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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title The Death of Laban: A Literary Interpretation

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Reference *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 179-95.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract This article approaches the narrative of Laban's death using literary criticism and studies how Nephi's use of specific words and phrases offers additional insight to this story.

THE DEATH OF LABAN: A LITERARY INTERPRETATION

Steven L. Olsen

From all perspectives, Nephi's killing of Laban was traumatic. As viewed by the contemporary Jewish leaders at Jerusalem, the event was likely remembered as the murder of a defenseless religious leader, the theft of a sacred scriptural treasure, and the kidnap of a trusted servant. Even by his own account, Nephi initially resisted the Spirit's directive to take Laban's life, the only recorded instance in which Nephi questioned, even for a moment, the wisdom of divine inspiration (1 Nephi 4:10). Yet this story is the most detailed portion of Nephi's migration narrative (1 Nephi 3–4) and a pivotal event in the temporal and spiritual salvation of Lehi's family.

Students of the Book of Mormon have come to terms with this difficult story in various ways. Hugh Nibley and others have emphasized a historiographical approach, in which details of the narrative of Laban's death are shown to correspond with what has become known of cultural, political, and linguistic features of sixth-century Jerusalem.¹ Most of these features were not known, even by scholars, at the time of the Book of Mormon's publication; hence they provide indirect evidence of the book's antiquity. A moral or ethical treatment of the story by Latter-day Saints examines questions of righteousness

1. See, for example, Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 108–18, and *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 87–95; and John W. Welch and Heidi Harkness Parker, "Better That One Man Should Perish," *Insights* 18/6 (1998): 2.

in modern times, such as the need to obey God's commands even when they seem inscrutable or absurd, to have the courage to accomplish seemingly impossible objectives, and to justify violence in extreme circumstances for a righteous cause.² Thirdly, John W. Welch has examined Laban's death from the perspective of period Hebrew jurisprudence, demonstrating Nephi's legal grounds for carrying out the Spirit's command "Slay him" (1 Nephi 4:12).³

I wish to examine the death of Laban from yet another perspective: literary criticism. This application seeks to neither challenge nor supplant existing scholarship, only to provide additional insight into the Book of Mormon text from a perspective that has considerably enriched the study of the Hebrew Bible.⁴ As a general rule, the literary analysis of texts focuses on the author's selection and ordering of particular words into meaningful phrases, images, and events. The approach assumes that the author of a story had access to sufficient source materials and had mastered essential literary skills in order to communicate intended messages through the use of expressive devices and conventions within a larger narrative frame.

2. See, for example, Jeffrey R. Holland, "How Can I Explain Nephi's Killing Laban to My Nonmember Friends?" *Ensign*, September, 1976, 83–84, and "The Will of the Father in All Things," *Brigham Young University Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1988–89), 75–84; Rodney Turner, "Why Did the Lord Command Nephi to Slay Laban When to Do So Was Contrary to the Commandment 'Thou Shalt Not Kill?'" I Have a Question, *Ensign*, February, 1996, 62–63; and Eugene England, "Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon," in *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 131–56.

3. John W. Welch, "Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 119–41. This topic is explored further in Welch's introduction in the BYU student journal *Studia Antiqua* (Summer 2003): 9–12; this special issue reports the proceedings of a conference entitled "Hebrew Law in the Book of Mormon," held on the BYU campus on 24 February 2001. See also Fred Essig and Dan Fuller, "Nephi's Slaying of Laban: A Legal Perspective," FARMS preliminary paper, 1981.

4. See, for example, Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 3–23; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1982); and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

Recognizing the expressive quality of a historical text does not lessen the text's documentary value. Rather, it recognizes the crucial role of the author's ability to communicate meaning in subtle and sophisticated ways through the specific use of language.⁵ In fact, Erich Auerbach asserted that if biblical stories "produce lively sensory effects, it is only because the moral, religious, and psychological phenomena which are their sole concern are made concrete in the sensible matter of life. But their religious intent involves an absolute claim to historical truth." He further claimed that the "absolute authority" of the biblical narrative "seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history."⁶ In short, the historiography of the Hebrew Bible seems to be as much about interpretation as documentation and about communicating spiritual truths as recording empirical facts.

Although the interpretation of a text can often be enhanced with reference to a variety of relevant extratextual sources, a literary approach views the finished text as sufficient to stimulate the reader's quest for meaning. The process of interpreting a text may benefit considerably from earlier drafts, original source materials, and written commentaries, but these are not prerequisite for readers to make sense of a well-crafted text. A skilled author provides enough material within the text itself for readers to gain great pleasure and insight from the experience of reading.

Internal evidence suggests that it is reasonable to apply a literary approach to the study of the Book of Mormon. Early in his record, Nephi acknowledges that he received prior training "in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2). Throughout his literary career, Nephi displays an abiding interest in and concern with the written word. For example, he begins both the extant account of his ministry (the "small plates") and his earlier record (written on his "large

5. See Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 23–35, for a thorough critique of the use of the term *fiction* when referring to biblical narrative.

6. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14–15.

plates”) with versions of the record of his father.⁷ In addition, Nephi displays complete familiarity with the contents of the brass plates through numerous allusions to and citations from the Hebrew scripture.⁸ In his editorial asides, the detailed instructions he leaves to subsequent stewards of the record, and his undertaking late in life a second version of the official record of his ministry, Nephi reveals his abiding commitment to have his written legacy fulfill its divinely ordained purpose.⁹ Although Nephi may have been initially uncertain of the purpose for his writing the second account of his ministry (9:5–6; 19:3), at the end he testifies that his record will serve as an eternal standard of truth at the judgment bar of God (33:3–11). I know of no other book of scripture whose author is so self-conscious of its spiritual purpose, so determined to achieve that purpose, and so confident in the end that he has done so as Nephi is of his own writing. The known details of Nephi’s literary training, experience, and production suggest that he had mastered the literary craft of his day and was completely capable of creating a permanent record of the eternal significance of his life and ministry.

The viability of a literary approach to the Book of Mormon is limited by one obvious characteristic: the text exists only in an English translation created fourteen hundred years after the last writer had finished his work.¹⁰ While little if anything is known for certain about “reformed Egyptian”—that is, the language of the Book of Mormon text (Mormon 9:32)—it is clear that English and Egyptian or Hebrew, in any of their respective variations, have little in common. Hence

7. 1 Nephi 1:17; 10:1; 19:1. See S. Kent Brown, “Nephi’s Use of Lehi’s Record,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 3–14.

8. For example, 1 Nephi 5:10–16; 17:23–42; 19:10–17; 20–21; 2 Nephi 7–8; 12–24.

9. For example, 1 Nephi 6; 9; 14:28–30; 19:1–6; 2 Nephi 4:14–16; 5:29–34; 25:18–24; 26:14–17; 27; 29:11–13; 30:3–5; 31:1–3.

10. On the challenges of undertaking the literary analysis of a text in translation, see Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), xvi–xlv.

it may be unrealistic to expect that the nuances of Nephi's Egyptian have been retained to any great degree in Joseph Smith's English.¹¹

It was Emma Smith's firsthand witness that her husband could not have produced the translation by means of the limited literary and rhetorical capacities that he possessed in 1829.¹² Hence the choice of English words and phrases in the published text was not Joseph Smith's alone. It is also the case that the Prophet later called the Book of Mormon "the most correct of any book on earth"¹³ and that the Lord himself pronounced, "It is true" (Doctrine and Covenants 17:6). From the perspective of those who were most closely connected with the translation process, the translation of the text from "reformed Egyptian" to Elizabethan English was more than simply a mechanical or even academic exercise. It also involved the production of a text that was accepted of God. If "the gift and power of God" (Book of Mormon title page) influenced not only the accuracy but also the artistry of the English translation, then the translated text might not be far from Nephi's (or God's) original intent. Therefore, despite inherent limitations, the literary analysis of the English translation should yield considerable interpretive insight without compromising the intended meaning of the original text. With this qualification, it seems reasonable to suggest preliminary conclusions from a detailed study of the artistry of Nephi's text, as translated by Joseph Smith.

Nephi's Narrative of Laban's Death

The killing of Laban is a violent consequence of the mission by Lehi's sons to recover a version of Hebrew scripture called the brass plates. The divine commandment to obtain the record comes to Lehi in a dream (1 Nephi 3:1–2). Accomplishing this mission is arguably

11. Because the precise details of the translation process are not known, I will neither address nor attempt to resolve this concern in this study.

12. See John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–44*, ed. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 88–89; see also Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 71–73.

13. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 4:461.

the family's riskiest venture in their quest for the promised land since these scriptures are a sacred treasure strenuously guarded by a powerful religious leader in Jerusalem named Laban (vv. 3–4).¹⁴ Recognizing this risk, Nephi's brothers resist their father's direction. But Nephi, ever the faithful son, accepts the assignment with the declaration, "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (v. 7).

Among other things, the mission to obtain the brass plates is the first instance of Nephi's exercising leadership over his older brothers. Assuming and then documenting his leadership role are crucial for Nephi since an angel had recently promised the role to him in response to his desire to understand and accept Lehi's inspired direction (1 Nephi 2:16–22). The first public announcement of Nephi's divinely ordained leadership role occurs when the angel rebukes Laman and Lemuel for resisting Nephi's desire to complete the mission to obtain the brass plates (3:29). Nephi's eventual success in completing the mission demonstrates his capacity and qualification to fill the leadership calling from God.¹⁵

Obedient to their father's charge, the four sons return to the doomed city of Jerusalem, where they fail twice in their attempt to acquire Laban's sacred record. On both occasions they barely escape with their lives, and on the second attempt, they lose their family's accumulated wealth as well. These frustrations motivate Nephi's two eldest brothers to attack him physically and verbally for leading them

14. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 110–12, and *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 96–105.

15. See Welch, "Legal Perspectives," 120. The rest of Nephi's sacred record emphasizes the fulfillment of the prophecy of his leadership in the following events: interpreting Lehi's dream of the tree of life to his brothers (1 Nephi 11–16), constructing a ship to cross "Irreantum" (1 Nephi 17), guiding the family towards the promised land (18:9–23), creating two divinely ordained records of his ministry (19; 2 Nephi 5:29–34), interpreting the prophecies of Isaiah for the "profit and learning" of his followers (1 Nephi 19:23; 22; 2 Nephi 25–30), succeeding Lehi upon the patriarch's death (2 Nephi 4), reflecting upon his spiritual qualifications to lead (4:17–35), accepting the responsibility of being king to his followers (5:18), establishing a separate society for his followers in order to guarantee their safety (2 Nephi 5), and completing the sacred records of his and Lehi's ministries (5:28–34). Acknowledging the divine source of Nephi's claim to leadership, the narrative makes clear that he undertook none of these initiatives independent of divine direction or approbation.

on such a dangerous and seemingly misguided mission. In response, an angel intervenes on Nephi's behalf, rebukes Laman and Lemuel, directs them all to return a third time, and promises success (1 Nephi 3:9–29). Leaving his brothers concealed outside the city walls, Nephi enters the city being “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do” (4:6). Nephi finds Laban unconscious, kills him, dresses in his clothes, and convinces an unsuspecting servant to entrust him with the sacred record. Then he and the servant, named Zoram, reunite with Nephi's brothers and they all escape together into the wilderness (vv. 7–38).

“The Lord Hath Delivered Him into Thy Hands”

I focus my illustration of Nephi's fine crafting of this story on two prevailing verbal concepts, or *leitworten*, in the text. *Leitwort* is the technical term for a word that an author uses repeatedly throughout a narrative as a way of concentrating the reader's attention on its central themes.¹⁶ The leitwort *deliver* appears in the narrative of Laban's death both frequently and strategically. For example, the decision to return to Jerusalem a third time turns on the angel's command and promise, “Behold ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands” (1 Nephi 3:29). After the angel departs, Nephi's ever-skeptical older brothers equivocate once again, questioning the angel's ability to fulfill his promise of deliverance (v. 31). Undaunted, Nephi bears strong testimony of the power of God to accomplish his purposes, regardless of their seeming impossibility, concluding his witness with the assertion “The Lord is able to deliver us” (4:1–3).

This theme next appears in the narrative when Nephi is “constrained by the Spirit” to kill Laban. Upon finding Laban lying unconscious, Nephi initially resists the Spirit's constraints. Responding immediately to Nephi's hesitancy, the Spirit informs him, “Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands.” The structural similarity between the two declarations—“the Lord will deliver Laban into your

16. For an expanded discussion of this term of art, see Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 92–95.

hands” and “the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands”—suggests that the angel intends Nephi to take the opportunity as direct fulfillment of the promise. As a way of processing this realization, Nephi begins to entertain reasons why Laban is deserving of death. Nephi’s initial justifications, however, reveal a decidedly human and personal perspective: Laban had sought to kill Nephi and his brothers, had been disobedient to God’s commands, and had stolen Lehi’s family wealth (1 Nephi 4:10–11).

While the angel does not reject Nephi’s reasoning, he provides instead a *divine* justification for such an extreme act. The angel repeats the injunction “Slay him”¹⁷ and, in order to reinforce that doing so fulfills the earlier promise of deliverance (1 Nephi 3:29), adds, “for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands” (4:12). The angel next provides Nephi with a divine perspective for following his command: “Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring to forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (v. 13). At this point the mission to recover the brass plates is no longer simply about the temporal deliverance of a nuclear family—avoiding death, recovering property, preserving honor. Rather, the proper context for the deed has become the spiritual deliverance of a divinely chosen nation.

Although Nephi had earlier received the prophecy that he and his family would be led by God to a “land of promise . . . which is choice above all other lands” (1 Nephi 2:20), their destiny to become a “nation” in the promised land is first made explicit in the angel’s direction for Nephi to kill Laban. Carrying out this terrible action, then, fulfills one divine promise (i.e., delivering Lehi’s family) and facilitates another (i.e., their prospering as a nation in the promised land).¹⁸ Not wanting to become an enemy to God through his disobe-

17. The Spirit’s verbatim imperative “Slay him” heightens considerably the drama of the narrative, in which the initial command is simply reported by Nephi indirectly through use of the passive voice: “I was constrained by the Spirit” (1 Nephi 4:10).

18. The term *nation* in this context probably refers to its covenantal sense (e.g., Genesis 12:1–3; 17:4; 18:18; Exodus 19:6) rather than to its strictly political or social sense. Delbert Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins

dience, Nephi steels himself for the deed, repeating the term *deliver* for the seventh time in this brief but detailed narrative (4:17).

If seven repetitions of the term are not enough to focus our attention on God's "power of deliverance" (1 Nephi 1:20) in the account of Laban's death, the term is used twice more in the mission's emotional conclusion. Before his sons return from Jerusalem, Lehi assures his grieving wife, "The Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban" (5:5). Upon their safe return, Sariah confesses, "I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban" (v. 8).

The fact that a central message is repeated so frequently and strategically is crucial for a text as spare of descriptive detail and psychological ornamentation as the Book of Mormon. In this and other ways, the rhetoric of the Book of Mormon text is similar to that of the Hebrew Bible, in which the authors restrict their narrative to only the most essential elements.¹⁹ Such essentialist rhetoric, however, is neither simplistic nor primitive. Rather, it concentrates a world of meaning into a few salient words, phrases, and verbal images that are repeated and refined in sophisticated and insightful ways throughout the account. The biblical narrative style allows for no wasted or extraneous details, no superfluous or trivial utterances. Nothing exists for its own sake. Instead, all textual features contribute to layers and complexities of meaning that point to a much grander truth than that which can be attributed to human agency and empirical circumstances alone. "What [the biblical narrator] produced . . . was not primarily oriented toward 'realism' (if he succeeded in being realistic, it was merely a means, not an end); it was oriented toward truth. . . . The Bible's claim to truth . . . is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims."²⁰ Verbal repetition within

University Press, 1969), 72–97, demonstrates the covenant connections with kingship in ancient Israel.

19. A most insightful analysis of the spare rhetorical style of biblical narrative is found in Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 3–23. Useful amplifications of this concept are found in Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114–30; and Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 186–229, 321–64.

20. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14.

a spare narrative style is recognized by leading students of the biblical text as a “thematic marker” and an “aesthetic virtue.”²¹

So it is with the Book of Mormon. Individual details must be viewed as potentially essential to the text’s overall meaning, and multiple repetitions of the same or similar words and phrases throughout the narrative help reveal the authors’ central themes and clarify key literary purposes. Repeated often and at critical junctures, *deliverance* becomes such a leitwort for the narrative of Laban’s death and is essential to its meaning.

On a larger scale, *deliverance* serves as a leitwort for Nephi’s entire record, indeed for the Book of Mormon as a whole. At the beginning of his sacred record, Nephi identifies deliverance as one of its central themes: “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” (1 Nephi 1:20).²² A review of Nephi’s record suggests that he made good on his literary promise and focused his record on God’s “power of deliverance” on behalf of Lehi’s family.²³ Fully developed in the Book of Mormon, the concept of deliverance pervades the narrative. In fact, the word *deliver* and its several variations appear some 230 times in the text, averaging about once every two pages in the English translation. This degree of usage makes *deliver* one of the most repeated concepts in the Book of Mormon. As used therein, this

21. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, xxxi, 149 n. 11. On the importance of textual repetitions in the rhetoric of the ancient Hebrews, see Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 365–440; and Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 88–113.

22. See Alma 7:13; 9:28; and 15:2 for repetitions of this critical phrase.

23. For example, the theme of deliverance is seen in the following events: Lehi fleeing those in Jerusalem who sought to take his life (1 Nephi 1:18–20), Nephi obtaining the plates of Laban (1 Nephi 3–4), convincing Ishmael’s family to join the exiles in order to guarantee the survival of their lineage (1 Nephi 7), surviving eight years in the wilderness and crossing the ocean with the aid of the Liahona (1 Nephi 16, 18), constructing a ship as directed by God (1 Nephi 17), Nephi succeeding to Lehi’s patriarchal authority and establishing a righteous society apart from those who sought to take their lives (2 Nephi 5), and Nephi providing numerous revelations and prophecies that promise spiritual salvation to the righteous (1 Nephi 8; 11–14; 22; 2 Nephi 1–4; 6–9; 25–33).

word has at least three connotations.²⁴ The first of these—“to liberate or release from captivity, danger, or death”—is the most relevant to the Laban story. In this connotation, *deliver* has two complementary applications that relate to the concept of salvation: temporal deliverance and spiritual deliverance. Temporal deliverance involves overcoming, transcending, or escaping the powers of earth, as manifest in danger, disease, privation, captivity, human limitations, and physical death. It is particularly salient in the migration narratives in the Book of Mormon, in which God’s power enables his people to escape one set of circumstances in order to be blessed by another.²⁵

John Welch has amply demonstrated that a special case of temporal deliverance in the slaying of Laban involves a legal principle of the law of Moses.²⁶ Nephi initially recoils at the thought of slaying Laban, not only because he has never before killed another person (1 Nephi 4:10) but also because intentional killing is expressly forbidden by the law of Moses under penalty of death (Exodus 20:13). However, a subsequent provision of the law qualifies this absolute prohibition: “He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death. And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand; then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee” (Exodus 21:12–13). The specific wording of Nephi’s account places his deadly action clearly in the context of the legal justification for taking another’s life—namely, the act was not premeditated but guided and authorized by the Spirit (1 Nephi 4:6), and the “land of promise” would serve as a chosen place of refuge (2:20; 4:14).

Secondly, spiritual deliverance involves overcoming or escaping the power of evil through the atonement of Jesus Christ as administered

24. For example, “to liberate or release from captivity, danger, or death” (e.g., 1 Nephi 7:17; 17:14; 2 Nephi 3:9–10; Mosiah 21:5–36; 22:1–4; 23:23–24; 24:16–21; Alma 20:3–5; 36:2, 27–29); “to submit or surrender to a separate or subsequent authority” (e.g., 2 Nephi 9:11–13; Omni 1:7, 9, 25; Words of Mormon 1:2–3, 10; Mosiah 12:16; Alma 4:18–20; 5:4–6; 10:19; 44:3–9; 57:1–2; Moroni 9:24); and “to accomplish a task or responsibility” (e.g., 2 Nephi 27:9–19; Words of Mormon 1:1; Mosiah 13:3; 25:21; Alma 5:11).

25. Notice the repeated use of the concept of deliverance in the following narratives of relocation and disruption: 1 Nephi 17:14; 2 Nephi 4:31; 5:4–5; Mosiah 21–29; Alma 5:4–6; 29:11–12; 58:37.

26. Welch, “Legal Perspectives” (see note 3 above).

in the principles and ordinances of his gospel. In fact, what Latter-day Saints currently call the “plan of salvation” is referred to on occasion in the Book of Mormon as the “way [or plan] of deliverance” (2 Nephi 9:11; 11:5). The most striking use of the leitwort *deliver* in this spiritual sense appears in Jacob’s discourse on Christ as the Savior of mankind. Referring to the complementary roles of resurrection and redemption, Jacob observes:

And because of the way of deliverance of our God, the Holy One of Israel, this death, of which I have spoken, which is the temporal, shall deliver up its dead; which death is the grave.

And this death of which I have spoken, which is the spiritual death, shall deliver up its dead; which spiritual death is hell; wherefore, death and hell must deliver up their dead, and hell must deliver up its captive spirits, and the grave must deliver up its captive bodies, and the bodies and the spirits of men will be restored one to the other; and it is by the power of the resurrection of the Holy One of Israel.

O how great the plan of our God! For on the other hand, the paradise of God must deliver up the spirits of the righteous, and the grave deliver up the body of the righteous; and the spirit and the body is restored to itself again, and all men become incorruptible, and immortal, and they are living souls, having a perfect knowledge like unto us in the flesh, save it be that our knowledge shall be perfect. (2 Nephi 9:11–13)

The slaying of Laban applies both connotations of deliverance, enabling Lehi’s family to escape undetected from the doomed city of Jerusalem and providing them the sacred records by which they can obey the commandments of God in the promised land, thereby securing the promises of salvation.

“I Remembered the Words of the Lord”

The second interpretive focus of the narrative of Laban’s death concerns the leitwort *remember*. To the Spirit’s assurance of deliverance and as inspired by the angel’s indirect promise that Lehi’s family

would become a great nation in the promised land, Nephi adds his own perspective for slaying Laban: “I remembered the words of the Lord which he spake unto me in the wilderness, saying that: Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” (1 Nephi 4:14). The concept of remembrance is as central to Nephi’s sacred record as that of deliverance and is crucial to understanding how this particular story fits into the broader history of the Nephites. In fact, the term *remember* and its variations appear throughout the Book of Mormon over two hundred times—almost as frequently as does the leitwort *deliver*—and in supremely significant contexts.²⁷

In Nephi’s record and in the Book of Mormon as a whole, the concept of remembrance has four complementary connotations. The first—“to recall or to call to mind”—is most apparent in Nephi’s response to the Spirit’s prompting to slay Laban. Nephi recalls that just before his father had asked him to obtain the brass plates, the Lord had established a covenant with Nephi that assured Nephi’s faithful family of receiving a homeland, “choice above all other lands,” where they could live in safety as if in the presence of God (1 Nephi 2:20). Standing before Laban, Nephi reasons that his family cannot keep God’s commandments according to the covenant, and thereby secure its blessings, without the brass plates (1 Nephi 4:14–17), hence the necessity of slaying Laban to obtain them.

The obligation to remember their covenantal relationship with God is one of the most sacred duties of the Nephites, and it is repeated on numerous sacred occasions.²⁸ The spiritual weight of this word is

27. On the topic of remembrance in the Book of Mormon, see Louis Midgley, “The Ways of Remembrance,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 168–76; Louis Midgley, “Preserving and Enlarging the Memory of the Saints,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 21–24; Louis Midgley and Gary F. Novak, “Remembrance and the Past,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 37–66; and James E. Faulconer, “Remembrance,” *FARMS Review* 19/2 (2007): 71–88.

28. These include ceremonies of renewal and succession (e.g., 2 Nephi 1–5; Mosiah 1–5; Alma 34:29, 37; 36:13–19; 37:13–14, 32–35; 38:5, 14; Helaman 5; 3 Nephi 18:7, 11; Moroni 4–6), events of large-scale recommitment and conversion (e.g., 2 Nephi 9:39–52; Jacob 3:9–10; Alma 5:6, 18; 7:16; 9:9–14; Helaman 11:7; 3 Nephi 16:11–12; 18:7, 11), and critical times of personal assessment and reflection (Alma 29:10–12; Helaman 12; Moroni 10).

signaled by King Benjamin when he counsels his people on the conduct of their lives at the end of his valedictory sermon with the words “O man, remember, and perish not” (Mosiah 4:30), thereby closely connecting the concepts of remembrance and deliverance.

Throughout the Book of Mormon text, the term *remember* has a different connotation when applied to God. On several occasions God declares that he will remember his covenants or his people (e.g., 1 Nephi 19:15–18; 2 Nephi 29:1–14; 3 Nephi 20:29; Mormon 5:20–21; 8:21–23). Given God’s omniscience, the meaning of *remember* as “call to mind” may seem absurd. More appropriate in this context might be the synonyms *renew* or *restore*, as in the Lord “remembers” (i.e., restores) his covenants with Israel when Israel “remembers” (i.e., recalls and commits to live) her divine covenants. In short, not only does the term *remember* frequently refer to keeping or preserving covenants, but it has covenantal implications in general usage throughout Nephi’s record.²⁹

A third related connotation of *remember* in the Book of Mormon is revealed by defining its opposite, which is not “forget” but “dis-member.” From this perspective, when a covenant with God is broken, the rebellious are cut off or cast out from God’s presence or from the covenant community (e.g., Genesis 17:14; Leviticus 18:29; Isaiah 53:8). In this sense, they are then “dis-membered,” or not “re-membered.” That is, they are not eliminated from one’s temporal consciousness but are separated from the covenant and its constituted community that had defined their eternal identity and place in the kingdom of God. From this perspective, for the ancient peoples of God, the sign of a covenant—such as circumcising the foreskin (Genesis 17:10; 34:15), sacrificing an animal (Moses 5:5–7; Abraham 2:7–8), or rending a garment, as in Moroni’s title of liberty (Alma 46:12–21)—often involved cutting, severing, or cleaving, indicative of the consequence of breaking or “dis-membering” the covenant.

Thus God’s directing Nephi to slay a Jewish religious leader by cutting off his head with his own sword symbolically indicates that Jehovah severed his covenant with the people of Israel at Jerusalem because of their wickedness. Lehi and his family were now to be the

29. See Midgley, “Ways of Remembrance,” 168–76.

rightful heirs of the promised blessings of the covenant. From this perspective, Nephi's preservation of Laban's sword as one of the Nephites' sacred artifacts and its later use as a model for Nephite armaments are seen more fundamentally as symbols of the covenant with God that defines and distinguishes their chosen identity and guides their lives in search of the covenantal promises of salvation.³⁰

A graphic detail from the story of obtaining the brass plates suggests the degree to which Nephi's crafting of the narrative reveals its covenantal significance. The image that Nephi paints in his brief description of the nighttime scene is tragic and gruesome: he finds Laban drunken and lying unconscious and then leaves him in a pool of his own blood after cutting off his head with his own sword (1 Nephi 4:7, 18–19). Taken out of context, this description might give the impression that Nephi took morbid pleasure in the details of this tragedy.

Yet these details reinforce the equally graphic image of an event of supremely spiritual significance in Nephi's rehearsal of Christ's ultimate victory over evil. Toward the end of his first book, Nephi applies the imagery of drunkenness and death not to the demise of a wicked individual but to the fall of the great and abominable church of the devil, which serves as the material symbol of the archenemy of the kingdom of God in the last days (1 Nephi 13–14). In the course of his larger narrative, following the successful arrival in and settlement of the promised land, Nephi cites prophecies of Isaiah concerning the eventual salvation of the house of Israel. Nephi enlarges upon Isaiah's prophecies with several of his own regarding the collapse of the great and abominable church. In conclusion, he testifies, "And the blood of that great and abominable church, which is the whore of all the earth, shall turn upon their own heads; for they shall war among themselves, and the sword of their own hands shall fall upon their own heads, and they shall be drunken with their own blood" (22:13). In Nephi's sacred record, both Laban and the church of the devil die by similar means (breaking the covenants of salvation) and through similar authority (the word and power of God). If these literary similarities are intentional, Nephi seems to imply that the death of Laban prefigures the

30. See 2 Nephi 5:14; Jacob 1:10; Mosiah 1:16; Words of Mormon 1:1.

destruction of evil at the end of time, as symbolized by the fall of the great and abominable church.³¹

The fourth connotation of *remember* that is salient to the narrative of Laban's death is that remembering is often an antecedent to action. Nephi and other writers of the Book of Mormon frequently use the phrase "remember to do" or "remember to keep," particularly in relation to the will and commandments of God.³² An essential prelude to righteous action, remembering is the first step in the process of conversion to the gospel of Jesus Christ, as reflected in Nephite discourse and practice.³³ The foundation of spiritual conversion and of righteous action among the Nephites was the act of remembering, not just in the sense of calling important truths to mind but also in the sense of committing to act according to the truths received.

Collectively, these various connotations of *remember* can be understood as contributing in complementary ways to the foundation of one's spiritual consciousness. Remembering in this multifaceted context is equivalent to becoming aware of and committing to live consistent with one's eternal identity. Nephi's remembering "the words of the Lord" on that fateful night in Jerusalem brought all of these connotations to bear. He recalls the divine prophecies regarding the land of promise, commits to obey the word of the Lord, and

31. I am indebted to Donald L. Enders for this insight.

32. For example, 1 Nephi 15:25; 17:45; 2 Nephi 1:16; 10:23; Mosiah 1:7; Alma 18:10; Helaman 5:6–14.

33. For example, the passage known by contemporary Latter-day Saints as "Moroni's challenge" begins with the injunction that those who are interested in receiving a witness of the truthfulness of the Nephite record must first "remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts" (Moroni 10:3, see vv. 4–5). Consistent with this pattern, the sons of Mosiah rehearse to the Lamanites "the records and the holy scriptures of the people" from the beginning of time (Alma 18:35–39; 22:12–14) as an essential first step in their spiritual conversion (18:35–39; 22:12–14). Likewise, Alma begins his ministry among the Nephites with an exposition of the origins of the Church among the Nephites and of their deliverance from the captivity of the Lamanites (5:1–6); Helaman empowers his sons Nephi and Lehi with a comparable historical context that he charges them to "remember" at the outset of their mission (Helaman 5:5–14); in ministering unto the surviving Nephites, Christ "expounded all the scriptures unto them which they had received" before delivering more scriptures unto the Nephite "disciples" and charging them to teach them to the people (3 Nephi 23:6–14).

accepts both the responsibility of preserving his family by the covenants and commandments of God and the dire consequences if his followers turn from their righteousness. Obeying the “voice of the Spirit” (1 Nephi 4:18) and completing the seemingly impossible mission, Nephi prepares to accomplish even greater and more difficult missions so that he can fulfill the measure of his own creation and prepare a record that will bring the blessings of salvation to the house of Israel and the family of God (2 Nephi 31–33).

These examples illustrate how the fine crafting of Nephi’s narrative of Laban’s death deepens and layers that event with significance within the sacred record and the context of the covenantal identity of ancient Israel. While it is possible that these connections are imposed on the text by the modern reader and were not consciously intended by Nephi, it is more likely that Nephi’s artistry and spiritual focus were responsible for the finely crafted text, whose meaning, in some measure, is dependent upon its literary sophistication.

