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Lesson 9: Escapade in Jerusalem

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Abstract: There is no more authentic bit of Oriental "culture-history" than that presented in Nephi's account of the brothers' visits to the city. Because it is so authentic it has appeared strange and overdrawn to western critics unacquainted with the ways of the East, and has been singled out for attack as the most vulnerable part of the Book of Mormon. It contains the most widely discussed and generally condemned episode in the whole book, namely, the slaying of Laban, which many have declared to be unallowable on moral grounds and inadmissible on practical grounds. It is maintained that the thing simply could not have taken place as Nephi describes it. In this lesson these objections are answered.

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ESCAPADE IN JERUSALEM

Prospectus of Lesson 9: There is no more authentic bit of Oriental "culture-history" than that presented in Nephi's account of the brothers' visits to the city. Because it is so authentic it has appeared strange and overdrawn to western critics unacquainted with the ways of the East, and has been singled out for attack as the most vulnerable part of the Book of Mormon. It contains the most widely discussed and generally condemned episode in the whole book, namely, the slaying of Laban, which many have declared to be unallowable on moral grounds and inadmissible on practical grounds. It is maintained that the thing simply could not have taken place as Nephi describes it. In this lesson these objections are answered.

Two Missions in Jerusalem: The final business of Lehi's people in Jerusalem was conducted during a couple of quick and dangerous visits to the city by his sons. After the family was well out of Jewish territory and camping Bedouin fashion "deep in the wilderness," it was necessary to send the young men back to town on two important missions. The second was only to "the land of Jerusalem" to pick up Ishmael. The fact that this was a simple and uncomplicated assignment at a time when things would have been very hot for the brothers in the city itself (where they had been chased by Laban's servants on their former expedition, and would be instantly recognized), implies that Ishmael, like Lehi, may have lived well out in the country. (1 Ne. 7:2-5)

But the first mission was an exciting and dangerous bit of work in the city itself. It was not undertaken originally as a raid, for we are explicitly told that the young men took their tents with them, (1 Ne. 3:9), which was never done on a raid and which showed their intentions to be peaceful and honorable. They went in boldly and openly to Laban and frankly stated their business to him. Yet they were expecting trouble and, in the immemorial and inevitable manner of the desert,

drew lots to see who would go in to Laban—they knew their man, and none of them wanted the job! (1 Ne. 3:11) After they failed to gain their point with Laban the trouble began. The record tells of hiding without the walls (as Arabs do when they reconnoiter a town), daring exploits in the dark streets, mad pursuits, dangerous masquerading, desperate deeds, and bitter quarrels—a typical Oriental romance, one might say, but typical because such things actually do, and always did, happen in eastern cities.

It has ever been an established and conventional bit of gallantry for some Bedouin bravo with a price on his head to risk his life by walking right through a city under the noses of the police in broad daylight—a very theatrical gesture but one which my Arab friends assure me has been done a thousand times. It was while reading the *Beni Hilal* epic that the writer was first impressed by the close resemblance of the behavior of Lehi's sons on that quick trip to Jerusalem to that of the young braves of the *Beni Hilal* when they would visit a city under like circumstances. The tales of the wanderings of the 'Amer tribe tell the same story—camping without the walls, drawing lots to see who would take a chance, sneaking into the city and making a getaway through the midnight streets¹—it is all in 1 Nephi, chapters 3 and 4 and all quite authentic.

The All-Important Records: The purpose of the first return trip to Jerusalem was the procuring of certain records which were written on bronze plates (the Book of Mormon like the Bible always uses "brass" for what we call bronze—a word that has become current only since its translation). Lehi had a dream in which he was commanded to get these records which, as he already knew, were kept at the house of one Laban. Nephi does not know exactly the reason for this and assumes, incorrectly as it turned out, that the object was to "preserve unto our children the language of our fathers." (1 Ne. 3:19.) It is interesting that the *Beni Hilal* in

setting out for their great trek felt it necessary to keep a record of their *fathers* and to add to it as they went, "so that the memory of it might remain for future generations." The keeping of such a *daftar*, as it was called, was also known to other wandering tribes.²

It was in fact the keeping of such records that distinguished civilized nomads from the floating riffraff of the desert, to judge by Jawad Ali's remarks in the opening of his big new work on the Arabs before Islam. The *Jahiliyah*, or "time of ignorance," gets its name, he says, not as has commonly been supposed from the ignorance of the true religion in which the primitive Arabs lived, but from the fact that it describes a period in which the people were ignorant of reading and writing: "They were nomadic tribesmen, living in ignorance and sloth, having no contacts with the outer world, and keeping no records."³ Actually their ancestors had reached a very high peak of civilization, but after the fall of the great kingdoms they had kept no records, and so had degenerated into the state of desert tramps—a condition which has always been regarded as utterly deplorable by the highest type of nomad, to whom *adab*, the preservation and cultivation of a literary tradition and especially the pure language of the fathers, is the highest human virtue. At the beginning of their long wandering, the Sheikh of the *Beni Hilal* ordered them to keep a record of each important event, "that its memory might remain for the members of the tribe, and that the people might read it and retain their civilized status" (*ifadah*). Accordingly verses recited on notable occasions were written down on the spot, just as Nephi wrote down his father's utterances by the river of Laban.⁴

Nephi's Wild Night: The records were in possession of a certain Laban—kept in his house. The figure of Laban will receive special attention hereafter; here it is the picture of Jerusalem that concerns us. Having failed in two attempts to get the records from Laban, and having in the process completely ruined their chances

of any kind of a bargain, what were the brothers to do? The elder men worked off their frustration by beating their brother, but he proposed to risk it alone the third time. Leaving the others hidden without the walls, "I, Nephi, crept into the city and went forth towards the house of Laban." (1 Ne. 4:5) It was very late at night and this was not the strictly legitimate way of going about things; but Nephi had been encouraged by an angel and he was resolved to get the plates by fair means or foul. "I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the things which I should do." (1 Ne. 4:6.) He had reached the end of his resources and his situation was completely desperate. Not far from Laban's house, where he had been so roughly and meanly treated before, Nephi stumbled upon the prostrate form of Laban, lying dead drunk in the deserted street. (1 Ne. 4:7) The commander had been (so his servant later told Nephi) in conference with "the elders of the Jews out by night among them" (1 Ne. 4:22), and was wearing his full dress armor. What a world of inference in this! We sense the gravity of the situation in Jerusalem which "the elders" are still trying to conceal; we hear the suppressed excitement of Zoram's urgent talk as he and Nephi hasten through the streets to the city gates (1 Ne. 4:27), and from Zoram's willingness to change sides and leave the city we can be sure that he, as Laban's secretary,⁵ knew how badly things were going. From the Lachish letters it is clear that informed parties in Jerusalem were quite aware of the critical state of things at Jerusalem, even while the *sarim*, "the elders," were working with all their might to suppress every sign of criticism and disaffection. How could they take counsel to provide for the defense of the city and their own interests without exciting alarm or giving rise to general rumors and misgivings? By holding their meetings in secret, of course, such midnight sessions of civil and military leaders as Laban had just been attending.

The Death of Laban: With great reluctance, but urged persistently by “the voice of the Spirit,” Nephi took Laban’s own sword and cut off his head with it. This episode is viewed with horror and incredulity by people who recently approved and applauded the far less merciful slaughter of far more innocent men on the islands of the Pacific. Samuel ibn Adiyt, the most famous Jewish poet of Arabia in ancient times, won undying fame in the East by allowing his son to be cruelly put to death before his eyes rather than give up some costly armor which had been entrusted to his care by a friend.⁶ The story, true or not, is a reminder that eastern and western standards are not the same, and that the callousness of Americans in many matters of personal relationships would shock Arabs far more than anything they do shocks us.

A famous test-case for liberal scholars in Islam was whether God would permit children to die in the Deluge or not: to answer that in the affirmative was to mark oneself a blind reactionary.⁷ Yet children still die in floods every year. Does the self-styled liberal with his glib and fastidious horror of killing ever stop to consider his own behavior pattern? What is meant, for example, by “backing the attack”? Anyone who has backed attacks both from the front line and the rear can affirm that “backing the attack” simply means sharing the full guilt of the slaughter without sharing the redeeming risk of combat. The front line soldier is exposed to a danger at least equal to that to which he exposes his opponent—each has a sporting chance of getting as much as he is giving. There might conceivably be some merit or honor in that. But what excuse is there for one who has supplied the means and enjoyed the profits of war in perfect safety to affect a sanctimonious and enlightened superiority to the base business of slaughter? Those who would strike the story of Laban’s death from the Book of Mormon as immoral or unbelievable are passing hasty judgment on one of the most convincing episodes in the whole book.

The Book of Mormon is no more confined to mild and pleasant tales than is the Bible; it is for the most part a sad and grievous tale of human folly. No one seems more disturbed by the demise of Laban, however, than Nephi himself, who takes great pains to explain his position. (1 Ne. 4:10-18) First he was "constrained by the Spirit" to kill Laban, but he said in his heart that he had never shed human blood and became sick at the thought: "I shrunk and would that I might not slay him." The Spirit spoke again, and to its promptings Nephi adds his own rationalizings:

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.

But this was still not enough; the Spirit spoke again, explaining the Lord's reasons and assuring Nephi that he would be in the right; to which Nephi appends yet more arguments of his own, remembering the promise that his people would prosper only by keeping the commandments of the Lord:

. . . and I also *thought* that they could not keep the commandments . . . save they should have the law.

which the dangerous and criminal Laban alone kept them from having.

And again, I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause. . . . Therefore I did obey the voice of the Spirit.

At long last, and with great reluctance, Nephi did the deed. If the Book of Mormon were a work of fiction, nothing would have been easier than to have Laban already dead when Nephi found him (killed perhaps in a drunken brawl) or simply to omit altogether an episode which obviously distressed the writer quite as much as it does the reader, though the slaying of Laban is no more reprehensible than was the beheading of the unconscious Goliath.

Is the Laban Episode Believable?: From time to time the claim is put forth, that the story of Laban's death is absurd, if not impossible. It is said that Nephi could not have killed Laban and made his escape. Those who are familiar with night patrolling in wartime, however, will see in Nephi's tale a convincing and realistic account. In the first place, the higher critics are apparently not aware that the lighting of city streets, except for festivals, is a blessing unknown to ages other than our own. Many passages might be cited from ancient writers, classical and Oriental, to show that in times gone by the streets of even the biggest towns were perfectly dark at night, and very dangerous. In the famous trial of Alcibiades for the mutilation of the Hermes, we have the testimony of one witness who, all alone, beheld by moonlight the midnight doings of a drunken band in the heart of downtown Athens, from which it is clear that at that time the streets of the greatest city in the western world were unlighted, deserted, and dangerous at night.⁸ To move about late at night without lamp bearers and armed guards was to risk certain assault, as we are reminded by Juvenal's immortal satire:

Consider now the various dangers that confront you by night. You are just plain crazy if you go out to dinner without having made out your will—as if nothing could happen to you! For when you go about at night danger lurks in every open window: you can consider yourself lucky if they confine themselves to dumping garbage on your head. Then there is the drunk and disorderly character, who hasn't killed anybody yet that night and can't sleep until he has. However much on fire with youth and wine he will give a wide birth to the rich escort with torches and bronze lanterns. But I who go by moonlight or with the stub of a candle am fair game. He blocks the way and orders me to halt: I comply—what else can you do if the guy is crazy and twice as strong as you are? "Where do you think you're going?" he shouts, "what strange synagogue do you hide out in?" . . . Well, it's the poor man's privilege to request his assailant, as he is being beaten up, to allow him to retain a few teeth. But that is not all you have to worry about: for you can always count on being robbed if you stay at home—even after everything has been tightly locked and barred—when some armed bandit is on the loose in the neighborhood.⁹

These are the perils of night in the streets of the greatest city in the world, at the very height of its grandeur and sophistication. The extreme narrowness of ancient streets made their blackout doubly effective. From the Greek and Roman comedy and from the poets we learn how heavily barred and closely guarded the doors of private houses had to be at night, and archaeology has shown us cities farther east (e.g., Mohenjodaro) in which apparently not a single house window opened onto the public street, as few do even today at ground level. East and West, the inmates simply shut themselves in at night as if in a besieged fortress. Even in Shakespeare's day we see the comical terror of the nightwatch passing through the streets at hours when all honest people are behind doors. In a word, the streets of any ancient city after sundown were a perfect setting for the committing of deeds of violence without fear of detection.

It was very late when Nephi came upon Laban (1 Ne. 4:5, 22); the streets were deserted and dark. Let the reader imagine what he would do if he were on patrol near enemy headquarters during a blackout and stumbled upon the unconscious form of some notoriously bloodthirsty enemy commander, renowned for his brutal and treacherous treatment of friend and foe alike. By the rough code of war the foe has no claim to a formal trial, and it is now or never. Laban was wearing armor, so that the only chance of dispatching him quickly, painlessly, and safely was to cut off his head—the conventional treatment of even petty criminals in the East, where beheading has always been by the sword, and where an executioner would be fined for failing to decapitate his victim at one clean stroke. Nephi drew the sharp, heavy weapon and stood over Laban for a long time, debating his course. (1 Ne. 4:9-18.) He was an expert hunter, a skilled swordsman, and a powerful man:¹⁰ with due care such a one could do a quick and efficient job and avoid getting much blood on himself. But why should he worry about that? There

was not one chance in a thousand of meeting any honest citizen, and in the dark no one would notice the blood anyway. What they *would* notice would be the armor that Nephi put on, and which, like the sword, could easily be wiped clean. The donning of the armor was the natural and the shrewd thing for Nephi to do. A number of instances from the last war could be cited to show that a spy in the enemy camp is never so safe as when he is wearing the insignia of a *high* military official—provided he does not hang around too long, and Nephi had no intention of doing that. No one dares challenge “big brass” too closely (least of all a grim and hot-tempered Laban); their business is at all times “top secret”, and their uniform gives them complete freedom to come and to go unquestioned.

Nephi tells us that he was “led by the spirit.” He was not taking impossible chances, but being in a tight place he followed the surest formula of those who have successfully carried off ticklish assignments. His audacity and speed were rewarded, and he was clear of the town before anything was discovered. In his whole exploit there is nothing in the least improbable.

How Nephi disguised himself in the clothes of Laban and tricked Laban’s servant into admitting him to the treasury is an authentic bit of Oriental romance, (e. g. Haroun al-Rashid) and of history as well. One need but think of Sir Richard Burton’s amazingly audacious masquerades in the East, carried on in broad daylight and for months on end with perfect success, to realize that such a thing is entirely possible.¹¹

Questions

1. Why was it so important for Nephi to get the brass plates?
2. Did Nephi and his brethren go back to Jerusalem as brigands or outcasts?
3. Does the account of the behavior of the brethren when they got to Jerusalem ring true? Can it be checked against real experience?

4. What conditions enabled Nephi to carry out his dangerous mission undetected?
5. What are the implications of the night meetings of the Elders in Jerusalem?
6. How does the unpleasantness of the episode of the killing of Laban speak for its authenticity? What is Nephi's attitude toward that exploit?
7. Was the killing of Laban a physical impossibility? Is Nephi's escape incredible?
8. Is the story of Nephi's exploits in Jerusalem too dramatic and exciting to be believed?
9. In times of war and revolution people do things they would not normally do, and do them differently. Is a student who has spent every day of his life safe within the four walls of an institution in a position to judge whether Nephi and his brethren could or would have done this or that?
10. Explain the saying: "Wo to the generation that understands the Book of Mormon!"