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Title Out of the Dust: All That Glitters Is Not . . . Steel

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Abstract A previous report characterized a metal blade discovered at the site of biblical Ekron in Israel as a steel short sword dating from the late seventh century BC, shortly before Lehi left Jerusalem, thus corroborating the much-criticized account of Laban's steel sword in the Book of Mormon. Unfortunately, these assertions are incorrect. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, who is personally acquainted with the excavators who unearthed the blade, explains here that the blade is not a short sword but probably a ceremonial knife. Additionally, the knife is likely from the eleventh century BC and cannot properly be described as steel. Though this artifact does not support the Book of Mormon account of seventh-century steel swords, much better archaeological parallels do exist. Chadwick mentions a meter-long steel sword discovered in Jericho that dates to around 600 BC. This genuinely steel sword from the proper time period makes Nephi's description of Laban's sword entirely plausible.



OUT OF THE DUST

All That Glitters Is Not . . . Steel

Jeffrey R. Chadwick

“Upon further review” is a phrase we sometimes cringe to hear. It usually means that we missed the first call, that we somehow got the facts wrong in our initial pronouncement.

But correcting errors is as important a function as announcing fantastic new findings. And upon further review it looks like the report entitled “Ancient Steel Sword Unearthed,” which appeared in the “Out of the Dust” department of the last issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (14/2, 2005, p. 64), was premature. In this case, all that glitters is not . . . steel.

The erroneous report featured a photograph of an ancient iron knife with a curved blade and an ornate ivory handle that had been discovered in Israel. The artifact was actually unearthed quite a long time ago, during the 1980s, by archaeologists Seymour Gitin and Trude

Dothan during the excavation of Tel Miqne, the ancient Philistine city of Ekron. In the 1990s I served as a field archaeologist under Gitin and Dothan at Ekron and became familiar with the finds of the site, including the handsome curved knife. It is now on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

The author of the item in the *Journal* had seen the photograph of the iron knife in a retrospective article by Gitin about Ekron that appeared in the November 2005 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* (often simply called *BAR*). Perhaps he assumed the find was recent. The caption given to the photo by a *BAR* editor, referring to the knife as a “dagger,” was incorrect. This is a term the excavators never use when discussing the artifact. Both Gitin and Dothan always refer to it as a knife.

The curved knife had been discovered next to a series of *bamot* (cultic installations) in the remains of a large public building at Ekron dating from the 11th century BC, during Iron Age I. Dothan, the world’s foremost expert on early Philistine material culture, maintains that the knife was probably a ceremonial tool used in a Philistine religious setting.

Unfortunately, the claims made in the *Journal* suggesting that this iron knife was actually made of steel and that it was really a “short sword” are incorrect and unsupportable. Neither of the excavators, whom I know personally quite well, would describe the knife in this manner. And the *Journal* write-up seems to give the impression that the knife dates to the late 7th century BC (the time of Lehi and Nephi) by mentioning a 604 BC destruction date of the city. But



This ancient Judean sword, dating to about 600 BC and found near Jericho, is on display at Jerusalem's Israel Museum. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey R. Chadwick.

this is also in error, since the knife was found in a stratum dating 400 to 500 years earlier!

The *Journal* write-up also insisted that the knife's blade “must technically be described as steel” because the smelting process infused carbon into the iron. But *any* smelting process that uses charcoal will introduce some amount of carbon into worked iron—this does *not* necessarily mean the iron has become hardened into steel. Insisting on such a notion would present a problem: if all smelted iron were called “steel,” then what is left to be called “iron”? Even Nephi, who was an experi-

enced metalworker, reported that he worked in *both* iron and steel (see 2 Nephi 5:15). Obviously, the iron that Nephi smelted did not all become steel.

In ancient Israel, the process of hardening iron into steel appears to have its origin in the 7th century BC (late in Iron Age II). This is the very period in which Lehi and Nephi lived. So Nephi's mention of “steel” in his narrative is quite plausible in archaeological terms. And, in fact, steel artifacts from this same period have been found in Israel, most notably a steel sword that was found near Jericho during the 1980s. The Jericho sword

may be considered a remarkable parallel to the steel sword of Laban mentioned by Nephi (see 1 Nephi 4:9).

But the curved iron knife in question was not produced in the 7th century BC. Rather, it was produced in the 11th, or possibly even the 12th, century BC, early in Iron Age I—centuries before the process of making steel came into play and centuries before the time of Nephi. It was not made of steel, nor was it a sword, “short” or otherwise. Upon further review, the record stands corrected. 