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Portrait of Laban

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

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10

Portrait of Laban

Laban is described very fully, though casually, by Nephi, and is seen to be the very type and model of a well-known class of public official in the Ancient East. Everything about him is authentic. Zoram is another authentic type. Both men provide food for thought to men of today: both were highly successful yet greatly to be pitied. They are representatives and symbols of a decadent world. Zoram became a refugee from a society in which he had everything, as Lehi did, it no longer being a fit place for honest men. What became of "the Jews who were at Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 2:13) is not half so tragic as what they had become. This is a lesson for Americans.

Laban as a Representative Man

Laban of Jerusalem epitomizes the seamy side of the world of 600 B.C. as well as Lehi or Jeremiah or Solon do the other side. With a few deft and telling touches Nephi resurrects the pompous Laban with photographic perfection—as only one who actually knew the man could have done. We learn in passing that Laban commanded a garrison of fifty, that he met in full ceremonial armor with "the elders of the Jews" for secret consultations by night, that he had control of the treasury, that he was of the old aristocracy, being a distant relative of Lehi himself, that his house was a depository of very old family records, that he was a large man, short-tempered, crafty, and dangerous, and to the bargain cruel, greedy, unscrupulous, weak, vainglorious, and given to drink. All of which makes him a *Rabu* to the life, the very model of an Oriental *Pasha*. He is cut from the same cloth as Jaush, his contemporary and probably his successor as "military governor of this whole

region, in control of the defenses along the western frontier in Judah, and an intermediary with the authorities of Jerusalem," or as Hoshiah, "apparently the leader of the military company located at some outpost on or near the main road from Jerusalem to the coast," who shows his character in the Lachish Letters to be one of "fawning servility."¹

Ever since the time of Hezekiah the greatest check on the power and authority of the king at Jerusalem had come from the leader of the new aristocracy of which we have spoken, that scheming and arrogant nobility which ran things with a high hand. Their chief bore only the harmless title of "Head of the Palace" (*'al-ha-Bait*), yet as did other mayors of the palace in later ages he knew how to make all things bow to his tyrannical will, and the prophets called him the "wrecker" or "despoiler," he being stronger than the king himself.²

For ages the cities of Palestine and Syria had been more or less under the rule of military governors of native blood, but in theory, at least, answerable to Egypt. "These commandants (called *Rabis* in the Amarna Letters) were subordinate to the city-princes (*chazan*), who commonly addressed them as 'Brother' or 'Father.' "³ They were by and large a sordid lot of careerists whose authority depended on constant deception and intrigue, though they regarded their offices as hereditary and sometimes styled themselves kings. In the Amarna Letters we find these men raiding each other's caravans, accusing each other of unpaid debts and broken promises, mutually denouncing each other as traitors to Egypt, and generally displaying the usual time-honored traits of the high officials in the East, seeking before all things to increase their private fortunes. The Lachish Letters show that such men were still the lords of creation in Lehi's day—the commanders of the towns around Jerusalem were still acting in closest cooperation with Egypt in military matters, depending on the prestige of Egypt to

bolster their corrupt power, and still behaving as groveling and unscrupulous timeservers.

Laban's office of headman is a typical Oriental institution: originally it was held by the local representative or delegate of a king, who sent out his trusted friends and relatives to act for him in distant parts of the realm. The responsibilities of such agents were as vague as their powers, and both were as unlimited as the individual chose to make them. The system of ancient empires was continued under the Caliphate, who copied the Persian system in which "the governor, or Sahib, as he was then called, had not only charge of the fiscal administration but also had jurisdiction in civil and penal matters . . . the sovereign power never gave up in full its supreme rights over every part of the body politic; and this right devolved upon his representative," so that in theory the *rabi* could do anything he wanted to. In the appointment of such a trusted official, character counts for everything—in the end his own honor and integrity are the only checks upon him; but in spite of all precautions in their selection, and as might be expected, "the uprightness of the Cadis depended only too often upon the state of society in which they lived."⁴ And the moral fiber of Laban's society was none too good.

The Typical Pasha

Al-Maqrizi (1364-1442 A.D.) has left a classic description of the typical pasha in his glory, which we reproduce here from Gottheil:

The rank of such a one was the highest of the dignitaries of the turband and of the pen. Sometimes the same was also preacher. . . . All religious matters were in his care. He took his seat every Saturday and Tuesday . . . upon a divan ('mattress') and a silken cushion. . . . Near him were five attendants; two in front, two at the door of his private room, and one to introduce those that came to him as litigants. Four guards stand near to him; two facing

two. He has an ink stand ornamented with silver, which is brought to him from the state treasuries; a bearer is appointed for it, who is paid by the government. From the stables there is brought for him a grey mule; one of such a color being reserved for him alone. From the saddle-magazine a saddle is brought for him, richly adorned, on the outside of which is a plaque of silver. In the place of hide, silk is used. Upon state occasions he wears chains and robes of honor faced with gold. . . . When he is appointed preacher as well as judge . . . the accompaniment of the dignity of the preacher is the drum, the clarion, and special flags; for this one is the keeper of the flags with which the Wazir 'Chief of the Sword' is honored. . . . He is borne (in state) by the lieutenants of the gate and the attendants. No one approaches his presence . . . nor does messenger or mission approach, except they receive permission. . . . The head of the Treasury must report to him. He has, also, to watch over the Diwan of the Mint, in order to render an account of the money that is minted.⁵

One need only compare this officer with some dignitaries in the court of Pharaoh (including Joseph himself) thousands of years before, to realize how little some things change in the East. The pampering, the magnificence, the armed guards and servants, the broad and general powers, especially those connected with the treasury, the forbidding presence and frightening display of power and temper in one who is supposedly a public servant — one can see Laban in every sentence!

Laban as a Man of the World

On the other hand, it must be admitted in all fairness that Laban was a successful man by the standards of his decadent society. He was not an unqualified villain by any means — and that as much as anything makes Nephi's account of him supremely plausible. Laban had risen to the top in a highly competitive system in which the scion of many an old aristocratic family like his own must have

aimed at the office which he held and many an intriguing upstart strained every effort to push him from the ladder that all were trying to climb. He was active and patriotic, attending committee meetings at all hours of the night; he was shrewd and quick, promptly recognizing his right and seizing his opportunity to confiscate the property with which Nephi and his brethren attempted to bribe him – a public official. The young men wanted some family records from him; they wanted them very badly but would not tell what they wanted them for. They were willing to pay almost anything to get them. There was obviously something shady about the deal from Laban's point of view. Very well, he could keep his mouth shut, but would it be sound business practice to let the plates go for nothing? With his other qualifications Laban was a big impressive figure of a man – not a man to be intimidated, outsmarted, worn down, or trifled with – he was every inch an executive. Yet he plainly knew how to unbend and get drunk with the boys at night.

Laban at Work

One of the main functions of any governor in the East has always been to hear petitions, and the established practice has ever been to rob the petitioners (or anyone else) wherever possible. The Eloquent Peasant story of fifteen centuries before Lehi and the numerable Tales of the Qadis of fifteen centuries after him are all part of the same picture, and Laban fits into that picture as if it were drawn to set off his portrait:

And Laman went in unto the house of Laban, and he talked with him as he sat in his house.

And he desired of Laban the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass, which contained the genealogy of my father.

And . . . Laban was angry, and thrust him out from his presence; and he would not that he should have the records. Wherefore, he said unto him: Behold thou art a robber, and I will slay thee.

But Laman fled out of his presence, and told the things which Laban had done, unto us (1 Nephi 3:11-14).

Later the brothers returned to Laban laden with their family treasure, hoping to buy the plates from him. This was a perfectly natural procedure. In Lesson 8 on ancient merchants we saw that the Syrians who came to trade in Egypt reserved their most precious things, portable treasures of gold and silver, as a "present" for Qenamun the mayor of Thebes, that is, the king's personal representative in that great city, and that the editor of the text regarded that present as "perhaps . . . a commission on the deal." The behavior of Lehi's sons in this instance shows that they had been brought up in a family of importance, and knew how things were done in the world; they were afraid of Laban, knowing the kind of man he was, but they were not embarrassed to go right in and "talk with him as he sat in his house," dealing with the big man on an equal footing. They might have known what would happen:

And it came to pass that when Laban saw our property, and that it was exceedingly great, he did lust after it, insomuch that he thrust us out, and sent his servants to slay us, that he might obtain our property.

And it came to pass that we did flee before the servants of Laban, and we were obliged to leave behind our property, and it fell into the hands of Laban (1 Nephi 3:25-26).

Compare this with the now classic story of Wenamon's interview with the rapacious Zakar Baal, governor of Byblos, almost exactly five hundred years before. The Egyptian entered the great man's house and "found him sitting in his upper chamber, leaning his back against a window," even as Laman accosted Laban "as he sat in his house" (1 Nephi 3:11). When his visitor desired of the merchant prince and prince of merchants that he part with some cedar logs, the latter flew into a temper and accused him of being a thief ("Behold thou art a robber!" says Laban in 1 Nephi

3:13), demanding that he produce his credentials. Zakar Baal then “had the journal of his fathers brought in, and he had them read it before [him],” from which it is plain that the important records of the city were actually stored at his house and kept on tablets. From this ancient “journal of his fathers” the prince proved to Wenamon that his ancestors had never taken orders from Egypt, and though the envoy softened his host somewhat by reminding him that Amon, the lord of the universe, rules over all kings, the hard-dealing official “thrust him out” and later even sent his servants after him – not, however, to slay him, but to check up on him and bring him something in the way of refreshment as he sat sorrowing. With cynical politeness the prince offered to show Wenamon the graves of some other Egyptian envoys whose missions had not been too successful, and when the business deal was finally completed, Zakar Baal, on a legal technicality, turned his guest over to the mercies of a pirate fleet lurking outside the harbor.⁶ And all the time he smiled and bowed, for after all, Wenamon was an Egyptian official, whereas Lehi’s sons lost their bargaining power when they lost their fortune. The Laban story is an eloquent commentary on the ripeness of Jerusalem for destruction.

The Garrison of Fifty

As to Laban’s garrison of fifty, it seems pitifully small for a great city. It would have been just as easy for the author of 1 Nephi to have said fifty thousand and made it really impressive. Yet even the older brothers, though they wish to emphasize Laban’s great power, mention only fifty (1 Nephi 3:31), and it is Nephi in answering them who says that the Lord is “mightier than Laban and his fifty” and adds, “or even than his tens of thousands (1 Nephi 4:1). As a high military commander Laban would have his tens of thousands in the field, but such an array is of no concern to Laman and Lemuel; it is the “fifty” they must look out

for—the regular, permanent garrison of Jerusalem. The number fifty suits perfectly with the Amarna picture, where the military forces are always so surprisingly small and a garrison of thirty to eighty men is thought adequate even for big cities. It is strikingly vindicated in a letter of Nebuchadnezzar, Lehi's contemporary, wherein the great king orders: "As to the fifties who were under your command, those gone to the rear, or fugitives return to their ranks." Commenting on this, Offord says, "In these days it is interesting to note the indication here, that in the Babylonian army a platoon contained fifty men";⁷ also, we might add, that it was called a "fifty"—hence, "Laban with his fifty." Of course, companies of fifty are mentioned in the Bible, along with tens and hundreds, etc., but not as garrisons of great cities and not as *the* standard military unit of this time. Laban, like Hoshaiah of Lachish, had a single company of soldiers under him as the permanent garrison, and like Jaush (his possible successor) worked in close cooperation with "the authorities in Jerusalem."

The Case of Zoram

An equally suggestive figure is Zoram, Laban's trusted servant whom Nephi met carrying the keys to the treasury as he approached the building. Zoram naturally thought the man in armor with the gruff voice was his master, who he knew had been out by night among the elders of the Jews (1 Nephi 4:22). Nephi, who could easily have been standing in the dark, ordered the man to go in and bring him the plates and follow after him, and Zoram naturally thought that a need for consulting the documents had arisen in the meeting, "supposing that I spake of the brethren of the church" (1 Nephi 4:26), in which case he would act with great dispatch in order not to keep the officials waiting. He hurried in, got the plates, and hastened after the waiting and impatient commander, but not, it must be admitted, "without another word"—for he talked and talked as he

hurried after Nephi through the dark streets towards the gates. What did he talk about? "The elders of the Jews" (1 Nephi 4:27), about whose doings he evidently knew a good deal. For Zoram, as Laban's private secretary and keeper of the keys, was himself an important official, and no mere slave. Professor Albright has shown that the title "servant" by which Nephi designates him meant in Jerusalem at that time something like "official representative" and was an honorable rather than a menial title.⁸

That the *sarim*, who, as we saw in another lesson, "were in permanent session in the Palace," were full of restless devices is implied not only in their strange hours of meeting but in the fact that Zoram seemed to think nothing strange of the direction or place where Nephi was taking him. But when he saw the brethren and heard Nephi's real voice he got the shock of his life and in a panic made a break for the city. In such a situation there was only one thing Nephi could possibly have done, both to spare Zoram and to avoid giving alarm – and no westerner could have guessed what it was. Nephi, a powerful fellow, held the terrified Zoram in a vice-like grip long enough to swear a solemn oath in his ear, "as the Lord liveth, and as I live" (1 Nephi 4:32), that he would not harm him if he would listen. Zoram immediately relaxed, and Nephi swore another oath to him that he would be a free man if he would join the party: "Therefore, if thou wilt go down into the wilderness to my father thou shalt have place with us" (1 Nephi 4:34).

The Oath of Power

What astonishes the western reader is the miraculous effect of Nephi's oath on Zoram, who upon hearing a few conventional words promptly becomes tractable, while as for the brothers, as soon as Zoram "made an oath unto us that he would tarry with us from that time forth . . . our fears did cease concerning him" (1 Nephi 4:35, 37).

The reactions of both parties make sense when one

realizes that the oath is the one thing that is most sacred and inviolable among the desert people and their descendants: "Hardly will an Arab break this oath, even if his life be in jeopardy,"⁹ for "there is nothing stronger, and nothing more sacred than the oath among the nomads,"¹⁰ and even the city Arabs, if it be exacted under special conditions. "The taking of an oath is a holy thing with the Bedouins," says one authority. "Wo to him who swears falsely; his social standing will be damaged and his reputation ruined. No one will receive his testimony, even if it is true, and he must also pay a money fine."¹¹

But not every oath will do. To be most binding and solemn an oath should be by the *life* of something, even if it be but a blade of grass. The only oath more awful than that "by my life" or (less commonly) "by the life of my head" is the *wa hayat Allah*, "by the life of God" or "as the Lord liveth," the exact Arabic equivalent of the ancient Hebrew *hai Elohim*.¹² Today it is glibly employed by the city riffraff, but anciently it was an awful thing, as it still is among the desert people. "I confirmed my answer in the Bedouin wise," says Doughty. "By his life . . . he said, . . . 'Well, swear By the life of Ullah' (God)! . . . I answered . . . and thus even the nomads use, in a greater occasion, but they say, *By the life of thee*, in a little matter."¹³ Among both Arabs and Jews, says Rosenblatt, "an oath without God's name is no oath," while "in both Jewish and Mohammedan sources oaths by 'the life of God' are frequent."¹⁴

So we see that the only way that Nephi could possibly have pacified the struggling Zoram in an instant was to utter the one oath that no man would dream of breaking, the most solemn of all oaths to the Semite: "As the Lord liveth, and as I live" (1 Nephi 4:32).

Transferred Loyalty

Now Zoram was the most trusted of secretaries, as his

intimacy with the most secret affairs of state, his liberty to come and go at all hours, and his possession of the keys to the treasury and archives attest. Yet in a single hour he shifted all his allegiance from the man who trusted and leaned on him to a stranger. The oath was enough to confirm such a move, but how could a man be so readily forced to take that oath? He was not forced into it at all, but talked into it, softened and persuaded by Nephi's words, in particular the promise "that he should be a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us" (1 Nephi 4:33). Plainly with all his influence and privileges Zoram did not think of himself as a free man, and his relationship with Laban was not one of trust and affection. Zoram's behavior is an even more eloquent commentary than that of his master of the true state of things in a society that had lost its balance and its faith and sought only after power and success, "the vain things of the world."

Questions

1. There is no passage in the Book of Mormon describing Laban, yet he is very fully described by hints dropped here and there throughout the narrative. How does this support the claim that the Book of Mormon is not a work of fiction?
2. In what ways was Laban a typical Oriental potentate? What could Joseph Smith have known about typical Oriental potentates?
3. What actual functionaries in ancient Israel exactly match Laban in his official capacity?
4. What reflection does Laban suggest on the nature of worldly success?
5. Is Laban a type characteristic of decadent societies? Do we have his like among us today?
6. In what way is the Laban story "an eloquent commentary on the ripeness of Jerusalem for destruction"?
7. What is the significance of "Laban and his fifty" as historical evidence?

8. What was the position of Zoram? How do his role and character enhance the plausibility of the story?
9. What did Zoram probably think when he recognized that he was among strange men? How did Nephi handle him? (Hint: at this time there were plots and conspiracies in every city and much espionage.)
10. Was Zoram a weak character? Why did he not consider himself a free man? Are you a free man?