"The Lord slayeth the wicked": Coming to Terms with Nephi Killing Laban

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Many would agree that the most disturbing narrative in all of the Book of Mormon is that of Nephi being commanded to slay Laban.¹ Few encourage their friends to turn to that passage when introducing the book.² It is the rather detailed account of what appears to be an

1. While most are appalled that Nephi would take the life of a defenseless man, Hugh Nibley did have a group of students who were bothered for a different reason. He had taught “the first class ever held in ‘Book of Mormon for Near Eastern Students’” (Hugh Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City, and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], xii). Those students were upset that it took Nephi so long to follow the instructions he was given (Nibley, An Approach, xii–xiii).

2. “Why does the story begin like this? The Hebrew Bible begins with the creation of heaven and earth; the New Testament begins with the mysterious birth of a boy god. What kind of bible starts off in a dark creepy alley, with a sleazy drunk guy and a gruesome murder/robbery? This sounded more like Dostoyevsky than Genesis” (Avi Steinberg, The Lost Book of Mormon: A Journey through the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri [New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2014], 19). Later, the author and a friend will conclude that the book begins with this story to show the importance of the book. “There’s a question at the beginning of this story: what kind of book is so important, what kind of story is so important, that you would kill for it—literally kill? Well, this is that kind of book” (Steinberg, Lost Book, 20). Though they are confusing the gold plates of the Book of Mormon with the plates of brass Nephi sought, it is still a provocative insight that one could apply to the brass plates: According to the Nephi narrative, God saw the plates as being so important to the people of Lehi that he was willing to have Nephi kill for them.
unconscionable act. Its closest parallel elsewhere in scripture is the story of Abraham and Isaac, with the all-important difference that, for Nephi, there was no ram in the thicket. How can we justify a man coming upon another man lying in a street, completely helpless, incapacitated because he is passed out from being drunk, and that first man decapitating the second man, stealing his sword and clothing, and then impersonating him so he could steal a most precious item from his treasury and lead one of his servants away from his household? On the surface, this is what appears to be happening. The fact that Nephi feels led by the Spirit to commit this act may be of little comfort to us as members of society since “few, if any of us, would want to live in a society where individual citizens are free to kill drunken fellow citizens—however guilty the drunk may be—because the citizen feels he has been constrained by God to do so.”

A number of writers have offered a variety of explanations for the account. While a few have proclaimed it to be everything from murder to the fictionalized result of a narcissistic Joseph Smith still reeling from his traumatic childhood, most have interpreted the killing as justified for one reason or another: Jewish law; Nephi acting as a sovereign entity; a “law of retribution” articulated in modern times in the Doctrine and Covenants; reasons given to Nephi by the Spirit. Clearly, the controversial and disturbing nature of this story has caused many careful readers of the Book of Mormon to feel the need to justify Nephi’s actions.

In this article, I will first address the main arguments other writers have put forth. I will then analyze the text of the narrative in detail, providing a close reading through a literary lens and presenting my theory regarding what I consider to be the only justification for Nephi killing Laban.

Legal Defense

Foundational to any study of the story of Nephi killing Laban is the work of John W. Welch, particularly his “Legal Perspectives on the

Slaying of Laban,” in which he explores the relevant law surrounding the event. Welch’s analysis argues that the story “can be evaluated profitably through the perspectives of the prevailing legal principles of Nephi’s day.” The summary of his argument is that “if an action had been brought against Nephi, early biblical law appears to have recognized two types of killings—excusable and inexcusable—and the slaying of Laban arguably falls quite specifically into the excusable category.” Welch’s argument centers around the interpretation of the “words of the Spirit [as] apparently a verbatim quote from Exodus 21:13, ‘And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand.’ These words or their equivalent, in [Welch’s] opinion, would have been recognized by Nephi as coming from the Code of the Covenant.”

Exodus 21:12–14 instructs what the followers of Jehovah are to do if a person kills someone: “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. But if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour, to slay him with guile; thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die.” Since God has delivered Laban into Nephi’s hands and Nephi was not lying in wait for him—in other words, since the act was not premeditated—Nephi is not guilty of murder. Of course, this interpretation of events is ultimately theoretical; what

6. Welch, “Legal Perspectives,” 133. He continues: “Growing up in Israel as a young boy, Nephi would certainly have learned this passage from Exodus 21. Deuteronomy 6:6–7 required righteous parents in Israel to teach their children the law of Moses, to talk of these words when they sat at the dinner table, to recite them as they walked down the path, to repeat them before going to bed, and to speak of them upon rising in the morning. One of the most important texts of the law of Moses was Exodus 21–23, essentially an elaboration of the familiar Ten Commandments. Coming early in the first chapter of the Covenant Code was the text cited by the Spirit to Nephi.”
an actual court in Jerusalem would have decided remains uncertain at best.7

Assuming Nephi is as well-versed in the law as Welch believes he is, Nephi faces a dilemma. While he understands that the act of taking Laban's life may not be considered murder for the reasons outlined by Welch, and that therefore the act may be “excusable,” he would also understand that, in order for the act to be justified under the law, he would be required to follow a certain process. He would have to await trial in a refuge city; if found innocent of murder, he would live in a city of asylum until the high priest dies.8 While Welch believes that Nephi met these criteria through his journey to the promised land, thereby meeting the requirement to flee and thus avoid polluting the land because he did not remain on it,9 it is questionable that the legal authorities of the day would have considered these criteria met. The refuge city is an externally designated location and not a choice selected by the killer. Additionally, the killer needed to remain in the place of refuge until the trial was completed; there was no option to simply escape. Nephi's justification under the law is thus a more nuanced matter than an appeal to the Code of the Covenant may initially suggest.

There is another fundamental question: Is Nephi concerned with how the law sees him or is he not? If he is, then one might think he would not feel right about breaking the law by escaping after killing Laban. If he is not, then one might think he would not be worried about whether his action would be considered excusable or inexcusable in the law even if the act is something that God commanded. Some might wonder if Nephi saw himself in a situation similar to Moses, who killed a man and fled (Exodus 2), yet Nephi never compares himself to Moses in this manner. The context of each death further separates Nephi from Moses: Moses

7. Even Welch admits that he does not know if “Nephi would have been able to persuade a court in Jerusalem to let him off or not” (John W. Welch, “Introduction,” Studia Antiqua: The Journal of the Student Society for Ancient Studies 3/2 [2003]: 12). He does say that he believes Nephi “certainly saw himself as not having violated the law.”
killed an Egyptian who was beating one of Moses's brethren, while Nephi killed a defenseless man who was passed out in the street.

Prophet like unto Moses

However, Welch also sees an additional justification for Nephi’s actions. He accepts a reading of Deuteronomy 18 regarding the figure of the “prophet-like-Moses” that leads to the understanding that “a prophet who is like Moses can change the law. He is the bearer of divine commands and legal formulations.” Welch cites instances in which “Nephi encourages his brothers to return to Jerusalem promising that God would deliver them as he had Moses” (1 Nephi 4:2) and when he “implicitly likens himself to Moses while preaching to his brothers Laman and Lemuel” (1 Nephi 17:41-42) in order to support the idea that Nephi is a prophet like Moses. Welch concludes by claiming that, by “receiving the word of the Lord directly from the Spirit, Nephi became a prophet like Moses and, as such, Nephi had the right to suspend or clarify the law as necessary.”

In response, one might argue that Jesus Christ is the more likely candidate for the prophet like unto Moses rather than Nephi. After all, Nephi himself declared that the “prophet of whom Moses spake was the Holy One of Israel” (1 Nephi 22:21). Similarly, later in the Book of Mormon, Jesus would state: “Behold, I am he of whom Moses spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord our God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me” (3 Nephi 20:23). Joseph Smith records that when Moroni appeared to him, he quoted Acts 3:22–23 (in which Peter teaches about the prophet like unto Moses) and “said that that prophet was Christ” (JS-H 1:40). Welch might reply, however, that “Deuteronomy 18 does not imagine that there would be only one prophet like Moses. Bernard S. Jackson rightly sees that such a prophet will be needed continually so that the people will not turn to augury and divination.”

Preservation of a People

A common justification provided for Nephi's actions is based on the Spirit's words following the second time the Spirit told Nephi to slay Laban because the Lord had delivered him into his hands. "Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Nephi 4:13). These words caused Nephi to remember that the Lord had told him that his posterity would prosper in the land of promise to the extent that they would keep his commandments. Nephi also "thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law. And [he] also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass" (1 Nephi 4:15–16). This moment appears to be key in Nephi's decision: "And again, I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause—that I might obtain the records according to his commandments. Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit, and took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword" (1 Nephi 4:17–18).

Writers who base the justification of the slaying on these verses believe Nephi had to kill Laban in order to get the plates, which would be necessary to his future posterity's ability to follow the Lord. "Nephi needs a powerful reason to overcome his reluctance to shed blood; that reason is his people's future ability to know the commandments. Because those commandments are contained on the brass plates, they are therefore necessary to Lehi's posterity."  

Laban's own sinful actions—how he had "sought to take away [Nephi's] life;" "would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord;" and "had taken away [their] property"—if one interprets Nephi's actions as motivated by a divinely directed concern for a future people's possibility for righteousness, then, in this context, Nephi did not kill Laban because he deserved to die. This was not an act of vengeance, retaliation, or justice, according to this theory; this was an act of preservation for an entire future nation. In this interpretive context, Laban had to die for the people of Lehi to survive, and the Lord was giving his blessing for this death to occur for that reason.

While there is no question that the possession of the plates was important to Nephi and his people, we must be careful not to ignore the unlimited alternative ways to acquire the plates without Nephi having to kill Laban. To answer that Nephi had to kill Laban in order to obtain the plates begs the question of why God did not choose one of an infinite number of other scenarios in which Nephi could have gained possession of the plates without killing anyone. Welch, for instance, speculates that if Nephi had allowed Laban to live, he could have either made it home when Nephi was pretending to be him while trying to get the plates, or returned the next day and led a search party to pursue Nephi and his brothers, possibly catching them, killing them, and retrieving the brass plates. But do those scenarios have to play out in those ways?

Joining Welch's viewpoint, Val Larsen writes that while it is "true that God could keep Laban unconscious or slay him himself," the "criticism

D&C 49:21)? There was something special, something unique, about these brass plates," Murphy writes. "They were not just a genealogy or a narrative; they were a written record that included the law of Moses. The Spirit told Nephi that without the plates his descendants would 'dwindle and perish in unbelief' (1 Nephi 4:13). The hidden presupposition in this statement is that belief, or at least the 'true' belief sought by Nephi, could not exist independent of the written word" (Murphy, "Laban's Ghost," 110).


is, nonetheless, invalid. While God has the power to remedy any ill we may encounter, no thinking Christian or Jew believes that God will or should instantly solve all the problems the believer faces.”15 But why is it permissible for God to intervene to the extent of leading Nephi to Laban (“I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do” [1 Nephi 4:6]) and repeatedly instructing him to slay Laban, but it is not allowed for him to keep Laban unconscious? The scriptures are abundant with examples of God intervening in the affairs of people, but perhaps one of the most relevant here would be the instance in the Book of Mormon in which “the Lord caused a deep sleep to come upon the Lamanites,” allowing a group of people to escape (see Mosiah 24:19ff.). Larsen continues to express his concern that “Laban will pose a serious danger if Nephi leaves him alive: the danger that he will wake and follow Nephi to his house or that he will pursue the brothers to recover the plates.”16 And yet, in the same Mosiah 24 narrative, “the Lord said unto Alma: Haste thee and get thou and this people out of this land, for the Lamanites have awakened and do pursue thee; therefore get thee out of this land, and I will stop the Lamanites in this valley that they come no further in pursuit of this people” (Mosiah 24:23).

Law of Retribution (Self-Defense)

Some scholars believe that a law pertaining to when it is appropriate to defend oneself set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants applies to Nephi’s killing of Laban. This “law of retribution”17 or “law of righteous retaliation”18 maintains that “if men will smite you, or your fam-

ilies, once, and ye bear it patiently and revile not against them, neither seek revenge, ye shall be rewarded.” Then, “if your enemy shall smite you the second time, and you revile not against your enemy, and bear it patiently, your reward shall be an hundred fold.” After this second time, “if he shall smite you the third time, and ye bear it patiently, your reward shall be doubled unto you four-fold” (D&C 98:23, 25–26). The law concludes: “Nevertheless, thine enemy is in thine hands; and if thou rewardest him according to his works thou art justified; if he has sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, thine enemy is in thine hands and thou art justified. Behold, this is the law I gave unto my servant Nephi, and thy fathers, Joseph, and Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham, and all mine ancient prophets and apostles” (D&C 98:31–32; emphasis added). For those who argue that Nephi is justified in killing Laban because of this law, Laban is guilty of three offenses as required by the law as they interpret it: when Laman asks for the brass plates, Laban angrily casts him out and threatens to kill him (1 Nephi 3:13); when Nephi and his brothers offer to purchase the plates with their family treasure, Laban casts them out so he can have their property (1 Nephi 3:25); and Laban sends his servants to kill the brothers (1 Nephi 3:25). In support of this interpretation, it is significant that all three of these offenses come to Nephi’s mind during his final encounter with Laban: “I also knew that he had sought to take away mine own life; yea, and he would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord; and he also had taken away our property” (1 Nephi 4:11).

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19. Nyman, I, Nephi, 67: Nyman seems to believe this is when the law of retribution is revealed. “All three of these offenses are brought to Nephi’s mind as he deliberates the Spirit’s commandment to slay Laban. The Lord had delivered Laban into his hands (v. 11), the law of the Lord was revealed.” McConkie and Millet also see this event as related to the law set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants. Rather than writing of Laban casting out Laman and threatening to kill him as one of his offenses, they offer the more general violation of not being obedient to the Lord’s commandments (McConkie and Millet, Doctrinal Commentary, Vol. 1, 44).

20. It is not difficult to imagine Nephi perceiving Laban’s refusal to give Laman the plates when he had first asked for them as a refusal to “hearken unto the commandments
One challenge to this justification for Nephi's actions, however, can be found in the law of retribution itself: "And now, verily I say unto you, if that enemy shall escape my vengeance, that he be not brought into judgment before me, then ye shall see to it that ye warn him in my name, that he come no more upon you, neither upon your family, even your children's children unto the third and fourth generation. And then, if he shall come upon you or your children, or your children's children unto the third and fourth generation, I have delivered thine enemy into thine hands" (D&C 98:28–29). According to these conditions, for the law of retribution to be invoked, the victim must first warn the enemy once the enemy has wronged the victim three times. Second, the victim does not act until the enemy has wronged the victim one more time (i.e., a fourth time) after the warning. Thus, when considering the full law of retribution, it would appear that this law fails to apply to Nephi's situation because he did not warn Laban and did not wait for a fourth offense before executing him.

While the Doctrine and Covenants makes it clear that Nephi received this law from the Lord at some point, it does not specify when. It is certainly far from clear during the Nephi and Laban encounter that the law of retribution is being given to Nephi at that moment; at no point, for example, does the Spirit use any language of retribution to justify instructing Nephi to slay Laban. It is true that Nephi thinks about how Laban has wronged him and might, therefore, be coming up with reasons to justify retribution, but the Spirit does not offer such reasons. If we consider the common understanding of a key word used in the Doctrine and Covenants law, *smite*, at the time of Joseph Smith, it conveys a much more physical meaning than anything Laban had done to Nephi or his brothers: "To strike; to throw, drive or force against, as the fist or hand, a stone or a weapon; to reach with a blow or a weapon; as, to smite one with the fist; to smite with a rod or with

_of the Lord" since it was the Lord who had commanded the sons of Lehi to retrieve the plates.
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a stone.” The second definition references killing and destroying life with weapons. This matches the historical context of the time in which this section of the Doctrine and Covenants was given—a time when members of the Church had experienced literal physical attacks. The heading to the Doctrine and Covenants section explains the context: “This revelation came in consequence of the persecution upon the Saints in Missouri. Increased settlement of Church members in Missouri troubled some other settlers, who felt threatened by the Saints’ numbers, political and economic influence, and cultural and religious differences. In July 1833, a mob destroyed Church property, tarred and feathered two Church members, and demanded that the Saints leave Jackson County” (D&C 98).

Section 98 (D&C) does not seem to provide a law for how to deal with an individual who offends you. With its talk of “men” who “smite” you “or your families,” this law does not appear to be counsel regarding conflict between two people, but rather as referring to the larger community. Additionally, consider that immediately following this law of retribution is a second law pertaining to when a people are allowed to go to battle against another people. This second law is patterned after the first; each provides a moral template and justification for larger sociopolitical events rather than individual grievances. Welch believes Nephi might have received the law of retribution when the Nephites separated themselves from Laman and his group, since the “rules of war fit the events in 2 Nephi 5, but they do not apply precisely to the case of Laban.” He makes the convincing argument that the statement “if he has sought thy life, and thy life is endangered by him, thine enemy is in thine hands and thou are justified” (D&C 98:31) “literally applies only


22. For a more detailed discussion of the historical events pertaining to the persecution of this time period, see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 222–27.
to a case of self-defense;” which is not the situation Nephi finds himself in when he stands over Laban, passed out in the street.23

Nephi as Sovereign

Val Larsen theorizes that “while any explanation of this episode will be unsatisfactory if Nephi is held to be acting as an individual, a close reading of the text makes it abundantly clear that the killing of Laban was not an individual act, but rather a sovereign act that had a clear political purpose. That Nephi acts as a sovereign is an overdetermined fact in the text.” Larsen believes Nephi became “prophet leader and king” when he killed Laban, gained possession of Laban’s sword and the brass plates, and led Zoram, who served as proxy for the people, out of slavery to the freedom of the promised land.24 “By putting on Laban’s clothing and armor,” he writes, “Nephi both symbolically and literally assumes the sovereign authority of Laban.”25 He views Laban as “worthy of death” and Nephi with “the sovereign power to execute criminals,” so that “far from being the lawless act of an individual citizen, Nephi’s execution of Laban is the lawful act of a sovereign lawgiver who is seeking to maintain among his people a social order based on law.”26

However, if Nephi assumes the sovereign authority of Laban when he puts on Laban’s clothing and armor, it is possible to argue that he did not have it at the time he executed the drunken man. Would that mean he was not acting as the sovereign when he performed the act that

26. Larsen, “Killing Laban,” 36–37. Nephi is a “lawgiver” in the sense that he is retrieving the brass plates, which have God’s law written upon them, and giving them to his people. Without Nephi, his people would not have the law (see 1 Nephi 4:14–17).
required the sovereign power to perform it? Another issue that may not be clear is the extent to which Nephi could gain sovereignty by taking Laban's life. Laban is not the head of Israel in any sense of the word. Perhaps it could be argued that, to some extent, Laban represented the leadership of Israel, but would slaying the representative of a leader bestow that leader's authority upon the perpetrator of the act?

Larsen points out, as additional evidence for Nephi's role as sovereign, that he is told before he leaves Jerusalem for the plates that, if he keeps the commandments, he will be made a "ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren" (1 Nephi 2:22). However, such an interpretation is not certain. There is no direct correlation between calling Nephi a "ruler" and understanding that designation to mean he will be a formal sovereign with official powers and authority. Other interpreters of the text do not connect the promise with actual legal authority. For example, Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet view the promise in terms of ecclesiastic duty: "God calls his obedient servants to rule and teach. The humble follower is called to lead; the teachable is called to teach." Later, when an angel stops Laman and Lemuel from beating Nephi and their other brother, Sam, with a rod, he asks them if they do not know that the Lord had chosen Nephi to be "a ruler" over them because of their iniquities (1 Nephi 3:29). Larsen interprets this second question to be a declaration of Nephi's "sovereign position in this new branch of Israel," making it a "fait accompli." The angel's words, however, could simply indicate that Nephi will be the leader of the family. As Eldin Ricks writes, "by divine edict Laman was to be disinherited from the traditional rights of the first-born son to succeed his father in property holdings and family leadership. He was to be supplanted, not by Lemuel, the second son, nor even by Sam, the third, but by Nephi, the fourth and youngest brother. This was the supreme ignominY." If

we turn to Nephi for an understanding of what was meant for him to be a ruler over his brethren, he appears to draw a distinction between that designation and the political authority of kingship:

And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power. And behold, the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren, which he spake concerning them, that I should be their ruler and their teacher. Wherefore, I had been their ruler and their teacher, according to the commandments of the Lord, until the time they sought to take away my life. (2 Nephi 5:18–19)

Nephi speaks these words at the time that his people are separating from the people of Laman and Lemuel. Note that Nephi’s people wanted him to be their king, but he does not accept that title and responsibility, though he certainly served them. Up to this point in the narrative, then, Nephi has not been a king. Also note that he believes that the prophecy about his being a ruler and teacher has already been fulfilled even though he has not been a king. It is clear that, to Nephi, his being a ruler does not mean that he will be a sovereign. It is of interest that Nephi’s brother, Jacob, will later say to the people that he had been “consecrated by [his] brother Nephi, unto whom ye look as a king or a protector” (2 Nephi 6:2; emphasis added). It seems that neither his own brother nor his people officially recognize Nephi as a king in the sense of one wielding sovereign power. Instead, they only look to him “as a king or a protector.”

Larsen offers as evidence for Nephi’s role as sovereign what he considers to be “explicit declarations of Nephi’s reign.” He points to Mormon’s subtitle for 1 Nephi: “His [Nephi’s] Reign and Ministry,” which, to him, indicates that Nephi was a sovereign before 2 Nephi. He then quotes Nephi’s only personal mention of his reign soon after he acquired the brass plates: “And now I, Nephi, proceed to give an account upon these plates of my proceedings, and my reign and ministry” (1 Nephi 10:1). “This explicit statement would seem to cap his acquisition of
sovereignty in the events that have just unfolded. The events that follow, this passage suggests, are part of Nephi's reign as sovereign.\textsuperscript{30}

An alternative reading, however, would be that this is the first verse after the chapter that discusses the two sets of plates: \textit{these plates}, which are the smaller plates that are more focused on “the ministry of [Nephi’s] people,” and “the other plates,” which “are for the more part of the reign of the kings and the wars and contentions of [Nephi’s] people” (1 Nephi 9:3–4). Since Nephi has just written about the two sets of plates, it makes sense that Nephi would continue by saying what he is about to do (“And now I, Nephi, proceed to give an account . . .”). Perhaps he is not necessarily saying that his \textit{reign} occurs in 1 Nephi, but that his account of his reign, whenever it might begin, is on \textit{these plates} as opposed to \textit{the other plates}. And if 2 Nephi 5:18 is read as an indication that Nephi had not yet been a king to that point, then it would also appear to indicate that he had not been a king in 1 Nephi. Additionally, it is possible that Mormon takes the subtitle for 1 Nephi from this particular verse rather than the subtitle being a statement from Mormon that Nephi’s reign as king began in 1 Nephi.

While Ben McGuire acknowledges that “Nephi’s account may also represent a reference to Exodus 21:13,” he interprets the story of Nephi slaying Laban as an allusion to the story of David killing Goliath, with the Spirit’s statement to Nephi about the Lord交付 Laban into his hands being a “distinctive point of verbal contact” in the last part of the statement David proclaims to the Philistine: “This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hands” (1 Samuel 17:46).\textsuperscript{31} Like Larsen, McGuire also sees Nephi as a sovereign.\textsuperscript{32} Just as the idea that God had delivered Goliath into the hands of David was a sign that God had

\textsuperscript{30} Larsen, “Killing Laban,” 40.


\textsuperscript{32} Much of McGuire’s article is an insightful discussion of methodology. He does bring up some issues, such as whether Nephi is considered a king by his people or the meaning of “the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands,” that I deal with when I discuss other articles.
chosen him to be king, McGuire understands the language of delivery by God into Nephi’s hands to indicate that Nephi will be king.\(^{33}\) While McGuire writes of a number of parallels between Nephi and David, I cannot help but be bothered by one of the glaring differences: David triumphed in battle with an armed man—a “giant,” even—while Nephi killed a drunken man passed out in the street. It is difficult to accept Nephi’s action as a divine sign of ascendency to the throne in the same light as David’s defeat of Goliath.

**Psychoanalytical Perspective**

Though by no means a widespread interpretation, there is one view of the Nephi/Laban narrative that holds the entire Book of Mormon as the product of Joseph Smith’s attempt to cope with a serious personality disorder resulting from his traumatic youth. William D. Morain reads the story of Nephi and his brothers retrieving the brass plates as “brimming with sibling rivalry” with a “main theme [of] patricide [that] can thus be best understood in a psychoanalytic context.” He believes Joseph Smith performed an act of “‘splitting,’ a primitive defense mechanism commonly used by traumatized children.” In this interpretation, Joseph assigned the positive attributes he saw in his father, Joseph Smith, Sr., to Lehi in the Book of Mormon, and the negative attributes to Laban. Laban is also representative of Dr. Nathan Smith, the doctor who performed the surgery on Joseph when he was seven years old and who thereby played a major role in one of the most traumatic experiences in the boy’s life. Thus, when Nephi kills Laban, Morain argues that Joseph is actually killing the parts of his father (and the surgeon) that he rejects, while being able to retain what he cares for. “Not only does Nephi confiscate the fearsome weapon from this surgeon/father representation,

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but he destroys the representation with it as well. In performing the unthinkable act, the hero not only takes his revenge on his evil father but also carries the age-specific oedipal imagery into the fantasy.\textsuperscript{34}

Though Dan Vogel’s interpretation of the narrative shares some aspects of the psychoanalytical perspective, he also sees the episode somewhat differently. While Joseph’s father can be seen in both Lehi and Laban, the killing of Laban, according to Vogel, may be understood as Joseph’s attempt “to free the Bible from the intellectualizing grip of his father and those like him, to interpret the scriptures for himself more literally and through the spirit of God.”\textsuperscript{35} For Vogel, in keeping with psychoanalytical criticism, this episode of Nephi and Laban serves as an extension of Joseph Smith’s personal life and how he dealt with his challenges.

Of the interpretations I have discussed, the psychoanalytic is the least promising to me. The parameters are too loose, with conjecture replacing historical or textual evidence. It would be a different matter if historians discovered a journal written by Joseph Smith supporting claims that certain characters in the Book of Mormon represented individuals in his life, but such historical evidence simply does not exist. As one critic observed, “one may indeed question those who believe that lifeless documents can substitute for the give-and-take between an inquisitive trained psychologist and his patient lying patiently on the psychologist’s couch.”\textsuperscript{36}


Taking a Narrative Approach

I believe that what Leland Ryken said about the Bible as literature applies to the Book of Mormon equally as well: “A working definition of literature . . . is that it is an interpretive presentation of experience in an artistic form. This means there are two criteria that must be insisted on if we are to distinguish between the literary and nonliterary parts of the Bible: (1) literature is experiential rather than abstract, and (2) literature is artistic, manifesting elements of artistic form.” 37 Nephi’s account of his coming upon Laban in the street provides an excellent example of scripture as literature. It is experiential in that it both depicts the experience for us as readers and it provides an experience for us. We experience the thrill Nephi feels as he comes upon the sword for the first time, the terror and confusion he senses when he is commanded to take another man’s life, the rationalization he works through as he tries to come to terms with what he has been told to do, the logic he remembers as he collects his thoughts, and the resolution he arrives at as he commits to obey the voice of the Spirit. Nephi creates for us what Robert Alter would call a “proper narrative event” because the “narrative tempo slows down enough for us to discriminate a particular scene,” giving us “the illusion of the scene’s ‘presence’ as it unfolds.” 38

When Nephi first comes upon Laban, he is completely enthralled with the sword—like any young man who has an interest in all things metal would be—and appears to have little interest in the body before him. He pulls the sword from the sheath and admires the hilt, which

appears to him to be “of pure gold” with “workmanship” that is “exceedingly fine.” He notes that the blade consists of what appears to him to be “the most precious steel” (1 Nephi 4:9). As far as we can discern from the text, Nephi has not considered what he should do with Laban at this point. Nephi’s apparent disinterest in Laban does not correspond with the idea of a person focused on searching out an enemy in order to execute him.

What comes next is a fascinating element of the narrative event. Alter points out that “as a rule, when a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue, so the transitions from narration to dialogue provide in themselves some implicit measure of what is deemed essential.” At this stage of the Nephi/Laban narrative, an unusual kind of dialogue develops—it is, in fact, more like a combination between both dialogue and monologue. The dialogue occurs between the Spirit and Nephi, but Nephi never responds to the Spirit. The Spirit speaks to Nephi, but never once does Nephi directly respond to the Spirit—at least, not in a verbal response. Nephi’s response has two parts: first, it occurs in the form of a monologue in which he narrates for us what is going through his mind; and, second, it occurs through the form of the actions he takes.

Early in this dialogue, Nephi is “constrained by the Spirit” to kill Laban. At the time of Joseph Smith, the word “constrain” conveyed an

39. Concerning both the hilt and the blade, I am cautious to qualify Nephi’s descriptions as limited to what appeared to him to be the case. I do not believe the text necessarily signifies that the hilt was tested and found to be made of actual “pure gold,” or that the blade had been analyzed, and the test results had come back that “the most precious steel” had been used. This is a text, not lab results. I am willing to believe the text represents either what Nephi as a young man believed the sword was composed of or Nephi as a more mature man believed as he remembered his first impressions or, perhaps, as he held the sword in his hands moments before he wrote the account.

40. By contrast, McGuire postulates that if “we accept the chronology provided in the text literally, then there is a real issue of whether or not Nephi entered the city fully expecting to kill Laban” (McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath,” 26). I do not see the text supporting this view, especially in light of Nephi’s statement that he was “led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which [he] should do” (1 Nephi 4:6).

41. Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, 182.
intense meaning: “To compel or force; to urge with irresistible power, or with a power sufficient to produce the effect.” The use of the term “constrain” thus indicates that Nephi likely does not feel he had a real choice, in any meaningful sense of the word. The use of the word “constrained” appears to be even stronger than commanded—being constrained by the Spirit may be more forceful than being commanded by the Lord. While “to command” signifies “to bid; to order; to direct; to charge; implying authority, and power to control, and to require obedience,” to constrain involves force and compulsion—the power to produce the effect. It is clear from various stories throughout the scriptures that commandments can be broken. The Lord requires obedience, yet individuals repeatedly fail to comply. Nephi’s use of a word later rendered as “constrained” may imply he felt a requirement that extended beyond the force of a commandment. It is important to consider it likely that Nephi applies some hindsight here in his use of the word “constrained.” As he writes this account, he knows that he will eventually take Laban’s life even though he initially hesitates. “Constrained” conveys the concept that the source making the request has the power to “require obedience.” Perhaps Nephi selects “constrained” purposefully, wishing to communicate that he felt as though the Spirit from the very beginning possessed the power needed to require obedience from Nephi. In other words, Nephi would be saying that, in hindsight, the Spirit’s initial words, as will be discussed in detail below, were sufficient to cause him to take Laban’s life without any need for


43. Of course, I recognize that Nephi did not choose the word “constrained.” However, he chose the word that was translated, somehow, into the word “constrained.” I do not make the claim carelessly, though, when I say that Nephi chose that word; by virtue of the fact that he chose the original word that was ultimately translated to “constrained,” he, in effect, chose the final word.

further prodding. In this reading, Nephi knew he was going to kill Laban from the beginning when the Spirit first spoke, but he still felt the need to work through the process mentally prior to taking action.

Nephi writes of his hesitancy to follow the direction of the Spirit. It is impressive that Nephi, many years after the fact, writing as a prophet and leader of his people, presents this narrative with such unflattering candor. Without concern for preserving a perfect image of himself as one who has always followed the Lord without question, he openly admits in his record, with the intention that it will last for thousands of years for all the world to read, that his first inclination was to not be inclined to follow what he was told to do. “I said in my heart: Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk and would that I might not slay him” (1 Nephi 4:10).

Nephi’s hesitancy is in direct contrast to his earlier bold proclamation: “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” (1 Nephi 3:7). He tells his father that he will go and do what the Lord commands him to do, but, in the very next chapter, the Lord commands him to take Laban’s life, and he immediately balks. When Nephi is “constrained by the Spirit” to kill Laban, the earlier Nephi who proclaimed his unwavering obedience comes face-to-face with a Nephi who has encountered something he likely thought impossible—a divine mandate to take another man’s life. This teenager is about to find out if 1 Nephi 3:7 is true, and the stakes are, in many ways, much higher than simply risking his own life to obtain the plates.

Note that, according to 1 Nephi 4:10, there is no mention that the Spirit gives Nephi any indication of a reason (outside of the command

45. Of course, this is speculation on my part. Perhaps the word “constrained” was not selected with this meaning in mind. However, this possibility is worth considering. While the Spirit did say more than what he did initially, and while Nephi did continue to think through the situation, it is worth considering what Nephi might be communicating after the fact by choosing “constrained” to tell his story years later.
itself) as to why Nephi should take Laban's life. By "reason," I mean there is no mention of the Spirit saying, at this point, that Nephi should take Laban's life because, for example, Laban had threatened anyone's life or stolen any property, or that it was better for one person to perish than a nation to dwindle and perish in unbelief. All we know is that the Spirit "constrained" Nephi to kill the man.

We do learn from the next verse, however, what was originally said: "And the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands" (emphasis added). We now learn that when the Spirit first spoke to Nephi, the message was "behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands." When Nephi hesitates to kill Laban, the Spirit repeats the words again. The first two times that the Spirit commands Nephi to slay Laban, we now know that the message was the same: that the Lord had delivered Laban into Nephi's hands. It is significant that when Nephi heard that message from the Spirit the first time, he understood it to mean that he "should kill Laban" (1 Nephi 4:10).

The Spirit is apparently reminding Nephi of a promise the Lord had made to him earlier. When Nephi and his brothers had offered Laban their family riches in exchange for the brass plates, Laban cast them out and sent his servants to kill them so he could steal their property. The brothers successfully escaped, but Laman and Lemuel were extremely angry with their younger brothers and struck out violently against them, beating Nephi and Sam with a rod. After chastising

46. I have not found another writer who has noted that the Spirit talked about the Lord delivering Laban into his hands in the very beginning of his interaction with Nephi. For example, Richard Dilworth Rust writes: "The first is a simple injunction: Kill Laban. The second is the impression that the Lord has delivered Laban into Nephi's hands" (Richard Dilworth Rust, Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City, and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997], 28).

47. Steven Olsen interprets the word deliver as a leitwort, a "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" (Steven L. Olsen, "The Death of Laban: A Literary Interpretation," FARMS Review 21/1 [2009]: 185). His article discusses, in part, how the Spirit's choice of words must be seen in the context of the surrounding chapters to be understood as a part of a pattern that reveals God's power of deliverance.
the two and telling them that Nephi will be a ruler over them, an
angel makes a promise: “Ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the
Lord will deliver Laban into your hands” (1 Nephi 3:28–29). Since the
Lord had already told Nephi, through an angel, that he would deliver
Laban to his hands, perhaps the message delivered by the Spirit is
meant to remind Nephi of this previous promise, and thus indicate
that his finding Laban passed out on the street is no accident. 48 If this
reading is correct, then Nephi is meant to see the hand of the Lord in
this event and in what he is being instructed to do. Since Nephi is not
going to concern himself with following the law anyway (i.e., he is not
going to turn himself over to the Jewish authorities, be tried, allow
himself to be exiled to the designated city of refuge, and so forth),
perhaps the assurance is not so much a matter of justifying Laban’s
death under the Mosaic Law as it is confirming for Nephi that what is
happening is from the Lord.

The Spirit’s words provide more than a reminder, however. The pre­
cise wording is of the utmost importance: “Slay him, for the Lord hath
delivered him into thy hands.” 49 In this sentence, the Lord, through
the Spirit, is giving Nephi the reason to kill Laban: Kill him, because
the Lord has delivered him into your hands for this purpose. Kill him,
because the Lord is commanding you to kill him.

48. Olsen also notes the similarity between what the angel had told Nephi and his
brothers and what the Spirit told Nephi (though he refers to the Spirit as an angel as
well). See Olsen, “Death of Laban,” 185–86. Millet and McConkie understand the Spirit’s
telling Nephi that the Lord had delivered Laban into his hands as indicating that his
finding the drunken man was no accident; it was reassurance that the Lord was involved
in him finding Laban (Doctrinal Commentary, Vol. 1, 44).

49. It is noteworthy that several writers simply do not analyze this key statement by
the Spirit even though they discuss the narrative sufficiently that it would make sense
for them to consider the statement. For example, Ricks, Book of Mormon Commentary,
69–71; Reynolds and Sjodahl, Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 39; Sperry, Book of
Mormon Compendium, 102; Hugh Nibley, Léhi in the Desert, ed. John W. Welch, with
Darrell L. Matthews and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City, and Provo, UT: Deseret
Book and FARMS, 1988), 98–99; Turner, “Prophet Nephi,” 85; Monte S. Nyman, I,
The Only Justification for Nephi's Action

In my view, there is only one justification for what Nephi did: God commanded him to kill Laban. As Welch states, "in the end, Laban was killed for one and only one reason, namely because the Spirit of the Lord commanded it and constrained Nephi to slay him, for 'the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands.' " 50 According to my reading, there is no other justification; it was an act of obedience. 51 If there were some other justification available, then there would be no need for God to tell him to kill him. If Laban's stealing of their property justified the killing, or if his sending his servants to kill Nephi and his brothers or his refusal to obey God's commandments by not turning over the plates justified Nephi killing him, then there would be no need for God to command Nephi to perform the act. If Nephi were indeed a sovereign who had

50. Welch, "Legal Perspectives," 131. McConkie and Millet concur: "In general, Nephi was justified in slaying Laban (without rational explanation) because God had commanded it" (McConkie and Millet, Doctrinal Commentary, Vol. 1, 44).

51. Looking at this story through a Girardian lens, Stirling rejects this reasoning: "The traditional LDS interpretation of this event, which sees Nephi as the virtually perfect example of human obedience, cannot be harmonized with the Girardian. In traditional LDS thought, Nephi was able to listen to the Spirit and obey the voice of God against the voice of his culture, which told him not to kill Laban (1 Nephi 4:10). . . . In contrast, Girardians will continue to see Nephi as a tragic illustration of the fact that even the most devoted individual may slide unconsciously into scapegoating and the violent sacred" (Stirling, "Violence in the Scriptures," 97). It should be noted, however, that Eugene England also analyzed the Nephi/Laban encounter through a Girardian lens and arrived at a different conclusion than Stirling: "What if it was a test, like the command to Abraham to kill Isaac? What if it was designed to push Nephi to the limits of the human dilemma of obedience versus integrity and to teach him and all readers of the Book of Mormon something very troubling but still very true about the universe and the natural requirements of a saving relationship with God? What if it is to show that genuine faith ultimately requires us to go beyond what is rationally moral, even as it has been defined by God—but only when God himself requires it directly of us? And what if each reader is intentionally left to solve the dilemma on their own through a vicarious experience with the text? . . . Girard recognizes, with seeming anguish, that much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, describes a natural order in which God seems to compromise to bring about ultimate change" (Eugene England, “Why Nephi Killed Laman: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon,” in Making Peace: Personal Essays [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995], 15–16).
the authority to execute Laban, then there was absolutely no need for the Spirit to tell him to do it. Perhaps there was a personal need for the Spirit to tell him—perhaps Nephi was so hesitant that he could not bring himself to do it without that added catalyst—but if that were the case, the nature of what the Spirit told him would certainly be different. Rather than “slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands,” the instructions would be more along the lines of “slay him, for as sovereign, you have the authority to execute him.”

Before Nephi leaves for the promised land, a place where he will eventually act as the prophet and leader for his people, he needs to learn that when he proclaimed he would “go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for [he knows] 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” (1 Nephi 3:7), he was speaking the truth. As Jeffrey R. Holland said when he was president of Brigham Young University, “if Nephi cannot yield to this terribly painful command, if he cannot bring himself to obey, then it is entirely probable that he can never succeed or survive in the tasks that lie just ahead.”

After the Spirit tells Nephi to slay Laban because the Lord has delivered him into his hands, Nephi reflects on Laban’s prior treatment of him and his family (see 1 Nephi 4:11, as discussed above). Then the Spirit speaks again: “Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands; Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:12–13). It is at this point where some may interpret the Spirit as providing Nephi with reasons other than obedience for going through with the act. These

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53. Hardy, for example, writes that the “angel” (though he is actually the Spirit, not an angel) offered “revenge and expediency” as “justification” for Nephi slaying Laban (Hardy, Understanding, 285n15).
are the Spirit's last words to Nephi during this narrative, and these are
the words that seem to bring him to the turning point that gets him to
finally act. Therefore, a closer reading of these words is in order.

"Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands." As dis-
cussed above, the Spirit is saying, in effect, "slay him, because the Lord
hath delivered him into thy hands." This statement focuses on the reason
Nephi should kill Laban: because the Lord has commanded him to do
it. The reason he is to kill Laban is because God has delivered him to
Nephi for that precise purpose: to kill him.

"Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous pur-
poses." First, note that the Spirit's words mark a precise attribution for
the act of killing itself: "the Lord slayeth," not "thou slayest." According
to the text, it is the Lord who is ultimately committing the act of slaying.
Just as the sword acts as an instrument in the hands of Nephi, Nephi acts
as an instrument in the hands of the Lord. Second, the structure of this
sentence identifies Laban with the wicked. Nephi is being commanded
to kill someone whom the Lord has pronounced as wicked. Though
Nephi considers his personal list of the wrongs Laban has committed,
he does not pronounce legal judgment. Instead, the Lord decrees that
Laban is wicked. And, third, the act of slaying Laban is categorized as
serving the righteous purposes of the Lord. Nephi need not worry about
whether this is an act of revenge or selfishness; this is, indeed, an act
that serves the Lord's righteous purposes.

"It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should
dwindle and perish in unbelief." These words do not provide the reason
for Nephi, as Nephi, to kill Laban. Rather, they provide the Lord's rea-
son—or, at least one of his reasons—for deciding to end Laban's life.
As Monte Nyman writes, "the Spirit a third time commanded and gave

54. Of course, this is putting aside the theory above based on the word "con-
strained" that Nephi, in hindsight, realized that he knew he was going to take Laban's
life from the moment the Spirit spoke but simply had to work his mind through the
process of accepting this reality.
the Lord's justification for taking Laban's life."\textsuperscript{55} Keep in mind that the Spirit's statement follows logically from his previous one asserting that the Lord slays the wicked in order to bring forth his righteous purposes. This ordering is not just a mere matter of semantics. If the Spirit were telling Nephi he would be justified in killing Laban due to the principle that it would be better for one person to perish than a nation to dwindle and perish in unbelief—if that were the justification for the killing and not the fact that God was telling him to do it—then this event would not be a test of obedience. As discussed above, the Lord would not need to \textit{command} Nephi to take Laban's life; rather, Nephi could simply take his life through the justification of saving the nation.

It appears that the Spirit offers the Lord's justification for taking Laban's life to help Nephi understand the Lord's purposes and to help him work through this difficult challenge, but the \textit{reason} remains the same: "Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands." After Nephi learns from the Spirit the Lord's justification for ending Laban's life, Nephi remembers what he has been told and logically thinks through the ramifications of his people not having the plates:

\begin{quote}
And now, when I, Nephi, had heard these words, 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. Yea, and I also thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law. And I also knew that the law was engraved upon the plates of brass. And again I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause—that I might obtain the records according to his commandments. (1 Nephi 4:14–17)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{55} Nyman, \textit{Lehi and Nephi}, 74. There may be many other reasons for the Lord deciding that now is the time for Laban's life to end. Perhaps ending Laban's mortal probation now is the most loving action to take on the Lord's part—that the Lord knows giving him more time to live will do nothing but make his eternal situation worse.
While it is important to understand Nephi's thought process here, it is imperative to remember that these thoughts are all internal to the mind of Nephi himself. The Spirit is not the one expressing these ideas; rather, these thoughts demonstrate the ways in which Nephi mentally works through the Spirit's information that the Lord is willing to slay wicked people to accomplish his righteous purposes and that it is better for one person to perish than an entire nation to dwindle and perish in unbelief. These verses provide Nephi's attempt to align what he is being commanded to do with the Lord's justification. He sees the way in which the potential fate of his people as lost without the guidance of the plates matches what he has just learned is a justification in the Lord's eyes for the Lord ending Laban's life.

But the next statement from Nephi is crucially significant. He does not say "therefore I did slay Laban because it was better for him to perish than for my people to dwindle and perish in unbelief." He says "therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit" (1 Nephi 4:18; emphasis added). The word "therefore" is important: it demonstrates a logical connection between Nephi's thoughts and his final decision. His reasons in the previous verses have helped him make up his mind. However, ultimately, the choice to kill Laban was still a matter of obedience for Nephi, and not one of logic or utilitarian calculation. "Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit."

It is important to note that to assert that the Lord had a justification for ending Laban's life is not to say that Laban's life had to be ended. While it may be true that it is better for one person to perish than an entire nation to dwindle and perish in unbelief, it is not necessarily true that the only way to stop an entire nation from dwindling and perishing in unbelief is for that person to perish. If one accepts the premise of the Book of Mormon while reading it—namely, that God is a God of miracles and unmatched power who is not limited by the imaginations and expectations of humankind—then it is not difficult to believe that such a God could find many different ways to save that nation from unbelief without having to take the life of that person: for example, finding an alternative method of retrieving the plates, producing another set of the
plates, and directly revealing the content of the plates to someone else belonging to that nation are just three possibilities. To say that Nephi had to obtain the brass plates or that Lehi's descendants would have unavoidably dwindled and perished in unbelief is to make the same two fundamental mistakes as the argument that Nephi had to kill Laban, or Laban would have followed him. First, it ignores the worldview of the Book of Mormon already mentioned above. And, second, especially germane to this article, it discounts the real reason the text provides for Nephi slaying Laban and offers ulterior motives that undermine that sole reason.56

It is important to understand how narrow the ramifications of this narrative are. I am not proposing that some sort of "Nephi doctrine" can be derived from the text, nor that such a construct could be applied by other people to their individual circumstances. This article does not support the notion that one may justify one's actions by claiming obedience to the commands of a higher human authority; no perpetrators of war crimes can rely on Nephi to save them from consequences. Other humans cannot claim the omniscience of God. While God perfectly knows when it is the right time for a person's life to end and can, with perfect justice and perfect love, make that determination and choose another person to be an instrument in his hands to end a person's life, as God did with Nephi and Laban, another human being does not have that perfect knowledge and cannot exercise that power with perfect justice and perfect love.

56. As Commissioner of Church Education, Jeffrey R. Holland wrote a brief article that discussed different aspects of this story. He concluded that "it would seem, finally, that obedience to divine revelation, not death, is the focal point of this story. God can restore life in time and eternity; he can do almost nothing with willful disobedience. The quality of our obedience to God's commandments is still the clearest expression of the quality of our faith in him" (Jeffrey R. Holland, "How Can I Explain Nephi's Killing Laban to My Nonmember Friends?," Ensign [September 1976], 83–84). As president of Brigham Young University, he would later write: "I believe that story [of Nephi slaying Laban] was placed in the very opening verses of a 531-page book and then told in painfully specific detail in order to focus every reader of that record on the absolutely fundamental gospel issue of obedience and submission to the communicated will of the Lord" (Holland, "Will of the Father," 78).
Nor do I suggest that Nephi's story supports those who might claim innocence by maintaining that what they did was commanded by God. I am not proposing a legal defense for anyone. What I am proposing is the sole justification for Nephi's actions, and that justification is a divine one, not a legal one. The text demonstrates an explicit act of justification, but it is a justification that occurs independent of any legal authority. If Nephi had been prosecuted under the Mosaic Law, the legal consequences for his action may very well have been unfavorable. The justification as narrated in the text, however, was a justification between Nephi and God, not between Nephi and the justice system of his time, nor of ours. It is not a public justification; it is a private one. It is not a justification that must be recognized in a court of law. When God commanded Nephi to take Laban's life, it was a test of Nephi's willingness to obey; it was a unique moment in scripture, not a prototype for all to follow in terms of how to treat human life.

Søren Kierkegaard explores this problem when writing about Abraham and Isaac in his book Fear and Trembling. Kierkegaard notes that the ethical "is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone,

57. As Welch has noted (see footnote 7).
58. Larsen does not see the Nephi/Laban episode as parallel to Abraham/Isaac: "The test of Abraham made a profound theological point: more than any other episode in scripture, it makes clear the cost God paid when he sacrificed his son in order to balance justice with mercy. And in the end, Isaac—and more profoundly, Abraham—was spared. Asking Nephi to kill Laban—violating his conscience, judgment, and God's law—does not have an equally clear theological purpose, and Nephi is not spared the trauma of actually carrying out the killing" (Larsen, "Killing Laban," 28). As already noted, England, on the other hand, wonders if the Nephi story might not be an Abrahamic test (England, "Why Nephi Killed Laban," 15). There is no question in my mind that, initially, what Abraham is commanded to do is a far greater sacrifice than that of Nephi. To be commanded to kill your child is an unfathomable, horrific nightmare—far worse than being commanded to kill someone who has stolen from you and tried to kill you. Still, being told to kill anyone would be a terrible commandment to receive. Yet the great difference, of course, is that Abraham was given a ram in a thicket and Nephi was not. For the sake of this discussion, however, it is not crucial to determine if the Nephi/Laban story is equal to the Abraham/Isaac story in all respects; it is sufficient to realize that they are equal in the fact that they each center around an essential theme of obedience.
which from another angle means that it applies at all times.”

However, he also makes this all-important observation: “The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual . . . determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute.”

While the ethical is universal and applies to all people, the individual is superior to the universal and is in relation to God, who is the absolute. Faith requires that relationship. In that way, faith supersedes the ethical. So, while the ethical course of action is for Abraham to refuse to sacrifice Isaac, faith requires him to obey God. Similarly, ethics requires Nephi to restrain himself from killing a man passed out in the street, but his faith demands that he obey God.

Some may argue that if Nephi killing Laban is justified by obedience to God alone, then there is nothing to stop God from being a sadistic entity who has people killed for no reason. If there is an additional reason, such as those reasons that have been discussed in this article, then at least there could be a rationale for the killing that could be found acceptable. However, the opposite is true. If an actual revelation from God were not necessary for such a killing to occur, there would be nothing to stop people from creating these alternative reasons and using them to justify murdering other people, perhaps in the name of God, perhaps not. Instead, the very nature of God stops him from being sadistic, and limiting the reason for Nephi’s actions to a command from God guarantees that the motivation behind it on God’s part will be perfectly just because he is perfectly just. What Kierkegaard said of Abraham provides insight into the plight of Nephi:

60. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70.
Why, then, does Abraham do it? For God's sake and—the two are wholly identical—for his own sake. He does it for God's sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it. The unity of the two is altogether correctly expressed in the word already used to describe this relationship. It is an ordeal, a temptation. A temptation—but what does that mean? As a rule, what tempts a person is something that will hold him back from doing his duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself, which would hold him back from doing God's will. But what is duty? Duty is simply the expression of God's will.\textsuperscript{61}

Nephi's "temptation" is to do the ethical thing and let Laban live, but instead he obeys God and acts as the instrument by which Laban's life is ended.

Conclusion

The story of Nephi killing Laban is one of the most difficult stories in all of scripture. The fact that so many scholars have invested time and effort into trying to understand the story and arrive at various explanations as to why Nephi killed Laban—reasons other than he had to obey a command from God—illustrates the reality that people find the story disturbing and feel the need to come to peace with it. It is understandable that we look for other Justifications for what Nephi did. If we can find other reasons that justify the slaying, then we no longer need to rely on obedience to God as the explanation. Deciding on an alternative explanation may bring peace to some readers, but it is equally likely to be troubling to others due to the subjective nature of the new explanation. I believe a careful reading of the text itself provides the best insights into the story and into Nephi's motivations.

If one is inclined to conclude that reading Nephi's justification here in terms of obedience to God is not important, all one needs to do is imagine if such were the case with the powerful story of Abraham and

\textsuperscript{61} Kierkegaard, \textit{Fear and Trembling}, 59–60.
Isaac. We know we can learn much from that biblical story, and that there are multiple layers of meaning, but the reason that Abraham offers up Isaac as a sacrifice is to be obedient to God. If there were another justification for Abraham to take Isaac’s life—for example, if Isaac had broken some commandment that carried the penalty of death—then that additional reason would have destroyed the meaning and purpose of the story as one of obedience. It would not be an *Abrahamic sacrifice* in which Abraham was sacrificing his son out of obedience, but it would rather be an *Abrahamic punishment* in which Abraham was to kill his son for disobedience to the law. It is difficult to make an argument that both a sacrifice of obedience and a punishment for breaking the law occur simultaneously, because it is understood that if the young man had to pay for his disobedience in breaking the law by being executed, then the element of sacrifice is nullified. The sacrifice cannot exist in a narrative where Isaac was required to die anyway.

If this element of sacrifice through obedience were removed from the Abrahamic narrative, no longer could we point to the story as a type of God’s sacrifice of his son Jesus Christ, because now the parallel would be corrupted with the conflict of Isaac being guilty of breaking a law and deserving of punishment by death. For the story of Abraham and Isaac to remain in harmony with its fundamental truth, it must be limited to its core story—to its essence—of the father being willing to sacrifice his son in obedience to the will of God. Similarly, for the story of Nephi slaying Laban to remain in harmony to its fundamental truth, perhaps it, too, must be limited to its essential story of the young man being willing to sacrifice what he initially thinks he is supposed to do—keep the commandment to not kill—in order to obey the will of God.

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