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KnoWhy #549 - Why Did Jacob Condemn “Deliberately” Killing?

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Abstract: Speaking at the newly built Nephite temple, near the time Nephi was crowned king, during one of the Israelite autumn festivals, Jacob provided a list of ten “woes” similar to the Ten Commandments. Jacob does not simply repeat the exact same ten commandments, however. He makes changes and adaptations based on the circumstances of his people. For example, he modified the law against homicide in a way to ensure Nephi’s slaying of Laban could not be misunderstood as a violation of the law. Jacob’s adaptation of the original Ten Commandments illustrates the ancient scriptural precedent for continued clarifications of the Lord’s standards, such as with the recent adjustments to the temple recommend interview questions.



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Still Image from “Jacob Teaches of the Atonement of Jesus Christ” via Gospel Media Library

WHY DID JACOB CONDEMN “DELIBERATELY” KILLING?

“Wo unto the murderer who deliberately killeth, for he shall die.”

2 Nephi 9:35

THE KNOW

Shortly after the Nephites built their first temple in the New World and asked Nephi to be their king, Nephi consecrated his brothers Jacob and Joseph as priests and asked Jacob to address the people (2 Nephi 5:16–18, 26; 6:1–4). The occasion of Jacob’s speech was most likely during one of the biblically prescribed autumn festivals, during which the Nephites would have formally crowned Nephi as their earthly king and covenanted loyalty to the Lord as their true king.¹ As part of his address, Jacob pronounced ten “woes” that parallel the Ten Commandments (2 Nephi 9:27–38).²

Jacob’s Ten Woes and the Ten Commandments

2 Nephi 9:27, 30-38	Compare Exodus 20:3-17
1. Woe unto them who knowingly transgress God’s commandments	1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me
2. Wo unto the rich who despise the poor and make treasure their god	10. Thou shalt not covet
3. Wo unto the deaf who will not hear	5. Honor (hear) thy father and mother
4. Wo unto the blind who will not see	
5. Wo unto the uncircumcised of heart	3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.

6. Wo unto the liar	9. Thou shalt not bear false witness
7. Wo unto the murderer who deliberately kills	6. Thou shalt not kill
8. Wo unto them who commit whoredoms	7. Thou shalt not commit adultery
9. Wo unto those who worship idols	2. Though shalt not make unto thee any graven image
10. Wo unto all those who die and remain in their sins	

Interestingly, another set of Ten Words or Commandments, as they are called in Exodus 34:27–28, are found in Exodus 34:14, 17–23, 25–26. This list is more interested in sacrificial and ritual practices, although commandments 1, 2, and 6 have counterparts in the basic Decalogue in Exodus 20. In brief, the commands in Exodus 34 are as follows:

1. Thou shalt worship no other god.
2. Thou shalt make thee no molten gods.
3. The feast of unleavened bread thou shalt keep.
4. All the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt redeem.
5. None shall appear before me empty.
6. On the seventh day thou shalt rest.
7. Thou shalt observe the feast of weeks.

8. Thrice in the year shall all your men children appear before the Lord
9. Thou shalt not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven.
10. Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk.

The existence of these two related, but distinct, sets of commandments in the book of Exodus, shows that the list of commandments could be adjusted over time or to suit the needs of the people in different circumstances.

According to Moshe Weinfeld, the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 were “the foundation document of the Israelite community.” They were given to Moses on Sinai, “at the dawn of Israelite history,” as the basis of God’s covenant with Israel (Exodus 20:2–17).³ Thus, Weinfeld argues, “They set forth the basic conditions for inclusion in the community of Israel,” and comprise “the essence of God’s demands from his confederates.”⁴ As such, these commandments were read during Israelite festivals as part of the renewal of their covenants with the Lord at the temple.⁵

Similarly, Jacob’s ten “woes,” pronounced on a festival occasion, at the dawn of Nephite history, likely served a comparable function for the Nephite people. John W. Welch explained:

His “ten woes” function as the equivalent of a contemporaneous Nephite set of ten commandments. His statement is an admirable summary of the basic religious values of the Nephites, cast in a form fully at home in ancient Israel and in the Near East.⁶

And like the commandments in Exodus 34, Jacob’s list is likewise not merely a repeat or “thoughtless copy of the biblical ideals.” Instead, “Jacob’s principles have been tailored as a revelation to his people and their needs.”⁷

An example of how Jacob intelligently adapted and clarified the original Decalogue is found in his seventh “woe,” parallel to the sixth of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17), recast by Jacob as, “Wo unto the murderer who *deliberately* killeth, for he shall die” (2 Nephi 9:35, emphasis added).

Speaking at or near the time of Nephi’s coronation, “Jacob could not likely have commented on the law of homicide without Nephi’s slaying of Laban coming to mind.”⁸ Indeed, some of the very emblems of Nephite kingship—such as the plates of brass and Laban’s sword—were obtained by means of Nephi slaying Laban.⁹ As Welch observed, under these circumstances, “Categorically cursing all people who killed ... would have been extremely undiplomatic,”¹⁰ and therefore Jacob would have naturally included the qualifying word “deliberately” to distinguish the basic law of homicide from Nephi’s unusual but legally distinguishable case.

Nephi carefully related the incident of Laban’s slaying in order to show that the Lord delivered Laban into his hands, making his actions unpremeditated and protectable under the homicide law of Exodus 21:12–14 (1 Nephi 4).¹¹ Thus, Nephi’s slaying of Laban was not *deliberate* in the sense of involving “deliberation, lying in wait, or other similar planning and hatred,” and was nonculpable under Israelite law.¹² What this meant in practice was that he and other such manslayers were authorized to flee, taking asylum in a city of refuge, or could flee from the holy land entirely, which is what Nephi and all of Lehi’s family did.

THE WHY

As discussed above, both sets of Ten Commandments in the Old Testament, and also Jacob’s ten woes in the Book of Mormon, probably functioned as “a set of concise basic obligations directed at all members of the Israelite [or Nephite] community, connected by a special covenant with God.”¹³ In this regard, these commandments or woes function in a manner similar to the questions asked by Latter-day Saint bishops and stake presidents in baptismal and temple recommend interviews, which is to identify the basic standards by which one must live to be a member of the Latter-day Saint community in good standing, to be worthy to enter the holy temple, and to make certain covenants with God.

These scriptural sets of moral injunctions also pertain to holiness, worthiness, and faithfulness. President Russell M. Nelson recently explained that the Lord “has directed what each person must do to qualify to enter His holy house,” stressing that, “All requirements to enter the temple relate to personal holiness.”

While the Lord’s standards remain steady and consistent, in the October 2019 conference, President Nelson announced that some of the temple recommend interview “questions have recently been edited for clarity.”¹⁴ Both Jacob’s inspired reformulation and adaptation of the original Ten Commandments into “a set of principles relevant to his people and their cultural needs and concerns,”¹⁵ and existence of second set of “ten commandments in Exodus 34 illustrate that this process and the need to clarify God’s laws and standards through His authoritative priesthood leader, given to his people in changing times and circumstances, is ancient and comports with scriptural precedent.

Just as Jacob’s clarification that it is the *deliberate* murderer who is condemned by the law is consistent with the original intent of God’s homicide laws to the Israelites (see Exodus 21:13–14), and also made clear how that original intent should be explicitly understood where questions might be expected to arise, so the recent updates and clarifications made by the Lord’s servants to the temple recommend questions remain consistent with God’s standards of worthiness established for entering the temple today.

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FURTHER READING

Book of Mormon Central, “Why Does Jacob Declare so Many ‘Woes’? (2 Nephi 9:27),” *KnoWhy* 35 (February 17, 2016).

John W. Welch, “Jacob’s Ten Commandments,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 69–72.

John W. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 119–141.

NOTES

1. See Book of Mormon Central, “Did Jacob Refer to Ancient Israelite Autumn Festivals? (2 Nephi 6:4),” *KnoWhy* 32 (February 12, 2016). For more information, see John S. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 123–150.
2. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Does Jacob Declare so Many ‘Woes’? (2 Nephi 9:27),” *KnoWhy* 35 (February 17,

- 2016). For more information, see John W. Welch, “Jacob’s Ten Commandments,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 69–72. See also John W. Welch, “Counting to Ten,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 48–49.
3. Moshe Weinfeld, “What Makes the Ten Commandments Different?” *Bible Review* 7, no. 2 (April 1991): 41.
4. Weinfeld, “What Makes the Ten Commandments Different?” 37, 38.
5. Weinfeld, “What Makes the Ten Commandments Different?” 41. For a more detailed treatment of these ideas, see Moshe Weinfeld, “The Decalogue: Its Significance, Uniqueness, and Place in Israel’s Tradition,” in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Edwin Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss, and John W. Welch (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 3–47.
6. Welch, “Jacob’s Ten Commandments,” 72.
7. Welch, “Jacob’s Ten Commandments,” 70.
8. Welch, “Jacob’s Ten Commandments,” 71.
9. See 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; Brett L. Holbrook, “Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 93–96; Gordon C. Thomasson, “Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 21–38.
10. John W. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 138.
11. Book of Mormon Central, “Was Nephi’s Slaying of Laban Legal? (1 Nephi 4:18),” *KnoWhy* 256 (January 2, 2017). See also Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” 119–141; John W. Welch, “Narrative Elements in Homicide Accounts,” *Jewish Law Association Studies* 27 (2017): 206–238; John W. Welch, “Homicides in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon,” *Clark Memorandum*, Fall 2018, 22–35.
12. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” 138.
13. Weinfeld, “What Makes the Ten Commandments Different?” 40.
14. President Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” October 2019 General Conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.
15. Welch, “Jacob’s Ten Commandments,” 72.