

The Power of Deliverance: Why Nephi Killed Laban

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For some people, especially those new to the Book of Mormon, a most challenging or unsettling story is Nephi’s slaying of Laban (see 1 Nephi 3–4). Couldn’t Nephi have just taken Laban’s clothes, retrieved the plates, and then left with Zoram?

Nephi Chose to Include the Story

In the many times I have studied and taught this account, I have pondered why Nephi included it. Surely he understood how hard this would be for others to understand. Couldn’t he have skipped the difficult detail about killing Laban and just said that by the power of God he and his brothers were eventually able to get the plates from him?

The point is that he did not. Nephi felt impressed by the Spirit to write this detailed account of how he obtained the brass plates (see 1 Nephi 19:6; 2 Nephi 5:30–32).

It’s important to note that when Nephi began this record, he wrote with hindsight. He had had

What appears to be the breaking of a commandment is actually an example of God’s great mercy.

more than 30 years to ponder the encounter with Laban, and its importance became ever more significant to him. He saw clearly what the Lord had done for his family and why. (See 2 Nephi 5:28.)

In 1 Nephi 1, with a perfect perspective of where he was leading his readers, Nephi explained a major theme for what he was about to write: “But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto *the power of deliverance*” (verse 20; emphasis added).

Ultimately, the particular deliverance I am focusing on was not merely of the plates or of Nephi’s life. Nor was it the deliverance of the Nephite nation alone. Instead, the outcome was something much greater—it was intended to assist in the deliverance of all mankind.

Context Is Crucial

To put this story in context, we need to review the events that led up to it.



The Lord had commanded Lehi to send his sons back to Jerusalem to obtain the plates of brass (see 1 Nephi 3:2–4). It would not be easy. The deliverance of these plates would be a true test of their faith.

When Nephi and his brothers arrived outside Jerusalem, they cast lots to determine who would approach Laban first.¹ The lot fell to Laman, who went to Laban’s house and asked for the plates. But Laban called Laman a robber and threatened to kill him. Laman fled and told his brothers what Laban had done. Despite the setback, Nephi persuaded them to continue their mission. (See 1 Nephi 3:10–21.)

For their second attempt, they decided to retrieve their father’s riches to bargain for the plates. When they arrived at Laban’s house, he again showed his corrupt nature by stealing their precious things and trying to kill them. The brothers fled and hid. (See 1 Nephi 3:22–27.)

Angry and full of unbelief, Laman and Lemuel, in spite of an angel’s rebuke (see 1 Nephi 3:29–31), refused to try again to get the plates. So Nephi went alone, being “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do” (1 Nephi 4:6). That night, alone in the streets of Jerusalem, Nephi found Laban on the ground in a drunken stupor.

As Nephi looked upon this man who had sought their lives, the Spirit constrained him to slay Laban.

The idea was abhorrent to Nephi, and he resisted. The Spirit prompted him twice more, reminding him, “The Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes” (1 Nephi 4:13; see also 1 Nephi 4:7–12; Deuteronomy 7:2). While Nephi’s reluctance reflected his respect for life, this experience ultimately demonstrated his deep reverence for obeying the will of the Lord.

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One Life Lost versus Many

Nephi recognized that the record would help preserve his people’s language and that his posterity would need to know the commandments in order to keep them (see 1 Nephi 3:19; 4:15–16). Without the brass plates, they would not have the prophets’ words. Nephi also knew by the Spirit that the Lord had delivered Laban into his hands and that it was “better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13).

The Lord was directing Nephi in a way that would result in the least loss of life. The Lord had given Laban two opportunities to part with the plates. While we do not know from the record, it is likely that the Lord would have given promptings or warnings to Laban,² who ignored them. The Lord also knew these sacred records would soon be destroyed in the upcoming invasion by the

Babylonians if they were not removed (in a related vein, see 2 Nephi 26:17; Enos 1:14; Mormon 6:6).

Leaving Laban alive would have likely led to more deaths and suffering. It’s possible that he or others would have followed Nephi and his brothers into the wilderness and killed their entire family. (See 1 Nephi 4:36.)³

More Miracles

Nephi obeyed the Lord. After slaying Laban, he dressed in Laban’s clothing and armor and went toward the treasury, where he met Zoram, Laban’s servant. Because of the power of God upon Nephi, it appears Zoram had no suspicions. To him, Nephi looked and sounded like Laban—another part of the miraculous deliverance. Zoram retrieved the brass plates and followed Nephi out of the city. (See 1 Nephi 4:19–26.)

Nephi’s brothers saw him from a distance and began to flee, mistaking him for Laban. Nephi called to them in his own voice, and they stopped. Zoram, however, feared for his life. Nephi made a solemn oath that if Zoram would go with them, they would spare his life and he would be a free man. Zoram—who became a critical second witness of this powerful deliverance—took courage from Nephi’s words and swore his own oath that he would stay with them. (See 1 Nephi 4:28–35.)

It would be hard for any of the brothers to think that anything but the power of God had delivered the plates into their hands. But they could not have known why this record was so critical that it required the life of the wicked Laban.

How Visions Expanded Nephi’s Perspective

Sometime later, following Lehi’s important vision of the tree of life, Nephi was shown a

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similar vision of the Savior’s ministry among the Jews, the history of his people, and a view of the nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles in the latter days (see 1 Nephi 11–14). In each case he saw that the outcome for all these people hinged on their acceptance of Jesus Christ. It must have become clear to Nephi that without the word of God on the brass plates, his posterity would not have been prepared to meet Christ (see Mosiah 1:3–4).

Consider the example of the Mulekites, a group who left Jerusalem after Lehi. They had no sacred record. When they were found by the Nephites years later, their language had become corrupted and they denied their Creator. (See Omni 1:15–17.) That is what would have likely happened to Lehi’s family if they had not retrieved the brass plates.

Another truth that underscored the future importance of the brass plates for Nephi was his vision of plain and precious truths being taken from the record of the Jews (see 1 Nephi 13:23–29). This loss would cause many in the latter days to stumble spiritually, and Satan would gain great power over them (see 1 Nephi 13:29, 34).

The ultimate solution to this dilemma was the Book of Mormon. It contains many of the plain and precious truths that were on the brass plates and were once in the original record of the Jews, the Bible.⁴ The brass plates became a source of inspiration for generations of Nephite prophets. Without them, they “would have dwindled in unbelief, and . . . should have [become] like unto . . . the Lamanites” (Mosiah 1:5). There would have been no righteous Nephite record to bring forth in the latter days to help the world understand Christ’s true doctrine. There would have been no Book of Mormon as we know it.

Deliverance for All

With this precise perspective of revelation, Nephi came to understand why he was required to obtain the plates in the way he did. When God delivered Laban and the brass plates to Nephi, He was ultimately delivering precious gospel truths to all who would eventually read the Book of Mormon. These truths are centered in the Savior and Deliverer, Jesus Christ. It is Christ who offers the most profound deliverance to all people—deliverance from sin and death—through His atoning sacrifice and eternal life in the world to come. ■

NOTES

1. Casting lots was an ancient practice whereby the Lord could make known His will (see Proverbs 16:33).
2. President Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985), taught: “The Lord has never condemned nor permitted destruction to any people until he has warned them” (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball [1982], 114).
3. See Jeremiah 26:20–23 for a clear example of a prophet who fled and was hunted down, brought back to Jerusalem, and put to death.
4. For examples of the plain and precious truths restored in the Book of Mormon, see Clyde J. Williams, “Plain and Precious Truths Restored,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2006, 50–54.