6] Doctrine and Covenants 65:2, 6.
[7] Doctrine and Covenants 98:16.   [8] Doctrine and Covenants 105:14.

believe "that some kind of transhistorical, transcultural 'essence' determines the attitudes and practices of a religion's adherents apart from the concrete social and cultural circumstances in which they live." This historical-contextual approach means that a particular tradition or movement cannot be reduced to a singular quintessence – thus, popular sentiments that Buddhism is "peaceful" while Islam is "violent" are equally superficial. "Most religious societies," Appleby observes, "have interpreted their experience of the sacred in such a way as to give religion a paradoxical role in human affairs – as the bearer of peace *and* the sword. These apparently contradictory orientations reflect a continuing struggle within religions – and within the heart of each believer – over the meaning and character of the power encountered in the sacred and its relationship to coercive force or violence."[9] Religiously inspired violence and nonviolence should therefore be understood as variable modes of discourse and behavior within internally plural traditions rather than fixed norms.[10]

A brief note on nomenclature is in order. Soon after Smith founded his new church in 1830, outsiders seized upon his followers' belief in the Book of Mormon and applied the nicknames "Mormons" and "Mormonism" to the movement. Rather than being offended, church members, including Joseph Smith himself, largely adopted these terms in referring to themselves and their religion. In late 2018, however, the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Russell M. Nelson, insisted that "Mormon" and especially "Mormonism" are misnomers that obscure the church's Christian self-understanding, and asked people not to use those terms to refer to the church or its members.[11] This study seeks to respect a group's right to name itself. Since most of this Element focuses on the experience of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for convenience I will simply refer to it as "the church." As is customary, members of

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[9] Appleby, *Ambivalence of the Sacred*, 15, 27.
[10] See Mason, "Violent and Nonviolent Religious Militancy."
[11] See www.mormonnewsroom.org/style-guide (accessed 19 March 2019); Russell M. Nelson, "The Correct Name of the Church," October 2018 General Conference, available at www.lds.org/general-conference/2018/10/the-correct-name-of-the-church?lang=eng.

the church will be called "Latter-day Saints" or "Saints." I use the term "Mormonism" only when referring to the larger constellation of distinctive historical, theological, political, social, and cultural movements that trace their origins to Joseph Smith's founding revelations. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the largest and brightest star in that constellation, but it is not the only one. In other words, "Mormonism" retains utility as a familiar and convenient if imperfect umbrella term for the broad religious tradition, but it should not be reduced to or confused with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or any of the other denominations or churches whose historical or theological lineage go back to Joseph Smith. Furthermore, "Mormon" is at times a usefully generic historical-cultural designation for aspects that appear in the past but which no longer correspond to contemporary Latter-day Saint beliefs or practices.

This Element traces the relationship of Mormonism and violence in four sections. Section 1 focuses on violence in the Book of Mormon, the most prominent distinctive scripture of the Latter-day Saints. (Latter-day Saints recognize four volumes of scripture: the Christian Bible, Book of Mormon, and two other books of modern-day revelation called the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price.) Readers have traditionally understood the Book of Mormon to embrace a view of heroic and even sacred warfare, though with principled limits on how war should be conducted. But the text also provides a counternarrative that allows for the book to be interpreted as a prophetic witness against the futility of violence. The ambivalence of the Latter-day Saint approach to violence thus originates in the scripture that launched the movement.

In the remainder of the Element, the primary site of analysis shifts from scripture to history. I argue that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has gone through four stages in its historical relationship to violence: (1) pacifism; (2) active self-defense; (3) assertive and repressive violence; and (4) a renunciation of religious violence and embrace of state violence. These four stages should not be seen as entirely separate and distinct; that is to say, elements of one or more of these differing orientations may appear in a period generally characterized by another approach. Section 2 covers the first two stages and the beginnings of the third, which were prominent during Joseph Smith's leadership of the movement from 1830 until his violent death

in 1844. An early commitment to pacifism quickly gave way to a posture of self-defense in the face of the violent persecution that Latter-day Saint settlers experienced in Missouri beginning in 1833. That self-defense morphed into militancy in the mid-to-late 1830s. Though the Saints asserted that their actions were both justified and legal, other settlers and state governments interpreted the martial organization of a religious movement in a different light.

Section 3 addresses the most intense period of Latter-day Saint violence. Frustrated with the local and national governments' failure to protect them from violent persecution, Latter-day Saints under the leadership of Brigham Young employed violent means to secure and preserve the establishment of their Zion in the West during the first decade of their settlement in the Great Basin. From 1847 to 1857 the Saints employed violence as an assertive and repressive tool against Native Americans, dissenters, and "Gentiles" (non-Mormons). This violent period culminated tragically in the Mountain Meadows Massacre, in which Latter-day Saint settlers in southern Utah, along with some Native allies recruited for the purpose, murdered 120 California-bound emigrants in cold blood.

The concluding section employs a more episodic approach to Mormon history since 1857 to demonstrate how Latter-day Saints have come to understand violence as an activity lying outside the proper bounds of religion and exclusively as a prerogative of the state. In the late nineteenth century Latter-day Saints renounced religious violence and came to support and participate in state violence, all as part of the religion's modernization and its accommodation with the American nation. Yet Mormonism has always retained an undercurrent of critique toward state violence and especially war. In recent decades an emergent peacebuilding tradition has flourished primarily in Community of Christ, the second largest "Mormon" denomination, but has also begun to take root in some corners of the larger Utah-based church.

A short Element like this cannot possibly contain all the information that readers need for a comprehensive understanding of any complex religious system. Those interested in learning more should consult the works listed in the bibliography. *Mormonism and Violence* sets forth a series of inter-pretive arguments about Mormonism as filtered through the question of its

relationship to violence. This is not to suggest that Mormonism is unusually violent, or even best viewed through the lens of violence, but only that the religion has a tradition of violence – as is the case for virtually all other religious and secular movements throughout history. Understanding how the resources of a particular religion have been mobilized toward violent ends is an important component in learning what is necessary to counter-mobilize the tradition in the service of peace.

1 "Wars and Contentions": Violence in the Book of Mormon

Many of the world's most cherished scriptures – the Hebrew Bible, Book of Revelation, Qur'an, Mahabharata, and Guru Granth Sahib – present capti-vating narratives of sacred violence perpetrated by holy warriors or divine beings. The Book of Mormon is no exception. Haunted by violence throughout, the book begins with attempted murder, moves quickly to decapitation and near fratricide, and then spends several hundred pages detailing epic battles with hundreds of thousands of casualties, finally culminating in not one but two civilizational holocausts. Indeed, one of the book's major plot devices is a frequent and often detailed recounting of "wars and contentions."[12] Those who wish to ascribe a violent quality to Mormonism need look no further than its scriptures.

But the Book of Mormon is also a sneaky text. Like any complex work, it is open to multiple interpretations. A plain reading of the book suggests that violence is simply part of the natural order of things, regrettable but inevitable and sometimes even necessary and divinely prescribed. An alternative interpretation proposes that rather than offering an endorsement and even religious warrant for certain kinds of righteous violence, the Book of Mormon can be read as a penetrating critique of the violence that lies at the heart of the human condition.

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[12] The phrase "wars and contentions" appears, with some slight variations, twenty-seven times throughout the Book of Mormon but not at all in the Bible or in other Latter-day Saint scriptures.

What is the Book of Mormon? Published in 1830 in upstate New York, Joseph Smith claimed that the book was the English translation of ancient American writings inscribed on gold plates delivered to him by an angel. Smith insisted he was not the author of the text but rather an inspired medium who relied on "the gift and power of God" to translate the sacred writings of prophets who lived in the Americas from approximately 600 BCE to 400 CE. It is not necessary here to review the fierce debates regarding the book's authenticity and historicity.[13] What does matter for our purposes is that the Book of Mormon serves as sacred scripture for millions of believers around the world, many of whom read from its pages daily for inspiration, comfort, and guidance.

In structure, tone, and format, the Book of Mormon is most similar to the Bible. Divided into fifteen books typically named after their principal author, its 500-plus pages contain a variety of genres including history, prophecy, theology, exhortation, and poetry. The main storyline follows a family that is warned by God around 600 BCE to flee their home in Jerusalem in advance of the Babylonians' impending destruction of the city. After wandering in the wilderness for several years, the family eventually builds a boat and sails to the "promised land," presumably the Americas. Upon the death of the family patriarch, a recurrent feud between the family's four oldest brothers leads to a schism that produces two warring factions called, after their original leaders, the Nephites and Lamanites.

Violence figures prominently throughout the Book of Mormon. This makes sense because of the ways in which violence shaped the experiences of the book's three primary narrators: Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni.[14] The life of Nephi, whose narration opens the text, is bookended by personal and family violence with broader social and political connotations. His family's exodus from Jerusalem is precipitated by an attempt on his father's life by those who refuse to believe his prophetic warnings that their city is under

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[13] See Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*; Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*; Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*; and Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography*.

[14] This approach is influenced by Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

divine judgment and will be destroyed.[15] After Nephi declares that God has chosen him, the fourth son, to succeed his father as the "ruler" over the family, two of his disgruntled oldest brothers, Laman and Lemuel, assault him repeatedly, and divine interference is required on multiple occasions to save his life.[16] When the family finally separates – both geographically and in terms of their identity – one of Nephi's first actions is to "make many swords" to protect his followers from the Lamanites, whom he portrays as being filled with "hatred towards me and my children and those who were called my people."[17] By the time of Nephi's death, familial violence had spiraled into tribal warfare, with the Nephites and Lamanites engaged in seemingly endless "wars and contentions."[18]

Indeed, war frames much of the Book of Mormon's historical account. One scholar found that military matters constitute approximately one-third of the book's total content, and another identified over ninety discrete instances of armed conflict (not including many other instances of personal violence) throughout the narrative.[19] One twenty-chapter stretch, consisting of fifty-two pages (approximately ten percent of the entire book), is a near-continuous war chronicle that taxes the patience of even devout readers who are typically looking for less martial fare.[20] From a narratological perspective, the heavy emphasis on war can be ascribed to the fact that book presents itself as being primarily compiled and edited by – and therefore named after – Mormon, a military general, historian, and Christian prophet who lived in the fourth century CE. Mormon's life and worldview is dominated by total warfare. He recounts witnessing large-scale conflict between the Nephites and Lamanites from the time he was eleven years old. Four years later, at age fifteen, Mormon is recruited to lead the Nephite armies. His first-person account is a harrowing tale of "blood and carnage spread throughout all the face of the land."[21] Eventually,

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[15] 1 Nephi 1:20.
[16] See 1 Nephi 3:28–29; 7:16–18; 17:48–54; 18:10–20; 2 Nephi 5:2–5.
[17] 2 Nephi 5:14.   [18] 2 Nephi 5:34.
[19] Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 291; Sorenson, "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica," Appendix.
[20] See Alma 43–62.   [21] Mormon 2:8.

Lamanite armies simply overwhelm the Nephite forces. Hundreds of thousands of Nephites are killed by the Lamanites, until Mormon is one of only twenty-five survivors. Before passing on the sacred record to his son Moroni – the final survivor and record keeper of the Nephite civilization – Mormon offers a haunting portrait of his people's ultimate fate: "their flesh, and bones, and blood lay upon the face of the earth, being left by the hands of those who slew them to molder upon the land, and to crumble and to return to their mother earth."[22]

The bloodshed portrayed in the Book of Mormon is both pervasive and poignant. After one particularly fierce battle in which "the number of their dead was not numbered because of the greatness of the number," the bodies of the killed are dumped into a river and carried out to sea.[23] In the final battle that resulted in the complete annihilation of the Nephite civilization, Mormon documents battlefield losses of nearly a quarter million people.[24] The Book of Mormon also seems to understand that the scope of human suffering entailed in such mass casualty statistics can be difficult to comprehend and even numbing, so it also offers more intimately scaled portrayals of violence. At one point, a group of women and children are burned to death for their religious beliefs, with the missionaries who converted them forced to stand by helplessly and listen to their screams.[25] Near the end of the Nephite holocaust, Mormon reports that the Lamanites took captives of men, women, and children, then "[fed] the women upon the flesh of their husbands, and the children upon the flesh of their fathers." Even worse, in his estimation, was the treatment of Lamanite prisoners by Nephite soldiers, who after raping their female captives "did murder them in a most cruel manner, torturing their bodies even unto death." Mormon spent his life immersed in war, but these atrocities forced him to conclude that his own people were utterly "brutal," "without principle," "past feeling," and "without civilization."[26]

There is a tragic symmetry to the violence that defines the Nephite civilization. Culminating in mass slaughter, it originates with a single killing. After leaving Jerusalem, Nephi and his brothers are sent back to the

[22] Mormon 6:15. [23] Alma 44:21. [24] Mormon 6:11–15. [25] Alma 14:8–10.
[26] Moroni 9:8–11, 19–20.

city by their father to retrieve a collection of sacred records. The owner of the records, named Laban, refuses the brothers' request and sends his guards after them. Undaunted, Nephi sneaks back into the city under cover of darkness and fortuitously discovers Laban passed out drunk in the street. Nephi's gaze is drawn to Laban's sword – "the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and . . . the blade thereof was of the most precious steel" – when he is suddenly "constrained by the Spirit" to kill Laban. Nephi initially fights the urge, recoiling at the suggestion that he should take a life. But the voice whispering in his ear is insistent, reasoning that "the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes" and "it is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief." Nephi overcomes his initial resistance and obeys. He decapitates Laban with his own sword, then dons the dead man's clothing to fool Laban's servant and retrieve the records.[27] Rather than leaving the weapon at the scene of the crime, Nephi carries it with him into the wilderness and eventually across the ocean. The "sword of Laban" appears recurrently in the Book of Mormon narrative – first as a pattern to forge more weapons, then as an emblem of kingly power and authority.[28]

Placed right at the beginning of the book, the story of Nephi killing Laban is well-known by Latter-day Saints and other Book of Mormon readers. Most official or otherwise sympathetic Latter-day Saint interpretations ignore the ethical questions associated with Nephi's violence, turning it instead into a moral lesson – Nephi faithfully obeyed God's Spirit even when it demanded a hard thing of him – or accepting the utilitarian argument that the long-term benefits of Nephi retrieving the sacred records

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[27] 1 Nephi 4, quotes from verses 9–13.

[28] The sword of Laban also figured in the modern Mormon imagination. Joseph Smith claimed that the sword was buried in the box with the golden plates, and some early Mormon converts, in fits of religious ecstasy, pretended "that they had the sword of Laban, and would wield it as expert as a light dragoon." See Doctrine and Covenants 17:1; "John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847," p. 26, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847/30.