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Nephi's Jerusalem and Laban's Sword

Author(s): William J. Adams, Jr.

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NEPHI'S JERUSALEM AND LABAN'S SWORD

*"And I beheld his sword, and I drew it forth
from the sheath thereof." (1 Nephi 4:9)*

When Nephi returns to obtain the plates of Laban, he finds Laban unconscious in the streets of Jerusalem. One of Laban's personal possessions that greatly fascinates Nephi is Laban's sword. As a matter of fact, Nephi is so intrigued that he describes the sword explicitly in 1 Nephi 4:9 as having a blade of the most expensive steel and a hilt of well-worked gold.

What were swords of Nephi's time like? Archaeology has unfortunately found few swords, mainly because swords are made of iron, which can quickly rust away. But one exciting find was excavated by Avraham Eitan at a site three miles south of Jericho called Vered Jericho.¹

The sword found at Vered Jericho is three feet long, about three inches wide, is made of iron, and has a bronze haft with a wooden grip. Even the tip of the sword remains intact. The strata from which the sword was excavated dates to the late seventh century or about 620 B.C. Most swords from the Middle East, as portrayed in pictures and reliefs, were short and seem to have been used like daggers. Thus, this three-foot sword from Vered Jericho seems to be unique in its large size.

Something else makes the Vered Jericho sword unique, and that is the fact that Israelite men of this time seem to have been only about five feet tall.² Thus, a sword three feet long and three inches wide would be quite a large hand weapon and brings the image of the medieval broadsword to mind. Perhaps the Israelite warriors used this sword in a similar manner.

Finally, 1 Nephi 4:18 indicates that Nephi took Laban by the hair and with the other hand he swung the sword of Laban in such a way as to decapitate him. I do not believe that a short, almost dagger-sized sword would decapitate Laban, but I can imagine that a longer, three-foot sword would have the weight and momentum to do what is described in 1 Nephi 4:18.

Now, with these comments in mind, let us compare the sword found at Vered Jericho with the sword of Laban as described in 1 Nephi 4:9:

	Vered Jericho Sword	Laban's Sword
Handle	Bronze, with wooden grip	Gold, well worked
Blade	Iron, three feet long	Expensive steel, in a sheath, heavy enough to decapitate

Today, we would refer to the Vered Jericho sword as a "factory" product, whereas Laban's sword would be considered an expensive, "customized" product.

The discovery of the seventh-century B.C. sword found at Vered Jericho gives us a tangible artifact with which we can gain a more vivid picture of Nephi and his times.

Research by William J. Adams Jr., originally published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/2 (1993): 194–95.

NOTES

1. See Avraham Eitan, "BAR Interviews Avraham Eitan: Antiquities Director Confronts Problems and Controversies," interview by Hershel Shanks, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12/4 (1986): 30–38.

2. See Joseph A. Callaway to Patrick A. Parnell, "The Height of Ancient Israelites," *Biblical Archaeological Review* 10/1 (1984): 20.