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The Laws of Eshnunna and Nephite Economics

Author(s): John W. Welch

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THE LAWS OF ESHNUNNA AND NEPHITE ECONOMICS

"And the judge received for his wages according to his time . . . according to the law which was given. . . . A senu of silver was equal to a senine of gold, and either for a measure of barley." (Alma 11:3, 7)

In order for ancient economies to work effectively, kings spelled out the value of various commodities and established exchange ratios, especially between consumable goods and precious metals. For example, the Laws of Eshnunna, promulgated in Babylonia probably during the early eighteenth century B.C., instituted a system of weights and measures.

The following initial provisions stand at the head of Eshnunna's ancient law code:

1 kor of barley [*she'um*] is (priced) at [*ana*] 1 shekel of silver;

3 *qa* of "best oil" are (priced) at 1 shekel of silver;

1 seah (and) 2 *qa* of sesame oil are (priced) at 1 shekel of silver [and so on]. . . .

The hire for a wagon together with its oxen and its driver is 1 *massiktum* (and) 4 seah of barley. If it is (paid in) silver, the hire is one third of a shekel. He shall drive it the whole day.¹

These laws in the kingdom of Eshnunna allowed people to deal confidently with barley, silver, oil, lard, wool, salt, bitumen, and refined and unrefined copper—an immense step forward from the former bartering system.

Several parallels exist between these foundational parts of the law code of Eshnunna and King Mosiah's economic system found in Alma 11:3–19. First, their basic forms are comparable. For example, the standard phrasing "One kor of barley is (priced) at one shekel of silver" resembles "A senum of silver was equal to a senine of gold" (Alma 11:7).

Second, the primary conversion in ancient Babylonia was between barley and silver. Nine other provisions convert various additional commodities into silver values, followed by three more provisions that convert others into measures of barley. Thus, precious metal and grain measures were convertible into each other. The law of Mosiah featured the same conversion capability: the basic measure for either gold or silver was equated with "a measure of barley" (Alma 11:7).

Third, in Babylonia the basic commodity valuation system allowed traders to deal in a variety of commodities, all convertible into silver or barley. Similarly, Mosiah's system allowed traders to expand from silver, gold, or barley into "a measure of every kind of grain" (Alma 11:7).

Fourth, both economic systems were instituted by kings for similar announced reasons. The Laws of Eshnunna began with a royal superscription that probably proclaimed this standardization as instrumental in establishing justice, eliminating enmity, and protecting the weak. Likewise, King Mosiah enacted his laws expressly to establish peace and equality in the land (see Mosiah 29:38, 40).

Fifth, the ideal, practical motivation behind the Laws of Eshnunna seems to have been to undergird the rental market and to standardize values on daily wages and the computation of various damages and penalties. Similarly, a motivation for the economic part of King Mosiah's reforms was to provide a standard system under the new reign of

judges for the payment of judges on a daily basis: “a senine of gold for a day, or a senum of silver” (Alma 11:3).

In enacting his law, King Mosiah “did not reckon after the manner of the Jews who were at Jerusalem” (Alma 11:4), but he still utilized a system that drew on elements known in the ancient Near East. Such similarities between the Laws of Eshnunna (discovered and translated in the mid-twentieth century) and Mosiah’s economic system show yet another way in which the Book of Mormon presents a truly complex civilization with roots in ancient society.

Research by John W. Welch, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (December 1998): 2.

NOTE

1. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 161; see also Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1995), 59.