

The Making of a Hard, Then Softened Heart in *The Book of Laman*

Mette Harrison. *The Book of Laman*. Salt Lake City, Utah: By Common Consent Press, 2017. 238 pp. Paper: \$9.95. ISBN: 978-0998605241.

Reviewed by Laura Hilton Craner

A fallen prophet. An abandoned wife and mother. A starving little brother. A big brother whose street smarts and steel are the linchpin to his family's survival. The cast of Mette Harrison's alternative telling of the beginning of the Book of Mormon is a motley and earthly one, striking a deep contrast to the lofty start of Nephi's scriptural telling. Gritty and as unforgiving of himself as he is of his earthly and Heavenly fathers, the central character of Laman, as painted by Harrison, is an everyman for the modern Saint with a struggle and his story is, in many ways, just as truthful as Nephi's.

The novel starts well before Nephi's birth and introduces us to a family that is as far from his "goodly parents" (I Nephi 1:1) as a family can get. Lehi and Sariah still live in Jerusalem but Lehi is not yet the visionary man of scripture. He is a drunk who runs out on his wife and two small sons because, when it comes right down to it, he prefers the attention of upbraiding crowds on the street. When Sariah tries to explain away his behavior as "telling stories," Laman responds with a scathing, "He was good at telling stories, but the problem was, they were never true" (1). And with that, the true conflict of every scriptural story is set up: how do you choose faith when the truth telling can't be parsed from the storytelling?

Laman's telling hits all the high and low points that scripture outlines, from Laban and the plates to the journey across the sea to building the

temple in the Promised Land, ending with Laman's death after Nephi and his people leave. Despite the drama of each plot point, the real drama happens in Laman's heart, where no matter how many angels he sees and how many times his prophet-father and prophet-brother testify to him, the overwhelming practical needs of taking care of his family (and later Nephi's) override any faith-promoting narrative presented. The trauma of being abandoned by Lehi in his early, most vulnerable years and seeing him rave drunkenly in the streets and chase after women while trying to support Sariah and protect Lemuel leaves a deep and untrusting scar on the young Laman's heart. This scar, developed over years of hardship and fear, isn't the kind that can be wiped away through a single prayer or a sweeping vision. It can only be understood and healed by a Savior and that Savior is strikingly absent from the narratives Lehi and Nephi present. With only the chastisement of his father and brother on the one side and the needs of his family on the other, Laman's best choice is usually what he believes is his only choice: to toughen up and soldier on. He doesn't have time for visions or prayers or temples; he's too busy feeding his and Nephi's children and brokering an uneasy peace between the varying factions in their new society.

Despite the hardness of Laman's heart, he is a deeply sympathetic character. Harrison, much like her leading man, pulls no punches when it comes to calling out anyone in the story. Nephi is a diligent prophet, but his rigidity often leaves those he is meant to save out to dry. Sam is a good brother, but his indecisive nature increases the struggle for those around him. Sariah is a faithful and forgiving woman, which is sometimes her greatest strength and sometimes her greatest flaw. Laman is often mean and callous, but is also incredibly aware and mindful of the needs of all around him and is in many cases a truth teller just like his little brother. You can't help but cringe when he goes wrong and then root for him when does right.

This searching and well-written narrative is a courageous addition to the many retellings of Book of Mormon stories that dot the land-

scape of Mormon literature. It is also not for the faint of heart. Many LDS readers will be uncomfortable with the too-many-shades-of-gray morality that is Laman's worldview. The story is worth the discomfort, though, if a reader is willing to stick with Laman to the end of his story.

Laman asks difficult questions, ones that seek to tease out not just truth from error but also truth from culture. Implicit in Laman's questioning and struggle is the question and struggle of any member who can't look at the Church with rose-colored glasses. When Laman asks, "Wouldn't it be nice to live in a world where faith and courage were all that was required to get what you wanted?" (78), he is speaking for every modern member who sits in Sunday School each week wondering how they can reconcile the black and white nature of theology with the ever-graying moral universe they inhabit.

Laman's redemption comes at the end of the novel when he is near death and finally granted a vision. It isn't a sweeping one like the Tree of Life, but it is perfectly suited to him. He is granted a vision of Christ, of the Savior he has needed and missed, who has been conspicuously absent from all preaching that Laman has been subjected to his entire life. Christ comes to the temple and blesses Laman's descendants. He tells Laman that he is forgiven and most importantly that, "Your children will one day call you blessed . . . and they will know that no one is ever too far from God to repent" (237).

In the end, Laman relates to the same message that Lehi, Nephi, and all scripture is seeking to pass on: Christ knows each of us individually and is willing to forgive even sinners such as Laman. His mercy covers so much more than we will ever be able to understand. His love can change even the hardest of hearts. We just have to be willing to see Him. Even if it takes an entire lifetime for that willingness to come about, even if you aren't a Nephi, Laman's message is that you are enough. When all the storytelling is done, that's the truth.