Mosiah 20:8–9

> 8 And now Limhi had discovered them from the tower, even all their preparations for war did he discover; therefore he gathered his people together, and laid wait for them in the fields and in the forests.
> 9 And it came to pass that when the Lamanites had come up, that the people of Limhi began to fall upon them from their waiting places, and began to slay them.

As the incident with Gideon and Noah shows, this tower gave a view of Lamanite lands. Therefore, Limhi was warned about the approach of this army which was no doubt large and which evidently made no attempt at a stealthy approach. In Mesoamerican warfare, a significant tactic was intimidating the enemy by a show of numbers and impressive regalia, and there is no reason to see these pre-encounter maneuvers as different.

Unlike Noah, who was on the tower by coincidence, Limhi was there because the recent hostilities between the two city-states and his resultant wariness about another attack. When he saw this one developing, he promptly launched an ambush to regain the tactical advantage. This maneuver suggests that he had significantly fewer fighting men than the Lamanite king. Verse 11 confirms that Limhi's army was "not half so numerous as the Lamanites." He was thus skillfully evening the odds.

Mosiah 20:10–11

> 10 And it came to pass that the battle became exceedingly sore, for they fought like lions for their prey.
> 11 And it came to pass that the people of Limhi began to drive the Lamanites before them; yet they were not half so numerous as the Lamanites. But they fought for their lives, and for their wives, and for their children; therefore they exerted themselves and like dragons did they fight.

Literature: The zoological reference to lions, while communicating accurately to an American audience, is not culturally accurate for Mesoamerica where the biggest feline was a jaguar. Joseph Smith likely substituted a well-known big cat for the less well known predator that was also a big cat. In other words, the underlying text was probably "jaguar," but the translation is "lion." It is easier to see explain this word as Joseph's mislabeling than Mormon's failure to correctly identify a jaguar.

The more common English idiom of fighting lions in verse 10 gives way to a much more awkward description in verse 11 of fight "like dragons." (The reference to fighting like dragons will also appear as a description of the Lamanites in Alma 43:44.) In English literature, the dragon appears as the maiden-devouring, fire-breathing foe of St. George and other fairytales. (In contrast, the Chinese dragon represents wisdom and longevity, rather than ferocity.) Furthermore, while the image of English dragons is always negative (a vicious enemy to the innocent), Mormon clearly uses the term to praise Limhi's soldiers. Why? The best explanation relies upon a Mesoamerican context. Mesoamerican culture contains a fictive

animal that combines elements of both serpent and bird (wings and feathers). During Mormon's time, this feathered serpent could have been seen as a symbol *par excellence* of valiant warriors. The Temple of the Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan clearly presents the symbol in this military context.[4]

Thus, recasting verses to reflect their Mesoamerican context might yield this retranslation:

> And it came to pass:
> The battle became violent and noisy
> They fought [for their families]
> Like God's jaguars for their prey.
> And it came to pass:
> The Limhites began to drive away the Lamanites
> Though they were not half so many.
> They fought for lives, wives, and children.
> They fought mightily.
> They fought like God's feared war serpent.

Of course this "translation" takes great liberties with the English text. I do not argue that it represents the actual underlying text but rather that it may simulate that text. In both Maya and Nahua poetry, the imagery comes in shorter and more powerful phrasings, so I have restructured the English ideas to provide a more Mesoamerican poetic flavor.

Mormon is clearly creating a poetic parallel between the lions and the dragons. When we add the religious/military significance of those images in Mesoamerica, the description of the Limhites' fighting fury takes on new meanings. In addition to the strength of arms alone is the implication of a divine presence ("God's"). In poetic terms, Mormon not only describes their efforts but also emphasizes the role God played in the victory.

John Sorenson has also identified the dragon as a Mesoamerican motif but missed the parallel to the lion and suggested that the dragon is the caiman or the earth monster.[5] While the caiman is certainly a respectable candidate for the dragon, being one of the few large predators of the area, its association with earth ignores the significant military associations of the war serpent of Mormon's time. Clearly there is not enough evidence to draw firm conclusions, but the war serpent appears to fit the context better.[6]

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[4]Saburo Sugiyama, "Rulership, Warfare, and Human Sacrifice at the Ciudadela: An Iconographic Study of Feathered Serpent Representations," in *Art, Ideology, and the City of Teotihuacán*, edited by Janet Catherine Berlo (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 209–10. This temple was constructed around A.D. 200. The imagery of the war serpent continued to be important in Mormon's times.

[5]John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985), 187. The caiman is a species of crocodile indigenous to Central America.

[6]David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993), 309, note that the war serpent was imported into Maya culture from Teotihuacán. This makes it a late symbol and not present when these events

Translation: What are the implications of this passage for Joseph Smith's translation process? While acknowledging the speculative nature of my poetic recasting, recasting the verses increases their meaning by incorporating the appropriate Mesoamerican context (lions = jaguars/ dragons = war serpents). Thus, this passage is another example to reinforce the idea that our current English text relates to the underlying original language on the basis of meaning, rather than literal translation.

Mosiah 20:12

> 12 And it came to pass that they found the king of the Lamanites among the number of their dead; yet he was not dead, having been wounded and left upon the ground, so speedy was the flight of his people.

Culture: There are two important parts of the battle's description: first, the Lamanites flee, leaving their wounded king behind; and second, he is wounded, not dead. While both of these facts are not necessarily foreign to modern warfare, they are more understandable in the context of Mesoamerican warfare.

First, even though the Limhites were not half so numerous as the Lamanites, their ambush is effective. Warfare of the time was essentially hand-to-hand, not long distance. Thrown arrows (employing the atlatl) might wound from a distance, but not necessarily kill the foe, if he were wearing the defensive padded shirt that was used for armor. (See commentary accompanying Alma 43:18–20.) Once the initial surprise of the attack from ambush has had its effects, the two armies would engage in hand-to-hand combat. The net effect of two Lamanites for every Limhite suggests that the ambush had not completely evened the odds or incapacitated half of the Lamanite army.

The ambush succeeded because the Limhites break through to the king and wounded him severely enough to incapacitate him. This stroke appears to have ended the battle, and the surviving Lamanites "speedily" retreated.

Next, we note that the king was only wounded. While there were certainly casualties in Mesoamerican warfare, both intent and characteristics of the weapons were more likely to inflict injury than death. Given Mesoamerican culture, it is predictable that the Limhites would attempt to capture the king rather than kill him.

Mosiah 20:13

> 13 And they took him and bound up his wounds, and brought him before Limhi, and said: Behold, here is the king of the Lamanites; he having received a wound has fallen among their dead, and they have left him; and behold, we have brought him before you; and now let us slay him.

After promptly treating the king's wounds, Limhi's soldiers deliver him for a face-to-face meeting. This king-to-king exchange represents, not a military conflict, but

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took place. It was, however, a symbol with which Mormon would have been painfully familiar. (See Helaman, Part 1: Context, Chapter 3, "The Gadianton Robbers in Mormon's Theological History: Their Structural Role and Plausible Identification.")