

Comments on 1 Nephi 4

The Lord delivers the wealthy, powerful and corrupt Laban into Nephi's hands, Nephi executes the evil Laban, and Nephi obtains the plates. The servant of Laban follows Nephi and joins their party to leave Jerusalem.

Sometimes people recoil at Nephi's execution of Laban, but collecting all of the details of Laban's character together presents him as a corrupt and murderous individual, likely engaged in organized crime. See the character study on Laban at the bottom.

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.

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.

v1-5 Despite the two failed attempts documented in the preceding chapter, Nephi encourages his brothers to put their hope in a miraculous delivery, which he is confident the Lord will provide, just as He has before (v. 1-3). The brothers are still angry, but they are sufficiently persuaded to go with Nephi back to Jerusalem and hide outside the city walls while he goes into the city (v. 4).

v1-2 Nephi responds in kind to Laman and Lemuel's argument. Nephi uses a kal v'khomer argument of his own (cp. 3:31), reminding them the Lord will in fact take care of the situation. Nephi's argument implicitly addresses their lack of faith, cp. Isa. 43:16-17.

Nephi's admonition in v. 2 sounds like he is expecting the Lord to do something rather impressive to dispose of Laban, perhaps hoping for something akin to Deut. 9:1-6. And note the way Nephi parallels Laban with Egypt in describing their

destruction in v. 3. Nephi is anticipating the Lord doing something miraculous and quite detached from himself. Instead, he finds out he is much more intimately involved in Laban's demise than he wants to be.

Nephi and his brothers attempted to borrow and then buy the plates, and they are now at their wits end. Nephi appeals to providence, as they are out of worldly options.

v1-3 "Let us go up...let us go up...Let us go up", note Nephi is building his persuasive argument by suggesting all they need to do is "go up" and the Lord will miraculously and powerfully destroy Laban.

v1 "Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands", the first reference to fifty is likely more literally accurate, and in response to Laman in 3:31, and the second number is likely a hyperbolic analogy to Pharaoh's armies in the next verse. Nephi is saying, "Laban has fifty men, but even if he had ten thousand men, it doesn't matter, as the Lord can wipe out any number of His enemies as He pleases."

v5-6 Nephi indicates that he was not sure what his course of action was to be in obtaining the plates, so what ultimately occurs was surely not premeditated.

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

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.

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. 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.

v6-19 Nephi literally has no plan, he is just hoping things work out favorably (v. 6). Nephi stumbles upon a drunken Laban, passed out on the ground on the way to his house (v. 7-8). Nephi disarms the murderous Laban (v. 9), but is prompted to kill him, which he recoils from (v. 10). The Spirit prompts him, reasoning with him why Laban must be killed (v. 11-13). Nephi reasons through the necessity and importance of dispatching Laban to obtain the plates (v. 17), and so he executes Laban (v. 18). Nephi then disguises himself as Laban, wearing his clothes and armor (v. 19).

There is nothing in the text suggesting Nephi took the armor and garments off of Laban, only that Nephi put them on after the execution (cf. v. 19). As the beheading was surely a bloody ordeal, it is safe to assume Laban wasn't wearing the clothing and armor when he was beheaded. Either Nephi stripped the armor and garments off first, beheaded Laban, and then later donned the clothing and armor or, Laban, being intoxicated, had undressed or began undressing himself, perhaps to relieve himself or get ready to turn in.

Nephi must have also found Laban in a relatively private place, or moved him to a private place. All of the activity documented here would have taken some time, and would have drawn attention if in a public space. Perhaps Laban had made it to the courtyard of his own residence before passing out.

Laban's body being beheaded and stripped may have served to make the killing look like a mob hit instead of a crime of passion or crime of opportunity. If this were a simple case of robbery gone wrong, the robber would quickly flee the scene with whatever was of value. An act of passion wouldn't have been so deliberate. Decapitation and stripping the corpse is interpreted as the humiliation of the victim (cf. 1 Sam. 31:8, Isa. 3:17, Isa. 20:1-6). Those investigating Laban's demise would be left with a crime scene that doesn't point to Lehi's family.

It seems odd Laban would go out at night wearing armor and a sword, and go on and get drunk, without armed guard. If Laban were concerned about a mortal threat and wearing armor to protect against such, getting drunk and traveling without guard is unwise. Perhaps he was close enough to home, or on the grounds of his home, so the guards had left him on the assumption that he was safe. Maybe Laban got home and then went back out to relieve himself in the local facilities and passed out in a state of undress. Perhaps Laban didn't trust his own armed guards. There are a lot of unanswered questions here, so making firm assumptions about how things went down is problematic. If the text doesn't say it, then don't assume it.

v6 Nephi lets the reader know there was no premeditation on his part when it comes to Laban's demise.

v7-9 Nephi stumbles upon Laban as he is passed out drunk. Nephi indicates that he draws Laban's sword. Why the sword was drawn is unclear, as the text does not inform the reader. It may have been done to disarm Laban in the event he awoke, given Laban's previous attempts to have Nephi and his brothers killed. Or, Laban had discarded it along with his armor and clothing in his drunken attempt to disrobe. Or, he had dropped it in his drunken state, and Nephi spotted it near the passed-out Laban. Or, perhaps Nephi was admiring the handiwork of the sword, hence the comments on its quality. There is nothing suggesting Nephi had any intention of killing Laban with his own sword at this point.

v9 "steel", the KJV on Jer. 15:12 refers to steel, but most modern translations call it "bronze", see also 2 Sam. 22:35. There are isolated cases of ancient meteoric iron and iron alloys found by archaeologists. But, Nephi later says he makes many swords similar to this one, suggesting it is bronze (cf. 2 Ne. 5:14), as archaeologists have found considerable evidence for [Pre-Columbian metallurgy](#) in [ancient Central and South America](#).

v10-19 is the legal rationale for Laban's execution. Note Nephi repeats three times that the Lord delivered Laban into his hands (v. 11, 12, 17), building the traditional semitic emphatic triple repeat. Nephi reasons through three charges in v. 11, attempted murder, rejection of the Law, and thievery. The Spirit then adds the eternal argument, explaining the necessity

of the Lord stepping into human affairs to kill the wicked to preserve the righteous (v. 13), and they need the brass plates so they will have the Lord's Scripture (v. 14-16).

Note the first two "Lord hath delivered him into thy hands" (v. 11, 12) brackets Nephi's three arguments (v. 11), and then the final "Lord had delivered Laban into my hands" (v. 17) frames the larger eternal argument about the necessity of getting the plates (v. 13-16). Nephi is recognizing killing Laban isn't him murdering Laban, but him delivering the Lord's divine judgement of execution.

This is clearly something Nephi was not happy or willing to do. He was not motivated by anger, resentment or revenge.

v10 Nephi is encouraged by the Spirit to kill Laban, and Nephi is shocked. He does not want to follow through with the command.

v11-12 The Spirit informs Nephi it is the Lord's will to have Laban executed. Nephi then goes over the causes of such a judgment: Laban had attempted to murder Nephi and his brothers, Laban had stolen their property, and Laban was generally rebellious with regards to the Law or Moses.

The statement that Laban "would not hearken unto the commandments of the Lord" can be taken to mean he was wholly dissolute and degenerate. This is not a generalized human opinion Laban isn't a nice guy, it is the Lord authoritatively judging him as someone who doesn't do what He says and never will. Anyone who would maintain a set of private servants willing to murder for gain by theft is clearly the kind of person who has done this before, and is willing to do it again.

Given the details from the text, Laban was comparable to modern-day crime boss, engaging in organized crime for personal benefit. We know from the text that Laban maintains a set of servants who are willing to murder for wealth. Given the opportunity to steal Lehi's property, Laban intentionally sends his murderous servants after Lehi's servants to kill all of them so he can steal the wealth. This isn't something new to Laban and his people.

We have no idea how prominent Laban was in the criminal underground, but if he is maintaining enough men to present an imminent and immediate mortal threat to four adult males, that suggests Laban has a significantly greater number of thugs in his full-time employ, and therefore has to be running an operation large enough to fund and sustain them.

Nephi quotes Laman as saying "can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty" (cf. 3:31). It seems unlikely Nephi would echo the number in v. 1 if it weren't reasonably accurate. The subsequent "even than his tens of thousands" is hyperbole where Nephi is saying it doesn't matter how many people Laban can muster, the Lord has much greater power at His disposal.

v13 Trendy Protestant views of the Lord as an all-beneficent, all-benevolent being who would never do anything harmful or violent are shattered by statements such as the one in this verse. The fact of the matter is the Lord does not conform to our self-serving views of ethics and morality, and does not have to. He creates, He destroys, He grants forgiveness, He condemns, and He does so righteously, unlike us.

Christians, and others as well, like to dismiss the God of the Old Testament, who is entirely capable of issuing commands to kill, with sanitized views selectively drawn from the New Testament (i.e., ignoring John's Revelation), as though the end of the Law of Moses meant an end to the Lord's anger at wickedness and His rejection of sin.

Why? I think it is because they do not want God to punish people. They see God as good and the devil as evil. Anything "bad" must come from the devil. But, the problem comes in our subjectivity in labeling things as "bad". If anything we don't like is "bad", then it cannot be from God, because God is good, not bad. So, it ends up a very self-serving means of ascribing causes and effects to either God or the devil. Anything we don't like comes from the devil and anything we like comes from God. Absurd.

This verse informs us things don't work that way. The Lord reserves the right to interfere in human history when it suits His needs. And, He does so justly.

This verse is also connected with the covenant the Lord made with Joseph ben Jacob, as discussed in 2 Ne. 3. The necessity of getting the brass plates into the hands of the lineage of Joseph through Lehi was part of the greater covenant made with the ancient Joseph.

v18 Nephi follows the counsel of the Spirit and executes Laban. Now, the question is, "Was Nephi justified according to the Law of Moses to execute Laban?" Or, is v. 11-17 a series of rationalizations attempting to justify the execution? One might seek to avoid saying Nephi was guilty of murder because it was not premeditated, the Lord commanded him to do it and because

there were compelling reasons to do so. However, all of these rationalizations seek to dodge the Law of Moses regulations concerning the taking of life, particularly in a situation which could seem problematic (i.e., Laban was killed covertly at night while intoxicated).

The Law of Moses clearly prohibits murder, and it might appear Nephi had murdered Laban in cold blood. However, recall Laban had previously attempted to have Nephi and his brothers murdered under false pretenses so as to obtain their wealth. According to the Law of Moses, attempted murder is a capital offense:

Deut. 19:16 If a false witness rise up against any man to testify against him that which is wrong; 17 Then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days; 18 And the judges shall make diligent inquisition: and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother; 19 Then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to have done unto his brother: so shalt thou put the evil away from among you. 20 And those which remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil among you. 21 And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Here, the Law states if any person has sought to use false witness against another and it is discovered, then the one bearing false witness is to suffer whatever fate he planned for the other. The regulation even goes so far as to include capital crimes as is indicated in v. 21. Verse 17 indicates that the two men shall stand before the Lord to be judged, or in the presence of the priests who were to act vicariously in the part of the Lord applying the Law (cf. Exod. 7:1, Exod. 21:6, John 10:35).

In this specific case of Nephi and Laban, the two of them are standing before the Lord directly for divine Judgement, so no intervening priests were necessary. The Lord judged Laban guilty of using false witness in an attempt to have Nephi and his brothers killed. Thus, according to the Law of Moses, Laban is guilty of attempted murder and guilty of a capital offense. Thus, Laban's execution is legal according to the Law of Moses and no rationalization is needed to justify Nephi's actions.

Other Old Testament beheadings can be found in Gen, 40:20, 1 Sam. 17, 1 Sam, 31:8-10, 2 Sam. 4, 2 Kings 10, and threats of beheading in 2 Sam. 16:9-10, Dan. 1:10, and a figurative beheading in 1 Sam. 5:4.

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.

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.

v20-29 After killing Laban and dressing in his clothing and armor, Nephi heads to the treasury, and comes into contact with the servant who is in charge of the treasury, whom he deceptively commands to go with him to the treasury (v. 20). It is dark, and Nephi is dressed like Laban, so the servant assumes Nephi is Laban (v. 21). The servant asks about the latest gossip (v. 22), and Nephi responds as if he was Laban (v. 23). Nephi tells the servant he wants the brass plates and intends to take them to his elder brothers outside the walls (v. 24) so he should carry them with him (v. 25), and the servant draws his own incorrect assumptions (v. 26). The servant continues asking Nephi for the latest gossip as they walk (v. 27). When Nephi approaches his brothers, they panic and start running (v. 28), but Nephi calls out to them, so they stop (v. 29).

v20 Nephi acts deceptively in order to dupe Zoram. Note there is no longer any mention of the Spirit actively guiding or talking to Nephi. He is now taking matters into his own hands. Do the ends justify the means? Do they ever?

"the treasury of Laban", Laban clearly had significant accumulated wealth. If he had a "treasury", he very likely had a larger property with multiple buildings, possibly multiple dwellings to house "his fifty" (v. 1) and perhaps a courtyard and [private commode](#). This is a private property large enough for a man to pass out and fall down and not be noticed. You would think there would be guards on the property, but if

everyone was intoxicated, as was Laban, then that would leave the compound effectively unprotected.

"I commanded him in the voice of Laban", Nephi and the other brothers had interacted with Laban (cf. 3:23-25), so he was aware of what he sounded and acted like.

v21 It was dark since it was night, maybe Zoram was groggy from sleep, perhaps no torches or candles were lit, possibly he was also intoxicated, or maybe he was nearsighted.

v22 "the elders of the Jews", these are not necessarily religious leaders, but could also be political leaders. As Laban was clearly wealthy and powerful, he would have circulated among the upper-class elite at Jerusalem. It is likely the religious and political leadership intermingled.

v23 Did Nephi play is straight, or did he pretend to be drunk, and use that as part of his disguise?

v24 Note Nephi doesn't take any other wealth from Laban's treasury, only the brass plates. Nephi doesn't even take back his own family's treasure which Laban's and his men stole from them. Nephi wants to make it plain this isn't about revenge or retribution, as he is only concerned about getting the plates and getting out of there. Nephi is fully focused on the long-term eternal goals.

Taking anything additional beyond the plates might also have raised suspicions with Zoram. If he has said to Zoram, "Pack up all of Lehi's family treasure too" it would have been suspicious, and may have been too much for two men to carry.

v26 Nephi seems to be suggesting he practiced the least amount of deception possible. He never overtly lied to the servant, only acted deceptively, allowing the servant to make a series of incorrect assumptions. Nephi is clearly very concerned about the morality and ethics of his behavior over the series of events.

v28 Both Nephi and Laban must have been the same height and stature to be confused by both Laban's servant and Nephi's own brothers. Yes, it was at night, but, still, they had to have been built the same, otherwise it would have been obvious they weren't one and the same man.

I cannot fault Laman, Lemuel and Sam for drawing such a natural and seemingly obvious conclusion. You see someone who looks like Laban come out dressed with armor and with weapons and a servant, and you are going to quickly jump to a negative conclusion and run to save yourself, given the previous threats Laban made on their life.

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. 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. 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.

v30-37 When the servant realizes Nephi isn't Laban and he is danger, he is about to run (v. 30). Nephi holds him so he cannot run (v. 31), and tells him that if he listens to him, he swears and oath that he will not be killed (v. 32), but can be a free man if he leaves Jerusalem with them, joining their group (v. 33), doing the Lord's will and being part of Lehi's family (v. 34). Zoram accepts the offer, is actually happy about it, and swears an oath to stay with them (v. 35, 37). They are pleased with this, because they didn't want him going back to Jerusalem and telling those there that they were ones who killed Laban and took the plates, resulting in them being chased and killed (v. 36).

v31 If Nephi were larger and stronger than average man, then he wouldn't have stated the Lord gave him additional strength to detain Zoram. We common assume Nephi is hinting he is a big, strong guy, but it seems more likely Nephi is saying he is a teenager who is already adult-sized, say around sixteen (cf.

Mormon 2:1-2).

v32 "as the Lord liveth, and as I live", Nephi is making an oath to Zoram, letting him know he fears the Lord, and does not want to break the Law of Moses' injunction against murder. He doesn't want to kill, he wants Zoram to live also, and live freely with them as part of the Lord's plan.

v33 "be a free man", suggesting Zoram was a slave, either by indenture or some other means. Freedom from servitude would have been appealing, especially with the threat of being killed.

"go down into the wilderness with us", traveling out into the desert alone would be dangerous for many reasons. Traveling with a party would be much safer. Nephi is saying he would be adopted into his group as an equal, not as a slave.

v34 Assuming Zoram was a religious man, it seems likely this verse is shorthand for Nephi explaining the theological purpose of Lehi's family going into the wilderness and going to a new Promised Land to Zoram, and Zoram understanding it, and deciding to go along with it. If Zoram was the one documenting Jeremiah's warnings on the brass plates, then he would have been aware of the impending threat to Jerusalem by Babylon.

v35 Note the discovery of the servants name as Zoram is at the same time he decides to join Lehi's party and swears by an oath to stay with them. The connection of the oath and name are tied together, as he is now one of them, so they need to know and use his name.

v36 If Zoram was not taken along then he would have known the people who took the plates, and therefore those guilty of his death, were not inside Jerusalem. As it was, those who would have investigated Laban's execution probably assumed the culprit was within the city, or at the very least wouldn't have known whether they were inside or out, and so little or no search would have been outside Jerusalem.

Regarding Zoram's character, see the comments on 3:3.

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.

v38 Despite a series of risky and dangerous events, the mission is successful and they return with the brass plates, as commanded in 3:4.

Character Analysis of Laban

It is useful to collect the small details about Laban from the text to put together a better understanding of the man.

Well-known. When Lehi identifies Laban and sends his sons to get the plates from him, there is no discussion over who and where he is (cf. 3:3-4). Lehi and his entire family know who and where he is.

Murderer, thief. Threatens Laman with death for no good reason (cf. 3:13). Sends armed servants to kill and steal wealth (cf. 3:25).

Organized crime boss. Maintains large private set of armed servants willing to kill and steal. Probably around fifty men (cf. 3:21, 4:1), plus other household servants (cf. 4:20), indicating there was a clear division of labor among household servants. Total population at his employ likely would have exceeded well over one hundred, given the support of fifty armed men.

Ultra-wealthy. Maintained private treasury large enough to have a door with keyed lock and a servant dedicated as treasurer (cf. 4:20). Suggests large real estate holdings with multiple buildings.

Politically connected. Laban actively socialized with "the elders of the Jews", the ruling political and religious elite at Jerusalem (cf. 4:22, 4:27).

Condemned by Lord. The Lord Himself has determined Laban is a problem and he needs to be executed (cf. 4:10-18). We know the few details of Laban's interaction with Lehi's family, the Lord knows all of Laban's dealings in entirety. Whatever Laban is involved in, good and bad, the Lord knows it, and He has determined it is time for the evil Laban does upon the people around him to stop.

The Lord gave Laban the opportunity twice to hand the plates over to Lehi's family, and he declined twice with threats of deadly violence. The Lord responds in kind, but follows through.

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