



Type: Journal Article

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Author(s): Taylor Halverson

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,
Volume 46 (2021), pp. 1-14

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

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INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 46 · 2021 · Pages 1 - 14

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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NEPHI'S GETHSEMANE: SEVENTEEN COMPARISONS FROM THE LITERARY RECORD

Taylor Halverson

Abstract: *This note explores a literary comparison between Nephi's confronting of Laban and shrinking from the act of shedding blood, to Jesus's experience in the Garden of Gethsemane of shrinking from the act of shedding blood. Comparing these two stories suggests that we can profitably read Nephi's experience with Laban as Nephi's personal Gethsemane.*

Everyone faces their own moment of truth. That fateful moment when one's life hangs on the thread of decision, an awful decision of the most serious magnitude, a decision that could affect the eternal life of the individual and the salvation of a multitude of souls.

Nephi stood at the anguished crossroad of decision entirely unforeseen, unbeckoned, undesired. If the tormenting possibilities momentarily distorted his view, the darkness of that horrific night covered any signs in the merciful depths of blackness. At his feet lay his personal Goliath,¹ the man who had slandered his brother, stolen the family wealth, and mercilessly sought his life — the infamous Laban. And in his heart the shocking impressions from the spirit reverberated, “Slay him.”²

1. “Why Was the Sword of Laban so important to Nephite Leaders?” KnoWhy (website), Book of Mormon Central, February 27, 2018, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-was-the-sword-of-laban-so-important-to-nephite-leaders>.

2. For several perspectives on why the story of Laban is included in the Book of Mormon, see the following: Val Larsen, “Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 26–41, 84–85; John W. Welch and Heidi Harkness Parker, “Better That One Man Perish,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo,

Nephi was no bloodthirsty warrior. Though prone to anger at times because of the awful dilemmas he faced with his older brothers (see 2 Nephi 4:16–35); and even though Laban had sought to violate Nephi’s life with various egregious acts and words, Nephi did not delight in the shedding of blood, as evidenced by his anguished response to the Lord. He pled that the constraining impressions flee: “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). The voice of the spirit persisted, urging Nephi to the act of bloodshed, using reasoning such as “It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13).

What is striking about this episode are the potential comparisons between Nephi’s most anguished moment and that of Jesus Christ.³ The Doctrine and Covenants preserves a heart-wrenching first person account from God Himself about His experience in the garden: “Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit — and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, *and shrink* — ” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:18, emphasis added).

I find compelling that both Nephi and Jesus shrank at the need to shed blood (the obvious and gargantuan difference being, of course, that Christ would have His own blood shed, both by bleeding at every pore in Gethsemane and being slain on the cross, while Nephi would shed Laban’s blood). This thought led me to read the two stories for comparative purposes, wondering if we could read Nephi’s story as his own personal Gethsemane.⁴

Utah: FARMS, 1999), 17–18; John W. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 119–41; Hugh Nibley, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 5, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 94–104; “Was Nephi’s Slaying of Laban Legal?” KnoWhys (website), Book of Mormon Central, January 2, 2017, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/was-nephis-slaying-of-laban-legal>.

3. Though Jesus’s death and resurrection are a centerpiece of the Christian testimony of faith (see Romans 14:9; 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:14), His suffering, from a literary perspective, has been largely overlooked in the New Testament. Only Luke mentions the agonizing blood-sweat Jesus experienced in the garden.

4. This article is not focused on allusion or intertextuality. Rather, this article practices literary comparison. Literary allusion and intertextuality seeks to establish a clear literary connection, dependence or borrowing between texts. Literary comparison does not seek to demonstrate connection, dependence, or borrowing. Instead, literary comparison seeks to read in new ways by reading one story through the lens of another story arc and structure. Literary comparison does not attempt to claim that these new readings are the intentional original

Like Jesus, Nephi had an “argument” with his brothers beforehand. Like Jesus, Nephi took three of his brethren with him. Jesus left Jerusalem at night, while Nephi entered Jerusalem at night. Nephi was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the outcome; Jesus was led by the Spirit *and* knew the outcome. In going forth, Jesus fell down; Nephi encountered a fallen man. The spirit urged the shedding of blood. Nephi shrank from the act of shedding blood; Jesus shrank from the act of shedding His own blood. Nephi wrestled with the Spirit three times, as did Jesus. The act of shedding blood was committed. The life of one man was worth an entire nation. Without this death, the law could not be satisfied.

Following the lead of Nephi, who declared, “I did liken all scripture unto us” (1 Nephi 19:24), this article explores insights we may derive by reading Nephi’s experience of killing Laban in comparison to Jesus’s experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. This short note looks at seventeen points of literary comparison between Jesus’s Gethsemane experience and Nephi’s experience of slaying Laban. I propose that this comparative reading may provide an additional way to interpret Nephi’s experience with Laban as “Nephi’s Gethsemane.”⁵

meaning of the text nor that the authors intended such comparative readings. Furthermore, literary comparison is not some form of parallelomania — the practice in which any potential connection between two ancient texts has been a cause for making claims that the two texts are literarily and intertextually related or dependent. Literary comparison is an act of reading and meaning-making done by readers to explore new angles on existing texts but not with the intent to claim the comparisons demonstrate literary dependence. For some useful readings on the pitfalls of intertextual readings and parallelomania, see the following: Lincoln Blumell, *Lettered Christians* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2012), 220; Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81, no. 1 (March 1962): 1–13; Benjamin L. McGuire, “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part One,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 1–59, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-one/> and Benjamin L. McGuire, “Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 61–104, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-two/>. For a strong example of how to read the scriptures from an intertextual perspective, see Ben McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath: A Case Study of Literary Allusion in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (January 2009), 18, no. 1: 16–31.

5. For other potential readings of Nephi’s slaying of Laban in 1 Nephi 4, see Taylor Halverson, *The Covenant Path in the Bible and the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Line of Sight Publishing, 2020), 149–87.

1. The Father sent the Son on a mission to save His people.

Soon after fleeing Jerusalem for the wilderness, Lehi had a dream. God commanded Lehi to send his sons on a mission back to Jerusalem to retrieve the plates of brass from Laban, plates that contained words of salvation which would be crucial for the preservation of Lehi's family, God's people (see 1 Nephi 5:10–22).

Wherefore, the Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brothers should go unto the house of Laban, and seek the records, and bring them down hither into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 3:4)

In the pre-mortal council, the Son was sent by the Father on a mission to save His people.

And the Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. (Abraham 3:27)

2. The rebellious sons murmured at the mission; the faithful son was obedient.

Laman and Lemuel were unwilling to return to Jerusalem, even though they had not wanted to leave Jerusalem in the first place; "Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father." (1 Nephi 2:13)

Like the Children of Israel in the wilderness, Laman and Lemuel murmured against the Lord's anointed: "And now, behold thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them; but behold I have not required it of them, but it is a commandment of the Lord." (1 Nephi 3:5)

Nephi, on the other hand, had made the sacrifice of time and energy to diligently learn for himself the truths of God. Nephi paid the price to have the Spirit. Nephi did the hard work of preparing his own heart to humbly receive the word of God as a seed planted in fertile ground:

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, being exceedingly young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers. (1 Nephi 2:16)

Nephi did not rebel against his father, as his brothers had done.

Similarly, in the premortal world Jesus did not rebel against his Father, as his brothers had done (led by Lucifer).

“And the Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first. And the second was angry.” (Abraham 3:27–28)

3. The Son knew that God would prepare a way for the mission to be fulfilled.

Laman and Lemuel rebelled at the idea of the mission. Nephi obediently and faithfully said to his father,

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)

Similarly, in the pre-mortal life God presented a plan. Lucifer rebelled, while Jesus in humility presented himself as the champion of the mission to do whatever God commanded:

And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go ... to see if [we] will do all things whatsoever the Lord [our] God shall command [us]. (Abraham 3:24–25)

Just as Nephi knew that the Lord would prepare a way for the mission to be accomplished, Jesus *is* the way.

4. His brothers argued with him beforehand.

During the mission, Nephi had to overcome the faithlessness, doubt, and antagonism of his brothers. They did not believe they could succeed in the mission. Even after seeing and being rebuked by an angel, they continued to argue with Nephi.

Now when I had spoken these words, they were yet wroth, and did still continue to murmur; nevertheless they did follow me up until we came without the walls of Jerusalem. (1 Nephi 4:4)

Jesus also had to confront His “brothers,” who did not understand His mission.

But Peter said unto him, Although all shall be offended, yet *will* not I. And Jesus saith unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this day, *even* in this night, before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice. But he spake the more vehemently, If I should die with thee, I will not deny thee in any wise. Likewise also said they all. (Mark 14:29–31)

5. He took three of His brethren with him.

Before his ordeal, Nephi took, or went with, his three brothers on the mission given him by his father.

Nevertheless they did follow me up until we came without the walls of Jerusalem. And it was by night; and I caused that they should hide themselves without the walls. (1 Nephi 4:4–5)

Before his ordeal Jesus, too, brought three of his brethren to accompany Him.

And he taketh with him Peter and James and John, and began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy; And saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch. (Mark 14:33–34)

6. Jerusalem at night (Nephi entered, Jesus left).

In Nephi's story, he entered Jerusalem by night.

Nevertheless they did follow me up until we came without the walls of Jerusalem. And it was by night; and I caused that they should hide themselves without the walls. And after they had hid themselves, I, Nephi, crept into the city and went forth towards the house of Laban. (1 Nephi 4:4–5)

In Jesus's story, He left Jerusalem by night.

And he came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him. (Luke 22:39)

And they came to a place which was named Gethsemane. (Mark 14:32)

7. Both Nephi and Jesus were led by the Spirit.

Though Nephi was led by the Spirit, he did not know what the outcome would be. He went forward, trusting that God's plan would unfold.

And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do. (1 Nephi 4:6)

Jesus knew beforehand what would happen to Him. Nevertheless, He went forth, while trusting God.

Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. (John 16:32)

And Jesus saith unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered. But after that I am risen, I will go before you into Galilee. (Mark 14:27–28)

And truly the Son of man goeth, as it was determined. (Luke 22:22)

8. Going forth, they encountered a fallen man.

As Nephi proceeded into the city, he found a fallen man, Laban, who was drunk with wine.

And as I came near unto the house of Laban I beheld a man, and he had fallen to the earth before me, for he was drunken with wine. And when I came to him I found that it was Laban. (1 Nephi 4:7–8)

As Jesus proceeds into the garden of Gethsemane He finds Himself falling down while drinking the bitter dregs of the sins of the world, drunk with the wrath and fury of God.

And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground. (Mark 14:35)

Thus saith thy Lord the LORD, and thy God *that* pleadeth the cause of his people, Behold, I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, *even* the dregs of the cup of my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again: But I will put it into the hand of them that afflict thee; which have said to thy soul, Bow down, that we may go over: and thou hast laid thy body as the ground, and as the street, to them that went over. (Isaiah 51:22–23)

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people *there was* none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample

them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. (Isaiah 63:3)

And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth. (Isaiah 63:6)

Wherefore *art thou* red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the winefat? I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people *there was* none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. (Isaiah 63:2–3)

Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, which hast drunk at the hand of the LORD the cup of his fury; thou hast drunken the dregs of the cup of trembling, *and wrung them* out. (Isaiah 51:17)

Thus saith thy Lord the LORD, and thy God *that* pleadeth the cause of his people, Behold, I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, *even* the dregs of the cup of my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again. (Isaiah 51:22)

And would that I might not drink the bitter cup, *and shrink* — Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men. (D&C 19:18–19)

9. The Spirit urges the shedding of blood.

The Spirit urges Nephi to shed blood.

And it came to pass that I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban. (1 Nephi 4:10)

Jesus also was urged to shed blood — His own. Here we note that in the scriptures, to “shed blood” means to kill, and certainly Christ was offering Himself as a sacrifice to have His blood be shed for us on the cross. But the loss of His blood on our behalf began in the Garden of Gethsemane: “great drops of blood” fell to the ground as He began taking our sins upon Him (Luke 22:44), and this can, with a little poetic license, also be described as the shedding of His blood.

For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit. (D&C 19:16–18)

10. They shrank from the act of shedding blood.

In Nephi's symbolic Gethsemane, he shrank from the act of shedding blood.

And it came to pass that I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban; but 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)

Jesus also shrank from the task of shedding blood.

For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit — and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink. (D&C 19:16–18)

And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. (Matthew 26:39)

Of course there is a major difference between Jesus's atoning shedding of blood, which can save everyone, and Nephi's private experience of killing Laban. Nephi did not create atonement. Still, the comparison is instructive, since in both instances the key actor shrank at the task of shedding blood, and the death of one man led to the salvation of a nation.

11. Both wrestled with the Spirit three times.

Nephi wrestled three times with the Spirit over the urging to shed blood.

And it came to pass that I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban. (1 Nephi 4:10)

And the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands. (1 Nephi 4:11)

And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me again: Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands. (1 Nephi 4:12)

Jesus also wrestled three times in prayer over the need to shed blood.

And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, Abba, Father, all things *are* possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt. (Mark 14:35–36)

And again he went away, and prayed, and spake the same words. (Mark 14:39)

And he cometh the third time, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take *your* rest: it is enough, the hour is come. (Mark 14:41)

12. The act of shedding blood is committed.

After mighty struggles and desiring to shrink from the deed, Nephi ultimately shed blood.

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 4:18)

After might struggles and desiring to shrink from the deed, ultimately Jesus shed blood.

Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:42–44)

13. The life of one Man saves an entire nation.

One man died to save an entire nation.

It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief. (1 Nephi 4:13)

Jesus was the one Man who died to save an entire nation of those who would be God's people.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. (John 11:49–52)

14. Without this death, the law could not be satisfied.

Without the death of that one man, the law could not be satisfied.

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. (1 Nephi 4:15)

Without the death of that one man, Jesus, the law could not be satisfied.

Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end. (3 Nephi 15:5)

15. The slaying of Laban is like the story of Abraham and Isaac, which is a similitude of Jesus.

Well known is the symbolic comparison of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac with the sacrifice God the Father made of His own Son, Jesus Christ.⁶ In such a comparison, Abraham is like God the Father, and Isaac is a symbol of the humble, dutiful, willing, and obedient son. Though Laban's death had no final saving power for anyone, the comparisons are intriguing. Like Abraham, Nephi went up to Jerusalem. Like Abraham, Nephi did not know how the situation would turn out in advance. Like Abraham, Nephi found a ram caught in a thicket (Laban, who was drunk). Like Abraham, Nephi ultimately was willing to sacrifice the provided ram so God's plan could roll forth. Like Abraham, Nephi returned from Jerusalem with an unexpected lad with him. For Nephi, he was Zoram. For Abraham, he was Isaac.

6. For comparing the Nephi vs. Laban story to Abraham on Mount Moriah, Moses vs. Pharaoh, and David vs. Goliath, see Halverson, *The Covenant Path*, 153–73.

16. The blood of the Firstborn is shed on Passover.

Nephi's encounter with Laban may have occurred on Passover.⁷ This ancient Israelite holiday celebrated the death of a firstborn lamb dedicated to God to preserve God's people, while each of the firstborn in Egypt was slain. Just as Jesus liberated the faithful through His death, so too does the death of Laban liberate the word of God to now be accessible to all the faithful.⁸

17. The Word of God is acquired through the shedding of blood.

Nephi went forth by the command of God to obtain the word of God. Those words represented salvation. Those words provided salvation to the people of Nephi. Similarly, Jesus went forth *as the Word of God* to fulfill all of God's words. In each instance, the shedding of blood marked the acquiring of the word. By blood, Nephi received the word of God. By blood, Jesus fulfilled the word. The words of salvation for Nephi and his kin and the Word of Life for all of us were secured by blood.⁹

Conclusion

There are deep and beautiful patterns throughout scripture that testify of and reinforce the gospel plan. When we compare the story of Nephi confronting Laban to the story of Jesus, reading through the lens of the excruciating ordeal of suffering that ended in the shedding of blood, we see a host of common instructive themes. Nephi is a Christ figure who must confront His own mortality and His own unwillingness to act according to God's plan to save His people. Like Jesus, Nephi masters his will by aligning his will with the will of God. By so doing, like Jesus, Nephi sheds blood that leads to the salvation of untold multitudes of souls.

Reading Nephi's agonizing encounter with Laban through the lens of Jesus's suffering, we see that Nephi had his own personal Gethsemane,

7. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 135–37.

8. My thanks to Jeff Lindsay for suggesting this insight.

9. My thanks to Jeff Lindsay for also suggesting this insight. Jeff suggested additional comparisons, such as “the act of taking on the clothing of the one whose blood was shed.” Garments represent authority. “By taking on the clothing and imitating the deceased, Nephi was able to gain access to sacred knowledge from a treasury and then was able to pass that blessing on to his family and many others.” When we take on the garments of Jesus and seek to imitate Him, such as at the sacrament or in temple covenants, we gain access to His saving power.

when he shrank from the act of shedding blood but eventually trusted and acted within God's plan for the salvation of many.

[**Author's Note:** My thanks to the reviewers who helped to improve the message and clarity of this article.]

Taylor Halverson is an aspiring master learner who has discovered his life purpose is to help people find and act on the best ideas and tools in order to experience enduring joy. He currently is an Entrepreneurship Professor in the BYU Marriott School of Business. As an executive coach and entrepreneur, he builds leaders and businesses while creating transformative professional and personal development experiences. Taylor leads acclaimed travel tours to incredible locations throughout the world (Israel, China, India, Europe, Central America, and America's National Parks). Tour members have loved his irresistible enthusiasm, encyclopedic knowledge, spirit of adventure, and sense of fun. Taylor is a prolific author and editor of 20 books and more than 300 articles and a developer of breakthrough scripture study resources with Book of Mormon Central (ScripturePlus app) and BYU's Virtual Scripture Group (3D Ancient Jerusalem project). Taylor loves to spend time with his wife Lisa and kids David and Rachel on all sorts of adventures including exploring the nooks and crannies of the American West and Southwest, participating with geology and archaeology teams on location, creating and mixing electronic music, watching and discussing edifying shows, reading good books, playing games, learning, and laughing. Taylor's academic training includes: BA, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Brigham Young University; MA, Biblical Studies, Yale University; MS, Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University; PhD, Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University; PhD, Judaism & Christianity in Antiquity, Indiana University.

