

When Is It Better for One Man to Perish Than an Entire Nation?

Key Scriptures 1 Nephi 4; 2 Samuel 20; 2 Kings 24

Explanation The Spirit told Nephi that the Lord had delivered Laban into Nephi's hands and that it was better for Laban to die than for an entire nation to perish because of unbelief (see 1 Nephi 4:11–13). Though this case is extremely rare, ancient Israelite law authorized the slaying of a particular man at least two other times. This chart compares Nephi's situation with two similar incidents found in the Bible: the beheading of the rebel Sheba and the execution of King Jehoiakim. Five conditions were present in each of these instances: The (1) recognized leader of Israel pronounced judgment upon a (2) specifically named person (3) guilty of some form of rebellion or disobedience that (4) would result in the destruction of at least part of Israel (5) unless the innocent people turned the traitor over for execution. Under these special circumstances, the law sanctioned the death of one instead of requiring innocent people to perish or be destroyed.

Source John W. Welch and Heidi Harkness Parker, "Better That One Man Perish," FARMS Update, *Insights* (June 1998): 2.

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	Five Conditions	Sheba 2 Samuel 20 ca. 1000 B.C.	Jehoiakim 2 Kings 24 ca. 598 B.C.	Laban 1 Nephi 4 ca. 597 B.C.
1	Judgment issued by the recognized leader of Israel	David (king of Israel)	Nebuchadnezzar (king of Judah)	Jehovah (king of all)
2	Person already guilty of offense against the leader	rebellion	treason	disobedience
3	Person specifically identified for death	Sheba named	Jehoiakim named	Laban delivered
4	Those surrendering person are innocent	city of Abel innocent	the council innocent	Nephi innocent
5	People face inevitable destruction if they refuse to surrender person	city of Abel attacked by Joab	Jerusalem threatened	nation would perish
	Result	Sheba beheaded	Jehoiakim taken to Babylon and presumably executed	Laban beheaded