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**Title** The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship

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**Abstract** Swords often symbolize divine authority and kingship. Numerous examples from the mythology, literature, and history of the world attest to distinct patterns. The sword of Laban from the Book of Mormon fits these patterns and can be compared to the sword of Goliath. The sword of Laban can also be traced as part of the royal regalia that provides authority throughout Nephite history and later as it appears in the restoration. The sword of Laban as associated with Joseph Smith came to be an additional witness of his authority and of the divine sanction for his work.

# The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship

Brett L. Holbrook

Abstract: Swords have often been seen as symbols of divine authority and kingship. Numerous examples from the mythology, literature, and history of the world attest to distinct patterns. The sword of Laban from the Book of Mormon fits these patterns and can be compared to the sword of Goliath. The sword of Laban can also be traced as part of the royal regalia that gives authority throughout Nephite history, and later as it appears in the Restoration. The sword of Laban as it is associated with Joseph Smith came to be an additional witness of his authority and of the divine sanction for his work.

Symbols are powerful tools found in literature, cultures, and religions all over the world. As a universal language, symbols are defined as “something that represents something else by association, resemblance or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible.”<sup>1</sup> Anthropological, literary, and biblical studies have utilized the methodology of interpreting symbols (symbolology) to understand the world-views and traditions of people.<sup>2</sup>

Many histories and traditions have included weapons as symbols of authority and royalty: the spear, bow, axe, and

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<sup>1</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), s.v. “Symbol”; Joseph F. McConkie and Donald W. Parry, *A Guide to Scriptural Symbols* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1990), 1; see E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968), 769.

<sup>2</sup> See Janet L. Dolgin et al., eds., *Symbolic Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University, 1977), 3–44, 183–94; Hazard Adams, *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1983), 177–99, 263–86; Helen M. Luke, *The Inner Story: Myth and Symbol in the Bible and Literature* (New York: Crossroad, 1982).

mace.<sup>3</sup> Since the evolution of the bronze blade around 3000 B.C., the sword has also become a fixture in world history and literature. As an object of war and ceremony, the sword came into prominence during the beginning of the second millennium as harder metals enabled the sword to supplant the mace and axe.<sup>4</sup> Specific swords of cultic importance have since appeared in almost every culture. An example of such a symbolic sword is the sword of Laban, first mentioned in the Book of Mormon in 1 Nephi 4:9.

In Jerusalem around 600 B.C., the powerful Laban was slain by the young Nephi with Laban's sword. Nephi then brought the sword with his father's family across the ocean to the Americas. The sword was revered in Nephite history and preserved until the nineteenth century, which hints at the importance of the blade. Because of its limited appearances not much is known about the sword, but it has shown up enough throughout time to justify investigating the purpose of its preservation.

The existing theories about the sword of Laban have suggested it as a standard high-quality Near Eastern sword,<sup>5</sup> a sacred implement of war,<sup>6</sup> or a metaphorical symbol for the word of God.<sup>7</sup> As a literary type, some have stated that the sword of Laban was a fixation of the Nephites that took on powerful symbolic importance. That symbolism, though, was of the violent paradigms in the human condition.<sup>8</sup> The sword has also

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<sup>3</sup> See J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage, 2d ed. (New York: Dorset, 1971), s.v. "Weapons"; H. J. T. Johnson, "Regalia," in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner's, 1951), 636; James Hoyle, "The Weapons of God in Samuel," *This World* 7 (Winter 1984): 120.

<sup>4</sup> Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, trans. M. Pearlman (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 1:60-61.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, "Swords in the Book of Mormon," in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 343.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Tvedtnes, "Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes," in Ricks and Hamblin, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 313, 321.

<sup>7</sup> Barney Madsen, "A Compass, a Sword, and Stones—and Sight: Reflections on Book of Mormon Artifacts," a paper in possession of author, Provo, Utah, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene England, "A Second Witness for the Logos: The Book of Mormon and Contemporary Literary Criticism," in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor*

been declared as the only constant in the Book of Mormon: a symbolic reminder and ensign of the Lord's providence.<sup>9</sup> John Taylor compared the preservation of the sword of Laban and other Nephite artifacts to the memorials found in Israel's Ark of the Covenant. They were manifestations and types of laws and ordinances belonging to the priesthood and purposes of God.<sup>10</sup>

Gordon C. Thomasson has noted that the sword of Laban was part of the royal treasures Book of Mormon kings possessed anciently as a tangible sign of their authority.<sup>11</sup> In a survey of historical and mythical literature, two patterns of swords appeared: the kingly and the heroic. Both types function as symbols of divine authority. The sword of Laban can be included among them as a combination of the two patterns. Indeed, it is comparable with an ancient Near East prototype: the biblical sword of Goliath. Tracing the significance and preservation of the sword of Laban through Nephite history and its role in the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ in the latter days will suggest that it was a symbol of divine authority.

### The Kingly and Heroic Sword Patterns

In almost every culture legendary swords have existed.<sup>12</sup> Most of those specifically noted in history, literature, and mythology can be categorized as kingly or heroic. Although each pattern has its differences, each is closely linked; both ultimately point to the sword as a symbol of divine authority.

The kingly pattern of swords was that which established the possessor as the chosen ruler on whom divine kingship was

of Hugh W. Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 2:106–9.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph F. McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2, *Jacob through Mosiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 6; vol. 4, *3 Nephi through Moroni* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 384.

<sup>10</sup> John Taylor, *The Mediation and the Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882), 122–23.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon C. Thomasson, "Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and the Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon," in this volume, pages 21–38.

<sup>12</sup> See listings in Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols* (New York: Scarecrow, 1962), 2:1518–20, 3:422–27; and Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 3 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966), 2:300–301, 3:222–25.

conferred. Kingship was a political institution found in nearly every ancient and medieval civilization, and the king was believed to be appointed by heaven.<sup>13</sup> The swords of kingship originated in association with historic figures or deities and ratified one's office. Anciently, and even in some cultures today, military, religious, and civil offices were often combined in the person of the king. This tripartite responsibility defined "the king's role in the protection of society as warrior, the guarantor of justice as judge and the right ordering of worship as priest."<sup>14</sup> As a symbol of power in war, the sword came to be part of the regalia (royal objects) owned by kings that justified their kingship and rule. The sword was passed on to the heir as a transfer of authority, and the giving of a sword to the new king was a widespread feature of coronation ceremonies.<sup>15</sup> Societies defined kingship in various ways, but the sword's symbolism in the royal regalia was the temporal representation of divine power in the sovereign.<sup>16</sup> Swords of a royal pattern appear in literature and history from Europe, the Far East, and even Africa.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen D. Ricks, "King, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 209; see also Gordon C. Thomasson, "Togetherness Is Sharing an Umbrella: Divine Kingship, the Gnosis, and Religious Syncretism," in Lundquist and Ricks, *By Study and Also By Faith*, 1:523–61; Todd R. Kerr, "Ancient Aspects of Nephite Kingship in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 85–118.

<sup>14</sup> Keith W. Whitelam, "Israelite Kingship: The Royal Ideology and Its Opponents," in R. E. Clements, ed., *The World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 130; see also Daniel J. Elazar, "Dealing with Fundamental Regime Change," in Jacob Neusner, ed., *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1989), 105–6.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, "Regalia," 636; Ricks, "King, Coronation, and Covenant," 214.

<sup>16</sup> Richard W. Thurn, "Blades," in Mircea Eliade, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 2:237.

<sup>17</sup> See the examples in Michael D. Coe et al., *Swords and Hilt Weapons* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 36, 148, 209–13; see also Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols*, s.v. "Sword"; Johnson, "Regalia," 635–38; David Cannadine and Simon Price, eds., *Rituals of Royalty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 145, 171, 320–25; Thurn, "Blades," 237; John A. MacCulloch, ed., *The Mythology of All Races*, 8 vols. (Boston: Jones, 1928), 8:228, 304; Yves Bonnefoy, ed., *Mythologies*,

Like the kingly pattern, the heroic pattern of swords, found mainly in literature and mythology, established the possessor as one invested with divine authority. In the heroic traditions the sword was preserved or bestowed by deity, often given to a hero for a specific deed. Consequently the hero who possessed the magical and personalized sword had the grace of the gods. In a way similar to kings, epic heroes were given divine authority and power with their swords, and the fortunes of each hero depended upon his sword.<sup>18</sup>

In Europe one such epic hero is the mighty Beowulf of Anglo-Saxon fame who used the magical swords Naegling, Hrunting, and an unnamed blade to overcome the monster Grendel. Using a sword against primordial monsters is a common motif; in this Beowulf has been compared with Nephi.<sup>19</sup> The swords gave heroes power because they represented blades used by the gods and manifested the "divine cutting power" of deity.<sup>20</sup> In Indian mythology, the creature Asi ("The Sword") was created to protect the gods, much like God the Father in Judaeo-Christian tradition protected the garden of Eden with a "flaming sword" (Genesis 3:24).<sup>21</sup> Yahweh himself is known to have a sword that he used in the cosmogonic battle before creation,<sup>22</sup> and his word was frequently equated with a

trans. Gerald Honigsblum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 2:990–91.

<sup>18</sup> Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology*, s.v. "Sword."

<sup>19</sup> Robert E. Nichols, Jr., "Beowulf and Nephi: A Literary View of the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue* 4 (Autumn 1969): 40–47. Interestingly, years after his heroic deeds Beowulf became king among the Geats. Kyle Gray, "Mightier Than the Pen," *Dragon* 46 (February 1981): 12; Ad deVries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1974), s.v. "Sword."

<sup>20</sup> Thurn, "Blades," 237.

<sup>21</sup> MacCulloch, *The Mythology of All Races*, 6:109; see also Ezekiel 21:15; Ronald S. Hendel, "The Flame of the Whirling Sword: A Note on Genesis 3:24," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (December 1985): 671–74.

<sup>22</sup> According to Isaiah 27:1: "In that day the Lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan the crooked serpent; and he shall slay the dragon that is in the sea"; cf. also Isaiah 66:16; Deuteronomy 32:41; Judges 7:18–20; Frank Moore Cross, Jr., "The Divine Warrior in Israel's Early Cult," in Alexander Altmann, ed., *Biblical Motifs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966),

sword.<sup>23</sup> As the Messiah of Christianity, Jesus Christ was to come a second time wielding a sword in the last days of judgment (Revelations 14:14–16).<sup>24</sup> Heroes with a sword in history and legend derived their symbol of divine power from such figures of deity, and this pattern can also be found throughout the world.<sup>25</sup>

### The Kingly and Heroic Patterns Combined

In some tales of swords, the elements from both the kingly and heroic are combined to symbolize complete divine kingship and authority. The most famous tale of a sword that symbolized this was that of King Arthur from medieval England. His sword with which he defeated the Saxons was originally known as “Caliburn,” but writers later renamed it “Excalibur.” Many additions to the tale led to Sir Thomas Malory’s 1485 story of the sword in the stone, which depicts Arthur drawing Excalibur from the stone, an act which symbolized his divine right to kingship.<sup>26</sup> Further Christian symbolism suggested that Arthur was made king by Christ’s election. Excalibur was a symbol of

11–30; G. G. D. Kilpatrick, *This Book of Isaiah*, vol. 6 in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, 12 vols. (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 356.

<sup>23</sup> George Elliot, “Does God Have and Use a Sword?” *Methodist Review* 40 (December 1924): 934–40; Hoyle, “The Weapons of God,” 120, 126, 130–34; see Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; Revelations 1:16.

<sup>24</sup> Cirlot, *Dictionary of Symbols*, s.v. “Sword.”

<sup>25</sup> William Sayers, “Fergus and the Cosmogonic Sword,” *History of Religions* 25 (August 1985): 30–56; Proinsias Mac Cana, “Fergus mac Roich,” in Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 5:314; Maria Leach, ed., *Funk and Wagnall’s Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (New York: Funk and Wagnall’s, 1950), s.v. “Swords”; *The Nibelungenlied*, trans. A. T. Hatto (London: Penguin, 1969), 28, 128, 283; Coe, *Swords*, 154; MacCulloch, *The Mythology of All Races*, 12:290–91; Joan O’Brian and Wilfred Major, *In the Beginning: Creation Myths from Ancient Mesopotamia, Israel and Greece* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982), 55–56; MacCulloch, *The Mythology of All Races*, 1:80.

<sup>26</sup> Similar tales such as Theseus from Greek and Sigmund from Scandinavian mythology express the same motif; see Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable* (New York: Penguin, 1962), 188–89; deVries, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 453.



justice given from God, which justice was the primary function of kingship.<sup>27</sup>

From examples in history, literature, and legend, common elements reveal the sword as a symbol of divine authority and kingship. In many cultures, the sword was a necessary part of the royal regalia the king received as part of his enthronement. The sword in both patterns was a tangible sign of authority for the people to recognize that the king or hero was divinely appointed. In addition to the discussion of swords as symbols of authority in literature, iconography has depicted them as such. Statues and portraits of royalty often presented them with sword in hand (cf. fig. 1, p. 27; and fig. 5, p. 30).<sup>28</sup>

Many times the swords of heroes and kings disappeared or were lost, but other swords took their place as if they were the original. The swords carried the same authority, for the symbolism was more important to the people than the object.<sup>29</sup> Swords that came from both kings and heroes were unique and were invested with a divine sanction—the blessing of deity gave the owner power.

### Swords from the Near East

The symbolism and patterns of swords established here were also prevalent in the Near East. The establishment of kingdoms relied heavily on the ability to achieve legitimacy through

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<sup>27</sup> Norris J. Lacy, "Excalibur" and "Sword in the Stone," in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1986); Rosemary Morris, *The Character of King Arthur in Medieval Literature* (New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982), 42–43; *Folklore, Myths and Legends of Britain* (London: Reader's Digest, 1977), 494–96.

<sup>28</sup> In a painting called the Nine Worthies, three Pagans (Hector, Caesar, Alexander), Jews (Joshua, David, Judas Maccabaeus) and Christians (Arthur, Charlemagne, Godfrey) were all portrayed with a sword as a symbol of their authority and power. Geoffery Ashe, *King Arthur, the Dream of a Golden Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 74, 86. In a sketch by Jacques L. David of the coronation of Napoleon, he depicted Napoleon in front of the Pope crowning himself while holding a sword. Antoine Schnapper, *David, témoin de son temps* (Paris: Bibliotheque des Arts, 1980), 22.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, "Regalia," 632; The use of sacred articles that have been passed down or represent past items marks a regeneration of sacred time; see Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 21–27, 34–37.

symbolic forms and divine sanction.<sup>30</sup> In ancient Near Eastern ritual coronations investiture of the king with royal insignia or regalia played an important role.<sup>31</sup> The symbols of the regalia provided the justification for kings to rule. Iconography was the prevailing mode of representation in the ancient Near East,<sup>32</sup> aside from iconoclastic Israel, as textual histories were few.

The gods often possessed magical weapons of cutting power, like the blade the Hittite gods had with which they cut heaven and earth asunder.<sup>33</sup> Thirteenth-century B.C. rock carvings from Yazilikaya in Anatolia depicted Hittite warrior-gods bearing swords.<sup>34</sup> In the Ugaritic myths, Baal wielded a blade in his right hand before the divine council and the war goddess Anat killed Mot with a sword.<sup>35</sup> From the Akkadian myths, the hero-king Gilgamesh had a sword with which he killed the wilderness monster Huwawa and the Bull of Heaven.<sup>36</sup> As noted previously, Yahweh, the God of Israel, has been referred to as using a sword. Many of his servants who visited mortals in his name also wielded a sword: the "captain of the host of the Lord" to Joshua and the "angel of the Lord" to Balaam and David (Joshua 5:13–15; Numbers 22:23, 31; 1 Chronicles 21:16). Such divine beings equipped with swords also appeared in Canaanite and Akkadian texts and iconography.<sup>37</sup>

Sumerian stele from 2500 B.C. showed Eannatum, king of Lagash, armed with the earliest type of sickle sword.<sup>38</sup> Ornamented short swords from the same period were found in royal

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<sup>30</sup> Keith W. Whitelam, "The Symbols of Power," *Biblical Archaeologist* 49 (September 1986): 166–68; Whitelam, "Israelite Kingship," 121.

<sup>31</sup> Ricks, "King, Coronation, and Covenant," 213.

<sup>32</sup> William W. Hallo, "Texts, Statues and the Cult of the Divine King," in J. A. Emerton, ed., *Congress Volume: Jerusalem, 1986* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Hans G. Guterbock, "The Hittite Version of the Hurrian Kumarbi Myths: Oriental Forerunners of Hesiod," *American Journal of Archaeology* 52 (1948): 129.

<sup>34</sup> Yadin, *The Art of Warfare*, 1:79, 205; see also reliefs that depicted the Hittite Elder weather-god with a sword, 2:359; O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (London: Penguin, 1990), pl. 28.

<sup>35</sup> John Gray, *Near Eastern Mythology* (New York: Bedrick, 1982), 77; James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 140.

<sup>36</sup> Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 79–80, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Hendel, "The Flame of the Whirling Sword," 674.

<sup>38</sup> Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, 1:45, 135.

tombs at Ur and Anatolia, and as early as the eighteenth century B.C. there was a clear connection between kingship and swords from royal burials in the Syro-Palestine area.<sup>39</sup> The sword grew in prominence in Egypt during the New Kingdom, and Yigael Yadin stated it was then that “it became the symbol of Pharaonic authority.”<sup>40</sup> In Persian iconography, a common theme depicted the king slaying a standing lion with a sword.<sup>41</sup>

Herodotus reported in the fifth century B.C. that the Scythians worshipped an ancient iron sword as the image of Ares and sacrificed horses to it. Eight centuries later in the same region the Alani worshipped their war-god as a naked sword stuck in the ground.<sup>42</sup> Jewish amulets from the Greco-Roman period depicted the Egyptian gods Set and Iao with a sword instead of an ankh in hand.<sup>43</sup> In 160 B.C. during the Jewish Maccabean revolt in Israel, Judas Maccabee told his troops of a dream he had. Onias the high priest and Judas were praying for divine providence, and **Jeremiah the prophet appeared to them.** He continued:

Jeremiah stretched out his right hand and gave to Judas a golden sword, and as he gave it he addressed him thus: **“Take this holy sword, a gift from God, with which you will strike down your adversaries.”** (2 Maccabees 15:11–16)

**This sword has even been identified as the one which the Frankish king Charlemagne later used.<sup>44</sup>**

Other swords have also come out of the Near East with a kingly or heroic pattern. For the sultans of Turkey the girding on of the sword of Osman was the symbol of authority at their

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 140–41; Graham Philip, *Metal Weapons of the Early and Middle Bronze Ages in Syria-Palestine* (Oxford: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1989), 171.

<sup>40</sup> Yadin, *The Art of Warfare*, 1:79, 204; 2:350.

<sup>41</sup> Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland: World, 1963), pl. 20, 68, 93.

<sup>42</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972), 290; Johnson, “Regalia,” 636; C. Scott Littleton, “War and Warrior,” in Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 15:347.

<sup>43</sup> Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), 2:267, 280.

<sup>44</sup> D. A. Trotter, “Judas Maccabaeus, Charlemagne and the Oriflamme,” *Medium Aevum* 54/1 (1985): 127–29.

inauguration.<sup>45</sup> Another example was the Islamic tradition of the sword of the prophet Muhammad called “Dhū ʿl-Faḡar.” It became important regalia for the caliphs, because whichever house possessed the sword held the Imamate. The sword was believed to have been brought by Gabriel from the heavens, and it personified the strength of Allah. The Shiʿites believed the Prophet passed it to Ali, and traditionally it was transmitted to the next Imam.<sup>46</sup> Islam also had a tradition of al-Mahdī, the Shiʿite Messiah who will come wielding a sword to cleanse the earth.<sup>47</sup> The above examples show that swords have played a role as symbols of authority in the ancient Near East. Not only was the sword an authoritative symbol for kings, but the gods themselves used magical blades that served as patterns for the swords of heroes.

### The Sword of Goliath and the Sword of Laban

The combination of the kingly and heroic patterns was also attested in the ancient Near East and is best exemplified by the sword of Goliath. As an ancient Near Eastern model and forerunner of the sword of Laban, the sword of Goliath is compared in Table 1 to the sword of Laban in striking parallels, indicating they were symbols of divine authority:

Table 1. A Comparison of the Swords of Goliath and Laban

1. Each sword was originally wielded by a man of might.

#### Goliath

The Philistine Goliath from Gath was a champion, six cubits and a span tall, whose coat alone weighed five thousand shekels. His large stature caused Saul and all of Israel to fear (1 Samuel 17:4–7, 11).

#### Laban

Laban from Jerusalem was a mighty man who Nephi’s brothers believed could command and slay fifty men. He was wealthy and powerful, and most likely a military commander with connections

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, “Regalia,” 636.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 635; Abdulaziz A. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 21; Habibeh Rahim, “Ali Ibn Abi Talib,” in Eliade, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1:208–9; Coe, *Swords*, 138.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Mahdī will also be known as Ṣāhib al-Sayf, or “Master of the Sword”; cf. Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism*, 23, 39, 64, 75, 159, 172, 175.

to Jewish religious leaders (1 Nephi 3:14, 31).<sup>48</sup>

Both David and Nephi overcame a mighty opponent with divine help.

2. The sword's owner had his head cut off with his own sword by a faithful youth.

### **Goliath**

After David hit Goliath with his sling, he "stood upon the Philistine, and took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head therewith" (1 Samuel 17:51).

### **Laban**

Similarly, Nephi "took Laban by the hair of the head, and [he] smote off his head with his own sword" (1 Nephi 4:18).

Both Goliath and Laban were decapitated in a similar manner with their own swords.<sup>49</sup> David and Nephi were fairly young and acted on faith (1 Nephi 3:7; 4:1, 10–11, 18; 1 Samuel 17:29, 34–37, 45–47). It is interesting to note that their actions personified the later words of the Lord who said, "[I] will draw forth my sword out of his sheath, and will cut off from thee the righteous and the wicked" (Ezekiel 21:3).

3. The sword was unusual in appearance.

### **Goliath**

Some time after he slew Goliath, David, running from Saul, stopped by the city of Nob for supplies. The sword of Goliath was there, and

### **Laban**

When Nephi first drew Laban's sword from the sheath he noted that "the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was

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<sup>48</sup> Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 97; John L. Sorensen, "The Brass Plates and Biblical Scholarship," *Dialogue* 10 (Autumn 1977): 33; Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 102, 514; 1 Nephi 4:22.

<sup>49</sup> Note that in most traditional legends, evildoers die by their own swords. See Leach, *Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary of Folklore*, s.v. "Swords," and Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology*, s.v. "Sword."

Ahimelech the priest said, "if thou wilt take that [the sword], take it: for there is none other save that here. And David said, There is none like that, give it to me." It was unusual because it was made of iron, a technology that belonged to the Philistines, and the Israelites used inferior bronze (1 Samuel 21:9; 13:19, 22). It is debated whether it was long and double edged as was typical of the sea-peoples, or if it was a curved sickle-sword common to the time.<sup>50</sup>

Both of the swords were finely crafted for their time and were unique.

#### 4. The swords were revered by the people.

##### **Goliath**

Josephus recorded that after David slew Goliath he carried the head of Goliath into his own tent, but dedicated his

##### **Laban**

The sword of Laban was protected and kept by Nephi, who brought it across the ocean into the promised land. In

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<sup>50</sup> William Wilson, *Old Testament Word Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1978), 433; Louis P. Hartman, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), s.v. "Sword"; Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), s.v. "Armor, Arms"; Yadin, *Art of Warfare*, 1:79–80, 2:250; Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Scimitars, Cimeters! We Have Scimitars! Do We Need Another Cimeter?" in Ricks and Hamblin, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 352–59.

<sup>51</sup> For a treatment of the existence of steel at the time, see Hamblin and Merrill, "Swords in the Book of Mormon," 344–47; Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, vol. 8 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 245, 256 n. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 108; Coe, *Swords*, 14, 18; Philip, *Metal Weapons*, 141, 151, 154–55, 162, 165, 170–72; Yadin, *The Art of Warfare*, 1:140–41; Alan R. Millard, "King Og's Bed," *Bible Review* 6 (April 1990): 19.

sword to God, [at the tabernacle.]”<sup>53</sup> The sword was then later kept with the ephod and priestly garments in Nob, where the tabernacle most likely was at the time (1 Samuel 21:9).<sup>54</sup> The sword of Goliath was highly revered and kept with the implements of spiritual authority. When Saul found out specifically that David had obtained the “sword of Goliath” (mentioned by name), he was afraid and slew all the priests in Nob that helped David. Apparently Saul also respected the weapon and what it stood for, and feared when David possessed it.

establishing his people, Nephi used the sword as a prototype to fashion other swords. It also became part of the sacred relics that were passed down among the kings, and the people followed the righteous leaders who possessed it (2 Nephi 5:14; Mosiah 1:16; Alma 37:14; Words of Mormon 1:13).

#### 5. The sword was used to lead people.

##### **Goliath**

Although there is no direct mention of the name of the sword again, it is assumed that David retained and used it. Right after David acquired the sword of Goliath from Nob, the Lord instructed him to battle against the Philistines. In that battle David and his men were victorious. Later on, when David led his men, specific mention was made that he girded on his sword (1 Samuel 23:1–5; 25:13).

##### **Laban**

The sword of Laban was often used throughout Nephite history by the kings. When Nephi grew old and anointed a new king, these words paid tribute to his life: “The people . . . loved Nephi exceedingly, he having been a great protector for them, having wielded the sword of Laban in their defense” (Jacob 1:10). Of all the things to remark about Nephi’s reign in retrospect, mention of the sword of Laban was significant.

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<sup>53</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1981), 135. 1 Samuel 17:54 NIV records that “David . . . put the Philistine’s weapons in his own tent.”

<sup>54</sup> Josephus, *Works* 139n.

## 6. The swords were symbols of authority and kingship.

**Goliath**

It was directly after David slew Goliath that the women sang, "Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:6–7). Already David was lauded and had supporters, for he made his name against Goliath and became one of the greatest soldiers in the history of Israel.<sup>55</sup> Although David had previously been anointed king by Samuel, the people needed a tangible sign of kingship, which David provided by slaying Goliath. It was also directly after David acquired the sword of Goliath from Nob again that he gained a following of four hundred men (1 Samuel 16:13; 22:1–2). And once he had the sword the priest Abiathar joined David, bringing with him the ephod that gave David added legitimacy (1 Samuel 22:20; 23:6, 9; 30:7).<sup>56</sup> After David had the sword, Saul admitted to him, "I know well that thou shalt surely be king," and David was finally anointed king of Israel in Hebron (1 Samuel 24:20; 2 Samuel 5:3). No specific mention was made later of the sword of Goliath being used

**Laban**

With the sword of Laban, Nephi led his people. As Nephi became king, and in fulfillment of the word of the Lord that he should be the ruler, he was divinely appointed (2 Nephi 5:18–19; 6:2; Jacob 1:9, 11, 15). The sword became part of the regalia, and was passed down among rulers as a sacred relic used by the leaders (Mosiah 1:15–16; Words of Mormon 1:13).

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<sup>55</sup> Hoyle, "The Weapons of God," 124; Elazar, "Regime Change," 107–8.

<sup>56</sup> Elazar, "Regime Change," 109.



or passed down to subsequent kings or leaders in the Bible. According to legend, David's sword was passed to the next king, his son Solomon. Near his death Solomon took the sword out of the temple and sent it out to sea on a ship he built. The sword was to be found on the ship by one of his descendants and only the rightful heir could then possess it. This sword became known as Excalibur of Holy Grail and Arthurian fame.<sup>57</sup>

For both David and Nephi, the swords of Goliath and Laban were symbols of obedience and divine authority, for it was by faith and obedience that they were able to slay their antagonist. The swords became not only a symbol of divine authority to the people, but also of kingship, for whoever possessed the swords possessed God's favor and retained the right to rule and administer.

### **The Sword of Laban in Nephite History**

The sword of Laban was preserved and revered throughout Nephite history. From the time of its acquisition, the sword of Laban was brought over to the Americas and Nephi "did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords" (2 Nephi 5:14). William Hamblin and Brent Merrill note that "the text does not say that Nephi instructed his people how to make swords, but rather that he made the swords himself." The sword is also only mentioned by the Nephites three times after that, which "suggests that the weapon was not only

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<sup>57</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *Bible and Sword* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1984), 17–18; Richard Cavendish, *King Arthur and The Grail* (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 168, 174; M. Victoria Guerin, "The King's Sin: The Origins of the David-Arthur Parallel," in Christopher Baswell and William Sharpe, eds., *The Passing of Arthur* (New York: Garland, 1988), 15–17; Arthur E. Waite, *The Holy Grail* (New York: University Books, 1961), 69–73, 89, 184–87.

well known, but also unique, wielded by kings, with no comparable weapon being used by others.”<sup>58</sup> In this sense, the sword was strictly part of the regalia and was not used or handled by any individuals beside the king.<sup>59</sup>

Held by the Nephite kings and leaders, the people saw the sword of Laban as a religious symbol and a sign of the leader’s kingship and power. As mentioned, Nephi used the sword, as did King Benjamin, who against the Lamanites “did fight with the strength of his own arm, with the sword of Laban” (Words of Mormon 1:13). As was the case with the reference to Nephi, this scripture came in a summary of the deeds in King Benjamin’s reign, and his possession and use of the sword of Laban was important to mention. In battle, the prophet/king led his people, wielding the symbol of power and authority, while the warriors used swords patterned after it. As a rallying point, this increased morale and the conviction that the favor of God was on their side. It was also common in other cultures that the regalia was “brought forth in times of public disaster for the purpose of staying the evil.”<sup>60</sup> The scant references to the sword of Laban in the Book of Mormon are all associated in some way with victory.

The sword of Laban was preserved through the centuries along with the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the Liahona, items which formed a collection of sacred relics. These sacred implements were passed down by the leaders throughout Book of Mormon history. Of these “national treasures a real king was required to possess anciently,” the sword of Laban was “a symbol of power and rule.”<sup>61</sup> When King Benjamin transferred “charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom” to his son Mosiah about 130 B.C., he also bequeathed the sacred relics, including the sword of Laban (Mosiah 1:15–16). It has even been suggested that the sword King Mosiah’s son Ammon used against Lamanite raiders forty years later was the very sword of Laban (Alma 17:37–39).<sup>62</sup>

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58 Hamblin, “Swords in the Book of Mormon,” 344–45.

59 For examples of cultures where the touching, using, or even the imitation of the objects of the regalia by those of nonroyal status are believed to cause disease or death, see Johnson, “Regalia,” 632.

60 Ibid.

61 Thomasson, “Complex Symbolism,” in this volume, pages 26–27.

62 Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation,” 321.

As in other cultures, Book of Mormon kings held the tripartite offices of military, religious, and civil leaders.<sup>63</sup> From King Mosiah the sacred relics were passed on to Alma the Younger, who was the high priest and reigning ecclesiastical authority (Mosiah 28:20). With the death of King Mosiah came an end to the reign of kings. A new system of judges was instituted, and Alma, who possessed the regalia, became the first chief judge (Mosiah 29:42). Most often in the Book of Mormon, the passing of authority was associated with the plates, a major part of the regalia.<sup>64</sup> Even though the sword is not always mentioned, textual clues show that it was still part of the sacred implements of authority. When Mosiah passed them to Alma, he gathered not only the plates of brass and of Nephi, but also “all the things which he had kept and preserved according to the commandment of God” (Mosiah 28:11).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>64</sup> The importance of genealogical records is not unprecedented, see Nehemiah 7:64 and Ezra 8:2–14. In antiquity kings concocted false genealogies to prove their right to rule; cf. Thomasson, “Complex Symbolism,” in this volume, page 26; and Johnson, “Regalia,” 633.

<sup>65</sup> Most agree that, logically, the sword of Laban was kept and passed on with the records, as they appear together later on; see Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation,” 315. There seems to be a strong connection between the records and a sword that extended from Book of Mormon times to the latter days. There are some interesting passages in the journal of L. John Nuttal, who worked with Brigham Young in the Saint George Temple. In January 1877 from the 18th to the 26th he mentioned the use of a sword while performing ordinances in the temple:

Thursday, 16th- “I officiated as Recorder - used the sword”

Friday, 19th- “I was Recorder & used Sword”

Friday, 26th- “At the Temple officiated as Recorder with the Sword.”

L. John Nuttal, “Diary of Dec 1876–Mar 1884,” Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, 1948, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 12–15. Each mention was in conjunction with doing sealings and endowments for that day, and the sword is mentioned only with the office of recorder. That office was described by Elder Edward Stevenson in his history: “On 29 June [1842] the ‘Law of the Lord’ and books belonging to the temple were transferred to William Clayton; and on 3 Sep President Joseph Smith charged William Clayton to take care of the records and papers; and from this time I appoint you temple recorder. When revelations are to be transcribed, you shall write them.” Joseph G. Stevenson, ed., *Autobiography of Edward Stevenson, 1820–1897* (Provo: Stevenson’s Genealogical Center, 1986), 83. As keeper of the records of the temple and of revelations a sword was used. This corresponds to the Book of Mormon where the keeper of the plates also kept the sword of Laban.

During a trying period for the Nephites, Alma turned over the office of chief judge to Nephihah so he could concentrate on his priestly duties. He also attempted to pass on the regalia to Nephihah, possibly as a way of reinforcing the judge's civil authority and uniting the people (Alma 4:11–18; 50:37–38).<sup>66</sup> Nephihah refused, and Alma later gave the regalia to his son, Helaman, who did many things. With the sword of Laban in his possession, Helaman reestablished the church, served as high priest, and became the great military commander who led the two thousand stripling warriors (Alma 45:22; 46:6; 53:18–22; 56). Thereafter the regalia was passed on and kept continuously. In another episode of serious difficulty in Nephite history, successive chief judges were murdered, and there was contention in the land. The voice of the people appointed Helaman the son of Helaman, who had been in possession of the regalia, to fill the judgment seat (Helaman 1:1–9, 13, 21; 2:1–2; Alma 63:11–13). These examples show how those in possession of the sword of Laban and the regalia were looked upon by the people as having authority. The line of succession that traced the transfer of the sword of Laban and the regalia can be seen in Table 2.

In the line of succession there is a gap in the records of the kings prior to King Benjamin. After the time of Nephi it was known that kings were anointed and were mighty men who led the people (Jacob 1:9–14; Jarom 1:7).<sup>67</sup> They may have acted also in a religious office as they “taught the people the ways of the Lord” (Jarom 1:7). The main record of the people was kept by these kings with the other regalia, even until the time of Mosiah the father of Benjamin (Omni 1:11, 14; Words of Mormon 1:10–11). Many of those who later possessed the regalia as prophet/high priest were also the chief judge or military leader. Of the three possible offices for a king to hold, later Nephite leaders usually filled two or more of them.

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<sup>66</sup> Note that according to Alma 50:38 Nephihah refused “to take possession of those records *and those things* which were esteemed by Alma and his fathers to be most sacred.” “Those things” most likely included the Liahona and the sword of Laban.

<sup>67</sup> “According to the reigns of the kings” refers to the pattern of kingship in Judah, which was now established amongst the Nephites; see Ricks, “King, Coronation, and Covenant,” 214.

Table 2. The Transfer of Regalia in Nephite History

Transfer	Reference	Regalia Mentioned	Other **
Nephi <sub>1</sub> » Others	Jacob 1:9 Jacob 1:7	No (Omni 1:14)	km (p)
Others » Mosiah <sub>1</sub>	Omni 1:12	No (Omni 1:14)	kpm
Mosiah <sub>1</sub> » Benjamin	Omni 1:12	No (Words of Mormon 1:10)	kpm
Benjamin » Mosiah <sub>2</sub>	Mosiah 1:15– 16	Yes*	kp
Mosiah <sub>2</sub> » Alma <sub>2</sub>	Mosiah 28:11, 20	Yes*	jpm
Alma <sub>2</sub> » Helaman <sub>2</sub>	Alma 37:1–2, 14; 50:38	Yes*	pm
Helaman <sub>2</sub> » Shiblon	Alma 63:1–2	Yes	jp
Shiblon » Helaman <sub>3</sub>	Alma 63:10–13	Yes	jp
Helaman <sub>3</sub> » Nephi <sub>2</sub>	Helaman 3:37	No	jp
Nephi <sub>2</sub> » Nephi <sub>3</sub>	3 Nephi 1:1–2	Yes*	p
Nephi <sub>3</sub> » Nephi <sub>4</sub>	4 Nephi (heading)	No (4 Nephi 1:19)	-
Nephi <sub>4</sub> » Amos <sub>1</sub>	4 Nephi 1:19	Yes	-
Amos <sub>1</sub> » Amos <sub>2</sub>	4 Nephi 1:21	Yes	-
Amos <sub>2</sub> » Ammaron	4 Nephi 1:47	Yes	p
Ammaron » Mormon	Mormon 2:17	Yes	pm
Mormon » Moroni	Mormon 6:6	Yes	p

\* definite reference to regalia other than the plates

\*\*Other known positions held by recipient of the regalia

k = king

j = judge

p = priest/prophet

m = military leader

When Alma passed the sacred relics to his son Helaman, he explained why:

And now remember, my son, that God has entrusted you with these things, which are sacred, which he has kept sacred, and also which he will keep and preserve for a wise purpose in him, that he may show forth his power unto future generations. (Alma 37:14)

The records had an impact both then and now, but why was the sword of Laban preserved? It was clear that the sword of Laban was sacred, was revered by many people, and was an instrument of religious significance. It symbolized kingship during the reign of kings, and divine authority and leadership under the rule of judges and thereafter.

As Moroni finished writing his record to close the Book of Mormon, he sealed up the records, and at the same time he “sealed up the interpreters [Urim and Thummim], according to the commandment of the Lord” (Moroni 10:2; Ether 4:5). It is possible he meant that the other sacred relics, the Liahona and the sword of Laban, were also sealed up for future generations.

### **The Sword of Laban in the Latter Days**

In the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ to the earth in A.D. 1830, the sword of Laban appeared as an additional witness to the divine authority and leadership of the Prophet Joseph Smith and that the Lord’s kingdom on earth would be restored through him. In the early stages of the Restoration, the Lord gave Joseph charge over the plates to translate and apparent charge over the other relics. But did Joseph ever possess or utilize the sword of Laban?

Though no documented proof exists, many other things suggest that when Moroni buried the gold plates, he included with them the sword of Laban and other relics. In media produced by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the sword is implied to have been buried with them.<sup>68</sup> In all of

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<sup>68</sup> The 1988 Latter-day Saint Church movie “How Rare a Possession,” made under the direction of the First Presidency, showed the sword of Laban in the stone box where Moroni buried the plates. Russ Holt, director of the production, said that the Church was not making a statement about the sword in the movie, but only that it was a possibility. This question about the sword had been posed to him before, and when the General

Joseph Smith's accounts of his history, the angel Moroni only told him that the plates and the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim were buried (Joseph Smith History 1:35, 42).<sup>69</sup> This could be because he referred only to those items needed for the translation.

When Joseph actually went to the hill, he again mentioned only what was named by Moroni as being in the stone box. But when he described the box, Joseph talked of the stones on which "lay the plates and the other things with them" (Joseph Smith History 1:52). In fact, in Lucy Mack Smith's version of his 1824 visit to the hill, Joseph set down the plates to cover the box up with earth, thinking "probably there was something else in the box besides the plates, which would be of some pecuniary advantage to him."<sup>70</sup> The "other things" and "something else" left open the possibility that the sword of Laban could have been in the box, but there were no clues from any other of Joseph Smith's accounts. It might be asked why Moroni made a seemingly large stone box for just a set of plates if he didn't include the sword. Oliver Cowdery noted that "this box was sufficiently large to admit a breast-plate, such as was used by the ancients to defend the chest," again with no mention of a sword.<sup>71</sup>

More directly, Catherine Salisbury, the oldest surviving sister of Joseph Smith and active in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, recorded in 1886:

I remember well the trials my brother had, before he obtained the records. After he had the vision, he went frequently to the hill, and upon returning he would tell us, "I have seen the records, also the brass

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Authorities were asked, word came back that "nobody knows" and there was no concrete evidence. Russ Holt, telephone interview by author, Salt Lake City, Utah, 19 November 1990.

<sup>69</sup> Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration* (Orem, UT: Grandin, 1983), 42–47. His mother Lucy also only spoke of Joseph having the plates and breastplate with the Urim and Thummim as he hid the items from a mob; see Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 112.

<sup>70</sup> Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, 83.

<sup>71</sup> Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII," *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835): 196.

plates and the *sword of Laban* with the breast plate and the interpreters.”<sup>72</sup>

An even earlier account was written by Mormon critic John Hyde in 1857, who wrote in passing, “Joseph Smith says he found, with these [Moroni’s] plates, . . . the sword of Laban.” He also recorded that when Joseph finally got the plates on September 22, 1827, that

besides the plates, he had, according to his third story, a breast-plate of brass, *Laban’s sword*, the crystal interpreters, [and] the “brass ball with spindles” director of Lehi.<sup>73</sup>

The mention of the sword allows that some believed that he had it, or at least that he had seen it although it remained in Moroni’s possession. Fawn Brodie wrote: “Joseph related that he found the plates in a stone box along with a sword and breastplate.” She did not, however, include an explanation or note.<sup>74</sup>

Edward Stevenson, who was personally acquainted with the Prophet Joseph Smith, included in his pamphlet *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet* an engraving of Joseph receiving the plates from the angel Moroni (fig. 1). In describing the picture Edward wrote:

We see him receiving the treasure, as pictured in the engraving. He is holding the book in his hands, while the breast-plate rests on the edge of the stone box, with the sword of Laban nearby.<sup>75</sup>

There is a good possibility that Joseph had the sword of Laban at some time, because it was referred to often in connection with the plates and the Urim and Thummim he did have.

<sup>72</sup> Katharine (Catherine) Salisbury, “Dear Sisters,” *The Saints Herald* 33 (1 May 1886): 260 (emphasis added).

<sup>73</sup> John Hyde, *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs* (New York: Petridge, 1857), 215, 244 (emphasis added).

<sup>74</sup> Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 39.

<sup>75</sup> Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Stevenson, 1893), 2, 19, 21.





Figure 1. The Angel Moroni Delivering the Golden Plates to Joseph Smith. Engraving in Edward Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Stevenson, 1893), 21.

In 1829 the Lord echoed the words given to Helaman by Alma when he said, "I have reserved those things which I have entrusted unto you, my servant Joseph, for a wise purpose in me, and it shall be made known unto future generations" (D&C 5:9). At the same time the Lord promised that "the testimony of three of my servants" would be added to Joseph's, and that unto these three "I will show these things" (D&C 5:11). What were "these things" that the Lord reserved and would show, the same "sacred things" referred to many times in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 28:11, 20; Alma 37:1–2, 14; 50:38; 63:1, 11; 3 Nephi 1:1–2)? To the three witnesses Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, the Lord promised:

You shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the *sword of Laban*, the Urim and Thummim, . . . and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi. (D&C 17:1)

Not only were they to see the objects, but "testify of them, by the power of God . . . that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work" (D&C 17:3–4).

The testimony of the three witnesses, in the *Documentary History of the Church*, mentioned only that they saw the plates, but other accounts reported that they also saw the sword of Laban. In **Martin Harris's dying testimony he said:**

Just as sure as you see the sun shining, just as sure am I that I stood in the presence of an angel of God with Joseph Smith, and saw him hold the gold plates in his hands. I also saw the Urim and Thummim, the breastplate, **and the *sword of Laban*.**<sup>76</sup>

**David Whitmer** told George Q. Cannon that "he was plowing when Joseph and Oliver came to him to speak about his being one of the witnesses." He then related:

They went out and sat upon a log, conversing upon the things to be revealed, when they were surrounded by a glorious light which overshadowed them. A glorious personage appeared unto them and exhibited to them the plates, **the *sword of Laban*,** the

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<sup>76</sup> William Pilkington to Vern C. Poulter, 28 February 1930, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (emphasis added).

Directors which were given to Lehi (called Liahona), the Urim and Thummim, and other records.<sup>77</sup>

In other accounts and interviews of the event, some stated that the sword of Laban appeared on a table.<sup>78</sup> Even though many accounts (Joseph Smith, Lucy Mack Smith, etc.) didn't mention the sword in connection with the plates, it was likely among the relics. Like the testimony of the three witnesses found in the *Documentary History of the Church*, the sword was there but not mentioned. They saw the sword of Laban, and it was an additional witness of the divine call of Joseph Smith.

The early members of the Church knew of the sword of Laban and understood it as an object of power and authority as in the Book of Mormon. In 1831 there were many spiritual phenomena and false visions in the Church that prompted the Lord to reveal section fifty of the Doctrine and Covenants. John Whitmer recorded that "some would fancy to themselves that they had the sword of Laban, and would wield it as expert as a light Dragoon [armed mountain soldier]."<sup>79</sup> The symbol of a sword as power was a strong image for the Saints. The scriptures of the Restoration are replete with references to the sword as a divine instrument of the Lord.<sup>80</sup> Joseph Smith often saw the formation of stars in the night sky as a sword, or a stream of

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<sup>77</sup> George Q. Cannon, "Church History," *The Juvenile Instructor* 19 (1 April 1884): 107 (emphasis added). See additional accounts of his testimony in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews* (Orem, UT: Grandin, 1991), 11, 15, 20, 86, 127, 192, 198, 213.

<sup>78</sup> See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 242–43; Edward Stevenson, "Letter to President D. H. Wells," *The Historical Record* 6 (May 1887): 212; Mary A. S. Anderson, ed., *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1952), 311; "Mormonism," *Millennial Star* 43 (4 July 1881): 421–23, 437–39.

<sup>79</sup> F. Mark McKiernan and Roger D. Launis, eds., *An Early Latter-day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer* (Independence, MO: Herald House, 1980), 62.

<sup>80</sup> The Lord has his sword in heaven (D&C 1:13); it is one of justice (Alma 26:19; 60:29; Helaman 13:5; 3 Nephi 20:20; 29:4, Ether 8:23), destruction (D&C 97:26; 3 Nephi 2:19), indignation (D&C 101:10), vengeance (D&C 121:5; Mormon 8:41), and almighty wrath (Alma 54:6). The Lord also has the sword of his spirit (D&C 27:18), and his word is as a double-edged sword (D&C 6:2; 11:2; 12:2; 14:2; 33:1).

light in the heavens in the form of a broadsword which many others witnessed.<sup>81</sup>

If Joseph Smith did possess the sword of Laban, or was at least aware of its existence, the angel of the Lord took it back prior to the completion of the translation of the plates.<sup>82</sup> This is surmised from the famous "cave story" told in a discourse by Brigham Young on June 17, 1877, at Farmington, Davis County, Utah. In the middle of his sermon about the treasures which the Lord has stored up in the earth, Brigham related a story from the life of Oliver Cowdery. He prefaced it by saying, "I tell these things to you, and I have a motive for doing so . . . that they may grow to an understanding of some things that seem to be entirely hidden from the human family."œ Brigham continued:

When Joseph got the plates, the angel instructed him to carry them back to the hill Cumorah, which he did. Oliver says that when Joseph and Oliver went there, the hill opened, and they walked into a cave, in which there was a large and spacious room. He says he did not think, at the time, whether they had the light of the sun or artificial light; but that it was just as light as day. They laid the plates on a table; it was a large table that stood in the room. Under this table there was a pile of plates as much as two feet high, and there were altogether in this room more plates than probably many wagon loads; they were piled up in the corners and along the walls. The first time they went there the *sword of Laban* hung upon the wall; but when they went there again it had been taken down and laid upon the table across the gold plates; it was unsheathed, and on it was written these words: "This sword will never be sheathed again until the

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81 HC 5:300–301, 304; John J. Stewart, *Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1966), 154–55; Stevenson, ed., *Autobiography of Edward Stevenson*, 90; see also Orson Hyde's account of seeing a glittering sword in heaven enroute to the Holy Land in Stewart, *Joseph Smith*, 154; cf. with 1 Chronicles 21:16.

82 David Whitmer claimed that angels were appointed guardians of the plates and "other things," and that they handled the transportation (taking and giving) of the items and showing them to witnesses, see P. W. Poulson, Ogden, Utah, to editors of the *Deseret News*, 13 August 1878, *Deseret News*, published on 16 August 1878, 2.

kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and his Christ.”<sup>83</sup>

Heber C. Kimball delivered an earlier discourse in 1856 and mentioned the same event:

How does it compare with the *vision* that Joseph and others had, when they went into a cave in the hill Cumorah, and saw more records than ten men could carry?<sup>84</sup>

Here it is declared a vision, but the authenticity of it is strengthened by at least **six other accounts**, some with variations that the sword was on a trunk or that a messenger angel in the room spoke the words written on the sword.<sup>85</sup> **Whether it was a vision or a physical event, the meaning of it was real and the principles in it just as relevant. From this story of the sword in the cave,<sup>86</sup> three main things are learned.** First, if it was an actual event, the sword of Laban was always in the cave or was returned there from Joseph’s possession prior to the completion of the translation of the plates around July 1, 1829. Secondly, Brigham Young emphasized the importance of the sword and

<sup>83</sup> *JD* 19:38 (emphasis added).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:105 (emphasis added). **David Whitmer also spoke of “the caves [that] hold other records that will not come forth till all is peace.”** Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews*, 7, 22, 127.

<sup>85</sup> See Paul T. Smith, “A Preliminary Draft of the Hill Cumorah Cave Story Utilizing Seven Secondary Accounts and Other Historical Witnesses,” unpublished paper, March 1980; Stevenson, *Reminiscences of Joseph, the Prophet*, 14–15; William H. Dame, “Diary,” 14 January 1855, Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Provo, Utah; *Brigham Young Manuscript History*, 5 May 1867, Church Archives, Latter-day Saint Church, Salt Lake City, Utah; Scott G. Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1984), 6:508–9; John M. Whitaker, “Daily Journal,” Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1:348–49; A. Karl Larson and Katharine M. Larson, *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:525–26.

<sup>86</sup> The cave probably represented either where Ammaron deposited all the records (Mormon 1:3; 2:17) or where Mormon made his abridgment (Mormon 6:6). Orson Pratt claimed that this great sacred depository located on the hill Cumorah had “its contents under the charge of holy angels, until the day should come for them to be transferred to the sacred temple of Zion”; N. B. Lundwall, *Masterful Discourses of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 390–91.

that it was preserved by the Lord. After the story he further stated:

I relate this to you, and I want you to understand it. I take this liberty of referring to those things so that they will not be forgotten or lost. . . . I would like the people called Latter-day Saints to understand some little things with regard to the workings and dealings of the Lord with his people here upon the earth.<sup>87</sup>

The urgency with which Brigham reported the event came just over two months before his death.

The third, and most important, point of the story for this study, was the appearance of words written upon the sword. Even if it was a vision, the symbolic meaning and the words are still true. It is reminiscent of the words of the Lord to Ezekiel:

Seeing then that I will cut off from thee the righteous and the wicked, therefore shall my sword go forth out of his sheath against all flesh from the south to the north: that all flesh may know that I the Lord have drawn forth my sword out of his sheath: it shall not return any more. (Ezekiel 21:4–5)

The same language engraved on the sword that declared that it will never be sheathed again was also stated by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo. Joseph was Mayor and Lieutenant General of the Nauvoo Legion, and had the three roles of prophet, military leader, and civil administrator.

On June 18, 1844, just prior to his death and with enemies on all sides, Joseph assembled the Nauvoo Legion. In full uniform, he gave his last public address to the troops, during which time he drew his sword, presented it to heaven, and said:

I call God and angels to witness that I have un-sheathed my sword with a firm and unalterable determination that this people shall have their legal rights.<sup>88</sup>

Others who witnessed the event recorded it as follows:

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<sup>87</sup> *JD*19:38.

<sup>88</sup> *HC* 6:497–99; Stevenson, ed., *Autobiography of Edward Stevenson*, 103.

I can see him now, as he stood with his sword drawn and lifted toward heaven, as he declared the things which should take place on the earth, that the sword should not be sheathed until the earth was cleansed from wickedness.<sup>89</sup>

There he stood between the Heavens and Earth and prophesied concerning our enemies. He said if they did persist in taking away our rights and we did unshield [*sic*] the sword we would not sheath it again until all our enemies were under our foot.<sup>90</sup>

(Drawing his sword out of its scabbard and rais[ing] it above his head), “I will call upon the Gods to bear witness of this. I will draw my sword and it shall never be sheathed again until vengeance is taken upon all your enemies.”<sup>91</sup>

At one time he straightened himself up in a very erect and bold position and drew his sword out of its scabbard and presenting it before him said, “The sword is unsheathed and shall never return to its sheath again until all those who reject the truth and fight against the kingdom of God are swept from the face of the earth.”<sup>92</sup>

Then, Said He, I will die for you. Drew his sword and raised it up to heaven and said it should never be sheathed again until Zion was redeemed.<sup>93</sup>

The sword Joseph used at this time was not the sword of Laban,<sup>94</sup> but language similar to that said to be engraven on the

<sup>89</sup> Wandle Mace, “Journal (1809–1890),” Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, 1959, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 134.

<sup>90</sup> Joseph G. Hovey, “Biography of Joseph Grafton Hovey,” Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 2.

<sup>91</sup> William B. Pace, “Diary,” Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, 1941, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 6.

<sup>92</sup> George Morris, “Autobiography,” Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 17.

<sup>93</sup> Larson, *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 524.

<sup>94</sup> Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo Legion sword was an early 1800 calvary issue, and is today on display in the Museum of Church History and

sword of Laban in the cave was used in conjunction with his Nauvoo military blade. Standing before his troops as their military leader, the sword had the same symbolic meaning as the sword of Laban. To Joseph and the rest, it represented the sword of Laban, and the people rallied around him as their leader with divine authority.

The Saints looked upon Joseph Smith as a leader fighting for their cause with the sword symbolizing the strength of God. In the October 1838 journal of Albert P. Rockwood, which was sent in installments as letters, he wrote to his family about the Mormon militia at Far West and the Battle of Crooked River. He implored his father:

Come to Zion and fight for the religion of Jesus[.] many a hoary head is engaged here, the prophet goes out to the battle as in days of old. he has the *sword that Nephi took from Laban*. is not this marvellous? well when you come to Zion you will see <& learn> many marvellous things, which will strengthen your faith, and which is for the edification of all the saints.<sup>95</sup>

In another manuscript of Rockwood's journal that he kept for himself, he wrote:

Many a hoary head is seen with their armour about them bold to defend their Master's cause. - You may ask if the Prophet goes out with the saints to battle? I answer he is a Prop[h]et to go before the people as in times of old & if you wish to know what sword he carries, just turn to the book of Mormon & see the *sword that Nephi took from Laban* when he slew him[.] you will there see what he has got.<sup>96</sup>

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Art in Salt Lake City. After Joseph's death it was passed on to Wilford Woodruff, who later became prophet of the church. See Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 43; *Millennial Star* 27 (1865): 195.

<sup>95</sup> Dean C. Jessee and David J. Whittaker, "The Last Months of Mormonism in Missouri: The Albert P. Rockwood Journal." *Brigham Young University Studies* 28 (Winter 1988): 25 (emphasis added).

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 39 n. 97 (emphasis added).



Whether Joseph actually used the sword of Laban was not important; what is important is that the sword he used had the same symbolism.

Some at least believed at the time that Joseph possessed the sword. Immediately following the above excerpts in both manuscripts, Rockwood wrote, "The Prophet has unsheathed his sword and in the name of Jesus declares that it shall not be sheathed again until he can go unto any County or state in safety and in peace."<sup>97</sup> Written more than five years prior to the Legion declaration, Joseph must have used the phrase previously or at least his association with the phrase on the sword of Laban was known.<sup>98</sup>

Another interesting early mention of the sword of Laban was made by Mormon dissident Francis Gladden Bishop. Bishop was a member of the Church from 1832–1842, before being cut off for teaching heretical doctrines.<sup>99</sup> He wrote at times in support of Joseph's prophetic calling, emphasizing Joseph's possession of the regalia. The full regalia, according to Bishop, comprised seven items, including the sword.<sup>100</sup> Bishop

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>98</sup> A month later in November of 1838 Rockwood recorded that in a meeting Joseph Smith, Sr., spoke: "The Patriarch wished us to be humble and united at a throne of Grace[.] he also remarked that the sword was unsheathed and could not be sheathed again until sin was swept from the face of the Earth & Christ come to reign with his saints." Ibid., 31.

<sup>99</sup> *HC* 2:241, 284–85; 4:105, 550. For the most part Bishop supported Joseph and his calling as a prophet, but felt himself divinely called to do a greater work that built on Joseph's. Although Bishop was reinstated after being removed from fellowship many times, Parley P. Pratt referred to him as a "thing" and Brigham Young declared him to be "a poor dirty curse" and "so low and degraded in his spirit, feelings and life"; *JD* 1:83, 86; 2:125. Joseph Smith stated at his trial in 1842 that "he was a fool and had not sens sufficient for the Holy Ghost to enlighten him." Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Journal, 1832–1842*, vol. 2 in *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 368–69 n. 1. Bishop's main conflict with the brethren were his professed visions and visitations by heavenly beings which called him to be the successor to Joseph. For a full treatise on his life, see Richard L. Saunders, "Francis Gladden Bishop and Gladdenism: A Study in the Culture of a Mormon Dissenter and his Movement," Master's thesis, Utah State University, 1989.

<sup>100</sup> The seven items were: The gold plates (which included the Book of Mormon, the Book of Ether, and the sealed portion or the Book of Life); the Interpreters or Urim and Thummim; the Breast-plate; the sword of Laban; the Directors or Liahona; a small silver crown of Israel representing

claimed that the work of this dispensation resembled former dispensations only “in the use of the sacred things which have been hid up unto the Lord,” and that “none could authoritively claim the inheritance” without them. He continued:

Joseph, by means of the sacred things which were put into his hands, was constituted a Prophet, a Translator, or a Law-giver, and a Leader, as Moses, unto his people. So also when the Prophet like unto Moses, who is the last leader of God’s people, is raised up, he must be established in his calling, by having the sacred things put into his hands also.<sup>101</sup>

Bishop’s claim to being Joseph’s successor as prophet and leader was based on the possession of the sword of Laban and the other sacred things, which would give him divine authority.<sup>102</sup> He even gave a description of the sword<sup>103</sup> and an account of its history:

the Aaronic priesthood; and a larger gold crown of Glory representing the Melchizedek priesthood. Francis Gladden Bishop, *A Proclamation from the Lord to His People Scattered throughout all the Earth* (Kirtland, OH: Author, 1851), 1–2; Francis Gladden Bishop, *An Address to the Sons and Daughters of Zion, Scattered Abroad, Through all the Earth* (Kirtland, OH: Author, 1851), 11–12, 27–29, 48–49; Saunders, “Francis Gladden Bishop,” 92.

<sup>101</sup> Bishop, *An Address*, 3–4.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 47. Bishop claimed that the sacred items were brought to him repeatedly by one of the three Nephites named Nephi. He wrote that

The Sword of Laban was presented and suspended before me, the blade of which appeared as a flame of fire, which greatly astonished me, when I was informed by the Angel that this sword was the emblem of God’s Justice and Wrath, which is spoken of in the Scriptures as a flame of fire.

After seven days Bishop was washed, anointed, robed and in vision placed upon a throne, and the sword of Laban was placed in his hand; *ibid.*, 26–29. To Bishop, this completed his calling, as upon him was conferred divine authority and kingship.

<sup>103</sup> The description is as follows:

The blade of this Sword is somewhat dagger shaped—i.e. broad at the hilt, having two sharp edges and terminating in a sharp point. It is about three feet in length, and is fine polished

It was caused to be made by Joseph, of old, in Egypt, by the direction of God, and was in the hands of Joshua when he led the house of Israel into the land of Canaan. And after him it came down in the lineage of Joseph to Laban, from whom it was taken by Nephi, according to the account given in the Book of Mormon; and since the fall of the Nephites it has been preserved with the other sacred things, to come forth into the hand of a descendant of Joseph of old, in the line of Ephraim, and it is regarded in the scriptures as an emblem of justice.<sup>104</sup>

Despite many heretical teachings, F. G. Bishop expressed the idea that the sword of Laban was known to exist amongst the saints, was possessed by Joseph, and gave him divine authority.

It is not exactly clear if or for how long Joseph may have had the sword, but it is evident that the sword of Laban was part of the sacred relics kept by the Nephites and handed down by Moroni. At least some of the relics were known to be in Joseph's possession, and all of them appeared in the Restoration. Joseph may periodically have had the sword and

steel. The hilt, or handle is pure gold, and four square, and opposite each square is a most beautiful guard, of fine gold also. Each guard is composed of three bars, upon each of which is set a precious stone, making twelve in all, of various hues, and are of the same kind as those twelve precious stones set in Aaron's breastplate. Upon the top of the hilt is fixed a gold Cross, each end of which is joined to the top of the four guards, respectively; and on the lower end of the hilt, the four guards are joined in one piece, upon which is fixed a most beautiful pearl.

Bishop, *A Proclamation*, 2; *An Address*, 49; Francis Gladden Bishop, *Zion's Messenger* (Council Bluffs, IA: Author, 1854), 68.

<sup>104</sup> Bishop, *A Proclamation*, 2. He also says that the sword "was the sceptre of Joseph in Egypt"; Bishop, *An Address*, 19. The origination of the sword with Joseph in Egypt is not without basis. The plates of brass Nephi took along with the sword were written in Egyptian (1 Nephi 3:19; Mosiah 1:2-5) and John Sorenson claims they "could have begun as early as the visit of [Abraham] to Egypt and certainly no later than the time of Joseph, the Egyptian vizier." John L. Sorenson, "The 'Brass Plates' and Biblical Scholarship," *Dialogue* 10 (Autumn 1977): 36; cf. Daniel N. Rolph, "Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and Its Possible Pre-Laban Origin," in this volume, pages 73-79.

then kept it, as he held on to the Urim and Thummim. The sword was thought by some in Joseph's day to be possessed by him, and its symbolic meaning was an added witness to the Restoration. Some viewed Joseph Smith as their leader wielding the sword of Laban for their cause. The sword Joseph carried as a military commander took on the same symbolic meaning as the sword of Laban. Whether Joseph had the sword of Laban or not, he was viewed as being called of God and having divine authority.

## Conclusion

The sword of Laban was a symbol of kingship and divine authority. It fit the patterns of both kingly and heroic swords that are found in history, mythology, and literature from all over the world. These patterns are also evident when compared to another sword from the ancient Near East, the sword of Goliath. The sword of Laban was preserved throughout Nephite history, and it served as part of the regalia held by their leaders. Its preservation until the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ in 1830 was remarkable enough, but it also played a role as an independent divine witness of the calling of Joseph Smith as the leader of the dispensation. With the sword of Laban and what it symbolized, some viewed Joseph as having divine authority in his civic, military, and prophetic duties. As a symbol, the sword of Laban represented the power and strength of God for whoever possessed it. The sword served its purpose for the Nephites and Joseph Smith and may be preserved for further use. It could still be needed by the Lord to bring about his "righteous purposes unto the children of men" and "show forth his power unto future generations" (D&C 17:3). The sword apparently remains unsheathed "until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and his Christ" (cf. Revelation 11:15).