

The Laban Story as a Symbolic Interplay of Goodness and Truth

Christian Swenson

Brigham Young University

“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.” -1 Nephi 4:18

The Laban story in the Book of Mormon makes us feel uncomfortable. It triggers us, riles us up. But there is more here than meets the eye. I suggest that this story is a universal human experience, something older and more permanent than the Book of Mormon. Namely, it is a symbolic expression of the relationship between God and humankind, between the infinite and the finite, and reveals a complex dialectic of justice and mercy. Nephi, I argue, embodies both divine truth and divine goodness in two converse movements. Truth and goodness, terms I loosely adapt from the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg, I find work well here as a hermeneutic tool to disclose what is at play in this story, and so know that I mean them in a somewhat idiosyncratic way that I will explain.

First of all, symbolic expression like this is not unheard of in the Old Testament world; it is a common *modus operandi* for God and prophets. What is already true spiritually signifies itself through a physical, symbolic incarnation. Consider Ezekiel, for instance. He was told by God to illustrate a broad spiritual problem concretely, to make the invisible visible:

Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile, and lay it before thee, and portray upon it the city, even Jerusalem: And lay siege against it, and build a fort against it, and cast a mount against it; set the camp also against it, and set battering rams against it round about. Moreover take thou unto thee an iron pan, and set it for a wall of iron between thee and the city: and set thy face against it, and it shall be besieged, and thou shalt lay siege against it. This shall be a sign to the house of Israel. Lie thou also upon thy left side, and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel upon it: according to the number of the days that thou shalt lie upon it thou shalt bear their iniquity. For I have laid upon thee the years of their iniquity, according to the number of the days, three hundred and ninety days: so shalt thou bear the iniquity of the house of Israel. And when thou hast accomplished them, lie again on thy right side, and thou shalt bear the iniquity of the house of Judah forty days: I have appointed thee each day for a year. Therefore thou shalt set thy face toward the siege of Jerusalem, and thine arm shall be uncovered, and thou shalt prophesy against it. And, behold, I will lay bands upon thee, and thou shalt not turn thee from one side to another, till thou hast ended the days of thy siege. (Ezekiel 4:1–8)

Here, God commands Ezekiel to cut an image of Jerusalem under siege on a clay tablet, to lie on his left side next to it for 390 days and to lie on his right side for forty days. Through this act, Ezekiel embodies God’s relationship to Judah. Jerusalem is a brick here, something artificial and not hewn from nature like stone, something like a graven image. He acts toward this brick in the way that God acts toward Jerusalem, which is to say that he acts like truth does toward

falsehood. Lying first on his left side and then on his right, Jerusalem is first judged by justice and then saved by mercy.

Or take Jeremiah as another example:

Thus saith the Lord unto me, Go and get thee a linen girdle, and put it upon thy loins, and put it not in water. So I got a girdle according to the word of the Lord, and put it on my loins. And the word of the Lord came unto me the second time, saying: Take the girdle that thou hast got, which is upon thy loins, and arise, go to Euphrates, and hide it there in a hole of the rock. So I went, and hid it by Euphrates, as the Lord commanded me. And it came to pass after many days, that the Lord said unto me, Arise, go to Euphrates, and take the girdle from thence, which I commanded thee to hide there. Then I went to Euphrates, and digged, and took the girdle from the place where I had hid it: and, behold, the girdle was marred, it was profitable for nothing. (Jeremiah 13:1–7)

Jeremiah's linen girdle is deliberately made dirty, prevented from being cleaned. Here, again, the truth symbolizes itself. This linen girdle, something that shows itself to others, that displays interiority externally, embodies truth as the correspondence and synchronization between inside and outside, between what one thinks and what one does. But it is not cleaned, left unattended, and therefore says much more about the worldly, that which is literally "dirty," than it does about a garment that instead should display the inward outwardly. This, too, embodies Jerusalem's situation. They have not attended to truth, not embodied it, and so falsehoods have crept in like dirt.

I could give more examples, but I argue that Nephi, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, embodied truth. By truth I mean, simply, that which persists without us, that which is independent of us, that which is transcendent. On the most basic level, I suggest that Nephi here symbolizes the truth that violently defeats falsehood—for truth always encounters falsehood violently. How many times have you been afraid to speak the truth because it would be awkward? To speak out, to speak the truth, would be abrupt and painful, so you'd rather not. This violence is what makes you sigh when, again, you repeat a bad habit that you don't have the gumption to change. Truth comes suddenly, swiftly, abruptly. It makes us realize that what we thought was true isn't. It makes the darkness we thought was light into darkness, and as a corollary, it makes the darkness clearly dark. For falsehood, when believed in, pretends to truth. It occupies its place wrongly. To shine the light, therefore, to tell the truth, is to rob life from those it doesn't belong to, is to kill.

Nephi, likewise, is in the midst into a culture that pretends to an authority it does not have, that dishonors the Divine, that mocks him. To speak out would be violent. Jerusalem at the time confused themselves as God's chosen people with God himself. They mocked and sought to kill prophets like Lehi who spoke of their sinfulness. They could do no wrong. Anyone who said otherwise was wrong. As such, the truth of God's transcendence was hidden, unheeded, and the divine in them was held captive by illusions that prevented that divine from appearing in its true character. God was trapped in Jerusalem, so to speak. The truth then had much more to do with "who" and "where" than "what," more to do with the accidents of speaking than with what is spoken, and therefore not much to do with truth at all.

But if God is trapped in Jerusalem, if truth has more to do with the local than the universal, then the truth will long to flee Jerusalem, and Jerusalem will one day wake up to find that the truth has fled. And that is indeed what happened: Nephi was commanded to steal the plates. Here, the truth is hoarded, kept back, kept private, but at night, when the keeper of the truth is asleep, the truth vanishes and the keeper is killed. Nephi here embodies truth on a deeper level than mere violence. More specifically, he embodies truth's character to achieve this violence unexpectedly. For falsehood always turns a blind eye. It ignores, prefers not to look, and so makes bad decisions. And it is precisely where we do not look that the truth returns.

For Nephi finds Laban when Laban is asleep and drunk. The wakeful finds the sleeping; the attentive finds the inattentive. It is never the other way around. What I refuse to look at will find me, and it will find me unprepared. For I cannot hide from what I do not know how to see. Moreover, "what I do not know how to see" can include my own finitude, my own weakness. If I do not attend to it, if I do not actively cultivate humility as a consciousness of my weakness, my weakness will be demonstrated to me anyway obviously and painfully. A version of this shows up in mindfulness as a meditative practice: one soon notices that there is both a mind that sees and a mind that is seen, and later one realizes that the seeing mind and the seen mind are radically different. One is attentive, active, alert, and the other automatic, passive, and mechanical. The one is awake and the other asleep. The latter is good for things that can and should be mindless, good for driving the car and cooking breakfast, but bad for relating to God, bad for spending time with loved ones, so it is best to use each appropriately, best to distinguish them. But you can only do this when you develop a feeling for what it's like to wake up from this sleep, what it's like to see the seen, what it is like to distinguish the seeing and the seen. And this can and does feel like a shock. One becomes, suddenly, awake. In other words, the irruption of mindfulness into the mindless mechanical mind can feel violating, can feel violent, just like Nephi is violent toward the sleeping Laban.

But this clunky, mechanical mind is not just shocked. It is also dismembered, torn apart. That is to say, that which this "natural mind" treats as a single thing is actually many things. I think "all x are jerks," and I believe it until I shock myself awake. Then I see that, no, some are nice, some are jerks, and some are every level in between. For falsity makes broad claims, makes all-or-nothing generalizations, and truth dismembers the cloud of generalities and notices what composes it. This is not unlike turning on the light and replacing what was a bland, uniform darkness with the variety of color. Again, it is not unlike those parts of the Bible where God makes an ordered structure out of vast, dark something. When He divides the primordial abyss in Genesis 1, what was undifferentiated gets form and contour. It has edges, is separated out. The Noah story, too, involves delimitation and dry ground: the water is behind the walls of the ark, and the crucial moment of the story involves the emergence of land, as does the parting of the Red Sea. The deep stays back behind a boundary. The big, undifferentiated abyss in these stories is falsehood itself: what paints a big label over a panoply of difference, what conceals more than it reveals, what keeps us asleep.

And Laban, too, is dismembered. His head comes loose from his body, becomes many when he was before one. This act manifests a violence brewing in the culture, manifests the truth and the attentiveness toward truth that was suppressed. Invariably, if we do not attend to the nuances in categories, if we do not divide well, if we do not heed the truth, these divisions, this

truth, return as violence. For just as truth is violent, violence is truth, unseen truth, declared as a last resort. When Nephi kills Laban, he manifests the violence done to truth in his culture, or more accurately, the violence that truth returns upon the head of that culture's own falsehood. For truth always does to us what we do to it. If we do not care for it, it will not care for us. If we are violent toward it, it will be violent toward us.

But truth is not the only factor at play here. If truth distinguishes, then something we might call goodness reunites. If truth dismembers, this goodness remembers. Goodness here is that which creates wholes, creates single things, creates unity. It draws together. It unifies. Moreover, it is indiscriminate. It gives universally. Or, put differently, it ignores differences, treats everything as if it were the same. Goodness is very like mercy in the Book of Mormon, just as truth is like justice. Moreover, just as mercy and goodness are like life, are like the Tree of Life that gives union with God, truth and justice are like both death and the Tree of Knowledge, that which separates us from God. We need both. Truth creates distance, is a mutual distancing of God from humankind. Goodness, however, eliminates distance, creates closeness between us and Him. Truth distinguishes, but goodness unites. Truth shows God, but goodness brings him close. Another way to say this is that truth delimits us, wounds us, even kills us, by showing us all the ways we are separate from God, all the ways we are spiritually dead, all the ways we are not Him, whereas goodness actually does bring us closer to him, but paradoxically, only to the extent we have realized that separateness, that death.

As such, when I do not confuse myself with God, when I die in this way, life can thrive in me. That death will happen sooner or later anyway: it's just a question of whether I accept it, whether I know that life and death, like mercy and justice, are inextricably linked. To accept justice, to accept the truth, is to accept mercy. To accept death is to accept life. Laban and Jerusalem hide from death, hide from justice, hide from the truth of themselves, and so cannot access life and mercy. But when Nephi slays Laban, he symbolically illustrates that death and so allows a space for mercy, for life, to come in.

We can say that this is why Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and even Christ perform the truth in the way that they do: their actions complete truth, unconceal it, disclose it, and as such allow a space for mercy, for goodness, and for love to come in. When the ugly truth of the situation has been made clear, symbolically or otherwise, when I see myself in all my unworthiness, progress can be made. Having admitted my powerlessness, I can rely on a higher power. Having died, I can be resurrected. The symbol completes death in these cases, but it also, therefore, begins new life.

And so it does here: Nephi kills Laban, yes, but he also inhabits his armor. He impersonates Laban, embodies him, resurrects him, but only after a death. Both movements show up in this story. It also shows up earlier: just as Nephi had, earlier, fled Jerusalem, had realized in that flight the truth of Jerusalem, that it had abandoned the truth, that it was dead, he returned to it as a manifestation of mercy, of resurrection.

And both are important, are necessary to the other. We need the exodus, yes, need the fall, but we also need the atonement, need gathering. We often favor one over the other, of course. The revolutionary, the heretic, will flee Jerusalem, kill the king, but then leave it and him for dead. Paradoxically, however, they find themselves becoming the tyrant they've assassinated: they

return despite themselves. The Pharisee, the dogmatist, on the other hand, clings to the corpse, insists that it does have life when it doesn't, and therefore abandons the tradition they cling to despite themselves. For true rebellion is the return to tradition, and true tradition is to perpetually rebel. True justice is mercy, and true mercy is justice. They are not two movements, but one.

The Book of Mormon, too, is a text that manifests its otherness from the Bible, a text long considered to be the sole locus of the divine, but nevertheless respects it, continues it. The Book of Mormon, like Nephi, both leaves and returns to Jerusalem. And so do all the house of Israel, interestingly enough.

The Laban story plays out this complex, cosmic dance. Life is both a perpetual flight from God, a perpetual act of distinction from him (justice) and a perpetual return, a perpetual reunion (mercy). Like Nephi both flees Jerusalem and returns to it, like Israel is both scattered and gathered, God flees from us, hides from us, constantly, but just as constantly rushes toward us. Truth creates distinctions, is violent, but only to protect the sanctity of God's transcendence, of his otherness. And mercy can appear when the truth of that transcendence has manifested itself fully, when I die and realize the truth of my death, my separateness from God. Laban is killed but reanimated. Jerusalem is sacked, its inhabitants scattered, but then reinhabited and become a locus for gathering. I am not God, but He loves me. I was dead and am alive again. That's how God works. That's how life works. By dying.