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Chapter V

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Abstract: The Status of Zoram—Law of Moses Respecting Bondmen—Character of Laban—Advantages of Taking Zoram into the Wilderness

CHAPTER V.

THE STATUS OF ZORAM—LAW OF MOSES RESPECTING BOND-
MEN—CHARACTER OF LABAN—ADVANTAGES OF TAKING
ZORAM INTO THE WILDERNESS.

THERE was one expression used by Nephi, which would lead us to suppose that Zoram was a bondman. He promised him freedom if he would go with them into the wilderness. This was evidently said to him as an inducement to comply with their wishes. There would be no special attraction in such a proposition to a man already free; but, to a bondman, the promise of being made as free as they were, would go a long way towards reconciling him to submit to their wishes. It may be asked, then, was Zoram one of the heathens or a son of one of the strangers who sojourned in the midst of Israel? for these only were the children of Israel permitted by the law of Moses to make perpetual bondmen.

We are aware that the law of Moses expressly commanded the children of Israel to keep no Hebrew servant whom they might buy, because of his poverty, for any longer period than six years; in the seventh year he should go out free for nothing, and be furnished liberally, by his master that had been, out of all the property the Lord had given him. There was only one condition, under the law of Moses, upon which one of the children of Israel could keep his brother in his service as a bondman; and that was by the free consent of the man himself. The law said that if in the seventh year, the man who had been bought, and who was at that time entitled to his release, should plainly say he would not go away from his master because he loved him and his family and was satisfied with him, then the master should take an awl and “thrust it through his ear unto the door,” and he should then be his servant forever. The Lord was strict upon this point, for He viewed all the children of Israel as His servants, and they

were not to be bought and sold as bondsmen, nor to be ruled over with rigor by their brethren. If, therefore, Zoram was an Israelite, as we fully believe he was, and the law of Moses had been strictly observed in Jerusalem at that time, the offer made by Nephi to make him a free man would have had no particular inducement to him; for, in any event, he would have been free at the end of six years, or if he had surrendered himself for life to Laban as his servant, and his ear had been bored with an awl, he had done so for love of Laban and his family and because he was pleased with the service. But, as we shall show, the law of Moses was not observed on this point in Jerusalem at that time. Laban was just such a man as would violate that law. He was a greedy, rapacious, cruel man, ready to take any advantage to gain his ends, even to shedding blood. Laman, Nephi's brother, must have known him well, and he said, "he can command fifty, yea even he can slay fifty." If he would not hesitate to murder these four young men, whom it is but reasonable to conclude he must have known were his kindred, being of the same lineage as himself, for their property, he would not scruple to enslave his poor brethren, or even to kill them on some pretext, if it suited his purpose to do so. The glimpse which Nephi gives of the condition of affairs in that city is sufficient to show us how little human life was valued. Men were stoned, and killed in other ways, were treated as though they had no rights which ought to be respected, because they warned the people to repent and prophesied if they did not, they would be visited by terrible judgments. There can be little doubt from Laban's character that he was one of these vindictive persecutors. It is very likely that he was a man who prided himself on his zeal for religion; for it is plain he went into the society of the elders of his people; yet he could get drunk, he could rob and try to murder, and still justify himself for such conduct as persecutors of the righteous do in these days. There can scarcely be any doubt about Lehi and he being acquainted. They were of the same lineage, residents of the same city, and Lehi knew that he had the records on the brass plates. Was not the repugnance of Laman and Lemuel to obey the command of the Lord through their father for them

to return to Jerusalem and get these records from Laban, and their remark that it was "a hard thing" which their father required of them, due, in part at least, to the fact that they knew Laban and knew how he felt towards the family because of their father's predictions? And is it not probable that one reason for his treating Nephi and his brothers as he did, and trying to kill them, was that he knew them as the sons of Lehi, and was satisfied he could justify himself for anything he might do to them, even if he murdered them? His conduct towards them was not that of a novice in crimes against innocent people; but whether he had helped shed innocent blood or not, the Lord knew that he had only failed in killing Nephi and his brothers through the inability of his servants to catch them, and He deemed him unfit to live and commanded Nephi to kill him. If he had been accessory to murder, the law of the Lord through Moses was very plain as to what his fate should be. The Lord says (*Numbers xxxv.*, 33), "For blood it defileth the land; and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it." Such a man as he would be a hard master, and it is scarcely improper to suppose that Zoram was the more content to accompany Nephi, because of the promise held out to him of a release from servitude. The Prophet Jeremiah, who knew all about the condition of affairs at Jerusalem during these days, speaks thus:

"Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel; I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondmen, saying,

"At the end of seven years let ye go every man his brother an Hebrew, which hath been sold unto thee; and when he hath served thee six years, thou shalt let him go free from thee: but your fathers hearkened not unto me, neither inclined their ear.

"And ye were now turned, and had done right in my sight, in proclaiming liberty every man to his neighbor; and ye had made a covenant before me in the house which is called by my name:

"But ye turned and polluted my name, and caused every man his servant, and every man his handmaid, whom he had

set at liberty at their pleasure, to return, and brought them into subjection, to be unto you for servants and for handmaids.'"

For breaking this covenant Jeremiah, inspired of the Lord, pronounced upon the nation, from the king down, terrible curses, and they were all fulfilled. From Jeremiah's words it is clear that Israelites were made bondmen by their brethren, and from Zoram's subsequent marriage and life we think it safe to assume that he was not an alien but an Israelite. Elder Orson Pratt thought that, from his being worthy to hold the keys of the treasury and of the sacred brass plates, Zoram was probably of the same tribe as Laban.

The determination of Nephi to take Zoram with them was clearly a matter of necessity. Nephi says they were desirous he should tarry with them that the Jews might not know concerning their flight into the wilderness, lest they should pursue and destroy them. When Zoram had made an oath to stay with them, their fears concerning him ceased. Two results were accomplished by having Zoram go with them. Their company was strengthened by the addition of one who proved himself a worthy man, and all clue to the cause of Laban's death and to the person who slew him was completely removed beyond reach of the Jews. The disappearance of Zoram, of Laban's clothing, armor, sword and records left the people of Jerusalem at liberty to frame whatever theory they chose respecting his death. There is no room to suppose that Nephi or his brothers were suspected of having had anything to do with it, for it does not appear that any of Laban's servants were present when they requested him to give them the records in exchange for their property, though they were afterwards told to chase and kill them. Had the names of Nephi and his brothers been associated with the death of Laban and the taking of the records, he was so prominent a man, and the circumstances of his death so widely known that they could not have visited Jerusalem again (which they did shortly afterwards) and induced another family to accompany them in the wilderness, with the least safety.