

# Rediscovering Zoram

## The Chief *Na‘ar* of the Commander of the Fortress

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There are several prominent figures in the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon whose roles, responsibilities, and titles may have eluded the modern reader. As more is learned about ancient Israelite laws, customs, and culture through archaeological successes and academic research, previous biblical scholarship is reworked, refined, or totally redesigned. So too with academic scholarship on the Book of Mormon. The way readers understand the central figures in the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon must be regularly reassessed as additional information is obtained. There is still a great deal more to discover about the people who played such a central role in the establishment of a new nation. Recent discoveries and scholarship may shed light on a man to whom very few verses are dedicated but whose legacy cannot be ignored: Zoram.

In light of additional insights into Israelite society gained by archaeological discovery and exceptional academic research in recent years, we can posit that Laban was a high-ranking military commander assigned by the king to the fortress within Jerusalem. We can further conclude that Zoram’s position may have been of a military nature as well, specifically that of the *na‘ar* of the commander of the fortress.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the

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1. Nephi states that he makes the record “in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Ne. 1:2). Many Hebrew words are used herein to explain possible context and meaning heretofore missed. It is possible that the nuanced meanings were lost because Nephi was not, in fact, writing in Hebrew. However, we *must* understand the “learning of the Jews” if we are to understand the world of Nephi and the people around him, and nuanced Hebrew terms become critical in understanding the background context (such context being

translation of *na'ar* has been viewed as meaning “young lad” (or another similar definition), but an extensive examination of the Israelite use of the word *na'ar* in a military context is something quite different. If Zoram was the chief *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress, he would have been the right-hand man of a highly important military leader. Additionally, Zoram would have been a man of noble birth, an elite military officer with extensive military training, and as such would have been an exceptional addition to Lehi’s family as they journeyed through the wilderness, crossed an ocean, and began life in the New World.

## 1. Reexamining Laban

Determining if Zoram was the *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress begins with an examination of Laban. Before Zoram’s position in the ancient Israelite society can be accurately determined, it is critical to understand Laban’s position. Much has been written about Laban, but with new discoveries and new research, possibilities relating to his position have come to light. John W. Welch has proposed that research done by William M. Schniedewind creates one such new possibility for understanding Laban’s role in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Welch suggested that Laban’s proper role may have been the commander of the fortress, as examined below. As I reviewed Welch’s proposal, the possibility for a new understanding of Zoram’s position became apparent.

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lost either in the translation to Egyptian [or reformed Egyptian] or the translation to English). As will be read in this article, quite a bit of explanation is needed to explain the difference between the Hebrew words *na'ar* and *'ebed*. We do not have words that easily distinguish between the two, and so the English word for both has been the same: *servant*. Whether the distinction was lost in Egyptian or English, the “learning of the Jews,” together with the context provided by Nephi, helps provide evidence of the historicity of the Book of Mormon and its connection to Jerusalem. Though Nephi states that he used the “language of the Egyptians,” Jerry D. Grover Jr. has proposed that the small plates containing Nephi’s writing “were not exclusively the original small plates, but rather were a version that included a set that had been translated/interpreted into reformed Egyptian.” Potential problems with lost meaning in translation apply equally to Egyptian or reformed Egyptian. See Jerry D. Grover Jr., “Possibilities of a Reformed-Egyptian Version of the Small Plates,” *Book of Mormon Scientific and Linguistic Research*, December 6, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/40525518/Possibilities\\_of\\_a\\_Reformed\\_Egyptian\\_Version\\_of\\_the\\_Small\\_Plates](https://www.academia.edu/40525518/Possibilities_of_a_Reformed_Egyptian_Version_of_the_Small_Plates).

2. John W. Welch has not yet published or written anything relating to his idea that Laban was possibly the commander of the fortress. However, the idea that Laban held this title belongs to John W. Welch alone. He verbally communicated the idea to me and handed me a copy of the Schniedewind article (see footnote 5 herein). The possibility of Zoram being the (chief) *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress springs directly from the exploration of Welch’s initial idea that Laban may have been the commander of the fortress.

Research completed by Schniedewind revisits some previous assumptions about a limestone seal<sup>3</sup> found at Tel Arad<sup>4</sup> in 1967.<sup>5</sup> The seal was excavated by Yohanan Aharoni, and the initial speculation was that it represented the fortress at Tel Arad itself.<sup>6</sup> Schniedewind states:

Presumably, this would have been the seal of the commander of the fortress at [Tel] Arad. In this respect, it should be seen as the forerunner for later seals. The title “commander of (the) fortress” is first known from inscriptions at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud. . . . The excavators of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud found . . . a multitude of inscriptions on jars, stone, and plaster walls—including three storage jars with the inscription of *le-śar ‘ir*, which must be translated “belonging to commander of fortress.” Although this title is usually translated as “belonging to the governor of the city,” this translation does not at all fit at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, which was no city. . . . Recently, excavations in the Temple Mount area of Jerusalem unearthed a new seal impression with the title *le-śar ‘ir*, spelled in exactly the same way as on the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud storage jar inscriptions.<sup>7</sup>

3. Sealing in the ancient world “was a fundamental tool of the administration and was used for both official and private purposes to secure and authenticate rooms, containers, and correspondence. Large assemblages of sealings have been found in contexts of storerooms (treasuries), both domestic and royal, and both sacred and secular” (internal citations omitted). Zachi Dvira and Gabriel Barkay, “Clay Sealings from the Temple Mount and Their Use in the Temple and Royal Treasuries,” *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* 2 (2021): 55–56, [https://jjar.huji.ac.il/sites/default/files/jjar/files/dvira\\_barkay\\_2021\\_jjar\\_2\\_41-75.pdf](https://jjar.huji.ac.il/sites/default/files/jjar/files/dvira_barkay_2021_jjar_2_41-75.pdf).

4. Tel Arad is one of Israel’s most important archaeological sites, located west of the Dead Sea. Remains of a temple and fortresses where the kings of Judah lived were excavated there. Archaeological finds date back to 950 BC. “During the period of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (10th–6th centuries BCE), successive citadels were built on the hill of Arad as part of a series of fortifications protecting the trade routes in the Negev and the southern border of the kingdom against marauding nomads. . . . The Israelite temple discovered at Arad is the only one known outside of Jerusalem.” “Archeology in Israel: Ancient Arad,” Jewish Virtual Library: A Project of AICE, accessed March 12, 2024, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ancient-arad>.

5. William M. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress?: Understanding an Ancient Israelite Military Title,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 45, no. 1 (January/February 2019): 39–44.

6. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 39; Yohanan Aharoni, “Excavations at Tel Arad: Preliminary Report on the Second Season, 1963,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 17, no. 4 (1967): 233–49; Zeev Herzog and others, “The Israelite Fortress at Arad,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 254 (1984): 1–34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1357030>.

7. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 40. “Kuntillet ‘Ajrud sits in the barren wilderness of the central Sinai . . . [and] was first discovered in 1969.” It is a site that would likely have been water source sites along ancient trade routes, though “the function of the site has been [a] hotly debated subject in the scholarly literature.” See

The storage jar inscriptions match the inscription on the limestone seal. The Israel Museum has two impressions of this limestone seal on display (see figs. 1 and 2).

The two separate impressions allow us to make a good composite drawing of the original seal, which features two figures. The larger figure on the left is the king, standing on a platform and holding military symbols of power that include a composite bow and three arrows. The figure on the right reaches out to receive the military symbols of authority; he stands above the title “commander of the fortress.” . . . On the basis of iconography and paleography, we would date this seal to the late seventh century B.C.E. So it is the chronologically latest example of a seal with the title “commander of the fortress,” and it is significant. . . . The bow and arrows give the seal a clear military import. This is not simply a civilian governor, but rather a military commander.<sup>8</sup>

Based on the foregoing, Schniedewind presents a very convincing argument that the later seals bearing the Hebrew term *le-śar 'ir* have all been translated incorrectly as belonging to “the governor of the city.” Instead, we can posit that the language could be translated to describe the owner as someone who protected a military outpost.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to *'ir*, the meaning and translation of *śar* have also evolved. Rather than referring to a governor, “the word *śar* is a loanword from Akkadian, and it refers to a military commander or an officer. It seems likely, then, that the title in the seal impression from Jerusalem should be translated as ‘commander of the fortress.’ Indeed, it makes little sense to think of it as a civilian title since the king also resided in Jerusalem.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, there would have been no governor in the city where the king ruled. Schniedewind then proposes, “The parallels for this title indicate that this was the military commander in charge of the fortified town of Jerusalem—or perhaps, more narrowly, *a fortress within Jerusalem*.”<sup>11</sup>

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Jeremy Smoak and William Schniedewind, “Religion at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 211.

8. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 40. Note that, based on the dating of the seal, this could have been the impression of the seal Laban himself used or made, if he were indeed commander of the fortress.

9. See Smoak and Schniedewind, “Religion at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud,” 211.

10. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 40–43.

11. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 43, emphasis added. “The inscriptions contain commands regarding supply of commodities (wine, oil, and flour) to military units and movement of troops, set against the background of the story events in the final years before the fall of Judah. They include orders that came to the fortress of Arad



**FIGURE 1.** Impression of the seal found at Tel Arad (*front*). Courtesy The Israel Museum at Jerusalem.



**FIGURE 2.** Sketch of the seal found at Tel Arad. Courtesy William M. Schniedewind.

From a seal impression dating to the late seventh century BC, we see an instance of the representation of *le-śar 'ir* receiving authority from the king.<sup>12</sup> Schniedewind argues that “the pose of the ‘commander of the fortress,’ who stands above his title and receives the bow and arrows from the royal figure, suggests that the seal was given to this figure by the king—perhaps when he was appointed to his position.”<sup>13</sup>

The significance of the position held by the commander of the fortress is indicated by the lack of the commander’s name on the seal. Schniedewind proposes, “In these seals, the title is more important than a personal name. The seal impressions from Jerusalem mention no names, only the title, and the storage jars at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud are also for an unnamed commander.”<sup>14</sup> A title without a corresponding name was found for one other position. “Almost all other seal impressions in ancient Israel mention their owner—with the exception of the royal *LMLK* seal inscriptions, meaning ‘(belonging) to the king.’ These, too, are unnamed and therefore transferable. In this respect, the ‘commander of (the) fortress’ title holds an exceptional place in the bureaucracy of ancient Judah.”<sup>15</sup>

Considering Schniedewind’s proposal that there may have been a position known as the commander of the fortress in Jerusalem (either responsible for the city of Jerusalem itself or perhaps commanding a fortress within the city of Jerusalem), together with the possibility that a seal referencing just such a commander corresponds to Lehi’s Jerusalem, we should look at Laban with a fresh perspective. Could Laban have been the commander of the fortress within Jerusalem, appointed by the king? Does it make sense that the treasury, including the brass plates, would have been a part of this internal fortress? Excluding Laban’s character

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from higher echelons in the Judahite military command system, as well as correspondence with neighboring forts.” Shira Faigenbaum-Golovin and others, “Multispectral Imaging Reveals Biblical-Period Inscription Unnoticed for Half a Century,” *Plos One* 12, no. 6 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0178400>.

12. Interestingly, Schniedewind points out an “obvious Egyptianizing element” of the later seals—“placing the title of the figure within a cartouche.” Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 43. This too lends credibility to Egyptian culture having influence in Israelite society. The adoption of “Egyptianizing element[s]” in Israelite society may possibly be historical support regarding Nephi identifying that the “language of [his] father . . . consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” in 1 Nephi 1:2.

13. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 43.

14. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 44.

15. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 44.

traits, what do we know about him from Nephi's description? Does what we know support the hypothesis that Laban was the commander of the fortress?<sup>16</sup> Consider the following:

1. Laban was a commander of fifty (1 Ne. 3:31).
2. He carried an unusual and remarkable sword (1 Ne. 4:9).
3. He wore armor (1 Ne. 4:19).
4. He had servants (1 Ne. 3:25–26; 4:20) who would obey his command to kill (1 Ne. 3:25).
5. He was responsible for the plates of brass, which were kept in the treasury (1 Ne. 3:3–4; 4:20–24).
6. His servant carried the “keys of the treasury” (1 Ne. 4:20).
7. He met with “elders of the Jews” at night (1 Ne. 4:22).

### Commander of Fifty

Laban's command of fifty is acknowledged first by Laman and Lemuel (1 Ne. 3:31) but is also affirmed by Nephi (1 Ne. 4:1). Some have commented on the small number this seems to present for a city like Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup> However, Hugh Nibley used information from comparable civilizations to explain this seemingly small number:

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

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16. For a full analysis of Laban, see Hugh Nibley, “Portrait of Laban,” in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed., ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988), 120–31. See also John W. Welch, “2: 1 Nephi 1–7,” *John W. Welch Notes* (2020), <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/1-nephi-1-7>. Please note that an in-depth analysis of each trait of Laban is not given here. Analysis in this article is limited to whether the few specific facts given about Laban in the Book of Mormon are consistent with the hypothesis that Laban could have held the position of commander of the fortress.

17. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 126–27.

suits perfectly with the Amarna picture, where the military forces are always so surprisingly small and a garrison of thirty to eighty men is thought adequate even for big cities. It is strikingly vindicated in a letter of Nebuchadnezzar, Lehi's contemporary, wherein the great king orders: "As to the fifties who were under your command, those gone to the rear, or fugitives return to their ranks."<sup>18</sup>

Hugh Nibley is not the only scholar to find similar references to "fifty." Joseph Offord said, "In these days it is interesting to note the indication here, that in the Babylonian army a platoon contained fifty men";<sup>19</sup> also, we might add that it was called a "fifty," hence, "Laban and his fifty." Thus, to a contemporary reader interpreting the situation through modern experiences, the command of fifty men may not seem to place Laban in an extremely important or powerful position. With that perspective, it seems unreasonable that Laman and Lemuel seem to ascribe such a great amount of power to Laban. However, as we learn more about the time and place of these events, Laban's position is clearer. If Laban were the commander of the fortress with a permanent garrison of fifty but commanding tens of thousands of soldiers, it would be more understandable why Nephi and his brothers would have rightly feared his power and position<sup>20</sup> and why they would not seek recourse after Laban's theft of their property.

### Laban's Sword

The uniqueness of Laban's sword led many scholars to believe that Nephi's description of it made it anachronistic to Lehi's Jerusalem. No steel sword capable of severing a man's head in one blow could possibly

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18. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 126–27.

19. Joseph Offord, "Archaeological Notes on Jewish Antiquities," *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (1916): 148.

20. In addition to Laman and Lemuel's concerns, Laban's apparent disposition to kill the brothers for their attempts to gain the plates and his corresponding power to see it done are confirmed by both Lehi and Sariah. While their sons are traveling back from Jerusalem, Sariah complains to Lehi, believing that she will never see her sons again. In 1 Nephi 5:5, Lehi responds to Sariah, "Yea, and I know that the Lord will deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and bring them down again unto us in the wilderness." After Nephi and his brothers return, Sariah says, "Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban" (1 Ne. 5:8). The danger and risk involved with sending their sons to try to get the plates from Laban seems to have never been in question, and their delivery from Laban is seen as nothing short of a miracle.

have existed at that time and place! Once again, scholarship must be reexamined because archaeological evidence bears out just such a sword existing contemporaneously with Laban. What is now called the “Jericho Sword”<sup>21</sup> has brought credibility to Nephi’s description of a sword that was previously considered by scholars to be an impossible weapon for that time. Dating to the time of King Josiah (about 620 BC), a contemporary of Lehi, the sword found at Vered Jericho (which is roughly fifteen miles from Jerusalem) is clear proof that long steel swords did indeed exist during Nephi’s day. Avraham Eitan wrote, “Metallurgical analysis of a sample taken from the blade proves . . . that the iron was deliberately hardened into steel, attesting to the technical knowledge of the blacksmith.”<sup>22</sup>

While we now know that steel swords did exist in the time of Nephi, it is also true that Laban’s sword was not ordinary. Nephi himself describes it as follows: “And I beheld the sword, and I drew it forth from the sheath thereof; and the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel” (1 Ne. 4:9). Jeffrey Chadwick discusses how rare this was: “To possess gold was very rare—gold was not used as a medium of common monetary exchange.”<sup>23</sup> An entire hilt made of “pure gold” would have been exceptionally rare, indeed. Rare is not impossible, though, and it isn’t hard to deduce that the cost, effort, and skill involved with such a sword would only have been invested in a sword of extraordinary significance.<sup>24</sup>

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21. Avraham Eitan, “Rare Sword of the Israelite Period Found at Vered Jericho,” *Israel Museum Journal* 12 (1994): 61–62. See also William J. Adams Jr., “Nephi’s Jerusalem and Laban’s Sword,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 194–95; and “Book of Mormon Evidence: Laban’s Steel Sword,” Evidence Central, January 4, 2021, <https://evidencecentral.org/recency/evidence/labans-steel-sword>.

22. Eitan, “Rare Sword of the Israelite Period,” 62. See also Hershel Shanks, “BAR Interviews Avraham Eitan,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 12, no. 4 (1986): 33; Neal Rappleye, “Vered Jericho Sword,” *Nephite History in Context* 3 (August 2018): 1–3.

23. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 114. Note that Chadwick makes a very convincing argument that Lehi and his sons were metallurgists (first proposed by John A. Tvednes); Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem,” 113–17.

24. For a comparison of a Hittite dagger with a gold hilt and steel blade found in King Tutankhamen’s tomb, see John W. Welch and Greg Welch, “Ancient Steel Weapons,” chart 11–139, (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), <https://archive.dev-bookofmormoncentral.org/content/ancient-steel-weapons>. See also

One possible explanation for the uniqueness of Laban's sword may be that it had been given to him by the king as a symbol of his position as commander of the fortress. Though the seal impressions discussed earlier display the king handing military symbols to the commander of the fortress in the form of a bow and arrows, Schniedewind acknowledges that seals such as these would likely have been passed down for generations (and perhaps even for centuries) to each new commander of the fortress.<sup>25</sup> It is possible that, originally, the military symbols given by the king to his commander of the fortress would have been a bow with arrows, but the seal did not change when the military symbol of authority given to the commander evolved and became a sword. It is also possible that the seal contained symbols that were not actually used. The way the Nephites used the sword of Laban, handing it down as a symbol of authority, may well be due to that particular sword actually having always been a symbol of authority—given by the king of Israel to one charged with protecting the Lord's people.<sup>26</sup>

## Armor

We understand from Nephi's story that not only did Laban have armor but that he was wearing that armor (and carrying his sword) when he went to meet with the "elders of the Jews" (1 Ne. 4:22). While certainly the night hours in Jerusalem were considered dangerous,<sup>27</sup> it is possible that Laban wearing armor to meet with the elders of the Jews may have been expected only if his position was primarily a military one, such as

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"How Could Laban Have Possessed a Sword of 'Most Precious Steel'?", Book of Mormon Central, February 1, 2018, <https://bookofmormoncentral.org/qa/how-could-laban-have-possessed-a-sword-of-%E2%80%9Cmost-precious-steel%E2%80%9D>; and "What Was the Sword of Laban Like?", Book of Mormon Central, January 23, 2018, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/what-was-the-sword-of-laban-like>.

25. Schniedewind, "Commander of the Fortress," 43.

26. See Daniel N. Rolph, "Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and Its Possible Pre-Laban Origin," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 73–79. See also "Why Was the Sword of Laban So Important to Nephite Leaders?", Book of Mormon Central, February 27, 2018, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-was-the-sword-of-laban-so-important-to-nephite-leaders>. The analysis discusses the similarities between Nephi and Goliath, each having a sword that "became a national heirloom, as well as an enduring symbol of divine deliverance and royal legitimacy." See also Brett L. Holbrook, "The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 39–72.

27. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 115–17.

the commander of the fortress.<sup>28</sup> Nephi does not seem to find it remarkable that Laban carried a sword. “And when I came to him I found that it was Laban. And I beheld his sword, and I drew it forth from the sheath thereof” (1 Ne. 4:8–9). Nor does he seem to find it odd that Laban wore armor: “And after I had smitten off his head with his own sword, I took the garments of Laban and put them upon mine own body; yea, even every whit; and I did gird on his armor about my loins” (1 Ne. 4:19). Possibly, Nephi presumes that the presence of the sword and armor would be understood without specifically noting their presence while writing his story.

### Servants Who Would Obey Laban’s Orders to Kill

Understanding already that Laban, as a military leader, would have had a garrison of fifty that constituted his regular, permanent garrison at Jerusalem, it is easy enough to note that he would have had men ready and willing to obey his order(s) to kill. Is it possible that the servants commanded by Laban to kill Laman and his brothers were either distinct from or within that garrison of fifty? The English translation of the text does not refer to the men ordered to kill Laman, Lemuel, Nephi, and Sam as soldiers, bodyguards, or even members of Laban’s fifty. Instead, the word *servants* is used (1 Ne. 3:25–27). Laban’s order to kill, followed by *servants* who attempted to search out Nephi and his brothers with the intent to carry out that order, makes more sense if Laban is a military leader surrounded by soldiers capable of complying with his demand.<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, Schniedewind notes that “commander of the fortress” as a title “has also been constructed in an inscription on one of the fortress walls at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud. . . . Although most of the plaster has fallen off the walls, some partial inscriptions can be reconstructed. . . . In

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28. For information on what armor in Laban’s day may have looked like, see Boyd Seevers, *Warfare in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2013). Though “neither biblical texts nor pictorial evidence tells us what Israelite armor may have looked like,” there are depictions of Israelite weapons, shields, and helmets in Assyrian reliefs of Lachish. Seevers, *Warfare in the Old Testament*, 66. Because Israelite armor may well have followed the trends of the day, reviewing Assyrian, Egyptian, Median, and Persian armor may give some idea of what Laban’s armor would have looked like.

29. If one believes that the term *servants* here is simply referring to regular domestic servants, one must ponder how likely it would have been that regular, nonmilitary trained servants would have been tasked with leaving the house to kill four men, at least one of whom was specifically noted as being “large in stature” (1 Ne. 4:31).

one fragmentary inscription, Biblical scholar Erhard Blum has reconstructed the expression *na'arē šar'ir*.<sup>30</sup> The plural of *na'ar* being *ne'arim* (though *na'arē* is also used, as in the inscription), the prior analysis of *šar* and *'ir* would lead one to translate this inscription as a reference to the servants of the commander of the fortress. Schniedewind, acknowledging that *na'ar* “means a servant,” seems to grasp that the meaning must be something more and instead translates the inscription as “apprentices of the commander of the fortress,” though he states that “it is possible they were young soldiers.”<sup>31</sup>

While Schniedewind grasps that *na'arē* in the inscriptions refers to military males serving the commander of the fortress, it is John MacDonald's in-depth analysis that provides greater context to the role of a *na'ar* in a military capacity.<sup>32</sup> MacDonald, whose analysis is explored in more detail in section 2 of this article, proposes that when *na'ar* is used in a military context, it refers to a “male of high birth,”<sup>33</sup> who “could serve in the elite corps of the army, being of full warrior status.”<sup>34</sup> MacDonald specifically notes that a *na'ar* “could be commanded to slay an individual or individuals at his lord's command.”<sup>35</sup>

### Laban Had the Brass Plates in the Treasury

While biblical scholars believe that Jerusalem had multiple “treasures,” it may be that “the treasury” (1 Ne. 4:20) Nephi referred to was the royal treasury (as opposed to the temple treasury, which would likely have had a priest as a guardian).<sup>36</sup> It is not unreasonable to believe that the royal treasury would have been inside “the fortress within Jerusalem” discussed by Schniedewind<sup>37</sup> and thus under the purview of the commander of the fortress. Thus, Nephi's references to the “treasury of Laban” may have been a reference to the treasury kept by the commander of the fortress.

Further, Nephi's narrative may indicate that he encountered Zoram prior to reaching the treasury. “I went forth unto the treasury of Laban. And as I went forth *towards* the treasury of Laban, behold, I saw the

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30. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 42.

31. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 42.

32. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 147–70.

33. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 147.

34. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 169.

35. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 169.

36. See Dvira and Barkay, “Clay Sealings from the Temple Mount,” 41–75.

37. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 43.

servant of Laban who had the keys of the treasury. And I commanded him in the voice of Laban, that he should go with me into the treasury” (1 Ne 4:20, emphasis added). It is not unreasonable to suppose that one dressed as (and appearing to be) the commander of the fortress, accompanied by his well-known chief *na’ar*, would have had no difficulty entering the fortress in which the treasury may have been found. Additionally, the fact that the plates were inscribed on brass lends itself to the idea that they were not an ordinary Israelite’s copy but belonged to someone of great importance.<sup>38</sup> If Laban was indeed the commander of the fortress that housed a royal treasury, then a supposition that the plates of brass belonged to the king himself is not unreasonable.<sup>39</sup> Further, one may suppose that Nephi required Zoram to accompany him *into* the treasury because he needed Zoram’s assistance identifying where the plates of brass were kept. This may indicate that Laban’s treasury was a larger treasury than the treasury of a single individual.

### The Servant of Laban Carried the Keys to the Treasury

Another interesting part of Nephi’s record is his first mention of Zoram. After Nephi has slain Laban and donned his clothing and armor, Nephi

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38. There is reasonable debate on whether the brass plates were the property of the king or another important individual, or whether they were the personal property of Laban himself. The text of the Book of Mormon does not give a definitive answer. “For behold, Laban hath the record of the Jews and also a genealogy of my forefathers, and they are engraven upon plates of brass” (1 Ne. 3:3). Upon Lehi’s examination of the plates, Nephi comments, “And thus my father, Lehi, did discover the genealogy of his fathers. And Laban also was a descendent of Joseph, wherefore he and his fathers had kept the records” (1 Ne. 5:16). While there are those who would conclude that the comment “wherefore [Laban] and his fathers had kept the records” indicates a personal record, there are other explanations. If the word translated as *kept* stems from the ancient Hebrew word *shamar*, the word means “to guard or to exercise great care over.” The “noun . . . (*shomra*) means guard.” If that same word instead stems from the ancient Hebrew word *mishmeret*, the word “literally mean[s] ‘with the function of watching’ used in the sense of a charge or obligation: an official function of guarding.” Abarim Publications’ Biblical Name Vault, s.v. “שׁמֶר,” accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Dictionary/si/si-m-r.html>. Additionally, even though Nephi makes a point that from the first command of his father, he and his brothers are to go to the “house of Laban” when seeking the records (1 Ne. 3:4, 11, 23), the implication from the text is that Nephi understands that the brass plates are not actually at the personal house of Laban. Given Laban’s reaction to the two requests for the plates, it is unlikely (and the text does not indicate) that Laban tells the brothers where the plates are housed.

39. See also John W. Welch’s examination of Laban’s accusation that the brothers are “robbers” in John W. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 119–41, especially 136–37.

says, “I went forth unto the treasury of Laban. And as I went forth towards the treasury of Laban, behold, I saw the servant of Laban who had the keys of the treasury” (1 Ne. 4:20). There are many questions that result from this simple retelling. One obvious question is how Nephi knew that *this* servant carried the keys to the treasury. To answer this question, there are several possibilities that present themselves. Zoram could have been present during the meetings Nephi previously had with Laban, and perhaps something was said or seen that identified Zoram as the keeper of the treasury keys. If Laban was the commander of the fortress and well-known among the people, perhaps the servant responsible for the keys would have been well-known also.

There is yet another possibility. While we may not know the precise type of lock(s) used for the treasury, the use of locks and keys was well documented long before the time of Lehi.<sup>40</sup> “The Holy Scripture reveals that locks and keys were known long before the birth of Christ. The classics of that time refer to these devices [such as] the song of Solomon, chapter V, verse 5; . . . Nehemia, chapter III, verse 3; . . . [and] Judges, chapter III, verses 23 and 25.”<sup>41</sup> After a description of a certain key found in the palace of Khorsabad, it is interestingly noted, “In Eastern countries even nowadays such keys are usually carried on the shoulder.” 1 Nephi 4:20 does indeed refer to Zoram carrying the “keys of the treasury” (emphasis added; note the plural reference). Perhaps Nephi knew exactly which servant carried the keys because they were worn, quite visibly, over the shoulder.<sup>42</sup> For an additional examination of this topic, please see section 2 of this article.

### Laban Met with the “Elders of the Jews” at Night

To understand the importance of Laban’s meeting with the “elders of the Jews” (1 Ne. 4:22), it is helpful to know who the “elders” actually were.<sup>43</sup> Hugh Nibley states, “Bible students recognize today that affairs at Jerusalem were completely under the control of the ‘elders.’ The word ‘elders’ has been understood to mean the heads of the most influential families

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40. See Vincent J. M. Eras, *Locks and Keys throughout the Ages* (Watchung, New Jersey: Artisan Ideas, 2019), 26–27.

41. Eras, *Locks and Keys*, 26.

42. Eras, *Locks and Keys*, 26. See a depiction of an “Arab carrying keys on his shoulder” on page 27.

43. For further analysis, see “Who Were the ‘Elders of the Jews’ Mentioned by Zoram?,” Book of Mormon Central, September 4, 2018, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/who-were-the-elders-of-the-jews-mentioned-by-zoram>.

of a city.”<sup>44</sup> However, in Lehi’s day, the ruling class that once advised the king had been altered. Nibley specifically states that “Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lehi were themselves members of th[e] ruling class.”<sup>45</sup> However, Nibley agrees with Heinrich H. Graetz<sup>46</sup> when Graetz claims that “Jeremiah [w]as a wealthy and powerful man with important connections—though they were mostly Babylonian connections, highly obnoxious to the ruling clique at Zedekiah’s court.”<sup>47</sup> In fact, Nibley quotes Graetz as follows: “The natural nobility, that descended from the patriarchal conditions of old, was, so to speak, pushed aside by an artificial nobility of courtiers.” Nibley goes on to paraphrase, “Under Hezekiah, that is, the old-fashioned “elders” of the first families were supplanted by the new crowd, composed of the younger sons of the kings and their families, an ‘appanage,’ along with the families of the favorites of favorites of former kings.”<sup>48</sup>

This “new crowd” designated as elders were “denouncing Jeremiah to the king and demanding that he be executed because of his bad influence on the morale of the people.”<sup>49</sup> The fact that the elders were successful in such petitions is evidenced by the king taking action against Jeremiah as recorded in the Bible.<sup>50</sup> That these actions were directly responsible for Jeremiah’s death is recorded in extrabiblical sources.<sup>51</sup> Readers can only speculate why Laban met with the elders at night. As the commander of the fortress, his interests and the interests of the elders would have intersected over security issues. It is possible that they met together to discuss the recent disruptions caused by the preaching and prophesying of Jeremiah,<sup>52</sup> Lehi,<sup>53</sup> and other prophets that, unless the people repented, Jerusalem would be destroyed.<sup>54</sup>

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44. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 96.

45. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 97.

46. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 97, citing Henrich H. Graetz, “Die Zeit de Königs Chizkija und der zeitgenössischen Propheten,” *MGWJ* 19 (1870): 49–51.

47. Graetz, in Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 97.

48. Graetz, in Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 97–98.

49. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 96.

50. See Jeremiah 36:26. See also John W. Welch, “The Trial of Jeremiah: A Legal Legacy from Lehi’s Jerusalem,” in Welch, Seely, and Seely, *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, 337–56; and Jeremiah 20; 26; 36–38; 43–45.

51. For example, Tertullian recorded that Jeremiah was stoned. See Tertullian, “Adversus Gnosticos,” in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 2, col. 137, as quoted and cited in Edward Lipinski and others, “Jeremiah,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed January 17, 2024, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jeremiah>.

52. See, for example, the account of the trial of Jeremiah 26:1–15.

53. See, for example, 1 Nephi 18–20.

54. See, for example, 1 Nephi 1:4.

## 2. Rediscovering Zoram

Zoram, who is introduced after Laban's death, figures prominently in only one chapter of the Book of Mormon (1 Ne. 4), even though he remains with Nephi throughout the rest of his life. Once Zoram has agreed to go into the wilderness with Lehi's family, only a few additional verses give us information about him: (1) Nephi records that Zoram marries the eldest daughter of Ishmael (1 Ne. 16:7); (2) before his death, Lehi leaves a final blessing upon Zoram (2 Ne. 1:30–32); and (3) Nephi acknowledges that Zoram and his family depart with Nephi when he separates from his brothers (2 Ne. 5:6). Interestingly, while seemingly little information or attention is given to Zoram in the opening pages of the Book of Mormon, Zoram's legacy lives on throughout the remainder of the Book of Mormon, with an entire people identifying themselves as "Zoramites"<sup>55</sup> and individuals being named after him.<sup>56</sup> Although Zoram has been called "a minor character,"<sup>57</sup> he certainly was not seen that way to the Nephite or Lamanite peoples.

One such example of his significance appears in the book of Alma. Zoram's story obviously remained a source of strife between peoples for generations, since in Ammoron's letter to Moroni, Ammoron, "king of the Lamanites" (Alma 54:16),<sup>58</sup> takes the time to specifically acknowledge that he is a descendant of Zoram: "I am Ammoron, and a descendant of Zoram, whom your fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem" (Alma 54:23). Despite what Ammoron argues happened to Zoram, Lehi claimed that Zoram was a "true friend" of Nephi's "forever" (2 Ne. 1:30), and when Nephi left his brothers in the New World, Zoram willingly followed him (2 Ne. 5:6). What occurred with Zoram in Jerusalem was subject to interpretation or revisionist history, and the perceived injustice was used to justify anger and war against the Nephites.<sup>59</sup>

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55. Russell explains, "An entire nation rises from his seed." Collin Charles Russell, "Meeting Zoram," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 11.

56. See, for example, Alma 16:5 and 30:59.

57. Russell, "Meeting Zoram," 11.

58. It should be noted that "king of the Lamanites" appears in quotes because Ammoron's brother, Amalickiah, had caused an insurrection among the Nephites (Alma 45–46). Amalickiah, desiring power, had desired to be king of the Nephites (Alma 46:4–5). Moroni had forced Amalickiah and his followers out of the land (Alma 46:33). Amalickiah thereafter went to the Lamanites "and did stir up the Lamanites to anger against the people of Nephi" (Alma 47:1), using this war and intricate machinations to seize the throne of the Lamanites (Alma 47:4, 8, 16–35).

59. Interestingly, it does not appear that Amalickiah used this argument when attempting to take the Nephite throne.

For a man prominent enough to have his descendants called by his name, it seems odd that so little has been written about him. From the small number of verses actually devoted to this man, what do we know?

1. He was “the servant of Laban” (1 Ne. 4:20).
2. He carried the keys to the treasury (1 Ne. 4:20).
3. He willingly (and apparently without surprise) retrieved the plates and followed a man he assumed was Laban outside the walls of Jerusalem at night (1 Ne. 4:24–26).
4. He knew that his master had met with the elders at night (1 Ne. 4:22).
5. He felt free to speak to his master about the elders and his master’s communications with them (1 Ne. 4:27).
6. He understood the importance of the oath uttered by Nephi (1 Ne. 4:32–35).
7. Zoram was promised he would be “a free man” if he went with Nephi and his brothers (1 Ne. 4:33).
8. His name was given rather late in the telling of the story (1 Ne. 4:35).
9. He did not return to Jerusalem with Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi to get Ishmael and his family (1 Ne. 7:1–3).
10. He married the eldest daughter of Ishmael (1 Ne. 16:7).
11. He received an individual blessing from Lehi (2 Ne. 1:30–32).
12. He was a true friend to Nephi (2 Ne. 1:30).
13. He was faithful (2 Ne. 1:31).
14. Zoram’s early descendants appear to be a military people (see Alma 47–52).

The use of the word *servant* rather than *slave* is significant.<sup>60</sup> One compelling argument that *servant* is the correct word rather than *slave* is the plain use of the word *servant* in the original translation of the Book of Mormon.

A final and simple reason to believe that Zoram was likely a servant and not a slave pertains to the translation process of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith. If the Hebraic word can be translated to mean both “slave” and “servant,” should we assume that Joseph Smith chose at random

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<sup>60</sup> See A. Keith Thompson, “Who Was Sherem?,” *Interpreter* 14 (2015): 11; Matthew L. Bowman, “See That Ye Are Not Lifted Up: The Name Zoram and Its Paronomastic Peroration,” *Interpreter* 16 (2016): 114, 118.

which term to use when the word came up in translation? The term *slave* appears five times in the book of Mormon (Mosiah 2:13; 7:15; Alma 27:8; 27:9; 3 Nephi 3:7), showing that Joseph Smith could differentiate two meanings while translating. . . . If [Zoram] were a slave, the Book of Mormon would call him a slave.<sup>61</sup>

If one decides that the word *servant*<sup>62</sup> is correct, the next step is to examine how that word would have been understood in Lehi's time. One fascinating clue is found when Lehi gives his final blessing to Zoram. Nephi interestingly records his father's words as follows: "And now, Zoram, I speak unto you: Behold, *thou art* the servant of Laban" (2 Ne. 1:30, emphasis added). When Lehi addresses Zoram at this time, Lehi must know that Laban is dead. Lehi has already seen in a vision that Jerusalem has been destroyed (2 Ne. 1:4). Regardless of his prior status, Nephi had promised Zoram that he "should be a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us" (1 Ne. 4:33). Yet Lehi still addresses Zoram, a free man, as the *present-tense* servant of a dead man. When reviewing all references to Zoram, each one specifically states, "*the* servant of Laban," notably not even "*a* servant." Possibly, Lehi addressed Zoram by an important title—one that honored Zoram and remained with him throughout his life. Hugh Nibley articulated that Zoram "was himself an important official, and no mere slave."<sup>62</sup> What could possibly be meant by the term *servant* as applied to Zoram?

## The Servant of Laban

### *'Ebed*

As with most aspects of the ancient world, modern ideas pertaining to servants and slaves are drastically different than the ancient Israelite and Near Eastern understanding. Two Hebrew words that would have been common in Lehi's time, both of which would be translated into English as *servant*, should be examined when considering Zoram's position: *'ebed* and *na'ar*. These words are closely linked.

William F. Albright, in examining the stamp of a seal found on two different pottery handles dating to the last preexilic period, explores the "category of seals bearing the inscription 'X servant (בֶּכֶץ) of Y,' since the words בֶּכֶץ ('ebed), 'slave, servant, officer,' and נָעַר (*na'ar*), 'youth, attendant, steward,'

61. Russell, "Meeting Zoram," 19.

62. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 128.

are roughly synonymous, and the formulae are thus parallel.”<sup>63</sup> Albright begins with a study of ‘*ebed*’ and whether or not the translation as *slave* can be supported. Because Albright and other scholars<sup>64</sup> agree that seals could not belong to slaves, the word ‘*ebed*’, at least as it appears on seals, can never mean *slave* because “slaves were not legally entitled to execute documents in their own names, and consequently had no right to carry seals. Since the word ‘*ebed*’ means ‘slave’ in the Bible, except where it is used of a servant of the king, i.e., a royal officer, it accordingly follows necessarily that it means ‘royal officer’ in the seals.”<sup>65</sup> This argument is further bolstered by the fact that “in no case does a name which is certainly not that of a king occur in the position Y.”<sup>66</sup>

Russell examines the possibility of Zoram’s role being in line with an ‘*ebed*’ and follows Hugh Nibley’s examination that it was more generally used to denote a “royal officer.”<sup>67</sup> But if ‘*ebed*’ referred to a servant of the king, then this would refer to Laban—not Zoram. Neither Nibley nor Russell specifically examines the category of *na’ar* as it relates to Zoram. While ‘*ebed*’ could be the original word used, if we follow the scholarship of Albright and others, the use of the term ‘*ebed*’ for Zoram would have meant a slave or lowly servant, since the only context in which it did not was for a high official of the king. We know Zoram was the servant of Laban, and Laban was not the king. Could *na’ar* be the more appropriate term for Zoram?

### *Na’ar*

*General Use of the Term.* The term *na’ar*, like so many words, has seen an evolution in meaning over time. Albright states, “The word means

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63. W. F. Albright, “The Seal of Eliakim and the Latest Preexilic History of Judah, with Some Observations on Ezekiel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51, no. 2 (1932): 79.

64. Albright, “Seal of Eliakim,” 79–80. Albright specifically refers to Clermont-Ganneau, Kautzsch, Lidzbarski, and Torrey.

65. Albright, “Seal of Eliakim,” 80.

66. Albright, “Seal of Eliakim,” 80.

67. See Russell, “Meeting Zoram,” 18. Russell uses the term *royal officer*, which is used exactly by Albright to define the category of ‘*ebed*’. Note that Nibley relied upon Albright’s analysis but does not use the term *royal officer*, instead choosing *official representative*. Nibley does not articulate his arguments based upon ‘*ebed*’ or *na’ar*, or to which category Nibley believed Zoram belonged. Nibley’s analysis is limited to the following: “For Zoram, as Laban’s private secretary and keeper of the keys, was himself an important official, and no mere slave. Professor Albright has shown that the title ‘servant’ by which Nephi designates him meant in Jerusalem at that time something like ‘official representative’ and was an honorable rather than a menial title.” Nibley further states, however, “Plainly with all his influence and privileges Zoram did not think of himself as a free man.” Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 128, 130.

originally ‘child, youth,’ a sense in which it occurs repeatedly in the Bible. It then comes to mean ‘young attendant, armour-bearer, confidential man,’ and ‘picked warrior,’ a sense of which occurs in Canaanite, as well as in the Bible. Finally, we find the word employed in the meaning ‘steward,’ i.e., ‘confidential attendant.’”<sup>68</sup> Additionally, Albright makes a point of noting, “It may be observed that *na’ar* always appears to connote the freedom of the person to whom the designation is applied.”<sup>69</sup> Currently, after new research, it seems that Albright’s understanding of the meaning of *na’ar*, though probably advanced at the time written, is woefully insufficient. As noted previously, John MacDonald radically altered the category of *na’ar* when, after an intensive, in-depth analysis of the meaning of *na’ar* in Israelite society, he published his findings. Upon concluding his research, MacDonald states, “The word *na’ar* is almost everywhere translated under two headings: (1) child, lad, young man; (2) servant. . . . [However,] these renderings are inadequate and produce a totally false impression of the person involved.”<sup>70</sup> If Laban was indeed the commander of the fortress, MacDonald’s research and analysis sheds important light on Zoram’s position in Jerusalem.

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68. Albright, “Seal of Eliakim,” 82.

69. Albright, “Seal of Eliakim,” 82.

70. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na’ar*,” 147. Interestingly, MacDonald’s analysis of the use of the term *na’ar* directly contradicts analysis by Schniedewind. Schniedewind sets forth a possible inscription interpretation found on one of the fortress walls at Kuntillet ‘Arjud. Relying upon biblical scholar Erhard Blum’s reconstruction of an expression found on the fortress wall as “*na’are sar’it*,” he believes it refers to “apprentices of the commander of (the) fortress.” However, Schniedewind uses the previously understood definition of *na’ar* and uses Judges 8:20 to support the idea. Schniedewind states that in the example we find in Gideon, the *na’ar* Gideon encounters “was a simple boy. . . : ‘But the *na’ar* did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a *na’ar*’ (8:20). In this context, *na’ar* seems to be a young person in training with the military, but not a seasoned soldier.” Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 41–42. Additionally, Schniedewind explains that if a *na’ar* killed a king outside of the battlefield, the penalty would be death by another *na’ar* (p. 169). MacDonald specifically addresses the use of *na’ar* in Judges 8 but reaches a very different conclusion. When discussing the phrase “still only a *na’ar*,” MacDonald writes, “One might argue that this means that he was too young, only a lad; however, would a mere lad be expected to despatch [sic] two warriors? Jether was Gideon’s firstborn! Yet we may easily miss some point about the status and role of the *na’ar* here by too ready assumption. Verse 5 may supply the answer, for there we learn that the two victims were kings. It may well be, therefore, that according to some sort of knightly code a *na’ar* did not rank high enough (indeed no one but a king did) to slay a king, especially when the killing was not in self defense. . . . Gideon himself had to carry out the execution. The next verse (22) reveals Gideon’s potential role of king. It was more appropriate for a man of equal rank to dispatch men of his own rank.” MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na’ar*,” 169.

According to MacDonald, the term *na'ar* appears “more particularly in military contexts.”<sup>71</sup> Whenever *na'ar* is used, it denotes a man “of high birth.”<sup>72</sup> MacDonald argues that a *na'ar* was of much higher rank than a common servant or slave,<sup>73</sup> and in many (if not most) instances, a *na'ar* could not be referencing a young man.<sup>74</sup> MacDonald goes through a great deal of detail to note that *ne'arim* were very special servants, and the duties included warrior duties as well as serving their master in a very personal way.<sup>75</sup> The extraordinary status of a *na'ar* is described in 2 Kings, according to MacDonald: “That Naaman was a man of very high rank may be observed from 2 Kings 5:1 and 5:21. He was an army commander and a great warrior, and he was very wealthy. The *na'ar* Gehazi was high-ranking enough for such a man as Naaman to alight from his chariot to greet him and receive Elisha’s message.”<sup>76</sup>

MacDonald further goes on to discuss Ziba in the Israelite royal court. “According to 2 Sam. 9:2, [Ziba] was a ‘*ebed* of the house of Saul. Ziba in addressing King David correctly refers to himself as a ‘*ebed* (vv. 2, 11); but when David summoned Ziba (v. 9), Ziba was referred to as Saul’s *na'ar*. According to v. 10, this same Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty ‘*abadim*, obviously a man of substance and estate.”<sup>77</sup> MacDonald also clears up any confusion with the seeming interchangeable terms of ‘*ebed* and *na'ar*, as Ziba is called both. “Any *na'ar* below the king himself is a ‘*ebed* (subject) of the state (king) and of the royal house or palace.”<sup>78</sup> Therefore,

71. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 151, emphasis added.

72. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 149. MacDonald repeats this conclusion on page 150: “*Na'ar* stands out, let it be repeated, as descriptive of high-born male young.”

73. It should be noted that MacDonald does not address or analyze Albright’s work. However, Albright acknowledges that an ‘*ebed* typically meant a slave, unless it was in the context of an ‘*ebed* to the king himself; see Albright, “Seal of Eliakim,” 80. This aligns with the findings of MacDonald. “Any *na'ar* below the king himself is a ‘*ebed* (subject) of the state (king) and of the royal house or palace.” MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 156. MacDonald theorizes that a *na'ar* may be able to achieve a status greater than that of a princely *na'ar*, if he were a commander’s *na'ar*. After giving many examples of *ne'arim* who refused to kill a superior, MacDonald recounts, “Was an army commander of superior rank to a princely *na'ar*? . . . Absalom, prince and *na'ar*, finally died at the hands of ten *ne'arim* who were armor-bearers of Commander Joab.” MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 164. It should be noted, however, that even a princely *na'ar*’s title would shift to ‘*ebed* when referencing the relationship between servant and king.

74. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 153.

75. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 155.

76. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 155–56.

77. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 155–56.

78. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 156.

“the reference to Ziba as a ‘*ebed* in 9:2 is proper [when in reference to his place under the king], but it is equally proper to refer to him as a *na’ar* in terms of his specific function as a personal top servant of a great man.”<sup>79</sup>

*Elite Military Officer.* The role of *na’ar* was one of great importance. The *na’ar*, “whose advice or suggestion was acceptable to kings and other great personages, existed as one of hierarchy, from royal palace to the household of the wealthy aristocracy, and may have belonged in some cases to a professional guild, perhaps including itinerant priests. If he was the son of [a] king or noble, he was himself in the ranks of nobility. The *na’ar* could hold property, be wealthy, receive gifts from famous persons or, in certain cases, be salaried. But his best-known role in Israelite society was that of élite military officer.”<sup>80</sup> As stated earlier, even Schniedewind, who was using the simpler definition and understanding of *na’ar*, still tied it to a military position. Schniedewind states, “If we understand that *na’ar* can be a young person receiving military training, then this would account for its relationship to the title ‘commander of (the) fortress.’”<sup>81</sup> Even if Laban was not the commander of the fortress, we do know he was at the very least a commander of fifty,<sup>82</sup> so it is in the military context that we find the most reasonable understanding of Zoram’s position.<sup>83</sup> This fits precisely with MacDonald’s findings.

As mentioned previously, there are many assumptions Nephi makes as he records his account. Nephi says simply, “And as I went forth towards the treasury of Laban, behold, I saw the servant of Laban who had the keys of the treasury” (1 Ne. 4:20). This appears to be the first mention of Zoram (though, notably, not by his name). How would Nephi know that Zoram was the servant who carried the keys to the treasury? MacDonald believes that in the Old Testament, the writers assume the reader will grasp the significance of the position of the *na’ar*. These types of

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79. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na’ar*,” 156.

80. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na’ar*,” 157.

81. Schniedewind, “Commander of the Fortress,” 41–42.

82. Laban’s position as an important military leader is explored in section 1. Notable scholars have confirmed this position. John W. Welch has referred to Laban as a “commanding officer of the city.” See Welch, “Legal Perspectives,” 137. Hugh Nibley supposes that Laban “is cut from the same cloth as Jaush, his contemporary and probably his successor as ‘military governor of this whole region, in control of the defenses along the western frontier in Judah, and an intermediary with the authorities of Jerusalem.’” Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 120–21.

83. Even without the benefit of MacDonald’s meticulous research, Russell explored a military leader as a possible role for Zoram under Laban’s command. Russell, “Meeting Zoram,” 15–17.

assumptions occur with all writers, and it is understandable that Nephi may have believed that a reader would be able to ascribe the same meaning to the status of the *na'ar* of Laban (as commander of the fortress or other military leader) as Nephi himself does.

If that were the case, Zoram's place beside Laban during Lehi's sons' communications with Laban would have been assumed as fact.<sup>84</sup> The sons of Lehi knew of Laban before they were sent back to get the plates. As Laban's *na'ar*, Zoram may very well have also been a person already known to them. Even if not previously known, however, Laban's *na'ar* would have surely been present during Laban's meeting with the sons of Lehi. Time and again in scriptural accounts, the *na'ar* doesn't have to be mentioned for the author to believe the reader understands that he is there. MacDonald drives this point home by pointing out the mention of the *na'ar* in the story of Samson. "Samson, prisoner of the Philistine lords, [is] forced to stand between two pillars and endure the 'sport' of the Philistines with him. The significant part of the story for us is the fact that Samson addresses the *na'ar* 'who held him by the hand' (Samson being blind)."<sup>85</sup> No mention is made of the *na'ar* until Samson addresses him. No mention is made of him after Samson addresses him. As MacDonald states, "Once again a *na'ar* appears, almost inconsequently, in a story and promptly disappears from the scene without further mention."<sup>86</sup> But any ancient reader would have understood that the *na'ar* was always with his military lord, because "his place beside a great lord is taken for granted."<sup>87</sup>

A modern reader might also have difficulty understanding Zoram's willingness to continue pressing with questions (believing Nephi to be Laban) about Laban's meeting with the elders. As mentioned previously, others have surmised that Zoram himself was no mere servant. However, Zoram as Laban's *na'ar* gives greater support to what "no mere servant" meant in this case. MacDonald, in reviewing the relationship between Saul, son of Kish, and his *na'ar*, relates an important exchange: "In vv. 5–8 there is a conversation between Saul and his *na'ar* such as could hardly

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84. MacDonald traces many stories when a *na'ar* seems to appear, "almost inconsequently, in a story and promptly disappears from the scene without further mention—a sure sign that the literary story teller is making no point as far as the *na'ar* is concerned. *His place beside his lord is taken for granted.*" MacDonald, "Status and Role of the *Na'ar*," 159, emphasis added.

85. MacDonald, "Status and Role of the *Na'ar*," 159.

86. MacDonald, "Status and Role of the *Na'ar*," 159.

87. MacDonald, "Status and Role of the *Na'ar*," 159.

be expected between a wealthy man's son and a menial. It is the *na'ar*'s recommendation that is accepted. The important role of the *na'ar* is highlighted in 10:14, where Saul's uncle addresses Saul and his *na'ar*, and Saul includes the *na'ar* with himself in making his reply.<sup>88</sup> If a *na'ar* was able to speak with the full trust of his lord, such that a recommendation from a *na'ar* was adopted, then Zoram's attempts to understand what had occurred between Laban and the elders would have been quite natural. Zoram would have expected to know what Laban knew so he could be of most use to his lord and, if needed, give recommendations as to action. However, if he were merely a servant, a young boy in training, or otherwise ignorant, would he have felt it was permissible to push Laban about what happened with the elders?

A *na'ar* was also commonly given stewardship over some portion of his lord's estate. MacDonald theorizes that David was Saul's *na'ar* after he was the *na'ar* of his own father, Jesse, in charge of the "sheep-keepers" (meaning that he was responsible for the servants watching the flocks; 1 Sam. 17:15).<sup>89</sup> The *na'ar* of Boaz was in charge of the reapers (Ruth 2:5–6). If Zoram was the *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress, he may have been the keeper of the treasury—thus he would hold the keys to the treasury. If Zoram was a highly ranked *na'ar* to the commander of the fortress, he could have been entrusted with the keys to the treasury, of which Laban may have been the particular guard. There are still details we do not (and perhaps cannot) know, but Zoram's unmentioned but assumed presence would explain how he was known to Nephi.

The extraordinary position of Zoram may not be fully realized without MacDonald's analysis of how the commander's *na'ar* ranked in comparison with other individuals below the king himself. MacDonald's analysis includes the ability of the *na'ar* of a commander to kill a prince. (For example, in 2 Sam. 13:28, Absalom ordered his *ne'arim* to kill Amnon, a prince, when he became drunk. Also, the commander Joab

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88. MacDonald, "Status and Role of the *Na'ar*," 159.

89. MacDonald further observes that David was no mere shepherd but made a particular point of the fact that David "went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep." The fact "that David was a *na'ar* (v. 42) in the military sense is quite clear from the fact that when Saul commissioned him to take up the Philistine challenge Saul at once clothed him in his own armor, helmet, and coat of mail—the full military gear of a top ranking warrior in Israel. . . . In 1 Sam. 20, we find further confirmation of our thesis that the *na'ar* was a distinctive military figure. First we observe that David had a place at court, as befitting a knight. He sat at the royal table (v. 5), as did the army commander Abner (v. 25)." MacDonald, "Status and Role of the *Na'ar*," 160–61.

ordered ten of his *ne'arim* to kill Absalom, a prince; 2 Sam. 18:15.)<sup>90</sup> The ability of the *na'ar* to lead, and even to possibly rule, is found in 1 Kings 20:14. “According to [scripture], King Ahab asked a prophet by whom the great multitude would be given into his hands, and the prophet replied that it would be ‘by the *ne'arim* of the governors of the districts’ . . . The army followed the *ne'arim* (v. 19)! This statement confirms the role of the *ne'arim* as élite troops, professionals, who spearheaded advances against the enemy.”<sup>91</sup> In fact, the very same *ne'arim* identified to King Ahab are referenced in the same chapter of 1 Kings: “Even the *former* governors’ *ne'arim* ‘larded it over the people.’”<sup>92</sup> MacDonald records an impressive list describing a *na'ar*:

[A *na'ar*] could serve in the élite corps of the army, being of full warrior status; he could serve as scout; he could pass on valuable information. He could be commanded to slay an individual or individuals at his lord's command, provided the proper “knightly” code of behavior was observed. For a *na'ar* to slay a king (outside of actual battle) was an offense punishable by death at the hands of another *na'ar*. [A *na'ar*] would voluntarily die with his lord to prevent an ignoble consequence. The armor-bearer of a senior military man, i.e., top ranking, was a *na'ar*, and he wore full battle accoutrements. A man of high rank, faced with death or torture, could have a *na'ar* with him. The task of watching enemy movements (or even a personal enemy of his lord in domestic circumstances) was given to a *na'ar*.

A *na'ar* would be expected to accompany his lord or his lord's son on a variety of missions, including helping him in the search for a valuable animal (and assist his lord against attack). He could be senior enough in rank to make acceptable suggestions and offer helpful advice. He (or several) would attend upon his lord's wife when her safety was involved. In actual combat a lord would have his (chief) *na'ar* close by him. A military lord and his *na'ar* armor-bearer were inseparable in war and often outside the battlefield. . . .

A *na'ar*'s success as a military leader could lead to his elevation in rank and the captaincy of soldiers. A very high-ranking *na'ar*, certainly, could have a place at court and eat at the royal table. . . .

In certain circumstances *ne'arim* could play political and civic roles.<sup>93</sup>

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90. It is difficult to miss the likeness between these commands to kill and the command Laban gives to his “servants” (perhaps originally identified as his *ne'arim*).

91. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 165.

92. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 166.

93. MacDonald, “Status and Role of the *Na'ar*,” 169.

Certainly, if Zoram was the chief *na'ar* to the commander of the fortress within Jerusalem, perhaps he was also one of the men commanded by Laban to kill Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi.<sup>94</sup> Or possibly that would have been a task for less high-ranking *ne'arim*, and Zoram would have remained by his lord's side. Zoram's immediate response to Nephi's command to get the plates by walking outside the walls of Jerusalem with him and freely asking questions about Laban's meeting would be consistent with the role of at least a high-ranking, if not the chief, *na'ar*.

Another clue to Zoram's status may be inferred from Lehi's last blessing to Zoram: "And now, Zoram, I speak unto you: Behold, thou art the servant of Laban; nevertheless, thou hast been brought out of the land of Jerusalem" (2 Ne. 1:30). The odd word here is *nevertheless*. More commonly, this is interpreted as a reference to the fact that Zoram served a wicked man but was brought out of Jerusalem. However, if Zoram is the chief *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress, one could see this as an acknowledgment of Zoram's title (and thus his high position or rank) and that the Lord saw fit to bring Zoram out of Jerusalem in spite of that high position. Further, the very next comment from Lehi is "and I know that thou art a true friend unto my son, Nephi, forever" (2 Ne. 1:30). This seems somewhat disjointed from the immediately preceding fact. Perhaps this is a tantalizing clue that Zoram's place by Nephi's side fulfilled the Lord's purpose, and it was for that reason Zoram was taken from a high and powerful position to wander with Lehi's family in the wilderness. It is certainly possible that Zoram played a crucial role in helping the Nephites defend themselves in war, and his guidance and advice to Nephi may have been essential for the Nephites' preservation and continuation.

### As a Free Man

Zoram being Laban's *na'ar* may be the best explanation for the many questions a modern reader might have—including Lehi addressing him so many years after leaving Jerusalem with "thou art the servant of Laban." Zoram, as the *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress, would not have been just a freed servant who was lucky enough to be included in Lehi's group but a significant and important addition to Lehi's family. A nobleman of high military rank (including his vast military knowledge) would be a huge boon to the renegade party, worthy of marrying

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94. It is also possible that, as a higher ranking or chief *na'ar*, he would have led the other *ne'arim* in pursuit of Lehi's sons.

into Ishmael's family and worthy of an entire people being named for him. However, if he was indeed the *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress, a modern reader must wonder how he changed loyalties so quickly.

Often, Nephi's promise to Zoram, "that he should be a free man like unto us if he would go down in the wilderness with us" (1 Ne. 4:33), appears to be a compelling and attractive promise to a man in bondage who longs to be free.<sup>95</sup> However, what is such a promise if Zoram is a *na'ar*, who, according to all accounts, would have already been considered a free man of high birth? Russell's previous analysis may be pertinent in this regard: "If we examine Nephi's oath, it becomes apparent that he may not have implied a previous state of bondage. Nephi promises "that he need not fear; that he should be a free man like unto [Nephi and his family]" (1 Nephi 4:33). . . . In this light, Nephi does not promise to liberate Zoram from preexisting bondage, rather to free Zoram from entering bondage to Nephi himself."<sup>96</sup>

The possibility that Zoram left not only Jerusalem but a high place of position and power and all that the future held for him in Jerusalem must make one consider whether those actions are consistent with what one would expect from a loyal *na'ar*. Unfortunately, there are but few examples in Hebrew texts since, as was mentioned previously, the *na'ar*'s presence was often assumed and not directly discussed. One of these rare examples is found in Judges 7–8, where we read about the miracle God performed as the children of Israel stood against the Midianites. Gideon is commanded by God to go to the camp of the enemy, where he "caught a *young man* of the men of Succoth, and inquired of him: and he described unto him the princes of Succoth, and the elders thereof, even threescore

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95. "What astonishes the western reader is the miraculous effect of Nephi's oath on Zoram, who upon hearing a few conventional words promptly becomes tractable, while as for the brothers, as soon as Zoram 'made an oath unto us that he would tarry with us from that time forth . . . our fears did cease concerning him.' The reactions of both parties make sense when one realizes that the oath is the one thing that is most sacred and inviolable among the desert people and their descendants: 'Hardly will an Arab break this oath, even if his life be in jeopardy' . . . But not every oath will do. To be the most binding and solemn an oath should be by the *life* of something, even if it be but a blade of grass. The only oath more awful than that 'by my life' or (less commonly) . . . 'by the life of God.' . . . So we see that the only way that Nephi could possibly have pacified the struggling Zoram in an instant was to utter the one oath that no man would dream of breaking, the most solemn of all oaths to the Semite: 'As the Lord liveth, and as I live.' Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 128–29, emphasis original (internal citations omitted).

96. Russell, "Meeting Zoram," 17–19, emphasis added.

and seventeen men" (Judg. 8:14, emphasis added). MacDonald identifies this verse as one in which *na'ar* was incorrectly translated to "young man." MacDonald then explores what happened next. "The knowledge possessed by the *na'ar* is such that he is not only able to write but to set down the names of the officials and elders of Succoth—seventy-seven names no less. He is evidently no mere lad or common servant."<sup>97</sup>

While MacDonald is using this story to affirm the idea that the definition of *na'ar* has been mistranslated and misunderstood, it gives us an idea about a *na'ar* who was captured. Are the actions of this *na'ar* very different than Zoram's? MacDonald's theory is supported by Nibley, who states that Zoram's "relationship with Laban was not one of trust and affection. Zoram's behavior is an even more eloquent commentary than that of his master of the true state of things in a society that had lost its balance and its faith and sought only after power and success, 'the vain things of the world.'"<sup>98</sup> It is possible that Zoram was a trustworthy servant, but because Laban was an untrustworthy master, Zoram willingly followed a new path, just as the *na'ar* captured by Gideon did. Another possibility is that, just as the *na'ar* captured by Gideon had lost his master in battle and so no longer had a duty to a living commander, Zoram was no longer bound to be loyal to Laban after Laban's death.

### Named Late in the Telling of the Story

Before and after Nephi states Zoram's name, Nephi refers to him repeatedly as "the servant of Laban" (1 Ne. 4:20, 30, 31, 38). Most of Nephi's interactions with Zoram occur without Nephi using Zoram's name, even though the name was known to Nephi when he recorded his history. The first time Nephi uses Zoram's name, Nephi has already misled Zoram, had him get the brass plates, had Zoram walk with him outside of the city walls, and grabbed him to keep him from fleeing. Only after all these events does Nephi state, "And it came to pass that Zoram did take courage at the words which I spake. Now Zoram was the name of the servant"

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97. MacDonald, "Status and Role of the *Na'ar*," 158.

98. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 130. It should be noted that while Nibley declares that the relationship was "not one of trust and affection," it appears he meant on the part of Zoram. Laban had sufficient trust in Zoram that Zoram had the keys of the treasury, Zoram was aware of Laban's meeting with the elders of the Jews at night, Zoram was sufficiently comfortable to continue asking questions about the meeting, and one can infer from the lack of mention in Nephi's record that Zoram was not surprised to be accompanying his (supposed) master on a secret mission outside the walls of the city. The descriptions in the text indicate that Laban wholly trusted Zoram, and Zoram knew it.

(1 Ne. 4:35). It certainly is possible that as Nephi is recalling the event, he gives the name of Zoram around the point Nephi himself learned his name. It is possible that Nephi did not know Zoram's name until Zoram agreed to go with Nephi and his brethren into the wilderness, and Nephi's use of Zoram's name at this point is an unconscious reference to when he learned it.

However, it is also possible (if not likely) that, as previously discussed, Nephi and his brothers knew who Zoram was, just as they knew who Laban was, and Nephi emphasizes Zoram's position as Laban's *na'ar* because he believes that the position provides context for the events and, perhaps particularly, for Zoram's actions. It is notable, though, that even after stating Zoram's name, Nephi still refers to Zoram as "the servant of Laban." Nephi wrote: "And it came to pass that we took the plates of brass and the *servant of Laban*, and departed into the wilderness, and journeyed unto the tent of our father" (1 Ne. 4:38, emphasis added). Another possible reason that Zoram was named so late in the story is that Nephi was using a title that Nephi felt was as appropriate a reference for Zoram as his name.

### Zoram Remains in the Wilderness

One interesting item worth noting is an event in which Zoram is specifically *not* mentioned. After returning to the wilderness with the brass plates, Lehi is commanded to send his sons to Jerusalem once more to retrieve Ishmael and his family. The brothers obey and again return to Jerusalem. Zoram, however, does not go with them. One possible reason could be fear that Zoram would report all that had occurred, jeopardizing the lives of the Lehite clan. If Zoram was the *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress, he would be expected to report the events surrounding Laban's death if questioned by the king, the new commander of the fortress, or some other elder or official. Another possibility is that suspicion for Laban's death had fallen on Zoram, and Nephi had (intentionally or unintentionally) taken with him a scapegoat, though *ne'arim* were known for their loyalty, even to death, so this possibility seems highly unlikely.<sup>99</sup> Another possibility

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99. However, there is yet another possibility as to why Zoram would not have been invited to return to Jerusalem, and many questions that are helpful in creating theories. It seems likely that there would have been more confusion surrounding Laban's death if Zoram never returned to give his story. The people within Jerusalem woke to find the body of Laban lying in the street, stripped of his clothing, armor, and sword. His *na'ar*, responsible for the keys to the treasury, was missing. We know from Nephi that the brass plates were (at least relatively) current. How quickly would the plates have been

is that Nephi and his brothers were leaving their parents and other family members in the trust of one able to provide protection while they remained in the wilderness.

### Zoram Married the Eldest Daughter of Ishmael

The fact that Zoram married Ishmael's oldest daughter points to Zoram's status as a *na'ar*, in the sense of a military leader rather than just a young boy. The marriage makes more sense if Zoram was a man of status and capable of marrying the oldest daughter. While we do not know the ages of Ishmael's daughters, we do know that Ishmael's daughters begin to bear children in the wilderness, and that ancient Israelite custom was for women to marry between twelve to fourteen years of age.<sup>100</sup> Other than Zoram, Nephi does not detail the birth order of the other daughters. Nephi felt it was important to specifically note the birth order for Zoram's wife. It is possible that this is an indication of Zoram's age relative to the sons of Lehi.<sup>101</sup>

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missed? Instead of immediately suspecting the sons of Lehi, who had just recently been asking for the plates, suspicion may have fallen elsewhere. If Lehi and Sariah believed it was only by a miracle that their sons had been delivered from Laban, would there have been any in Jerusalem who would have believed the sons of Lehi could have overcome Laban, his *na'ar*, and any other servants ready and able to fulfill orders to kill? It seems likely that Laban's meeting with the elders of the Jews would have been kept from general knowledge, so there would have been very few who would have understood why Laban was out in the streets alone. Would there have been additional keys to the treasury, or did the keys simply disappear with Zoram? Did the missing keys play a role to give space between the sons of Lehi asking after the plates and the discovery that they were missing? How quickly could a replacement for Laban be appointed? If Zoram wasn't suspected in the death of Laban, it's possible that some would believe that Jerusalem's enemies had stealthily crept into the city and assassinated Laban, and Zoram either fled or was taken captive.

100. Ariel E. Bybee, "A Woman's World in Lehi's Jerusalem," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 133.

101. "The most significant event in the life of a woman in ancient Israel was marriage. From birth, a woman was prepared by her parents to become a wife and mother" Bybee, "Woman's World," 133. Noting that girls typically married between the ages of twelve and fourteen (and there is no reason to believe Ishmael's family deviated from the tradition), it is possible that some of Ishmael's daughters were being married at a significantly younger age than women today or were not married until they arrived at the appropriate age during the sojourn. Nothing in Nephi's account states that they were all married at once. If Zoram married the eldest, he may have been the first to wed, or wed the eldest daughter while one or two of the other brothers married younger daughters that were

## Zoram's Blessing

In Lehi's blessings upon his children and Ishmael's sons before he dies, it is notable that Lehi also blessed Zoram.<sup>102</sup> Before examining the content of the blessing, it is interesting to note that Zoram's blessing seems to have been performed in the middle of all Lehi's final blessings.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, it appears that the blessing itself may have served to identify Zoram as the head of a distinct tribe. As the descendants of Lehi and Ishmael divided into tribes, Lehi's final blessings do seem correlated to the perceived positions of the seven different tribes. "One of the many enduring legacies of Lehi's last will and testament appears to be the organization of his descendants into seven tribes. After speaking to several of his sons collectively, Lehi spoke first to Zoram, second to Jacob, third to Joseph, fourth to the children of Laman, fifth to the children of Lemuel, sixth to the sons of Ishmael, and seventh to Nephi and Sam together. This seems to be the precedent that established the social and legal order that lasted among these

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also of age. In the event Zoram was the first to wed one of the daughters, one might suppose that it was due to his age or status. Therefore, perhaps Zoram was either (1) older than Laman, or (2) considered to be of higher status, such that he might have been the first to have children in the wilderness. See also Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 104–111, which discusses the tradition of a father selecting the spouse for his daughter. If that tradition were followed here, it would mean that Ishmael selected Zoram for his eldest.

102. Lehi's final blessings upon his children are found in 2 Nephi 1:1–4:11.

103. It is possible that Zoram was adopted into Lehi's family when he agreed to go into the wilderness with them (or at some point thereafter). The case for adoption in Israelite society seems to be a source of great disagreement. See "Adoption," Jewish Virtual Library, 2008, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/adoption>. The most compelling arguments that adoption was practiced in ancient Israelite society are typically relating to childless couples seeking an heir. Obviously, that would not have been the case here. While at no point does Lehi refer to Zoram as a "son," which would be the strongest argument for some type of adoption, he does appear to include Zoram in references he makes to "my sons" (see 2 Ne. 2:14, 28–30). A formal or informal type of attachment to Lehi's family cannot be proven but should not be disregarded. Nephi's word to Zoram in 1 Nephi 4:34 at least hints at his position: "Therefore, if thou wilt go down into the wilderness to my father thou shalt have place with us." John W. Welch has compellingly proposed that Zoram was indeed actually given "full status as [a] family [member]" by Lehi, since "adult adoption was legally permissible and normal enough in the ancient Near East." See John W. Welch, "Lehi's Last Will and Testament: A Legal Approach," in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 73. Certainly, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints adhere to the idea that Jacob adopted Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh (see chapter heading of Gen. 48 as well as Gen. 48:5).

people for almost one thousand years.”<sup>104</sup> In fact, “Three times in the Book of Mormon these seven [tribes] are mentioned, each time in the rigid order of ‘Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites’ (Jacob 1:13; 4 Ne. 1:38; Morm. 1:8). Significantly, these references come from the earliest as well as the latest periods of Nephite history.”<sup>105</sup> It should be noted that the descendants of Sam did not constitute a separate tribe. Lehi specifically tells his son Sam, “Blessed art thou, and thy seed; for thou shalt inherit the land like unto thy brother Nephi. And thy seed shall be numbered with his seed” (2 Ne. 4:11). Separate from the content of Lehi’s blessings, it appears that Lehi was acting in a foundational or organizational way. “In many ways, Lehi is acting here like Jacob of old. Both Jacob and Lehi pronounced their blessings to ‘all [their] household,’ who had gathered around them shortly before they died. The aim was to organize a household of God in a new land of promise. Both organized their posterity into tribal groups in the patriarchal tradition of ancient Israel.”<sup>106</sup> In fact, it has been proposed that “only the idea that Lehi originated this tribal organization can comfortably explain why it persisted so long and was recognized both by the Nephites and the Lamanites. This is evidence that Lehi’s last words to his sons were taken as being constitutionally definitive. Thus, there are Jacobites and Josephites, but never Samites, in the Book of Mormon.”<sup>107</sup> If Lehi chose Zoram to be the leader of one of the seven tribes he was establishing, such a decision may be an acknowledgement of (and would appear to be consistent with) Zoram being the *na’ar* of the commander of the fortress (particularly when highlighted against Lehi’s own son Sam not receiving such a distinction).<sup>108</sup>

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104. John L. Sorenson, John A. Tvedtnes, and John W. Welch, “Seven Tribes: An Aspect of Lehi’s Legacy,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: The F.A.R.M.S. Updates*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 93.

105. Sorenson, Tvedtnes, and Welch, “Seven Tribes,” 93. One interesting result of dividing the sons of Lehi and Ishmael in this way has been proposed by John W. Welch. Welch proposed (in unpublished lectures) that Zoram was intended to be a “tiebreaker” amongst the sons.

106. Sorenson, Tvedtnes, and Welch, “Seven Tribes,” 94.

107. Sorenson, Tvedtnes, and Welch, “Seven Tribes,” 94.

108. “Division of these people into kin-based tribes served several functions—religious, military, political, and legal. The Israelite tribe of Levi was given priestly duties, as was the family of Jacob and his recordkeeping posterity in the Book of Mormon.” Sorenson, Tvedtnes, and Welch, “Seven Tribes,” 94–95. If Lehi were trying address the four aforementioned functions of the various tribes, the *na’ar* of the commander of the fortress would be able to help meet the military needs of the people.

## A True Friend to Nephi

There is nothing to indicate that Nephi told Zoram that he killed Laban, but Zoram likely knew or suspected. How else could Nephi have obtained Laban's clothing, armor, and sword? The text does not provide Zoram's feelings about what Nephi did. Additionally, it was Nephi who tricked Zoram into leaving the immediate safety of Jerusalem and its wall and prevented Zoram from fleeing back into the city.<sup>109</sup> It seems contrary to most human experience that Zoram would be a friend to Nephi rather than Laman and Lemuel (as the two older brothers regularly, and sometimes violently, opposed Nephi). However, Zoram's devotion to Nephi is unquestioned, as Lehi, while blessing Zoram, takes the time to identify him as "a true friend unto my son, Nephi, forever" (2 Ne. 1:30). We also know that Zoram left the Lamanites with Nephi (2 Ne. 5:6).

However, an additional clue to Nephi's close relationship with Zoram may be found in Nephi's list of those who departed with him into the wilderness: "It came to pass that I, Nephi, did take my family, and also Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, and all those who would go with me" (2 Ne. 5:6). Nephi lists Zoram before his own family, and Zoram is the only non-blood-relative who is specifically mentioned. For example, no sons of Ishmael are ever identified by name at any point.

In the event that Lehi fully adopted Zoram, as has been proposed by John W. Welch and explored in footnote 103 herein, such adoption may explain why Zoram would not initially be willing to use his military knowledge to fight Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael when there were violent divisions. It is possible that out of deference to Lehi, Sariah, and Ishmael, Zoram may not have been willing to harm the eldest sons and adoptive brothers. Only when Lehi had passed and Zoram left with Nephi (to avoid Nephi's murder) did wars commence,<sup>110</sup> presumably with Zoram at Nephi's side. In fact, Nephi states that he "did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us" (2 Ne. 5:14). While Nephi may have been readily able to make swords,<sup>111</sup>

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109. "And it came to pass that when the servant of Laban beheld my brethren he began to tremble, and was about to flee from before me and return to the city of Jerusalem" (1 Ne. 4:30).

110. "And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren" (2 Ne. 5:34).

111. See Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem," 116.

teaching the people to use them in defense would have been a different task. If Zoram was a *na'ar* with military experience, he could have been relied upon to teach the people how to properly wield such a sword.

This interpretation of the textual evidence suggests that Zoram, used to being the right-hand man of an important official, transferred his loyalty to Nephi.<sup>112</sup> Additionally, Zoram took an oath: “And he promised that he would go down into the wilderness unto our father. Yea, and he also made an oath unto us that he would tarry with us from that time forth” (1 Ne. 4:35). We know that the family divided after Lehi’s death. Nephi was the individual who received Zoram’s oath (1 Ne. 4:32–33). It was Nephi who communicated to Zoram the righteousness of their cause—which, as he tells Zoram, the Lord commanded them to accomplish (1 Ne. 4:34). It is certainly possible that Zoram considered that his oath was made specifically to Nephi, rather than to the group generally, or to any of Nephi’s brothers.<sup>113</sup> As stated previously, a *na'ar* was known for his loyalty, even unto death. In addition to Zoram’s righteousness (mentioned specifically by Lehi; 2 Ne. 1:31), Zoram’s loyalty to Nephi could be the result of Zoram seeing Nephi as the rightful ruler over the people. Lehi designated Nephi as the appropriate ruler over the family due to Laman and Lemuel’s unrighteousness.<sup>114</sup> When leaving the Lamanites, Nephi takes with him the sword of Laban, a symbol of authority that Zoram would have recognized and respected.

### “Thou Hast Been Faithful”

It is difficult to believe that Zoram shared in Laban’s extraordinary wickedness and was suddenly reformed upon hearing Nephi’s oath.<sup>115</sup> Zoram, as far as we know, did not waver or ever side with Laman and Lemuel.

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112. Additionally, it is possible that Zoram appreciated and understood the need for hierarchies, which has been typical of military men of all ages. Laman and Lemuel were dismissive and irreverent towards the hierarchical structure in which the family operated—specifically, they were rebellious towards the patriarch Lehi. Given that Nephi was deferential to Lehi and respected his authority, it may be that Zoram identified more closely with Nephi than Laman and Lemuel.

113. See “As a Free Man” analysis above. While it is possible that Zoram may have been required to make an oath of loyalty to Laban (or, possibly to the position of the commander of the fortress rather than to Laban himself), Zoram’s oath to Nephi may be further evidence that Zoram realized his master must be dead.

114. For example, see 2 Nephi 1:28–29; 3:25.

115. If Zoram were a righteous servant of an evil master, he would not have been the first. A young, righteous David was a loyal servant of a fallen and wicked Saul (see 1 Sam. 18–26). In spite of Saul’s wickedness, David continued to be loyal to him and serve him.

There are no references to him expressing doubt or dismay. While we do not know the selection process for Zoram's position, we can easily discern he must have been an officer of great distinction and trust. Whether or not his faithfulness played any role in determining whether he was the chief *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress, it is certainly a strong part of his legacy that cannot and should not be ignored.

### Zoram's Descendants Appear to Be a Military People

The descendants of Zoram were regularly noted as being great warriors or a warlike people, and it is not uncommon in the Book of Mormon to find military men bearing the name "Zoram." For example, during the eleventh year of the reign of the judges, after a period of peace, the Lamanites surprise the Nephites with an attack: "For behold, the armies of the Lamanites had come in upon the wilderness side, into the borders of the land, even into the city of Ammonihah, and began to slay the people and destroy the city. And now it came to pass, before the Nephites could raise a sufficient army to drive them out of the land, they had destroyed the people who were in the city of Ammonihah . . . and taken others captive into the wilderness" (Alma 16:2–3). The Nephites turn to their chief captain, a man named Zoram (Alma 16:5). Zoram and his two sons ask Alma where they should go to find the captive Nephites (Alma 16:5). Inspired by the Lord, Alma is able to direct Zoram where to go (Alma 16:6). Zoram and his sons, together with their armies defeat the Lamanite army and retrieve the captives (Alma 16:8). While we do not know this chief captain Zoram's lineage, it is curious that the name was given to a great warrior and military leader.

John Tvedtnes argues convincingly that the Zoramites were indeed a separate tribal people from the other named tribes of the descendants of Lehi. In Alma 30, the people calling themselves Zoramites defected from the Nephite people. Tvedtnes proposes the possibility that these people "were really descendants of the Zoram of Nephi's time. . . . The name of the sect's leader may have been passed down in the family. The fact that the Zoramites all lived in the same geographical area . . . indicates that they may have been a tribe with . . . customs that differed from those of the Nephites."<sup>116</sup> This supposition appears to be

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<sup>116</sup> John A. Tvedtnes, "Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 305.

confirmed when a specific point is made that Amalickiah and Ammoron, of those Zoramite defectors, are identified as direct descendants of Zoram.<sup>117</sup>

Additionally, the recounting of the wars of the Amalickiah period certainly hint at the Zoramites being of what Tvedtnes calls a “military caste.”<sup>118</sup> The record states “the Nephites greatly feared that the Zoramites would enter into a correspondence with the Lamanites, and that it would be the means of great loss on the part of the Nephites” (Alma 31:4). It is certainly possible that the defection of the Zoramites was seen as dangerous simply because they would have inside knowledge of the Nephite people. However, it’s also possible that this great fear was due to the military capabilities of the Zoramites. Such capabilities seem to be confirmed when the violence breaks out and Zoramites are at the fore.

For example, when Amalickiah joins the Lamanites, the Lamanite king is quick to entrust Amalickiah with a portion of his army (Alma 47:3). One may reasonably presume that Amalickiah was either already known to possess or had demonstrated some military knowledge to be so entrusted. Thereafter, Amalickiah certainly shows military brilliance in the way he uses the men of Lehonti and orders them to surround his own army (Alma 47:13–15). Additionally, the chief captains of his army are all Zoramites: “And thus he did appoint chief captains of the Zoramites, they being the most acquainted with the strength of the Nephites, and

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117. It should be noted that the genealogy of Amalickiah, and therefore of his brother Ammoron, appears to conflict throughout the story. “And it came to pass that they [the Lamanites] returned to the land of Nephi, to inform their king, Amalickiah, who was a Nephite by birth, concerning their great loss” (Alma 49:25). Thereafter, Ammoron identifies himself differently. “And behold now, I am a bold Lamanite; behold this war hath been waged to avenge their wrongs, and to maintain and to obtain their rights to the government” (Alma 54:24). However, as noted earlier, Ammoron also identifies that he is a direct descendent of Zoram. It does seem that the reference to Amalickiah as a Nephite is likely contributed to the custom identified in Jacob 1:13–14: “Now the people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. But I, Jacob, shall not hereafter distinguish them by these names, but I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi, according to the reigns of the kings.” Ammoron’s reference to himself as a bold Lamanite and his cause for war appears to be a reference to his adoption of a new people and part of his war propaganda to continue gathering support from the Lamanites.

118. Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation,” 320.

their places of resort, and the weakest parts of their cities; therefore he appointed them to be chief captains over his armies" (Alma 48:5). These listed reasons for appointment imply that the Zoramites had military knowledge. Regular citizens may have information about the previous cities they inhabited and so on, but not necessarily where the weakest parts of defense would be. For those defectors without military knowledge, one might expect such to be informants but not necessarily military leaders.

In addition, Lamanite warriors might not have submitted to the Zoramite chief captains if they were seen as just mere citizens with valuable information. The genealogy of certain military leaders seems to be a particular point. "And it came to pass they sent embassies to the army of the Lamanites . . . to their leader, whose name was Jacob. . . . But behold Jacob . . . was a Zoramite." And then again, "And it came to pass that Jacob, being their leader, being also a Zoramite, and having an unconquerable spirit, he led the Lamanites forth to battle with exceeding fury against Moroni" (Alma 52:20, 33). Tvedtnes states, "The Zoramites had likely been military leaders among the Nephites prior to the their defection to the Lamanites. . . . In [Alma], we learn that it was the Zoramite chief captains who had introduced shields, breastplates, and armor . . . to the Lamanites. These implements had aided the Nephites during previous battles against the Lamanites."<sup>119</sup> The apparent military tradition of the Zoramites as a people, relied upon by both the Nephites and the Lamanites, is consistent with the possibility of Zoram being the chief *na'ar* to the commander of the fortress at Jerusalem.

### 3. Conclusion

Laban's position in ancient Israel may have been the commander of the fortress in Jerusalem. An elite military position such as this would very likely have included *ne'arim*. As one of the *ne'arim* usually outranked the rest of the group, the commander of the fortress would have had one particular *na'ar* that was his chief *na'ar*, or right-hand man. The use of the word *servant* as it applies to Zoram aligns much more closely with the military definition of *na'ar* than with the more superficial and regularly used definition of a young boy. As chief *na'ar*, Zoram was entrusted with stewardship over a specific portion of one of Laban's significant responsibilities—the keys to the treasury. Zoram felt comfortable discussing Laban's nighttime meeting with the elders of the

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<sup>119</sup> Tvedtnes, "Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliations," 320.

Jews, and he married the eldest of Ishmael's daughters. All these facts incline one away from the idea that, as a *na'ar*, Zoram was just seen as a young boy.

Once he joined Lehi's family, Zoram was still repeatedly and regularly referred to as "the servant of Laban," which was most likely used to acknowledge his prior important position. If he was a man from a noble family with extensive military training, responsibilities, and high position, readers can see why an entire people were called after his name. The military legacy seen in Zoram's descendants also points to his military position in Jerusalem. Since Nephi mentions that Zoram came with him when he separated from Laman and Lemuel, even before he mentions blood members of his own family, we can infer that Nephi held Zoram in incredibly high regard. For a man to whom so few verses were dedicated, his legacy looms large through the pages of the Book of Mormon. Whether or not Zoram was indeed the chief *na'ar* of the commander of the fortress, the thorough examination this article provides should result in an acknowledgement that, rather than being a minor character, Zoram was a man of knowledge, training, and position, who may have used his military background to assist in the preservation and continuation of the Nephite people. Thus, Zoram is a man worthy of an enduring legacy.

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