

# Journal of Book of Mormon Studies

Volume 6 | Number 1

Article 8

1-31-1997

## "The Workmanship Thereof Was Exceedingly Fine"

John A. Tvedtnes Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms

### **BYU ScholarsArchive Citation**

Tvedtnes, John A. (1997) ""The Workmanship Thereof Was Exceedingly Fine"," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 6 : No. 1, Article 8. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol6/iss1/8

This Notes and Communications is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen\_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

- **Title** Notes and Communications: "The Workmanship Thereof Was Exceedingly Fine"
- Author(s) John A. Tvedtnes
- **Reference** *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/1 (1997): 73-75.
  - **ISSN** 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)
  - **Abstract** The *War Scroll* of the Dead Sea Scrolls describes magnificent swords, whose workmanship may parallel that of the sword of Laban. Israelite leaders may well have carried precious swords.

#### NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

## "The Workmanship Thereof Was Exceedingly Fine"

### John A. Tvedtnes

So much has been written about the sword of Laban that it sometimes seems unimaginable that more could be said.<sup>1</sup> But no one appears to have drawn a parallel between the description of the sword of Laban and a similar sword description in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Hence this brief note.

Let's begin by reviewing what Nephi wrote about the sword of Laban, which he examined with care and evident awe:

And I beheld his sword, and I drew it forth from the *sheath* thereof; and the *hilt* thereof was of *pure* gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and I saw that the *blade* thereof was of the most precious steel. (1 Nephi 4:9)

measures a cubit and a half in total langth un

<sup>1</sup> In this journal alone, the following articles have discussed the subject: Todd R. Kerr, "Ancient Aspects of Nephite Kingship in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 85–118; Brett L. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 39–72; Daniel N. Rolph, "Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and Its Possible Pre-Laban Origin," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 73–9; William J. Adams Jr., "Nephi's Jerusalem and Laban's Sword," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (1993): 194–5; and John A. Tvedtnes, "The Iliad and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 147. Compare this with the description given in the *War Scroll* of the swords to be used by the Israelites during the final battle between the forces of good and evil:

The swords shall be of *purified iron*, refined in a crucible and *whitened like a mirror*, work of a *skilful craftsman*; and it will have shapes of an ear of wheat, of *pure gold*, encrusted in it on both sides. And it will have two straight channels right to the tip, two on each side. Length of the sword: one cubit and a half. And its width: four fingers. The *scabbard* will be four thumbs; it will have four palms up to the scabbard and diagonally, the scabbard from one part to the other (will be) five palms. The *hilt* of the sword will be of select horn, *craftwork*, with a pattern in many colours: *gold*, *silver and precious stones*.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that both texts mention the hilt and the sheath or scabbard of the sword is relatively insignificant. More important is the composition of the hilt and the blade. Laban's sword blade is made of "the most precious steel," while the future swords of the Israelite army will have blades "of purified iron . . . whitened like a mirror." Nephi describes the hilt as being made "of pure gold." The future Israelite swords will have a hilt "of select horn . . . with a pattern in many colours: gold, silver and precious stones," though designs in "pure gold" are also mentioned. Both the Nephite and the Qumran descriptions refer to the "workmanship" or "craftwork" of the swords, saying it was "exceedingly fine" or "of a skilful craftsman." The War Scroll is particularly detailed when it describes the sword's ornamentation and size.

Interestingly, the sword described in the Qumran document measures a cubit and a half in total length with a blade four fingers wide (i.e., its width is three inches, while the length depends on which cubit was meant). Using a cubit measure of 17.5 inches, it would have been 26.25 inches long (just over two feet), while a cubit of 20.4 inches would give a length of 30.6 inches or 2.5 feet. This reminds us that the seventh-century B.C. iron Israelite

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> 1QM V 11-4, in Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 99.

#### TVEDTNES, EXCEEDINGLY FINE WORKMANSHIP

sword found at Vered Jericho measured three feet in length with a three-inch-wide blade. We do not know the size of Laban's sword, but William J. Adams, in his discussion of the unusually long Vered Jericho sword, noted that Nephi would have had an easier time decapitating Laban with his sword (1 Nephi 4:18) if it were longer than the usual short swords known from the ancient Near East.<sup>3</sup>

I am not suggesting a direct connection between the account in 1 Nephi and the one in the *War Scroll*. But it may be that the idealized Israelite sword described in the latter reflects the concept of precious swords carried by earlier Israelite leaders such as Laban.

garment in a furnace of fire" (Mosiah 12:10). The prophecy was fulfilled when King Noah was burned to death (Mosiah 19:20) Mark J. Morrise has shown that Abinadi's words fit the pattern of a simile curse, of which he gives examples.<sup>1</sup> Hugh Nibley suggested that Abinadi borrowed from the simile curse in Isatah 50:9, 11 (cited in 2 Nephi 7:9, 11): "Who is he that shall condentn me' ho, they all shall was old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up. Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks; walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled."<sup>2</sup>

But the Isaiab parallel is only a partial one, for verse 11 (which mentions fire) has nothing to do with the garment, which is consumed by the moth, not the fire. If there are parallels to be found, one might expect them to include both the gurment and the fire

This article was prompted by a question from a FARMS subscriber, Dal-Willes, who asked if any ancient traditions about the burning of garatent existed that might explain Abinadi's prophecy about the face of king Monb <sup>1</sup> Mark 1. Morthee, "Simile Curses in the Ancient Near Bask Old Testa ment, and Book of Mormos." Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 201 (1993) 124-38 Bit discussion of Mosiah 12.3, 10-2 is found on page 13).

2 Harb Nibiev, Fite Prophetic Red. of Monoral

For details, see Adams, "Nephi's Jerusalem."

3