

Statutes, Judgments, Ordinances, and Commandments

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2 Nephi 5:10 “And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses.”

In 2 Nephi 5:10, Nephi records that his people were strict to observe “the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses.” Why did he use so many words to convey what seems to us the simple idea that they kept the law?

Part of the answer comes from Hebrew, which uses several words to express different semantic aspects and subtle nuances of our word “law.”¹ Those words may match the Book of Mormon usage of comparable English terms.

Torah. In Hebrew, the “law of Moses” is always the “*torah*” of Moses. It means more than “law” in any modern sense. *Torah* derives from the verb *yarah*, whose many meanings include “to show, to instruct, to teach.” The *torah* thus embodies all God’s instructions given to his people, implemented and taught through his priests. Only a rebellious people would fail to listen to the *torah* of the Lord (see Isaiah 30:9).

These ideas fit the frequently mentioned priestly function of “teaching” in the Book of Mormon (see, e.g., Jacob 1:17-19; Jarom 1:11; Mosiah 6:3; 12:25; Alma 8:24; Moroni 3:3). Isaiah’s message also fits Benjamin’s warning that anyone who transgressed “the law [*torah*?] of God contrary to his own knowledge, . . . the same cometh out in open rebellion against God” (Mosiah 2:33, 37).

Mishpat. Usually translated “judgment,” this word not only means “to pronounce a verdict,” but it also embraced most phases of a trial. It usually has something to do with the rules of governing properly. For example, the laws in Exodus 21-23 are called the *mishpatim*, giving standards of behavior required by God.

Likewise, in the Book of Mormon, when the term *judgments* appears by itself, it is in the context of judges who “judge righteous judgments” (Mosiah 29:29, 43), or it refers to the outcome of a court procedure (Alma 30:57), or to God’s judgments upon his people.

Huqqah and *hoq*. In this pair, the first is feminine, the second is masculine. Both, though, have substantially the same meanings, basically “custom, manner, decree, portion, order, prescription, limit, etc.” Often these words are translated interchangeably as “statute” and “ordinance,” but their meanings are very broad. Thus, when the word *ordinance* is used to translate these terms from an ancient text, we should understand that it includes more than priesthood ordinances. What is covered is a wide range of cultural rules.

Indeed, when the Book of Mormon speaks of ordinances in an outward sense, it generally seems to add the term *performances* (see 2 Nephi 25:30; Mosiah 13:30). Those words describe the kind of “outward performances” (Alma 25:15) that became unnecessary after the atonement of Christ (see 4 Nephi 1:12), not the idea of law or orderly conduct in general.

Mitzvah. This broad term has no technical meaning and is usually translated “commandment” or “precept.” It is found frequently in Deuteronomy to signify divine commandments in general. Similarly, the use of the word *commandments* is broad and extensive in the Book of Mormon (see, e.g., 1 Nephi 3:7; Jacob 1:2).

Edut. Less common is this word, meaning “testimony, witness, or monument.” Especially in the early biblical period, the law was thought of as a testimony or witness that God had established. The book of the “law” (*edut*, Deuteronomy 31:26) witnessed that God had established his law, by which mankind will be judged (see Psalms 78:5).

In the Book of Mormon, similar ideas are found, for example, in Benjamin’s farewell speech (see Mosiah 3:23-24) and in Moroni’s words concluding the monumental Nephite record (see Moroni 10:27).

Another part of the meaning of *edut* was the idea of “law” as in the expression “the book of the law.” Besides the oral and ethical instruction of the *torah* and the prophets, law was also the written text (see Joshua 8:31; Exodus 24:3-7), as well as covenantal monuments denoting the covenant (see Joshua 8:32; 23:6; 24:24-26). Thus, the mysterious *edut* given to the king at his coronation may have been a copy of the law (see 2 Kings 11:12; also Deuteronomy 17:18; Mosiah 1:15-16). Lehi and his family risked much to obtain a copy of the written law, for in a literal sense one is without the “law” (*edut*) without a written copy.

These terms for “law” are often used cumulatively in the Hebrew Bible. Modern legal draftsmen sometimes do the same, multiplying words in pleonastic lists to cover all the bases (i.e., “rights, title and interest”). King David exhorted Solomon to keep God’s “statutes [*ḥuqqot*], and his commandments [*mitzvot*], and his judgments [*mishpatim*], and his testimonies [*edot*], as it is written in the law [*torah*] of Moses” (1 Kings 2:3). Likewise, the terms *statutes*, *judgments*, *commandments*, and *ordinances* often cluster together in the Book of Mormon as in 2 Nephi 5:10 see also 1 Nephi 17:22; Mosiah 6:6; Alma 8:17; 30:3; 58:40; Helaman 3:20; 15:5).

Interestingly, usage of the two Hebrew words *hoq* and *huqqah* may correspond quite precisely with the Book of Mormon “ordinances” and “statutes.” Due to the near identity of these Hebrew words, finding them both in the same sentence or pleonastic list would be odd. No Hebrew verse has been found containing both *hoq* and *huqqah* (When “statute” and “ordinance” occur together in the King James translation, the Hebrew word translated as “statute” is either *hoq* or *huqqah* but then the word for “ordinance” is *mishpat*.) Thus, it appears significant that “ordinance” and “statute” never appear as companions in the Book of Mormon. Indeed, they are the only two English equivalents of the Hebrew terms for law that never appear in the Book of Mormon in combination with each other.

Based on research by John W. Welch, June 1988.

Footnotes

1. J. van der Ploeg, “Studies in Hebrew Law: The Terms,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 12 (1950): 248-29.