



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>

Confession of Sins Before Execution

Author(s): David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes

Source: *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible*

Published: Toelle, UT; Heritage Press, 2003

Page(s): 157-160

Chapter 25

CONFESSION OF SINS BEFORE EXECUTION

And it came to pass that they took him; and his name was Nehor; and they carried him upon the top of the hill Manti, and there he was caused, or rather did acknowledge, between the heavens and the earth, that what he had taught to the people was contrary to the word of God; and there he suffered an ignominious death. (Alma 1:15)

The concept of having a condemned man confess his sins before being executed is intriguing. Since the man is doomed, why would he cooperate with the authorities by detailing his crime? With no hope of leniency for confessing, what could he possibly gain?

The answer may lie in the regulations followed by Jewish religious authorities in the time of Christ. One of the tractates of the ancient Jewish *Mishnah* describes in detail the procedures used by the Sanhedrin in capital cases, from the value of eyewitness testimony to the various means of execution.¹ A major provision concerning confession is described thus:

When he [the condemned man] was about ten cubits from the place of stoning they used to say to him, “Make thy confession,” for such is the way

¹ The Mishnah was compiled by Rabbi Judah the Prince (A.D. 137-219) from oral traditions.

TESTAMENTS

of them that have been condemned to death to make confession, for every one that makes his confession has a share in the world to come. (*Sanhedrin* 6.2)²

The passage then cites Joshua 7:19 as precedent for this provision. When Achan was condemned to be stoned for his sin:

Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou hast done; hide it not from me. And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done.

The Mishnah makes it clear that the confession would not alter the decision of the court, but that it would be taken into consideration in the final judgment that would be made by God. This seems to be the reasoning in another Book of Mormon account, in which a man named Sherem had been guilty of teaching falsehood. While the Nephite authorities did not intend to execute him, the Lord had stricken him.

And it came to pass that he said unto the people: Gather together on the morrow, for I shall die; wherefore, I desire to speak unto the people before I shall die. And it came to pass that on the morrow the multitude were gathered together; and he spake plainly unto them and denied the things

² Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 390.

CONFESSION OF SINS

which he had taught them, and confessed the Christ, and the power of the Holy Ghost, and the ministering of angels. And he spake plainly unto them, that he had been deceived by the power of the devil. And he spake of hell, and of eternity, and of eternal punishment. And he said: I fear lest I have committed the unpardonable sin, for I have lied unto God; for I denied the Christ, and said that I believed the scriptures; and they truly testify of him. And because I have thus lied unto God I greatly fear lest my case shall be awful; but I confess unto God. And it came to pass that when he had said these words he could say no more, and he gave up the ghost. (Jacob 7:16–20)

Sherem's words make it clear that his confession was "unto God" as well as a means to acknowledge to others that he had been teaching false ideas about God. It may be significant that Sherem asked that the people gather "on the morrow" to hear his confession before he died. The Mishnah notes that a man found guilty of a capital crime could not be executed until the day following the judgment (*Sanhedrin* 5.5).³

We do not know the nature of the "ignominious death" that Nehor suffered, but it is interesting that he was brought to the top of the hill to be executed, for the Mishnah requires that the place of stoning be at least twice as high as a man so that he could be pushed over the edge before being stoned (*Sanhedrin* 6.4).⁴ Of the various approved methods of execution, stoning was required for "he that beguiles [others to idolatry], and he that leads [a whole town] astray" (*Sanhedrin* 7.3).⁵

³ Ibid., 389.

⁴ Ibid., 390.

⁵ Ibid., 391.

TESTAMENTS

Nehor's execution atop a hill may be behind the statement that he made his confessions "between the heavens and the earth," i.e., on an elevation. But it may have something to do with calling heaven and earth to witness, as in several Old Testament passages (Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 31:28). Ze'ev W. Falk, an expert on Jewish law, noted that confession before execution was intended to "effect the atonement" and to assure the judges that their verdict was correct.⁶

Acknowledging that the Mishnah was not compiled until the second century A.D., it seems clear that we should not expect all of its provisions to have existed in the ancient kingdom of Judah from which the prophet Lehi fled more than seven centuries earlier. But the close parallels between these Book of Mormon accounts and the Mishnah suggests that the elements discussed here may predate the Babylonian captivity.

⁶ Ze'ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2001), 53.