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KnoWhy #548 - Why Did Nephi's "Fine Steel" Bow Break?

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Abstract: Understanding that Nephi's bow was likely not fully made of steel or bronze, but rather a composite bow with steel or bronze sheeting is significant for understanding how Nephi's bow could break in the Arabian wilderness. Beyond such environmental and physical factors, however, are the spiritual lessons Lehi's family needed to learn from such an incident. When Nephi's bow broke, Laman, Lemuel, and even Lehi, "began to murmur against the Lord." After Nephi built a new bow and arrow, he asked his father where he should hunt, a gesture that humbled Lehi and got him to "inquire of the Lord." Book of Mormon readers today can learn from Nephi's example. When things go wrong or unexpected obstacles get in the way, instead of murmuring and complaining, it can become an opportunity to put one's trust in the Lord, rather than relying on the "arm of the flesh."



KnoWhy #548
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“Arco Roto” by Jorge Cocco

WHY DID NEPHI’S “FINE STEEL” BOW BREAK?

“Behold, I did break my bow, which was made of fine steel.”

1 Nephi 16:18

THE KNOW

While traveling through the wilderness, Nephi recounts that his family stopped for a hunting expedition. Nephi, “went forth to slay food,” but “did break [his] bow, which was made of fine steel” (1 Nephi 16:18). The reference to Nephi’s steel bow recalls several biblical passages which reference a “bow of steel.”

“He teacheth my hands to war, so that a *bow of steel* is broken in mine arms” (2 Samuel 22:35; Psalms 18:34).

“He shall flee from the iron weapon, and the *bow of steel* shall strike him through” (Job 20:24).

The word translated “steel” in these passages is the Hebrew *nbnsh* which actually means “bronze” and is rendered that way in more recent translations.¹ The King James translation as *steel* reflects an older, broader range of meaning which included not only carburized iron (what we would call *steel* today) but also hardened copper alloys such as bronze. This broader meaning of *steel* is also shared with other European languages.² The Book of Mormon translation may have also used this broader meaning for *steel*, thus indicating that Nephi’s

“fine steel” bow was similar to the bow of *nbnsh* (bronze, steel) mentioned in the Bible.

According to Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, the bronze bow in biblical passages does not refer to a bow made entirely of metal, but instead, “probably refers to a composite bow, bound and/or inlaid with bronze.”³ Such bows could be “decorated or reinforced in certain parts (usually the upper limb, nock, and grip) with bronze.”⁴ More common composite bows were made from a wooden base, animal horn, and sinew. These materials were bound and glued together to form an integrated body, shaped into a double-convex form that was powerful enough to fire arrows which could effectively pierce objects from 300–400 meters away.⁵ It was also smaller and less heavy than regular bows. They were very effective and feared in warfare, but were difficult and expensive to make. “For a considerable period after the composite bow was introduced, it remained primarily a weapon of royalty.”⁶

Relatively few composite bows have survived from the ancient Near East. Before the discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb, only ten of these were known, but amidst the treasures of Tutankhamun’s tomb, 27 composite bows were found. Although some of the weapons were purely ceremonial, “the majority of the weapons would have been usable.”⁷ One of these, the so-called “Bow of Honour” was beautifully decorated with gold sheeting on the grip, lower, mid, and upper arms as well as the tips of the weapon.⁸ Howard Carter, who first discovered and excavated the tomb, described it as a “work of almost inconceivable fineness,” reminding us of Nephi’s description of his own bow of “*fine steel*” (1 Nephi 16:18).

According W. McLeod, Tutankhamun’s “Bow of Honour” “could have been strung” and used.¹⁰ It is reasonable to suppose, based on the biblical references to a “bow of bronze,” that the same could be done with bronze either for decorative purposes, or to strengthen parts of a composite bow without substantially increasing the weight.

THE WHY

Understanding that Nephi’s bow was likely not fully made of steel or bronze, but rather a composite bow with steel or bronze sheeting is significant for

understanding how Nephi’s bow could break in the Arabian wilderness. William J. Hamblin, an authority on ancient Near Eastern warfare, noted:

Composite bows have a specific structural problem that leaves them susceptible to changes in temperature and climate, which may cause the bow to warp and break. ... Thus, if Nephi’s bow were of a composite type, his move from the more temperate climate of Palestine to the dry heat of the Arabian peninsula could have contributed to the risk that his bow might warp and break.¹¹

In addition, such bows might break at points where the stiffer metal ended, creating pressure points where and when the wood or more flexible materials were pulled back.

Beyond such environmental and physical factors, however, are the spiritual lessons Lehi’s family needed to learn from such an incident.¹² As Alan Goff noted, “The message of the broken bow is that the Lord’s people can’t rely on the arm of flesh but must rely on the arm of the Lord.”¹³

When Nephi’s bow broke, Laman, Lemuel, and even Lehi, “began to murmur against the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:20). After Nephi built a new bow and arrow, he asked his father where he should hunt, a gesture that humbled Lehi and got him to “inquire of the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:24). In response to his inquiry, Lehi was prompted to look upon the Liahona. It was from this occasion that Nephi learned that the pointers in the Liahona “did work according to the faith and diligence and heed which we did give unto them,” and thus, “by small means the Lord can bring about great things” (1 Nephi 16:28–29).

Nephi gave heed to the pointers in the Liahona, which pointed him to where he could find food, and he returned to camp “bearing beasts which [he] had slain,” compelling his family to further “humble themselves before the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:32). Nephi and his family learned the lesson taught by the psalmist: “For I will not trust in my bow, neither shall my sword save me. But thou hast saved us In God we boast all the day long, and praise thy name for ever” (Psalm 44:6–8).

Book of Mormon readers today can learn from Nephi’s example. When things go wrong or unexpected

obstacles get in the way, instead of murmuring and complaining, it can become an opportunity to put one's trust in the Lord, rather than relying on the "arm of the flesh" (2 Nephi 4:34).

FURTHER READING

Book of Mormon Central, "Why Did Nephi Include the Story of the Broken Bow? (1 Nephi 16:23)," *KnoWhy* 421 (April 3, 2018).

William J. Hamblin, "The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon," in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 365–399.

Alan Goff, "A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and the Book of Mormon" (Master's Thesis, Brigham Young University: 1989).

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NOTES

1. "Bow of bronze" in the NASB, NRSV, NIV, NKJV.
2. The Florentine glassmaker Antonio Neri used the word *acciaio* ("steel") for bronze in his influential book, *The Art of Glass* translated into English in 1662 (Paul Engle, "Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall," *Conciatore: The Life and Times of 17th Century Glassmaker Antonio Neri*, January 20, 2015. <https://www.conciatore.org/2015/01/>). Likewise, the Spanish historian Tezozomoc recorded that the Tarascans of western Mexico had helmets of steel (*acero*) although this likely referred to bronze, not actual steel (Edward Kingsborough, *Antiquities of Mexico* [London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848], 9:83. On Tarascan bronze technology during late Pre-Columbian times see Dorothy Hosler, *The Sounds and Colors of Power: The Sacred Metallurgical Technology of West Mexico* [London: MIT Press, 1994], 21). The meaning of the Hebrew *nbwsh* was possibly extended to actual steel by medieval Jewish commentator Joseph Kimhi who rendered *nbwsh* as "hard metal." (Steven Shnider, "Psalm XVIII: Theophany, Epiphany, Empowerment," *Vetus Testamentum* 56, no. 3 [2006]: 394.)
3. Frank Moore Cross Jr. and David Noel Freedman, "A Royal Song of Thanksgiving: II Samuel 22 = Psalm 18," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 72, no. 1 (March 1953): 31. Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*. Translated by John McHugh (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 243: "the term refers to the metal coverings of certain bows." Peter C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary. Psalms 1-50* (Waco, Texas: Word Press, 1982), 176: "The expression 'bow of bronze' may either indicate a wooden bow with bronze decoration, or the bronze tipped arrows shot from large bows, or it may be a poetic way of describing the great strength of the warrior's bow."

4. William J. Hamblin, "The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 374.
5. Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 1:7–8.
6. Cross and Freedman, "Royal Song of Thanksgiving," 31.
7. Karl Chandler Randall IV, "Origins and Comparative Performance of the Composite Bow" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of South Africa: 2016), 61.
8. According to W. McLeod, "Details of construction are concealed by gold sheeting and fine filigree gold-work inlaid with colored stones and glass. The bow is not completely covered with gold sheeting in a single piece; rather each plain band is composed of a single piece of gold; the decorative bands overlap it at each edge for a width of 0.004." He also notes, "Because the gold of the 'Bow of Honour' is not continuous, but is applied in zones, presumably, it could have been strung." W. McLeod, *Composite Bows from the Tomb of Tutankhamun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 10, 12.
9. See Nicholas Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun* (London: Thames and Hudson), 174–175.
10. McLeod, *Composite Bows*, 12.
11. Hamblin, "The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon," 374.
12. For discussion of additional symbolism in this narrative, see Book of Mormon Central, "Why Did Nephi Include the Story of the Broken Bow? (1 Nephi 16:23)," *KnoWhy* 421 (April 3, 2018).
13. Alan Goff, "A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and the Book of Mormon" (Master's Thesis, Brigham Young University: 1989), 95.