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Jacob's Ten Commandments

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Abstract: Jacob apparently had the Ten Commandments in mind when he gave his inspired sermon of 2 Nephi 6 through 10. Their prohibitions are clearly present in the prophet's ten "woes" in 2 Nephi 9. However, Jacob's summary is much more than a thoughtless copy of the biblical ideals. Whereas the Decalogue gave the law, Jacob goes one step further by stressing the consequences of breaking the law, and are tailored as revelation to his people and to their needs.

Chapter 18

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2 Nephi 9:27 "But wo unto him."

In a lecture delivered at Brigham Young University in 1985, Professor William M. Brinner of the University of California at Berkeley analyzed two passages in the Qur'an that seem to contain Islamic versions of the "Ten Commandments." These are not copies of the biblical Decalogue, Brinner argued, although there are some resemblances that have led others to belittle the Qur'an as a poor copy of the Bible. Each religion, Brinner suggested, has its own summary of its most cherished principles, stated in terms relevant to its own cultural setting.

Similar observations might be made regarding ten statements made by Jacob in 2 Nephi 9:27–38. There Jacob summarizes ten essential principles and rules of Nephite religion. They may be paraphrased as follows:

1. Wo unto them who have God's law and commandments, who transgress them because they are learned and think they are wise. They hearken not unto the counsel of God, supposing they know of themselves. Therefore, their wisdom is foolishness, and they shall perish (vv. 27–29).

2. Wo unto the rich. Because they are rich, they despise the poor. Their treasure is their God, and their treasure shall perish with them (v. 30).

3. Wo unto the deaf who will not hear, for they shall perish (v. 31).

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4. Wo unto the blind who will not see, for they shall perish also (v. 32).

5. Wo unto the uncircumcised of heart, for a knowledge of their iniquities shall smite them at the last day (v. 33).

6. Wo unto the liar, for he shall be thrust down to hell (v. 34).

7. Wo unto the murderer who deliberately kills, for he shall die (v. 35).

8. Wo unto them who commit whoredoms, for they shall be thrust down to hell (v. 36).

9. Wo unto those who worship idols, for the devil of all devils delights in them (v. 37).

10. Wo unto all those who die in their sins, for they shall return to God, behold his face, and remain in their sins (v. 38).

Jacob apparently had the Decalogue of Deuteronomy 5 or Exodus 20 in mind when he wrote these words. The prohibitions against worshipping images, committing murder or adultery, and bearing false witness (see Exodus 20:4–6, 13–14, 16) are clearly present in Jacob's sixth through ninth woes. Jacob's summary in these ten "woes" is much more than a thoughtless copy of the biblical ideals. Whereas the Decalogue gave the law, Jacob goes one step further by stressing the consequences of breaking the law. Furthermore, Jacob's principles have been tailored as revelation to his people and to their needs:

The first and second woes are heaped upon those who reject the counsel of God and make riches their God. In these verses Jacob basically reinterprets the first commandment against having any other gods (see Exodus 20:3) and mentions the rewards that will come to those who obey God (see Exodus 20:6).

Setting aside the counsels of God was a particular problem that Jacob had to confront, given the hardness of Laman and Lemuel. A broader problem was the persistence of the Nephites from the beginning to seek riches (see Jacob 2:13, 19–21). His curse upon those who despise the poor is like the third commandment of the Qur'an to give liberally to kinsmen, to the

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needy, and to travelers, and it may relate to the Israelite command against coveting (see Exodus 20:17).

In Jacob's third and fourth woes, he curses those who will not hear, see, or obey, perhaps intentionally expanding the commandment that one should hear and obey parents.

Lehi's contemporary, Jeremiah, was the one who commanded the Israelites to "circumcise [themselves] to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of [their] heart" (Jeremiah 4:4; see 9:26), a precept Jacob echoed here in his fifth wo.

Jacob expands the sixth prohibition against bearing false witness to include all liars, as in Leviticus and Proverbs (see Leviticus 19:11; Proverbs 6:17, 19). Jacob's wo also parallels the punishment associated in Proverbs with lying: "He that speaketh lies shall perish" (19:9; see 19:5).

Jacob's seventh command prohibits "deliberate" killing, that is, intentional or premeditated murder. Jacob could not likely have commented on the law of homicide without Nephi's slaying of Laban coming to mind. Since Nephi's killing of Laban can be considered unpremeditated and classified with nonculpable slayings under ancient Israelite law,¹ it seems that Jacob intentionally condemned only those who killed deliberately.

Jacob's eighth commandment is against whoredoms, not just the narrower crime of adultery. This reflects Lehi's teachings against whoredoms of any kind (see Jacob 2:33–34).

The ninth wo addresses idolatry, the refusal to hear the word and see the way of the Lord, which had been the downfall of the people in Jerusalem. On the other hand, listening to the Lord's word and following his way had resulted in the salvation of Lehi and his family (see 1 Nephi 1:6).

The threat in the tenth wo, that the unrepentant sinner will behold the face of God, seems to hark back to Moses, whose unrighteous people might have been destroyed if they had seen the face of God (see Exodus 19:21; Deuteronomy 5:4).

Jacob's woes are not formulated as "thou-shalt-not" statements, as in the Ten Commandments, but the "wo-unto" idiom is functionally equivalent to those prohibitions. Compare, for

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example, the set of twelve "cursed-be-he-that" woes in Deuteronomy 27:15–26, some of which also implement the interdictions of the Ten Commandments.

Thus, a new perspective of 2 Nephi 9:27–38 emerges. Jacob's inspiration formulates a set of principles relevant to his people and their cultural needs and concerns. 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.

Based on research by John W. Welch, March 1985.

Note

1. Exodus 21:12–14, part of the law in effect in Jerusalem at the time of Lehi and Nephi, defines certain slayings as nonculpable acts if (1) the slayer did not lie in wait to ambush or attack the victim and (2) God delivered the victim into his hands. Nephi's account in 1 Nephi 4 purposefully sets forth facts that satisfy these two conditions. For further discussion, see Fred Essig and H. Daniel Fuller, "Nephi's Slaying of Laban: A Legal Perspective" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1982).