

# 1 Nephi 4

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## ***1 Nephi 4:1–3***

1 And it came to pass that I spake unto my brethren, saying: Let us go up again unto Jerusalem, and let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands?

2 Therefore let us go up; let us be strong like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea.

3 Now behold ye know that this is true; and ye also know that an angel hath spoken unto you; wherefore can ye doubt? Let us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians.

### *Comments*

Nephi provides the first instance that demonstrates that he was becoming a teacher over his brothers. This incident, as well as many he will record later, serves to demonstrate the fulfillment of the prophecy Yahweh delivered to Nephi, and which the angel had delivered to his brothers.

Again, assuming Nephi's scribal training, he would have been quite familiar with the stories of Israel's history as recorded in scripture. He would have been familiar with using scripture to provide a course of action in the present. In this case, he is admonishing his brothers to action against a formidable foe.

Nephi chose the story of Moses. Laban has his fifty, but Moses was up against Pharaoh's army. Yahweh provided two miracles. The waters opened and the children of Israel came through on dry land. Then they returned, and destroyed Pharaoh's army. Lest the brothers miss the lesson, he declares: "Let us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians."

The story of the parting of the waters certainly provided a parallel to their situation in that they faced a powerful enemy. It is perhaps also a foreshadowing, for Moses' people were saved when the enemy was killed. The brothers will be saved when Nephi kills Laban.

## The Third Attempt

### **1 Nephi 4:4–6**

4 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.

5 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.

6 And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do.

### *Comments*

Nephi's exhortation to his brothers was ultimately successful, as they did follow him to the walls of Jerusalem. However, it was not a complete miracle as the brothers continued to be angry with him, and continued to murmur. Where they had acquiesced to go together to Laban in the last unsuccessful attempt, this time it appears they allowed Nephi to go. They would wait, but that was the extent of their support.

When Nephi wrote this incident he obviously knew how it ended. We know how it ended. Nephi will kill Laban, and Nephi—and we—know that Yahweh commanded “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13). That is the way it is translated in the King James Version. Robert Alter, the eminent scholar, translates it: “You shall not murder.” There is a difference.

One of the legalistic differences between killing and murder is intent. An accident resulting in death fits the definition of killing, but not the intent of the commandment. Murder is associated with intent. Nephi is clearly aware that there is a command not to murder. Nephi was clearly aware that he killed Laban. It was important to him to make sure that his action was justified, and there are several ways in which he makes certain that his perceptive readers would understand the difference between killing and murder.

The first of these is that he notes that: “And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do.” Nephi did not begin with the intent to murder Laban.

### **1 Nephi 4:7–10**

7 Nevertheless I went forth, 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.

8 And when I came to him I found that it was Laban.

9 And I beheld his sword, and I drew it forth from the sheath thereof; and the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel.

10 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.

## *Comments*

Nephi enters the city at night and the Spirit leads him to Laban, lying drunk on the ground. Perhaps without fully understanding why, Nephi drew Laban's sword from its scabbard. As the son of a metalsmith, he understood the fine workmanship of the sword, but it is doubtful that he wrote this passage to praise the sword. Rather, it is more likely that he noted the finery of the sword to characterize the man. This was more than a tool, it was a symbol. This was a powerful man who exercised that power through wealth and position. This was, after all, a man whose unrighteous desire for wealth resulted in the theft of the gold and silver that had been offered as an exchange.

With the sword in hand, Nephi gives us the next reason why killing Laban was not murder. The Spirit commanded it. Even with the Spirit commanding that he should kill Laban, Nephi notes that he shrank from the idea. This reinforces the lack of intent while adding the divine sanction. It cannot be murder if a messenger from the very God who gave the commandment not to murder now commanded to kill.

## ***1 Nephi 4:11–13***

11 And the Spirit said unto me again: Behold the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands. Yea, and 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.

12 And it came to pass that the Spirit said unto me again: Slay him, for the Lord hath delivered him into thy hands;

13 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.

## *Comments*

As Nephi continues to struggle, the Spirit says: "Behold the Lord had delivered him into thy hands." As one familiar with the scriptures, Nephi would surely have understood that reference. Exodus 21:12–14 was directly relevant to the choice Nephi faced:

12 He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death.

13 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.

14 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.

The Spirit's words echoed the condition of Exodus 21:13 that provides an exception to taking a life if "a man lie not in wait," and if God were to "deliver him into his hand." A good scripture scholar would recognize the reference, and the surrounding context.

Thus, Nephi has declared that he didn't know what he was to do beforehand, and that he came upon Laban. Nephi did not have intent, nor did he lie in wait. The Spirit confirmed that God had delivered Laban into his hands.

As Nephi continues to struggle, he realizes that: "It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief." John W. Welch and Heidi Harkness Parker note that this concept is supported in Hebrew law. The specific language, however, echoes John 11:50 "It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not."

### ***1 Nephi 4:14–18***

14 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.

15 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.

16 And I also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass.

17 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.

18 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.

### ***Comments***

Nephi's justification for killing Laban shifts from an examination of the legalistic aspects to the pragmatic implications. Nephi has been promised that he will be a ruler and a teacher over a people in a choice land. That choice land of promise has a condition attached to it. The people will prosper only as they follow Yahweh's commandments. Nephi notes that "they could not keep the commandments of the lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law." Perhaps Nephi could teach his children from memory, but for an entire nation to be governed by Yahweh's laws, those laws had to be available. Those laws were on the plates of brass, and therefore the Lord had commanded that the brothers retrieve them and take them on the journey to the land of promise.

Nephi then reiterates the legalistic justification, that Laban had been delivered into his hands. He cut off Laban's head.

There were any number of ways Nephi could have killed Laban. Even slitting his throat would be similarly bloody, but not as gruesome (at least to modern readers). Benjamin McGuire has suggested that Nephi also crafts this part of the story to parallel David and Goliath. They were parallel in that the less powerful were up against a much more powerful opponent. There were the implications for the future of Israel.

There is the very obvious parallel in cutting off the head. There is probably an intended parallel in showing that, like David, Nephi was destined to become a king.

### ***1 Nephi 4:19***

19 And after I had smitten off his head with his own sword, I took the garments of Laban and put them upon mine own body; yea, even every whit; and I did gird on his armor about my loins.

#### *Comments*

How is it that Nephi could put on Laban's garments after such a bloody death? A former police officer explained that in his experience, one of the more difficult tasks for a very drunk person is to walk down an incline. When unable to firmly balance due to drink, they gain too much speed as they go downhill, and eventually that speed overcomes their balance. They go down, and the natural position of the body has the head lower than the feet.

In such a condition, the blood from the cut naturally flows downhill, and that is away from the body and the clothing. It is probable that there was blood spatter on the clothing, but in the dark it would not be nearly as noticeable as large blood stains that might have happened had not Laban fallen with his head lower than the feet. Of course, nothing in the text tells us that this was how Laban fell, but knowing that he was drunk allows that probability.

Nephi dons the clothing because he still needs a way to get the plates. Even though Laban is much older, Nephi has already informed his readers that he was "large in stature" (1 Nephi 2:16). Perhaps that prepares his readers for this episode with Laban's clothes. Nephi does not say that he donned Laban's clothing at the continued suggestion of the Spirit, but the mild miracles which follow underscore that Nephi is still following divine guidance.

### ***1 Nephi 4:20–27***

20 And after I had done this, I went forth unto the treasury of Laban. And as I went forth towards the treasury of Laban, behold, I saw the servant of Laban who had the keys of the treasury. And I commanded him in the voice of Laban, that he should go with me into the treasury.

21 And he supposed me to be his master, Laban, for he beheld the garments and also the sword girded about my loins.

22 And he spake unto me concerning the elders of the Jews, he knowing that his master, Laban, had been out by night among them.

23 And I spake unto him as if it had been Laban.

24 And I also spake unto him that I should carry the engravings, which were upon the plates of brass, to my elder brethren, who were without the walls.

25 And I also bade him that he should follow me.

26 And he, supposing that I spake of the brethren of the church, and that I was truly that Laban whom I had slain, wherefore he did follow me.

27 And he spake unto me many times concerning the elders of the Jews, as I went forth unto my brethren, who were without the walls.

### *Comments*

Nephi introduces Laban's servant, without writing his name at this point. Although there may not have been any intention behind not using the name at this point, it is appropriate to the situation. Nephi did not know the servant, nor did he know anything about the servant. At the beginning of the encounter, he didn't know how the servant would react. The fact that Nephi meets the very servant who has the keys to the treasury continues to affirm Yahweh's guidance.

Not only is Nephi's body dressed in Laban's clothing, his voice is miraculously dressed as Laban as well, at least well enough that the servant didn't question that it was Laban. Modern readers must remember that this is night, and that there are no streetlights. There might have been random lamplight, but it is doubtful that the servant could easily see Nephi's face to burst the illusion. Nephi has the servant obtain the plates, and then carry them outside the walls. It is possible that Nephi realized that a man like Laban would not have carried them himself, and had Nephi attempted to take them himself, it could have destroyed the illusion and caused alarm.

Thus it was that Nephi, still dressed as Laban, and Laban's servant (carrying the plates of brass), approached the place where Nephi's brothers awaited him outside of Jerusalem's walls.

### ***1 Nephi 4:28–30***

28 And it came to pass that when Laman saw me he was exceedingly frightened, and also Lemuel and Sam. And they fled from before my presence; for they supposed it was Laban, and that he had slain me and had sought to take away their lives also.

29 And it came to pass that I called after them, and they did hear me; wherefore they did cease to flee from my presence.

30 And it came to pass that when the servant of Laban beheld my brethren he began to tremble, and was about to flee from before me and return to the city of Jerusalem.

### *Comments*

We never get a glimpse of Nephi's sense of humor. It is doubtful that when he wrote this, he was aware of the humor of the situation. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of the reactions of Nephi's brothers and Laban's servant would make a humorous break in the tension of the situation.

Nephi's brothers had personal experience with a Laban who threatened to kill them. They surely worried that Nephi might have been killed in yet another failed attempt. When Nephi returns, Laman does not see Nephi, but just as Laban's servant did, he sees Laban. His worst fears are fulfilled and the brothers prepare to flee before him.

Nephi calls out to them, and with whatever he said, was able to convince them that it was indeed he, Nephi, and not Laban.

Whereupon, it was the servants turn to panic and attempt to flee. Nephi solved the first crisis by creating a similar one, but with the servant running toward Jerusalem rather than the wilderness.

It was a rapid turn of events. If it were part of a film, it could easily provide a brief comic break—even though the situation was deathly serious. Literally.

### ***1 Nephi 4:31–34***

31 And now I, Nephi, being a man large in stature, and also having received much strength of the Lord, therefore I did seize upon the servant of Laban, and held him, that he should not flee.

32 And it came to pass that I spake with him, that if he would hearken unto my words, as the Lord liveth, and as I live, even so that if he would hearken unto our words, we would spare his life.

33 And I spake unto him, even with an oath, that he need not fear; that he should be a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us.

34 And I also spake unto him, saying: Surely the Lord hath commanded us to do this thing; and shall we not be diligent in keeping the commandments of the Lord? Therefore, if thou wilt go down into the wilderness to my father thou shalt have place with us.

### ***Comments***

Nephi's large stature and strength are essential to restrain the servant, who would certainly have been extremely scared and attempting to flee. Realizing that Nephi must have killed Laban in order to be wearing his clothes and carrying his sword, it was a small step to suppose that Nephi might also kill him.

To comfort him, Nephi swears an oath, and the situation appears to change immediately. The power of an oath in the ancient world was similar to a contract in the modern world. Depending upon how the oath was sworn, the servant would understand that he would not be killed. He listened to his options.

Nephi offers the servant the chance to change his effective social status. Although he had served a wealthy man in Jerusalem, he was still a servant. Freedom would be an important incentive. Secondly, Nephi offers him a place in Lehi's family. This was an informal adoption, a promise of familial protection. He would share in the protection of the family. Nephi was confirming that they did not take him to some point far from Jerusalem and then set him free to fend for himself among strangers.

## ***1 Nephi 4:35–38***

35 And it came to pass that Zoram did take courage at the words which I spake. Now Zoram was the name of the servant; and he promised that he would go down into the wilderness unto our father. Yea, and he also made an oath unto us that he would tarry with us from that time forth.

36 Now we were desirous that he should tarry with us for this cause, that the Jews might not know concerning our flight into the wilderness, lest they should pursue us and destroy us.

37 And it came to pass that when Zoram had made an oath unto us, our fears did cease concerning him.

38 And it came to pass that we took the plates of brass and the servant of Laban, and departed into the wilderness, and journeyed unto the tent of our father.

### ***Comments***

Nephi suggests that the servant go with them into the wilderness. Now, at last, we learn that the servant is Zoram. Only after the crisis has ended would this information have been exchanged. Now, as Zoram is to become essentially part of the family, it is relevant.

Why would Zoram go? He probably understood that were he to return to Jerusalem and to a dead master, with the plates of brass missing, that the one who had held the keys would also hold the blame. Although he would not understand the nature of his future with Lehi's family, it would be preferable to the probable execution he would face in Jerusalem. Once he received the oath that they would treat him as a free man, it is probable that the option to join Lehi's group was seen as the much better choice.

Nephi also clarifies the reason that they made this offer. They feared that those in Jerusalem might believe Zoram's story and seriously pursue the brothers. That could have been disastrous for the entire family. Thus, it was beneficial for Zoram, and beneficial to Lehi's family.

Nephi signals that another episode of the story has ended because they travel "unto the tent of our father." That literary device continues to mark the bounds of parts of the story. However, even though it is an ending, and even though it ends a modern chapter, Nephi's story is not finished and his original chapter continues.