

More on the Hanging of Zemnarihah

“And their leader, Zemnarihah, was taken and hanged upon a tree.” (3 Nephi 4:28)

The Book of Mormon details the execution of a leader of the Gadianton robber band in the following words:

And their leader, Zemnarihah, was taken and hanged upon a tree, yea, even upon the top thereof until he was dead. And when they had hanged him until he was dead they did fell the tree to the earth, and did cry with a loud voice, saying: May the Lord preserve his people in righteousness and in holiness of heart, that they may cause to be felled to the earth all who shall seek to slay them because of power and secret combinations, even as this man hath been felled to the earth. (3 Nephi 4:28–29)

In the law of Moses, stoning was the usual method of execution for Israelites guilty of sin. Nevertheless, there is evidently provision for hanging in Deuteronomy 21:22–23: “And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day.”¹ Most early rabbis understood this to mean that the bodies of stoned malefactors were subsequently hanged for public display to warn others. Some of them held that only blasphemers and idol worshippers were to be hanged.² But one of the Dead Sea Scrolls supports the use of hanging for certain crimes and may shed light on why Zemnarihah was hanged rather than stoned. The *Temple Scroll* calls for execution by hanging for the crime of treason:

If there were to be a spy against his people who betrays his people to a foreign nation or causes evil against his people, you shall hang him from a tree and he will die. . . . If there were a man with a sin punishable by death and he escapes amongst the nations and curses his people [and] the children of Israel, he also you shall hang on the tree and he will die. Their corpses shall not spend the night on the tree; instead you shall bury them that day because they are cursed by God and man, those hanged on a tree; thus you shall not defile the land which I give you for inheritance.³

The Gadianton band led by Zemnarihah consisted of “dissenters” who had turned against the Nephites (see Helaman 11:24–26; 3 Nephi 1:27–28). Giddianhi, Zemnarihah’s predecessor as leader of the band, admitted that his people had dissented from the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 3:9–11). It is also of interest that Giddianhi swore “with an oath” to destroy the Nephites (3 Nephi 3:8), clearly cursing the people as also mentioned in the *Temple Scroll*.

During the great war with the Lamanites, the Nephites regularly executed dissenters who refused to defend their country against enemy invasion (see Alma 51:15, 19–20; 62:6–10). Later, members of the Gadianton band were also executed if they did not renounce their evil ways and rejoin the Nephite nation (see 3 Nephi 5:4–5). We are not told how these traitors were executed, but the story of Zemnarihah, along with the evidence of the *Temple Scroll*, suggests that they may have been hanged.⁴

Research by John A. Tvedtnes, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (April 1997): 2.

Notes

1. John W. Welch has noted that Jewish law required that the tree on which a criminal was hanged be cut down and buried with the body, and he noted that the hanging was principally to suit the punishment to the crime. He further demonstrated the execrational nature of Zemnarihah’s execution. See “The Execution of

Zemnarihah,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 250–52, and his sources.

2. See Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot: The Commandments and Their Rationale* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 450–51, and his references.

3. *Temple Scroll*, (11Q19), col. 64, lines 6–13, in Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 178.

4. Some have wondered if Nehor may have been hanged, since Alma 1:15 speaks of him acknowledging his faults “between the heavens and the earth.” However, this may have reference to the fact that he had been taken “upon the top of the hill Manti.” In any event, we are merely told that “he suffered an ignominious death.”