# Illegal Speech: Blasphemy and Reviling

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# Illegal Speech: Blasphemy and Reviling

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Two primary passages from the law of Moses record for us the laws regulating speech. The first is contained in the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" (Exodus 20:7). This commandment, when interpreted in its purest form, prohibited verbalization of the tetragrammaton in public, an act known as blasphemy. The commandment was expanded over time to include any form of evil, insolent, or disrespectful speech directed toward God or God's anointed representative. The commandment is given in apodictic format ("thou shalt not") with no specific punishment attached. However, Moses adjudicated a case of blasphemy, as recorded in Leviticus 24, in which the Lord revealed that death by stoning was to be the punishment.

The second passage that regulates speech is found in the Code of the Covenant, Exodus 22:28: "Thou shalt not revile the gods, nor curse the ruler of thy people." Known as the law against reviling, this commandment acted, for the most part, like a subset of blasphemy. The Hebrew root word in this verse that is translated as "revile" means literally to "make light" or to "be light." Over time, this word came to mean "despising" or "speaking evil" of someone or something. Intially the commandment against reviling meant that one could not utter a formal curse against God or God's anointed leader.[1] Over time, it came to mean that one should not speak

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evil of God or God's anointed leader. As with blasphemy, this commandment is given in apodictic form with no attached punishment.[2]

With an understanding of these two foundational commandments from the law of Moses, we can now approach the subject of legal speech in the Book of Mormon. As has been made clear in other papers in this volume, the Nephites had access to the Code of the Covenant and were therefore familiar with these two commandments. Three trials in the Book of Mormon deal with charges of blasphemy and reviling: those of Sherem, Abinadi, and Amulek. Each trial builds upon the next.

Jacob's dispute with Sherem is recorded in Jacob 7, which is added as an appendix to the rest of Jacob's book. The time is roughly 500 B.C. Sherem approaches the ecclesiastical authority of the time, the high priest Jacob, and questions him about "the doctrine of Christ" (Jacob 7:6). In 1 and 2 Nephi, both Nephi and Jacob have openly talked about Christ. Consider Nephi's statement that the Nephites "talk of Christ, . . . rejoice in Christ, . . . preach of Christ, . . . prophecy of Christ" (2 Nephi 25:26).

It is against this backdrop that Sherem enters the scene, seemingly concerned that Jacob is leading away the people from the "right way of God," which Sherem believes to be the law of Moses. Sherem says that Jacob "convert[s] the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence. And now behold, I, Sherem, declare unto you that this is blasphemy" (Jacob 7:7). Here we have the formal accusation: blasphemy. Such a pointed declaration, uttered in public, was as good as "service of process" in our day. The two parties were in formal dispute.

Jacob defends himself on two counts: first, the prophets (including Moses) have all prophesied concerning Christ; second, the Holy Ghost has confirmed to Jacob that Christ shall come (see Jacob 7:11–12).

Sherem, still convinced that he is right, challenges Jacob to an ordeal by asking that a sign be given by "this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye know so much" (Jacob 7:13). Jacob reluctantly agrees and then restates the conditions of the ordeal to clarify the meaning of the sign: it means that Christ shall come. Immediately Sherem is struck down by the power of God; days later he recants his accusation of blasphemy. The ruling, as delivered by divine power is this: to preach of Jesus is not blasphemy (see Jacob 7:14–19).

What do we see here? Under a strictly traditional interpretation of the law of Moses, to preach of Christ is to blaspheme. Why? Because it is, in Sherem's mind, to go after other gods, or to place a new god in the place of the "One God." Is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sufficient? And if this God is sufficient, why should there be another? As Moses declared: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

To preach of Jesus is to preach a radical concept—one not accepted by those who claim to strictly interpret the law of Moses. Jacob comments on Sherem and those like him among the Jews when he says that they look "beyond the mark" and thus "reject the stone upon which they might build and have safe foundation" (Jacob 4:14–15). Obviously this is the same resistance faced by Jesus when he preached his new gospel and was rejected.

The trial of Abinadi is next in approximately 150 B.C. Abinadi has been called of God to warn the wicked king Noah and his people (the people of Zeniff) to turn from their unrighteous ways. These are "over-zealous" people that have risked everything to reinherit the land of their forefathers (see Mosiah 9:3). They take offense at being told by Abinadi that the Lord had "seen their abominations, and their wickedness, and their whoredoms" (Mosiah 11:20), and they bring him before Noah and his priests who begin to cross-examine him.

Abinadi is charged with no fewer than four counts of violating the law of Moses. One of the priests quotes the passage from Isaiah 52 that begins, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings." The priest asks that Abinadi explain these verses (Mosiah 12:20–24). Perhaps Zeniff's group was convinced that these celebratory verses referred to them.

Rather than answer the question, Abinadi first offers a counterclaim: the priests do not teach the law of Moses correctly. And he pleads his claim with particularity, providing concrete examples. King Noah listens for a short time but then pronounces Abinadi to be "mad" and orders him to be taken away. It is at this point that Abinadi, in what can be considered a type of interlocutory ordeal, is immediately given spiritual protection, and his face shines "even as Moses' did while . . . speaking with the Lord" (Mosiah 13:5).[3] What could be more convincing during a trial where the central issue is the correct interpretation of the law of Moses than for Abinadi to appear as if he were Moses returned from the dead? Noah and the priests should have conceded immediately—but they did not.

Abinadi delivers the message that he has been given by God: "there could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God" (Mosiah 13:32). He then quotes from Isaiah as added authority for his position. Indeed, the priests have played into his hands by quoting Isaiah 52 with its somewhat cryptic reference to a coming Messiah. Abinadi quotes Isaiah 53, which more expressly declares that a Messiah shall come to suffer for and redeem his people (Mosiah 14). After quoting Isaiah as authority, Abinadi gives his own interpretation: "God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people" (Mosiah 15:1).

Then Abinadi teaches how it is that Jesus is both Father and Son, one God, and how all the prophets have testified of

his coming (Mosiah 15:2–13).[4] He finally addresses the original question concerning "beautiful . . . feet" and "good tidings" by teaching that Isaiah's words are a reference to the coming of Jesus. He then summarizes: "Therefore, if ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come—Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father. Amen" (Mosiah 16:14–15).

Noah consults with his priests and they pass judgment on Abinadi for blasphemy. However, Abinadi is unmoved by the decree and this makes Noah nervous. Noah has already witnessed Abinadi's power. He rethinks his position and is ready to let Abinadi go when the priests, in a remarkable move, turn prosecutors and level a charge against Abinadi of reviling the king.[5] This charge is a personal affront to Noah; he cannot nor will not let Abinadi go. The charge of blasphemy, coupled with the charge of reviling against Noah and the people, form the final judgment against Abinadi. This is a direct application of the prohibitions contained in the law of Moses.[6]

The charge of blasphemy against Abinadi is not based on preaching Christ as a new God (as with Sherem's accusation against Jacob) but on preaching that God will come down to earth to save the fallen people, or the condescension of God. The text clearly identifies Abinadi's blasphemy as being the statement that "God himself should come down among the children of men" (Mosiah 17:8). The priests of Noah claim that such language is disrespectful and untoward, denigrating to God.

Let's now turn our attention to the trial of Alma and Amulek. The year is 82 B.C. and the law of Moses is now interpreted within the system of judges established by Mosiah. The setting is Ammonihah, a city and region that subscribes to Nehorism and openly and violently opposes Alma and what he represents. After calling the city's inhabitants to repentance, Alma and Amulek are openly accused of reviling against

Ammonihah's laws and the "wise lawyers" of their legal system (see Alma 10:24). The "most expert" lawyer, Zeezrom, is called upon and he first questions Amulek.

We have an apparent word-for-word transcript of the proceeding (see Alma 11:26–39). Zeezrom first lays a foundation for his questions: "Thou sayest there is a true and living God?" (v. 26). Amulek answers yes. Choosing his questions very carefully, next Zeezrom asks, "Is there more than one God?" (v. 28). This is a difficult question, but it is fair. Most Latter-day Saints would answer yes. We are taught that the godhead consists of three Gods—one godhead, three Gods.

Amulek may have wanted to ask for clarification or to answer yes and no—really both answers are right. But Amulek answers no. To answer otherwise is to risk an offense against the first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." If Amulek had answered yes, then Zeezrom would have moved for summary judgment immediately on the grounds of blasphemy. Zeezrom fully understood the difficulty of this question and undoubtedly knew what Amulek's answer would be.

Next, Zeezrom asks: "Who is he that shall come? Is it the Son of God?" (v. 32). Amulek answers yes. The next question, "Shall he save his people in their sins?" (v. 34) is another carefully worded question that requires a yes and no answer. We are all sinners and must be made clean before salvation is complete. So Amulek must choose carefully, and he answers no—prepared to support his response with an appeal to scripture: "no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of heaven" (v. 37; see also 1 Nephi 15:34).

Zeezrom now summarizes for those in attendance: "See that ye remember these things; for he said there is but one God; yet he saith that the Son of God shall come, but he shall not save his people—as though he had authority to command God" (v. 35). Finally Zeezrom asks: "Is the son of God the very Eternal Father?" (v. 38). Amulek answers with a resounding

yes. And this is in harmony with Abinadi's teaching that Christ is both "the Father and the Son" (Mosiah 15:2).

Alma and Amulek ultimately silence Zeezrom by catching him in his "lying and deceiving" (Alma 12:1) and Zeezrom never does get a chance to deliver his closing argument—to summarize what he believes to be the theological inconsistency in Amulek's blasphemous responses. Again, as with Jacob and as with Abinadi, the issues are whether it is blasphemous to preach of other gods, and whether Jesus is indeed another God. The ruling, again given by divine intervention, is that Amulek spoke the truth.

Three trials. All decided through an ordeal and culminating with divine intervention. All three involving blasphemy, and the last two also involving reviling. A rather solid conclusion to be drawn? Yes. The speech prohibitions outlined in the law of Moses were honored in Nephite society. The three trials also show that the Nephite legal system sometimes misunderstood the intent of the law of Moses. As a result, it could be a dangerous activity to preach of Christ. This dynamic may partially explain the Book of Mormon's theological emphasis on "one God."

## Notes

1. The parallel structure of the commandment emphasizes the similarity of God and God's anointed leader.

2. This commandment is specifically referred to by the Apostle Paul when he returns to Jerusalem and appears before the high priest, Ananias. Paul calls Ananias a "whited wall" and is charged with reviling against "God's high priest." Paul claims he did not know Ananias was the high priest and cites the law against reviling (Acts 23:3–5).

3. Cf. the account of Brigham Young and Sidney Rigdon shortly after Joseph Smith's martyrdom.

4. "And because he dwelleth in the flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father,

being the Father and the Son—The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son" (Mosiah 15:2–3).

5. Bringing charges was normally the task of the people.

6. Sometime later, Abinadi is vindicated when his curse upon King Noah is fulfilled.