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Daniel N. Rolph

Hahnemann University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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Author(s) Daniel N. Rolph

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Abstract The sword of Laban plays a prominent role in the Book of Mormon narrative as a Nephite national treasure. Scholarly analysis of this regal heirloom has primarily concentrated upon its physical construction in relation to ancient Near Eastern metallurgical technology. However, when examined within the cultural milieu of the ancient world, along with data from church history, the scriptures, and Jewish tradition, the sword of Laban takes on new significance. Though the Book of Mormon reveals that the sword of Laban served as an ancestral and hereditary sword of the ancient Nephite prophets, evidence suggests that the weapon may have been the birthright sword of biblical tradition, a sacred heirloom that may have been wielded by the patriarchs up until the time of Joseph of Egypt. Laban, being a descendant of Joseph, inherited the birthright sword and the plates of brass, both treasures eventually coming into the possession of Nephi, who was both a prophet and a descendant of Joseph, as was Joseph Smith Jr.

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Abstract: The sword of Laban plays a prominent role in the Book of Mormon narrative as a Nephite national treasure. Scholarly analysis of this regal heirloom has primarily concentrated upon its physical construction in relation to ancient Near Eastern metallurgical technology. However, when examined within the cultural milieu of the ancient world, along with data from Church history, the scriptures, and Jewish tradition, the sword of Laban takes on new significance. Though the Book of Mormon reveals that the sword of Laban served as an ancestral and hereditary sword of the ancient Nephite prophets, evidence suggests that the weapon may have been the birthright sword of biblical tradition, a sacred heirloom that may have been wielded by the patriarchs up until the time of Joseph of Egypt. Laban, being a descendant of Joseph, inherited the birthright sword and the plates of brass, both treasures eventually coming into the possession of Nephi, who was both a prophet and a descendant of Joseph, as was Joseph Smith, Jr.

Until quite recently, scholarly investigation concerning the sword of Laban, or the pre-Columbian weapon wielded by the ancient Nephite kings and prophets, has almost exclusively been restricted to an examination of the physical characteristics of the sword.¹ Although the technological or metallurgical capabilities of early Near and Middle Eastern cultures are relevant issues in

¹ See, for example, "Iron Sword from the Time of Jeremiah Discovered near Jericho," *Ensign* 17 (June 1987): 57; Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 108–9; William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, "Swords in the Book of Mormon," in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 329–51.

discussing the sword, pertinent data contained within the scriptures, Church history, Jewish tradition, and certain social customs of antiquity imply that the provenance and true significance of the Nephite heirloom may have hitherto been completely overlooked.

In the beginning of the Book of Mormon record, Nephi informs us that the sword of Laban was a weapon with a hilt "of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine," while "the blade thereof was of the most precious steel" (1 Nephi 4:9). Soon after his arrival in the land of promise, the sword served as a model or pattern by which he made "many swords," fighting all the while with the sword against the Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:14; Jacob 1:10). Most importantly, we discover that though almost five hundred years pass away between Nephi and King Benjamin, the latter ruler "did fight with the strength of his own arm, with the sword of Laban" (Words of Mormon 1:13), eventually transmitting the weapon to his son and regal successor, Mosiah, in about 124 B.C. (cf. Mosiah 1:16). Apparently, the sword of Laban and the other Nephite heirlooms, such as the "plates of brass," failed to perish, rust, or be "dimmed any more by time" (1 Nephi 5:18-19) until the latter days.

In June of 1829 at Fayette, New York, Joseph Smith received a revelation from the Lord permitting Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris to view the sacred treasures of the Nephite patriarchs, namely, "the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, . . . the miraculous directors," and, of course, the golden plates (D&C 17:1). Though on a separate occasion Joseph had previously seen the above artifacts, he fails to mention the sword of Laban as being present within the stone receptacle during his initial visits to the Hill Cumorah repository (D&C 17:5).² However, Brigham Young, while speaking at Farmington, Utah, in 1877, declared that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, on subsequent visits to a cavern located within the hill, observed the sword of Laban as it "hung upon the wall," and "laid upon the table across the gold plates . . . unsheathed, and on it . . . written these words: This sword will never be sheathed again until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and his Christ."³

² HC 1:16-18.

³ JD 19:38.

The uniqueness of the sword of Laban is apparent, since by Joseph Smith's day the instrument was at least twenty-five hundred years of age, and evidently in excellent condition. Joseph Smith, Jr., was the first individual permitted to view the ancient sword and its accoutrements long after their interment at Cumorah by Moroni; though he was a Latter-day prophet of God, Joseph Smith was also directly descended from the biblical patriarch, Joseph of Egypt.⁴ As we have seen, these sacred objects of veneration were formerly transmitted through the lineage of the Nephite prophets, who also stemmed from Joseph, just as other treasures of a sacred nature were passed down to Abraham, and by the Jaredites from "the fathers" (cf. Abraham 1:2-4, 31; Ether 8:9; 15:33; Mosiah 21:27). Could ancestry thus play an important role in relation to the sword of Laban *prior* to Laban's ownership?

The prophet Nephi and his successors fail to mention or reveal the provenance of the sword previous to its possession by Laban and, since the sword bears his name, one naturally assumes the blade was forged within Laban's day, though the ancient technique of producing iron and steel is lost in antiquity.⁵ This lack of knowledge concerning the sword's possible pre-Laban origin is not surprising, for Lehi, prior to obtaining the "plates of brass," appears either to have been unaware that he descended from Joseph of Egypt (1 Nephi 5:14), or else to have had no documentation other than oral tradition. Most importantly, Laban also was "of Joseph, wherefore *he and his fathers* had kept the records" (1 Nephi 5:16).⁶

⁴ For Joseph Smith as a descendant of Joseph of Egypt, see 2 Nephi 3:7-19; JST, Genesis 50:24-38; D&C 113:1-6; see also the Prophet's patriarchal blessing, as given by his father, Joseph Smith, Sr., in *Our Lineage* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1933), 14.

⁵ See "Recent Studies on the Book of Mormon," *Ensign* 19 (June 1989): 50; G. A. Wainwright, "The Coming of Iron," *Antiquity* 10 (1936): 17-18; Oleg D. Sherby and Jeffrey Wadsworth, "Damascus Steels," *Scientific American* 252 (February 1985): 112-20; J. P. Lepre, *The Egyptian Pyramids: A Comprehensive Illustrated Reference* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1990), 245; Immanuel Velikovsky, *Ramses II and His Time* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 222-37.

⁶ Laban and Lehi's "fathers" may have been among those fugitives of Ephraim and Manasseh who fled to the Kingdom of Judah during the reign of King Asa in about 955 B.C. (see 2 Chronicles 15:8-9), or were part of the "children of Israel which dwelt in the cities of Judah" during the king-

But what of the sword? Had the weapon, like the brass plates, come down from the fathers, as a regal treasure of Joseph? Was it accidental, or an act of Providence, that Nephi brought the sword as well as the plates out of Jerusalem to the land of promise? It is interesting to learn that, according to Jewish tradition, the antediluvian patriarch Methuselah slew myriads of demons with a "wonderful sword,"⁷ a weapon Abraham is said to have inherited, by which he "conquered the kings. . . . Esau thus received it, as heirloom, from Isaac, since he was the first-born. This sword passed to Jacob when he purchased the birth-right."⁸ This miraculous sword of Methuselah, described as being "more [precious] than money,"⁹ was not the only treasure secured by Jacob from Esau. A special rod, known later as the "rod of Aaron," was also procured by Jacob, who eventually "bequeathed it to his favorite son Joseph."¹⁰

The birthright, or rights of inheritance connected with the firstborn, generally included land acquisition, along with the authority to preside (see, for example, Abraham 2:9–11; Genesis 48 and 49; Deuteronomy 33:13–17; D&C 86:8–10). Since Jacob and Leah's eldest son Reuben had "defiled his father's bed" (1 Chronicles 5:1), thus losing his right to succession, his birthright and inheritance passed to the eldest son of Jacob and Rachel, "unto the sons of Joseph" (1 Chronicles 5:1). Though out of Judah would come the Christ or the "chief ruler," the "birthright was Joseph's" (1 Chronicles 5:2). As a result of this event, the birthright sword and other sacred regalia of the patriarchs would naturally come into the possession of Joseph and his descendants, which included both Laban and Nephi.

The Bible also contains a number of passages attesting to an interrelationship existing in antiquity among prophets, kings, and swords. The prophet Samuel is stated to have "cut into pieces" Agag, the Amalekite king, with an unidentified sword, "before the Lord in Gilgal" (1 Samuel 15:33). Phineas or

ship of Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:17), not long after the formation of the Northern and Southern kingdoms.

⁷ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913–25), 1:141.

⁸ Ibid., 5:165.

⁹ Ibid., 1:321.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5:412. For a rod in connection with Joseph Smith, Jr., see D&C 8:6–9; Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 5–6.

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron (Exodus 6:25), considered to be a descendant of Levi, is traditionally stated to have descended also through the lineage of Joseph.¹¹ Moses reportedly bestowed upon him the leadership of the people while the Israelites were fighting the Midianites of the trans-Jordan region, along with the ark of the covenant, the Urim and Thummim, and the gold plate of the mitre that rested on the high priest's forehead. Balaam, a renegade prophet who sold out to the Moabites, is specifically addressed by Phineas as an archetype for that "Aramaeian Laban who tried to destroy our father Jacob," and, like the Laban of Nephi's time, this Laban/Balaam's head was struck off by Phineas with a special sword.¹²

Another sword figures prominently in later Israelite history, when David, like Nephi, slew and decapitated his adversary Goliath with the enemy's own sword (1 Samuel 17:51), and then deposited the weapon at Jerusalem or in the sanctuary of the priest at Nob in the lands of Benjamin.¹³ As a fugitive fleeing from the wrath of Saul, David later obtained Goliath's sword from the priest Ahimelech (1 Samuel 21:8-9). Eventually, this weapon is said to have been inherited by David's famous son and successor, King Solomon.¹⁴

Accounts of swords (*herev* or *hereb*) as emblems of sacred kingship and authority are prevalent in antiquity. Semitic nations such as the Babylonians and Assyrians venerated particular swords. Tiglath-Pileser I, one of Israel's conquerors, dedicated his "copper lightning flash" as "a trophy of victory, in a chapel

¹¹ Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 3:409-11.

¹² Ibid. In the *Aggadah*, Laban is identified with Balaam's father Beor (Numbers 22:5), the name Laban being interpreted as "he shone with wickedness," an excellent characterization of Nephi's adversary named Laban; see C. Roth, "Laban in the Aggadah," in C. Roth, ed., *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 15 vols. (Jerusalem: Macmillan and Keter, 1971), 10:1315-17; T. K. Cheyne, W. M. Müller, and S. A. Cook, "Phinehas," in T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black, eds., *Encyclopedia Biblica*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1899-1903), 3:3727-30; Numbers 31:8; Joshua 13:22. Traditionally, Levi beheld a vision of the third heaven where an angel of God gave him a shield and a sword. See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2:194-96.

¹³ Cf. 1 Samuel 17:54; Maurice A. Canney, "Sword," in Cheyne and Black, eds., *Encyclopedia Biblica* 4:4828.

¹⁴ Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 6:287.

built on the ruins of one of the vanquished cities.”¹⁵ The Assyrian god Ramman is also frequently represented on monuments as armed with a “two-bladed flaming sword.”¹⁶

The ancient Scythian people worshipped an iron scimitar, to which they offered yearly sacrifices of cattle and horses, while the Japanese revered a mirror, sword, and jewel as the regalia inherited from the ancestral sun goddess, Amaterasu, “Heaven Shining.”¹⁷ Among the Germanic tribes of Northern Europe, swords were highly valued as treasure and were transmitted through successive generations.¹⁸ The Anglo-Saxon tale of *Beowulf* speaks of that warrior’s *gomele lafe*, or “ancient heirloom,” an iron sword inherited “from long ago,” while the English king Aethelstan, in his will dated from 1015, bequeathed a sword to his brother Edmund, reputedly owned by old King Offa who lived some two hundred years previously.¹⁹

According to medieval tradition, the famed Germanic hero Siegfried, of the *Nibelungenlied*, obtained a certain sword which enabled him by “ancient law” to acquire “the rights of the first born.”²⁰ Often such inherited swords were buried or “stored for another generation, to be given to a descendant for a

¹⁵ Gaston Maspero, *The Dawn of Civilization: Egypt and Chaldea* (London: SPCK, 1922), 642, 662.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 662. See also T. K. Cheyne, “Goliath,” in Cheyne and Black, eds., *Encyclopedia Biblica* 2:1755.

¹⁷ *Herodotus*, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972), 290; Neil G. Munro, *Prehistoric Japan* (Yokohama: Morice, 1908), 456; G. B. Sansom, *Japan: A Short Cultural History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 272.

¹⁸ H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 118–21.

¹⁹ Caroline Brady, “‘Weapons’ in *Beowulf*: An Analysis of the Nominal Compounds and an Evaluation of the Poet’s Use of Them,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979): 107; H. R. Ellis Davidson, “The Sword at the Wedding,” *Folklore* 71 (March 1960): 7. It is not known conclusively whether “Offa” refers to the king of the eighth or that of the fourth century. Traditionally, Aethelstan also received the sword from Duke Hugh of the Franks in A.D. 926, a weapon said to have originally belonged to the Emperor Constantine; see Charles Kightly, *Folk Heroes of Britain* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 59–60; Frank Barlow, *Edward the Confessor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 34–35.

²⁰ Helen M. Mustard, “The *Nibelungenlied*,” in *Medieval Epics* (New York: Random House, n.d.), 230.

further lifetime of use.”²¹ The Pandyan prince, Kumara Kampana, before going into battle against the Muslims, was given a “divine sword” by a goddess, while another sacred weapon came into the possession of the Rajput kingdom of Mewar, where the blade was “handed down from generation to generation.”²²

As Hugh Nibley has aptly stated, the “kings and leaders of the people, as the trustees of the heritage of culture and dominion, are the regular keepers of the record, ‘which is had by the kings’ (Omni 1:11), handed down from father to son . . . along with the national treasures.”²³ Occasionally these records and artifacts fall into the possession of unrighteous men, as in the case of Laban and Omni (1 Nephi 3:23–26; 4:13, 17; Omni 1:2), though they still are held by individuals belonging to the proper lineage or royal seed.

Just as the discovery of ancient writings on metal plates supports the Book of Mormon account, ancient tradition and custom strongly suggest that Laban *inherited* his sword from the “fathers,” a weapon important because of its history as well as its construction, a “birthright sword” wielded by the patriarchs of old, perhaps centuries before Laban’s or Nephi’s time. Though impractical as an instrument of self-defense in Joseph Smith’s day or our own, its presence in the hand of a Latter-day prophet, descended from Joseph of Egypt, who held the birthright in ancient Israel, testifies to the world that “the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever” (D&C 20:11–12), and that “his course is one eternal round” (D&C 3:2).

²¹ R. Ewart Oakeshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry* (London: Arms and Armour, 1981), 16; also by same author, see *The Archaeology of Weapons* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 103.

²² David Kinsley, *The Goddesses’ Mirror: Visions of the Divine from East to West* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 18–19.

²³ Hugh W. Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet*, vol. 2 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1986), 137.