



The opening pages of the Book of Mormon confront us with the most problematic story in the entire book—the murder of a defenseless Laban by a sword-wielding Nephi. (1 Nephi 4) We all know the story. Nephi has been commanded by God (through his prophet-father Lehi) to obtain Laban's brass plate version of the Hebrew

Scriptures. Nephi and his brothers return to Jerusalem and try everything they can think of to get the plates—with the result that Laban robs them of all their worldly possessions and tries to kill them.

Nephi, not knowing what to do next, goes into Jerusalem by night, stumbles across Laban lying drunk in the gutter, and is “constrained by the Spirit” to kill Laban. Nephi resists the murderous injunction twice, but relents upon the third command and “smote off his head with his own sword.”

The traditional Mormon response to this grisly tale is to seek to justify Nephi in his murder, adopting the rationales Nephi himself gives to cover his deed: (1) Laban had sought to kill Nephi; (2) Laban would not hearken to the commands of the Lord; (3) Laban had robbed Nephi of his property; (4) Nephi’s posterity cannot keep the commandments unless they have the law of Moses engraved on the plates, and if they cannot keep the commandments, they will not prosper in the promised land; and, (5) “It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief.” (This last excuse is ironically footnoted in the 1981 LDS edition to “Life, Sanctity of” in the Topical Guide.)



Not cross-referenced is the fact this same rationale was given by Caiaphas as the basis to kill Jesus Christ: “[I]t is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.” (John 11:50) This should be our first indication that something is wrong; that perhaps justifications are not in order but rather a closer examination of the story; that possibly we find the story of Laban’s murder troublesome because it is supposed to be troublesome. Certainly Nephi is troubled. Why should we not be?

Does the story teach that we should do whatever the Lord commands, even if it goes against everything we have been taught and everything we believe in? Is Laban an



Isaac for whom no ram in the thicket was caught? Is Laban a wicked Messiah whose blood must be shed for the salvation of the Nephites? Or is something else at play?

We are taken aback when a brass ball magically appears overnight in front of Lehi’s tent after the departure from

Jerusalem. (1 Nephi 16:10) If God could gift Lehi and Company with a brass ball, why could he not have done the same with the brass plates? Was the murder of Laban necessary? Was it a loyalty test for Nephi? Did Nephi pass the test? Or did he fail?

Murder Most Foul

Nephi rationalizes his murder of Laban because Laban had tried to kill Nephi and had robbed Nephi of his property. But this is exactly what Nephi now does. Nephi murders Laban and robs him of his property. Not only does Nephi steal Laban's brass plates, but also his sword and servant. Is Nephi interested in more than the brass plates? Is cupidity for Laban's sword suggested by Nephi's rapturous description of its having a gold hilt, fine workmanship and blade of "most precious steel"?



Nephi does every wicked act of which he accuses Laban. In short, Nephi becomes Laban. The text emphasizes this transition of identity when Nephi puts on the garments of Laban, "yea, even every whit," including his armor (and sword). Nephi even speaks to Zoram in the voice of Laban: "I spake unto him as if it had been Laban." (1 Nephi 4:23—Nephi seems constrained to speak of himself in the third person here—not "I spake unto him as if I had been Laban," but "as if **it** had been Laban.") So complete is Nephi's transformation that Zoram recognizes Nephi as Laban, as do Nephi's brothers outside the city walls, "for they supposed it was Laban."

Nephi murders Laban under cover of darkness ("And it was by night") when evil deeds are wont to occur. As Hamlet puts it:



'Tis now the very witching time of night,

When churchyards yawn and hell itself breaths out

Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood,

And do such bitter business as the day

Would quake to look on. (III, 2)

The Curse of Nephi

But surely Nephi did the right thing in killing Laban. Did he not obtain the brass plates? Were not the plates necessary? Did not Nephi correctly conclude that his "seed" had to keep the commandments contained on the brass plates in order to "prosper in the land of promise"?

But here's the rub—Nephi's seed is ultimately destroyed. And more than that, God curses Nephi with the knowledge of it.

In response to Nephi's prayer to know the meaning of the dream of his father, the Lord opens up to Nephi a panoramic vision of the future of the world on both hemispheres. Nephi sees many things in chapters 11-14. He sees the baptism, ministry and crucifixion of Jesus and the call of the twelve apostles (chapter 11); the righteousness and iniquity of his people, the appearance of Jesus to the Nephites, and the utter destruction of his own descendants at the hands of the Lamanites (chapter 12); the church of the devil set up among the Gentiles, the discovery of America, the loss of many plain and precious parts of the Bible, the restoration of the gospel, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the building up of Zion (chapter 13); the polarization of people into either the church of God or the church of the devil, the persecution of the saints by the great and abominable church, the destruction of the wicked in the last days and the triumph of the righteous (chapter 14).



The vision ends on an upbeat and glorious note. But what is Nephi's immediate reaction to this overwhelming vision? What is the one thing that arrests his attention? It is the destruction of his descendants that he sees midway through the vision.

"And it came to pass that I was overcome because of my afflictions, for I considered that mine afflictions were great above all, because of the destruction of my people, for I had beheld their fall." (1 Nephi 15:5)

This is the exact right emotional note. In spite of all the wonderful things Nephi has seen, this is the fact on which he fixates. It is reminiscent of Adam's response to the vision he receives from Michael in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which Adam is shown the destruction of his posterity in the Flood:

How didst thou grieve, then, Adam, to behold

The end of all thy offspring, end so sad,

Depopulation? Thee another flood,

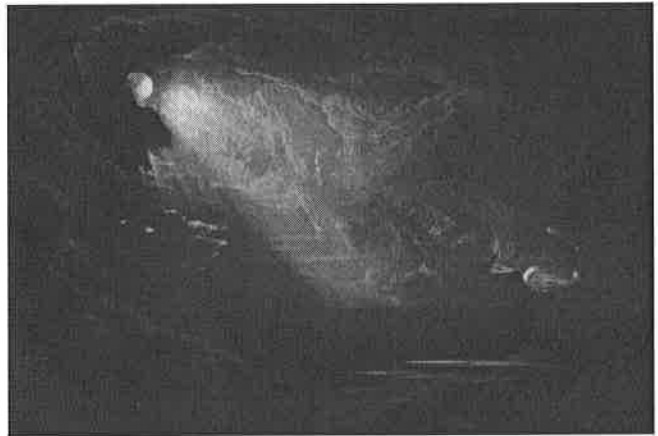
Of tears and sorrow a flood thee also drown'd,

*And sunk thee as thy sons; till gently
rear'd*

*By th' angel, on thy feet thou stood'st
at last,*

*Though comfortless, as when a father
mourns*

*His children, all in view destroy'd at
once.*



Adam's words upon seeing this vision are reminiscent of Nephi's:



*O visions ill foreseen! Better had I
Liv'd ignorant of future, so had borne
My part of evil only, each day's lot
Enough to bear; those now, that were
dispens'd*

The burden of many ages, on me light

*At once, by my foreknowledge gaining
birth*

Abortive, to torment me ere their being,

With thought that they must be. (Book IX, lines 754-770)

As Adam must be "gently rear'd by th' angel" upon seeing this calamity befall his posterity, so Nephi must "receive strength" before he can carry on. (1 Nephi 15:6) As Adam is tormented "with the thought that they must be," so is Nephi "grieved" because of the things which he had seen, "and knew that they must unavoidably come to pass." (1 Nephi 15:4)

Nephi considers his afflictions "great above all, because of the destruction of my people, for I had beheld their fall." (1 Nephi 15:5) And well he might. What could be a greater and more miserable burden for Nephi to bear? And why does God choose to curse Nephi with this knowledge?

The text thrusts Nephi into the full irony of the situation, for upon returning to the



tent after his vision, Nephi sees Laman and Lemuel arguing over the meaning of their father's words. It is these two brothers who have been unrighteous, who have murmured against the will of God from the beginning, who have fought against the divine directive at every turn. These are the two brothers who cannot understand the meaning of Lehi's words because "they were

hard in their hearts, therefore they did not look unto the Lord as they ought." (1 Nephi 15:3) And yet it is their descendants who will survive, not Nephi's. This is similar to the disquieting moment when Macbeth learns that though he will be king, it is Banquo who will beget kings.

What justice is there in this? Everything is turned on its head. Why should Nephi's descendants be the ones who are destroyed? Nephi is the one who has been faithful. Nephi is the one who speaks with God. Nephi is the one who has done everything that Lord has asked. Nephi is the one who even murdered a man in cold blood because God insisted he do so.

Hold that thought.

Is there a connection? Nephi murders a man in cold blood and robs him of his possessions, effectively becoming the wicked Laban in word, dress and deed. And it is Nephi who receives from God the greatest curse a person could have; that of

witnessing the utter destruction of his posterity and knowing it must come to pass.

It is a lesson in futility. After everything Nephi has done (and will yet do) to establish his people in a land of promise, it is all for nothing. "We set out to save the Shire, Sam," Frodo tells his friend. "And we did save it . . . but not for me."



But is it also a lesson in consequences? In retribution? In balancing the scales? Does Nephi receive so great a curse **because** he commits so great a sin?

These questions are ultimately unanswerable, but begin to raise the lid on the story of the slaying of Laban as a dark fable of the human soul.

A Spirit of Health or Goblin Damn'd?

The natural objection to this line of thought would be that it is the Spirit of God that coerces Nephi to murder Laban, and how can it be wicked to do what is divinely commanded? Why should there be any retribution for doing what is right? What scales need balancing?

This leads us to the more fundamental question of just who, if anyone, spoke to Nephi that bleak Jerusalem night.

We know Nephi claims he was repeatedly commanded by the Spirit to do the deed, a command Nephi virtuously resisted. But we also know Nephi's account is replete with rationalizations for the murder. Might the narrative of the divine command be merely one more attempted justification?

Put another way, the only account we have is from Nephi. We don't get to hear Laban's version. Dead men tell no tales. If Nephi were on trial for Laban's murder, how might an impartial jury view his story, especially considering he is an admitted murderer and thief? Would it be reasonable to conclude that Nephi actually heard a voice commanding him to kill?

And assuming he really did hear a voice, how is it Nephi can so positively identify it as coming from God? Here it might be noted the voice is identified throughout the narrative only as "the Spirit," never as "the Spirit of God." Just who is this "Spirit" anyway?

The reader is confronted with Hamlet's dilemma, even if Nephi appears not to recognize the issue. Hamlet also is confronted by a spirit in the likeness of his father who commands Hamlet to kill the new king, Hamlet's uncle. But Hamlet is not sure

the spirit is who it claims to be. Is it "a spirit of health of goblin damn'd?" (I, 4) Or as Hamlet later more fully soliloquizes:

*The spirit that I have seen
 May be the devil; and the devil hath power
 To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me. (II, 2)*



Has Nephi been deceived by a spirit that assumed "a pleasing shape"? Was the Spirit that led him and spoke to him that night, a spirit that is never positively identified as being of God, really from God at all? It was Joseph Smith who was reputed to have said, "Some revelations are of God, some are of men, and some are of the devil." [i]

Is the story of Laban's murder a parable about spiritual discernment, and how even the righteous may be deceived?

But what if Nephi was correct in attributing his guiding "spirit" to God? Is it possible that God would direct Nephi to murder Laban and then harshly punish him for doing as commanded?

One is reminded of the "lying spirit" the Lord sent his prophets to entice Ahab to go to battle so that he might be slain (2 Chronicles 18), or the "false Dream" Zeus sent Agamemnon urging him to a premature attack on Troy with lying promises of victory. (*The Illiad*, II, lines 1-20) Is the spirit that spoke to Nephi a "lying spirit" sent from God?



The last possibility to be considered is the most troubling—and the most profound—that Nephi was led by a true spirit of God in murdering Laban; and that it is for obeying the voice of God's Spirit that Nephi's life is so onerously blighted by a vision of his posterity's destruction.

Here we enter upon the ancient soil of Greek tragedy. In *The Oresteia* trilogy of plays by Aeschylus, Orestes is the son of Agamemnon, who must avenge his father's murder at the hands of his mother, Clytemnestra. As Rex Warner says in his introduction *The Oresteia*, "We are again involved in incompatibilities, logical and

emotional. It is right to kill one's father's murderer; it is wrong to kill one's mother. Orestes has been instructed by Apollo, 'the interpreter of Zeus,' to do something that is both right and wrong." But upon slaying his mother at the end of the second play, Orestes is pursued by other divine beings (the Furies) who are his mother's avengers, themselves seeking retribution.



"The problem is this: Orestes has acted as Apollo ordered him to act; he is then punished for his action by other divine powers. Can the Gods be double-faced? Can there be two opposite divine views on the same point? Aeschylus boldly answers 'Yes.'"[ii]

Is the question at the heart of *The Oresteia* the same as at the heart of the Book of Mormon, "Can one who is loyal to God in the extreme also receive the cursing of God in the extreme?" Is this the ultimate example of bad things happening to good people? Is it an instance of how Tennyson has Guinevere portray Arthur, "He is all fault who hath no fault at all"? Is it an example of Stephen King's observation, "God is cruel. Sometimes he makes you live"?

Is it a morality tale of the perils of unquestioning obedience, even when such obedience contravenes one's core principle? Is this a lesson other Mormons had to learn on a late summer's day in 1857 at a place called Mountain Meadows?



Does the tale of the slaying of Laban plumb the depths of the human experience, where evil is often returned for good, and cursing for faithfulness? Should the first book in the Nephite record be subtitled, "The Tragedy of Nephi"? Does it serve as a second witness with Job to the inscrutability of fate, and the universality of the mystery of God? And

lastly, does it stand as a testament to the proposition that, whereas we may not understand the dealings of God in what we frequently find to be a hard, cold cosmos, at least we are not alone in our plight?

If the Book of Mormon stands for any of these propositions, it is a book well worth the reading, well worth the pondering, and perhaps well worth the fearing.

[i] David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ by a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (David Whitmer: Richmond, Virginia, 1887), 30-31.

[ii] E.D.A. Morshead, translator, *The Oresteia* (The Easton Press: Norwalk, Conn, 1979), xv-xvi.



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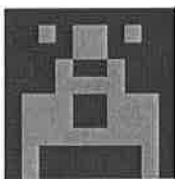
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LSDPPer on December 10, 2013 at 8:56 am

fascinating; very good, thank you.

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