

# What about the Story of Nephi Killing Laban?

*In the "I have a Question" section of the September 1976 Ensign, Elder R. Holland, then Commissioner of Church Education, wrote the following response to the question: "How can I explain Nephi's killing Laban to my nonmember friends? Some really reject it as scriptural."*

Here are at least a few things I try to keep in mind when discussing the taking of Laban's life:

Nephi intentionally records this experience in elaborate detail, even though his small plates were limited in both size and subject matter. Why did he take such pains to preserve for future readers an action which was so difficult for him to perform and which has been so widely misunderstood? Why not simply leave it out? Why, indeed, when the small plates were to be restricted to "things which are pleasing unto God" and "of worth unto the children of men" (1 Nephi 6:5,6)? Maybe there's a clue in all of that.

It is wrong to assume that Nephi in any way wished to take Laban's life. He was a young man, and despite a 600 B.C. world full of tensions and retaliations, he had never "shed the blood of man" (1 Ne. 4:10). Nothing in his life seems to have conditioned him for this task. In fact the commandments he had been taught from childhood declared, "Thou shalt not kill"; and he recoiled, initially refusing to obey the prompting of the Spirit.

Bible students will remember that the same Moses who received on Mount Sinai this very commandment against one man taking another's life also sang that the Lord could kill as well as make alive, wound as well as heal (Deut. 32:39). Indeed, Moses himself, descending from Sinai's summit with the Ten Commandments as fresh in his mind as they were in his hands, immediately caused 3,000 Israelite idolaters to be slain. Looking with an unbiased eye, one simply cannot disparagingly grimace when Nephi takes Laban's sword and, for the protection of an entire nation, slays him, and then with a change of facial expression, enthusiastically applaud when David takes Goliath's sword and, for the protection of an entire nation, "drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head therewith" (1 Sam. 17:51). The Bible and Book of Mormon are clearly shoulder-to-shoulder on such an issue.

Laban, lying before Nephi in a drunken stupor, has not been guiltless in his dealings with Lehi's family. In what little we know the man, Laban has at least: (1) been unfaithful in keeping the commandments of God; (2) falsely accused Laman of robbery; (3) coveted Lehi's property as a greedy, "lustful" man; (4) stolen that property outright; and (5) sought twice to kill Nephi and/or his brothers. He was, by the Holy Spirit's own declaration, a "wicked" man delivered unto Nephi by the very hand of the Lord (1 Ne. 4:13).

Even if we reject an Old Testament standard of legal judgments against "wicked" men, we still find the basis for Nephi's strict commandment in the laws governing our own dispensation. The Lord declared to the Prophet Joseph Smith:

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"And him that repenteth not of his sins, and confesseth them not, ye shall...do with him as the scriptures saith unto you, either by commandment or by revelation. And this ye shall do that God may be glorified—not because ye forgive not, having not compassion, but that ye may be justified in the eyes of the law, that ye may not offend him who is your lawgiver." (D&C 64:12-13; emphasis added).

The judgment against Laban is being received "by revelation," and Nephi ultimately must slay Laban for the very reason which initially led him to shrink from it—so that he will not offend the divine "lawgiver." (See D&C 98:23-32.)

We realize, then, that the application of laws changes at the command of the lawgiver. Our only safety—and Nephi's—is knowing and obeying that Holy Spirit which whispers truth. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "God said, 'Thou shalt not kill'; at another time He said, 'Thou shalt not utterly destroy.' This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire . . . Everything that God gives us is lawful and right" (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p 256).

It would seem, finally, that obedience to divine revelation, not death, is the focal point of this story. God can restore life in time and eternity; he can do almost nothing with willful disobedience. The quality of our obedience to God's commandments is still the clearest expression of the quality of our faith in him.

Ultimately, what we come to through all of this (and the list of justifications for the incident could be much longer) is at least a partial answer to the first question posed—why is the story told at all? In addition to any of the above mentioned plausible meanings and legitimate reasons, this account does at least one more truly essential thing: it underscores the monumental—yes, even life-and-death-importance of sacred scripture, of records which contain "words which have been spoken by the mouth of . . . holy prophets" (1 Ne. 3:20).

One who does not understand Nephi's relentless determination to enter that city and obtain those records, no matter what the cost to his own life or others, will never understand why it was so fundamentally necessary to bring forth the Book of Mormon in this dispensation, or why the forces of hell tried so to wrench those plates from the boy prophet, or why every one of us must search the scriptures and live by every word of God. As with Nephi's people traveling through their wilderness, it is "wisdom in the Lord" that we, too, should carry the sacred records with us on our own journey toward the Promised Land. (See 1 Ne. 5:22.) Our only alternative is to "dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Ne. 4:13).