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The Slaying of Laban

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Chapter 13

THE SLAYING OF LABAN

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)

Critics point to Nephi's slaying of Laban in 1 Nephi 4 as evidence that the Book of Mormon is false. They contend that God would never have approved such an act. God's commandment to expel and destroy the wicked inhabitants of the land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7:1-2) puts the lie to this kind of reasoning. More important are the legal issues behind Nephi's actions, discussed at length by John W. Welch.¹ Among the evidences for justifying Nephi's actions, Welch refers to the precedent of Moses' slaying of the Egyptian in Exodus 2.

An ancient rabbinic source sheds further light on Moses' actions. According to *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* 20, Moses summoned a court of ministering angels and asked them if he should kill the Egyptian, to which the angels responded "Kill him."² The same

¹ John W. Welch, "Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (Fall 1992), 119-141.

² The text goes on to specify that it was not with a sword that Moses slew the Egyptian, but with "the word." This was intended to explain why the Hebrew text of Exodus 2:14 adds *ʾōmēr* (here understood to mean "word") before "as thou killedst the Egyptian." The extra word may be a dittograph from the preceding line, but the interpretation in *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* is interesting in light of other passages that compare the word of God to a rod or sword. See John A. Tvednes,

THE SLAYING OF LABAN

story is told in *Midrash Rabbah* Exodus 1:29, which adds that, before calling on the angels for counsel, Moses perceived that no righteous persons would descend from the Egyptian man. A similar tale is told of David in the *Tosefta Targum* on 1 Samuel 17:43, where we read that, before killing Goliath, David looked up to heaven and saw the angels deliberating the fate of the giant. The Lord then expresses his will to David by telling him which stone to put in the sling.³

The Aramaic translation of Exodus 2:12 found in the second-century A.D. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* notes that Moses knew that no proselyte would come from the Egyptian's posterity. The medieval *Zohar* Exodus 12b records the story as follows: "He looked 'here' to see whether there were any good works wrought by the man, and 'there' to see whether a good son would issue from him. 'And he saw that there was no man'; he saw through the holy spirit that no such good son would ever descend from him, for he was aware, as R[abbi] Abba has said, that there are many wicked parents who beget more good sons than righteous parents, and that a good son born of wicked parents is of special excellence, being pure out of impure, light out of darkness, wisdom out of folly. The word 'saw' here indicates discernment through the holy spirit, and therefore he did not shrink from killing the Egyptian."⁴

"Rod and Sword as the Word of God," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996), 148-155.

³ The story of David has other parallels with that of Nephi: 1) Goliath and Laban were dressed in armor (1 Samuel 17:4-6; 1 Nephi 4:1); 2) David and Nephi cut off their adversaries heads with the man's own sword (1 Samuel 17:51; 1 Nephi 4:18); 3) both David and Nephi took the dead man's armor (1 Samuel 17:54; 1 Nephi 4:1); and 4) David and Nephi each took the dead man's sword, which became a national treasure (1 Samuel 21:9; 22:10; 1 Nephi 4:21; 2 Nephi 4:14; Jacob 1:10; Words of Mormon 1:13; Mosiah 1:17; D&C 17:1).

⁴ Harry Sperling, Maurice Simon, and Paul P. Levertoff, *The Zohar* (New York: The Rebecca Bennet Publications, 1958), 3:39.

THE SLAYING OF LABAN

The idea that no righteous person would descend from the wicked man the Lord has commanded to be slain may be reflected in the words of the Spirit to Nephi: “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).

CONCLUSION

The fact that the rabbis attributed Moses’ actions to a heavenly commandment, just as Nephi attributed his actions to the voice of the Spirit (1 Nephi 4:10-13), lends further support to Welch’s study and to the Book of Mormon account.