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Reclaiming Jacob

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Reclaiming Jacob

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Abstract. A chapter of Adam Miller's Future Mormon *concerns Jacob's encounter with Sherem in Jacob 7. While novel, Miller's treatment of Jacob and Sherem appears inadequate. He overlooks features of the text that seem to subvert his unconventional conclusions about them. This essay identifies a number of such matters, falling in four major categories, and shares thoughts on the need for perspective when discussing Jacob's conduct — or the conduct of any prophet, for that matter. It also highlights the jeopardy we face of being the second group to fall for Sherem's lies.*

In Chapter 3 of his *Future Mormon,* Adam Miller recounts the famous meeting between Jacob and Sherem recorded in Jacob 7.[1] His treatment raises several issues. Most importantly, it asks us to rethink our understanding of Jacob and Sherem themselves. I will follow this invitation by first summarizing Miller's treatment of these two figures and then by discussing what appear to be four primary categories in which errors occur (although there are other difficulties that are more secondary in nature) and that lead to his conclusions about them. I will close with a discussion of the kind of perspective that is required for any evaluation of a prophet's conduct and with a distinction between a reading of scripture that is "deep" and one that is merely unconventional. Finally, I will have a comment about the risk we face of falling for Sherem's lies all over again.

1 Adam S. Miller, "Reading Signs or Repeating Symptoms: Reading Jacob 7," *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016).

Jacob and Sherem

In the course of retelling and analyzing the Jacob/Sherem encounter, Miller shares various conclusions about the two main participants. Sherem, for example, is more sympathetic than we are wont to think. His motivation in challenging Jacob was a concern that Jacob's doctrine of Christ was "perverting the law of Moses and misleading the people" (27).[2] In this regard, we learn that Sherem was no different than Laman and Lemuel — or than the populace of Jerusalem generally — who resisted Lehi because they were merely defending "the received tradition" and "the primacy of the law of Moses" (29). From this point of view "the imposition of any novel dreams, visions, or messianic revelations" was a corruption of God's law and ought to be contested (29). Sherem is thus eager to meet with Jacob, whom he "has to go looking for," and his interest in doing so is "apparently sincere" (27).

Jacob, on the other hand, is less admirable than we are typically inclined to think. Given Sherem's legitimate concerns and his apparent sincerity, "much of Jacob's treatment of Sherem feels shortsighted and unfair" (28). For example, when Sherem charges Jacob with blasphemy and perversion, "Jacob responds in kind" (27). Indeed, throughout their encounter Jacob appears more interested in "defending a certain kind of Christian doctrine than with enacting a certain kind of Christian behavior" (27). This, we are told, is "tragic." After all, in the very course of defending the doctrine of Christ, Jacob ironically fails to instantiate a central teaching of that doctrine — namely, that "Christian behavior is more important than any Christian ideas" (27). Thus, although Jacob defends the concept of Christ's love, "we hardly see him enacting that love" (27); indeed, "it may be true that Jacob never truly sees Sherem" (33).

According to Miller, the failure to enact this love is evident even before Jacob and Sherem meet. After all, Jacob doesn't seek to meet with Sherem; Sherem "has to go looking for Jacob and, apparently, has a hard time finding him" (27). This leads us to ask: "Where is Jacob? Why is he so hard to find? Why isn't he actively seeking out Sherem?" (27) Moreover, not only does Jacob invite God "to smite Sherem" (27), but Jacob turns out to be wrong in his prediction about how Sherem would respond to a sign from heaven (27–28, 33). Additionally, Jacob then apparently does nothing in the aftermath to "nourish" Sherem as he lies stricken, nor is he present, apparently, "to hear Sherem's deathbed

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all in-text citations are to pages in Miller's book.

confession" (27). Indeed, while Sherem's deathbed preaching "appears to be massively successful in a way that Jacob's own preaching was not," Jacob nevertheless takes the credit for this by attributing the successful outcome to his own prayers (28). Finally, Jacob closes out the account by taking a "parting jab" at Sherem, referring to him, even in the end, as a "wicked man" (28).

Much of Jacob's treatment is thus "unfair" and, even though Jacob defends the doctrine of Christ, "he doesn't seem to do it in a very Christ-like way" (28). Thus, one reviewer aptly summarizes Miller's view of Jacob in this way: "A deeper reading shows Jacob, in spite of being the Lord's authorized leader and defender of the faith, was wrong in assessing Sherem and probably overly harsh, aloof, and judgmental. His defense of the doctrine of Christ missed the Christlike behavior that is always more important than the theology."[3]

Problems in the Retelling

There would appear to be a number of difficulties with Miller's account of Jacob and Sherem, however. I will draw attention to some of these under the following four topics: Sherem's "sincerity," Jacob's "un-Christlike" behavior, Jacob's "false prediction" regarding signs, and Miller's reliance on a strand of psychoanalytic theory in his approach to Jacob and Sherem generally.

Sherem's "Sincerity"

As mentioned, Miller paints a more sympathetic picture of Sherem than we normally see. Sherem seems to Miller to be sincere. He is someone legitimately concerned with preserving the law of Moses against alien influences. Miller thus seems to join John Welch's observation that Sherem "may have contested Jacob's doctrines and interpretations of the law for thoroughly pious reasons."[4]

We want to take the most sympathetic view we can of scriptural figures, of course. Hastiness to accuse and condemn is not the disposition

3 Jeff Lindsay, "A Brighter Future for Mormon Theology: Adam S. Miller's *Future Mormon*," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture,* 21 (2016): 121–22. http:// www.mormon interpreter.com /a-brighter-future-for-mormon-theology -adam-s-millers-future-mormon/

4 John W. Welch, "The Case of Sherem," in *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008); http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=2238&index=6.

we should have toward anyone. Neither, however, should we overlook what the record actually tells us, and there are central elements of the text that work against this sympathetic portrayal of Sherem.

Sherem's Personal Characteristics

The first of these is the objective Sherem pursued, namely, to "overthrow the doctrine of Christ" (Jacob 7:2). Not only was this Sherem's goal, but he also "labored diligently" to accomplish it (Jacob 7:3). He also had great success; the record tells us, "he did lead away many hearts" through his efforts (Jacob 7:3).

On one level, of course, it might seem that "overthrowing the doctrine of Christ" is merely a corollary of "defending the law of Moses" and thus that it might not carry the sinister implication we would normally attach to such a description. But this seems less plausible the more we notice other features of the text. For example — and this is the second point — the record clearly displays Sherem's intellectual dishonesty. He denies, for example, that Jacob can know of the coming of Christ because, he says, it is not possible to "tell of things to come" (Jacob 7:7). But then Sherem contradicts this view and claims to know the future himself; he declares that he knows there is no Christ and that there neither has been a Christ "*nor ever will be*" (Jacob 7:9). So now he knows what he earlier told Jacob it is impossible to know.[5] Sherem denies and asserts the same proposition, according to the rhetorical needs of the moment.

Third, Jacob tells us that Sherem "had a perfect knowledge of the language of the people" and thus "had much power of speech," all of which Sherem used to teach things "which were flattering unto the people." Indeed, because of Sherem's learning and because of his facility with language, "he could use much flattery" to "overthrow the doctrine of Christ" and "lead away the hearts of the people" (Jacob 7:2–4). It is difficult to see Sherem as sincere when he appears to have relied on cheap toadyism as a primary means for influencing others.

Fourth, Jacob tells us that Sherem's talent (i.e., his "much power of speech") was specifically due "to the power of the devil" (Jacob 7:4). From this we learn that Sherem was not alone in his public conduct opposing Jacob but reflected the influence of Satan.

5 It is also interesting to note that Sherem effectively denies the reality of revelation (Jacob 7:5, 12, 13), and yet he asserts that the law of Moses, which is based upon earlier revelation, is "the right way" — an assertion that is an *affirmation* of revelation.

Sherem's "Tone"

Sherem also exhibits a tone toward Jacob that generally would not be correlated with sincerity or innocence of intent. For example, he addresses Jacob as "Brother Jacob" — and then proceeds to accuse him of leading the people astray, of claiming to know of Christ whom "ye *say*" will come in many hundred years, and of committing "blasphemy" in what he is teaching (Jacob 7:6–7). "Brother Jacob," juxtaposed with such harsh accusation, feels like an ironic form of sycophancy: a thin veneer of friendliness covering an underlying hostility. Then, after Jacob testifies of what he knows by the power of the Holy Ghost — namely, of the reality of Christ and of the necessity of his Atonement — Sherem challenges Jacob to perform a miracle "by this power of the Holy Ghost, *in the which ye know so much*" (Jacob 7:13). Again, Sherem seems arrogant and insulting — a conclusion that is supported by what else we know about him: his purpose of overthrowing the doctrine of Christ, his intellectual dishonesty, his crass manipulation of the populace, and his affiliation with Satan.

Defending the Law of Moses and Similarity to Laman and Lemuel

All these reports make it difficult to imagine that Sherem's appeal to the law of Moses was sincere and that his defense of it was motivated by piety. It seems more likely that his defense of the Mosaic law was a pretext — a convenient smokescreen he exploited to obscure his actual intent: simply attacking the doctrine of Christ. That Sherem's defense of the law was insincere in this way is supported by Miller's comparison of Sherem to Laman and Lemuel. "Sherem," he tells us, "like Laman, Lemuel, and the people in Jerusalem, is a defender of the received tradition. In particular, Sherem, like Laman and Lemuel, is keen to defend the primacy of the law of Moses against the imposition of any novel dreams, visions, or messianic revelations" (29). This description, of course, presupposes that Laman and Lemuel were not motivated in their conduct primarily by hardheartedness, resentment at the loss of their riches, and anger at Nephi's leadership role (which are the explanations offered by Nephi — e.g., 1 Nephi 2:11, 18; 2 Nephi 5:1–3). Instead, they were motivated by the understandable desire to safeguard the law of Moses from corrupting influences like dreams and visions and messianic revelations.[6]

6 Neal Rappleye suggests this kind of approach to Laman and Lemuel in his "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for

But this point of view faces three fundamental hurdles.

First, since the Lord himself spoke of Laman and Lemuel's difficulties in terms of "rebellion" (1 Nephi 2:21–23), it seems evident that *he* did not think Laman and Lemuel were sincere in their attitudes and that they were merely mistaken. Nor did their father. Lehi implored Laman and Lemuel to awake from "the sleep of hell" and to "shake off the awful chains" — chains, he says, that lead to "the eternal gulf of misery and woe" (2 Nephi 1:13). Both of these reports support Nephi's explanation of Laman and Lemuel. "Hardheartedness," "rebellion," "the sleep of hell," "awful chains," "gulf of misery and woe" — these are not the expressions one typically uses to address innocent-but-sincere mistakenness. And these are the words of those who knew Laman and Lemuel personally and well — Nephi, Lehi, and the Lord.

Second, although the Book of Mormon recounts on numerous occasions the hatred the Lamanites held for Nephi and his descendants,[7] the motivation for this is never associated with a dispute over the law of Moses. On the other hand, we see explicit complaints from Lamanites about Nephi's "robbery" of the plates of brass at the time he separated from Laman and Lemuel upon arriving in the promised land (Mosiah 10:16; Alma 20:13), as well as his similar "robbery" of family authority that "rightly belonged" to Laman and Lemuel (Alma 54:17). Indeed, this perceived usurpation of authority is one of the reasons Laman and Lemuel sought to kill Nephi (2 Nephi 5:3) and is central to the multiple "wrongs" that descendants of Laman and Lemuel attributed to Nephi's treatment of his brothers (Mosiah 10: 12–16). Such complaints regarding robbery of the plates and of family authority would explain the generational hatred of the Lamanites for the Nephites and is plausibly the content of the "wicked tradition" that is reported multiple times to have been held by the Lamanites.[8] It is clearly evident that Laman and Lemuel passed down the charge that Nephi mistreated them in more than one way, but there is no evidence that they perpetuated a complaint that Nephi and Lehi were disloyal to the law of Moses. Perhaps they did perpetuate

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the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture,* 16 (2015): 87–99, http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/the-deuteronomist-reforms-and-lehis-family-dynamics-a-social-context-for-the-rebellions-of-laman-and-lemuel/.

7 See, for example: Jacob 3:7; 7:24; Enos 1:14, 20; Jarom 1:6; Mosiah 10:17; Mosiah 1:14; 28:2; Alma 26:9, 3, 13; and 4 Nephi1:39.

8 See, for example: Mosiah 10:12; Alma 23:3; 60:32; and Helaman 15:4.

that charge, but unlike the complaint regarding Nephi's treatment, any evidence of it is difficult to find.

Third, if Laman and Lemuel had been motivated by sincerely held religious ideology, and if one part of that ideology had led them to reject the idea of visions, then it is difficult to explain Laman and Lemuel's reaction once they had a vision of their own (1 Nephi 3:28–31). In the aftermath of that event one would expect them to *reject* their previous ideology — since their own visionary experience straightforwardly disproved it — and to embrace Lehi and his teachings. We would expect them to continue with the same sincere determination to do right that they they had before, but now with regard to the truth they had learned through their own divine visitation. But of course Laman and Lemuel did nothing like this. Their behavior did not remotely change following their vision. This reality strongly disconfirms the claim that their rebellion was traceable to a concern with doctrine in the first place. Instead, all the evidence points to Nephi's own explanation, corroborated by both Lehi and the Lord: at heart they were stiffnecked and rebellious.

In trying, then, to support the claim that Sherem was sincere in his assertions about the law, it does not help to compare his motivations with Laman and Lemuel's. That comparison compromises the claim rather than reinforcing it. If Sherem was truly similar to Laman and Lemuel, as Miller believes, this in itself constitutes additional reason to reject the idea of Sherem's sincerity.

A look at the text thus presents Sherem as one who was intellectually dishonest and who relied on vulgar manipulation to lead people away from Christ. In addition, Sherem's very tone suggests his condescension, not his sincerity, including his arrogant demand for a sign. And not only does Jacob state explicitly that Sherem was influenced by Satan, but also we have every reason to believe his appeal to the law of Moses was just another form of intellectual dishonesty; it served as a convenient pretext for his actual intent of attacking the doctrine of Christ.

It is in regard to *this* man that Miller asks, "Where is Jacob? Why is he so hard to find? Why isn't he actively seeking out Sherem?" But it doesn't seem hard to imagine the answer. Jacob has far better things to do. There are people to serve whom he actually *can* serve. Jacob already knows much about Sherem (Jacob 7:1–4) and presumably he can see, as we all can see, what the probable outcome of any meeting with such a dissembling mountebank will be. Since there are plenty of sincere people to be helped, it would seem a poor use of resources to pass them by in order to meet with someone who is manifestly *in*sincere.

The Possibility of Bias and the Need for a Second Witness

A natural question to raise about all this, of course, is whether or not Jacob has a bias that influences his description of Sherem. If we think (as Miller does) that Jacob is predisposed to condemn Sherem, then his judgments about Sherem can hardly be taken as independent evidence of Sherem's ignobility. *Of course* he would charge Sherem with being a liar and an instrument of Satan. Miller does not make this point, but it is a natural objection to the kind of defense of Jacob offered. The defense risks circularity. Thus, if we think Jacob could be biased, it is only sensible to require additional evidence for his descriptions of Sherem; we need a second witness. I will have more to say about distrust of Jacob later, but for now let's grant the point: we need an additional witness to confirm what Jacob purports about Sherem's character.

The reality is that we have such a second witness. It is Sherem himself. Once he sees the error of his ways, Sherem states plainly that he "had been deceived by the power of the devil" and that he had even "lied unto God" (Jacob 7:18–19). Because of his lie, Sherem tells us, "I fear lest I have committed the unpardonable sin," and again says, "because I have thus lied unto God I greatly fear lest my case shall be awful" (Jacob 7:19).

Notice that Sherem does not speak here of his past sincerity. He does not refer to his prior conduct as innocent and well-intentioned. He does not talk of having a sincere but mistaken attitude toward the law of Moses. Instead he speaks plainly of lying unto God, of having been influenced by the devil, and of fearing that he is beyond forgiveness for all that he has done. It is the frank admission of a life of deceit, a confession that in the end amounts to something like, "I talked a pretty convincing talk, but Jacob was right about me."

In the end Sherem sees himself as Jacob had seen him. Sherem is Jacob's second witness.

There is a third witness, too, of course. It is the Lord. If we are inclined to discount the testimonies of Jacob and of Sherem, we are still left to explain the Lord's striking Sherem *dead*. Surely it tells us a lot (doesn't it?) that the Lord's reaction to Sherem was to kill him. This would seem to qualify as a suitable additional witness of what we learn from Jacob and from Sherem himself about Sherem's character.[9]

9 Stopping at this point in answering the objection will not seem satisfactory to some. After all, we learn of Sherem's statements and of the Lord's actions only because Jacob himself tells us of them. But if Jacob's descriptions of Sherem are in question in the first place, it does not seem sufficient to remove such doubt by simply relying on *other* things Jacob tells us. That just seems to exacerbate the

Jacob's "Un-Christlike" Behavior

As mentioned in the beginning, Miller also sees Jacob differently than we normally see him. He believes Jacob's treatment of Sherem feels "unfair" and that Jacob doesn't deal with Sherem "in a very Christ-like way" (28). It is true, of course, that no one is perfect, and this includes prophets. But that does not mean we shouldn't be careful when considering such evaluations. Just as there are central elements of the text that oppose a sympathetic portrayal of Sherem, there are three central elements of scripture that oppose a critical portrayal of Jacob.

The first of these is Jacob's report that, before he said a word to Sherem, "behold, the Lord God poured in his Spirit into my soul" (Jacob 7:8). This is significant. Jacob was not acting merely as a man in his encounter with Sherem but was under the direct and powerful influence of the Lord.

Second, if we want to say Jacob's defense of the doctrine of Christ did not express Christlike behavior, then we are forced to ask questions about the Savior himself. After all, in a single denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees Jesus called them "hypocrites" eight times, "fools" twice, "blind" four times, referred to them as "full of hypocrisy and iniquity," and ended by calling them "serpents," a "generation of vipers," and by asking: "How can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matt. 23:13–33). By the definition of "Christlike behavior" assumed by Miller in his discussion of Jacob, Christ himself was not Christlike in this treatment of the scribes and Pharisees. And of course multiple additional examples could be cited — cases in which the Savior himself would fail, in this analysis at least, to qualify as Christlike.

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circularity. However, while this might seem like a reasonable complaint on the surface, it is hard to see how it can be maintained by anyone who explicitly avows the authority of scripture. To recognize such authority regarding the Book of Mormon (for example) is to be bound by that book's characterization of itself and of the spiritual figures that populate its pages. This means that we care very much what the text says and that it would be self-contradictory to then pick and choose what to accept *regardless* of what it says. Whatever our outward avowals might be, such an ad hoc approach to interpretation (believing Jacob on this, disbelieving him on that, etc.) would be a tacit *dis*avowal of scriptural authority. By the same logic we could dismiss Mormon, Moroni, Joseph Smith — anyone we wanted. But to do so would simply signal that we actually reject rather than accept the idea of scriptural authority, whatever our particular ad hoc interpretations might be. In discussing Jacob, I, like Miller, am assuming an audience that accepts the canonicity and spiritual authority of the Book of Mormon and other Standard Works. Those who do not are an audience for another occasion.

A certain assumption is made in Miller's judgment about what constitutes Christlike behavior, and there would seem to be every reason to think it is mistaken.

Third, if Jacob was unfair in assessing Sherem, and overly harsh (i.e., unloving and un-Christlike) in his treatment of him, then, again, it is interesting that the Lord himself struck Sherem *dead*. If it is to be said that Jacob was unduly harsh, then it would seem the same must be said of the Lord. It is the Lord, after all, who determined that Sherem would be lethally smitten, not Jacob (Jacob 7:14). Further, if it is to be said that Jacob "never truly sees Sherem" (33) and that he doesn't actually address Sherem the person but addresses only an abstraction — "a Christ-denier" (31) — then, in light of the Lord's actions, it would seem the same must be said of the Lord. Whatever Jacob did, the Lord did the same, and more.

In short, it is difficult to complain about Jacob's reaction to Sherem when the Lord's reaction was to kill him.

This point, of course, is relevant to that just made regarding Christlike behavior. After all, since Christ is the God of the Book of Mormon, it was Christ who killed Sherem — and yet, based on Miller's characterization of Jacob, this would seem to fall in the category of un-Christlike behavior. Again, it would appear that the assumption about what constitutes Christlike conduct must be faulty, since Christ himself fails to satisfy it more than once.

In sum, this is what we learn about Sherem — he is laboring diligently and with flattery to lead people away from Christ; he accuses Jacob of blasphemy; he ridicules Jacob's prophecies regarding the coming of Christ; he is so intellectually dishonest that he can deny the possibility of anyone's knowing the future while simultaneously claiming to know it himself; and he demands a sign from Jacob "by this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye know so much" (Jacob 7:13). None of this is consistent with the picture of Sherem as innocent, sincere, or genuinely concerned with a spiritual defense of the law of Moses.

We learn this about Jacob: he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord in speaking to Sherem; nothing in his conduct can reasonably be considered un-Christlike; Sherem ultimately admitted that Jacob had been right about him; and finally, the Lord evidently saw Sherem the same way Jacob saw him — which is why he killed him.

Jacob's "False Prediction" Regarding Signs

The treatment of the matter of "signs" seems similarly problematic. Miller reports that Jacob was wrong in his prediction about Sherem's reaction to a sign. Jacob had said that a sign would not affect Sherem, and yet when Sherem did receive a sign, he acknowledged his deception and the wrongfulness of his conduct. Thus, Jacob was wrong in his prediction (27–28, 33). This failed prediction may seem particularly significant to some: if Jacob was wrong about *x* regarding Sherem, then he could also have been wrong about *a*, *b*, and *c* (for example, Sherem's wickedness and deceit).

All this, however, seems to overlook important features of the text and thus to give Jacob too little credit.

First, we don't actually need additional evidence that Jacob was right about Sherem's wickedness. As we saw earlier, the Lord and Sherem himself both corroborate Jacob's judgment. There is no aspect of Jacob's earlier evaluation of Sherem that is in doubt.

Second, it is at least relevant that Jacob reports being under the influence of the Spirit in his conversation with Sherem. It is possible to ask exactly what this entails about Jacob's state during the encounter (Does it mean he can't make a mistake? Does it mean he can make one kind of mistake, but not another? And so forth.), but at a minimum it prohibits *casually* reaching the conclusion that he was mistaken. The role of the Spirit cannot be overlooked when thinking about the matter, but Miller seems to do so.

Third, it is important to notice the context of the discussion about signs. It is Sherem who raises the issue in the first place, challenging Jacob to perform a miracle "by this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye know so much" (Jacob 7:13). Note that Jacob reports earlier in his record that his people experienced dramatic miracles. He records that "we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea" (Jacob 4:6). Moreover, in speaking to Sherem, he specifically refers to numerous divine experiences by saying simply: "I have heard and seen" (Jacob 7:12). All this forms the background for Sherem's demand for a sign: wondrous miracles are known among Jacob's people and Jacob himself speaks regarding miraculous experiences of "seeing and hearing." When Sherem insists on a sign, the only reasonable assumption is that he is asking for some wonderful occurrence that fits in this context, something dramatic — perhaps with trees, mountains, or the sea — that he can either hear or see. That is what we *all* think of as a sign.

It is in this context that Jacob straightforwardly refuses. He *won't* deliver a sign. He says: "What am I that I should tempt God to show unto thee a sign in the thing which thou knowest to be true?" He adds that Sherem will deny the sign he is asking for in any case "because thou art of the devil" (Jacob 7:14). Again, Jacob — by his report, acting under the influence of the Spirit — is calling Sherem out as a liar. Sherem is a dissembler (as he later admits), and Jacob refuses to indulge his dishonesty and manipulation by complying with his disingenuous demand for a sign.

But then Jacob changes the subject. He has already said that he won't supply the miracle Sherem is demanding. But then, as if responding to a prompting, he says "nevertheless, not my will be done." He then adds that "if God shall smite thee, let *that* be a sign unto thee" (Jacob 7:14). This is the second time Jacob uses the word "sign," but it is not in response to *Sherem's* idea of a sign — the kind of sign in which some miraculous spectacle occurs and which Jacob says will not make a difference. It is in response to the idea of God's *killing* Sherem. This, it would seem, makes everything different. After all, when Sherem demands a sign and Jacob refuses to comply, they are both assuming a certain type of miracle. It is against this background that Jacob says Sherem won't change and admit he's wrong.

But this background is no longer relevant once the Lord decides to slay Sherem. That decision *changes* the background. It is an example of what the Lord later explained to Joseph Smith, namely, that signs (such as the miraculous events enjoyed by Jacob and his people) follow those who believe — rather than preceding their belief — and that to those who merit God's anger, "he showeth no signs*, only in wrath unto their condemnation*" (D&C 63:9, 11). Here the Lord explicitly distinguishes between the types of signs he gives, and Sherem obviously falls under the second type. We are thus in an altogether different realm of miracle and "sign-giving" from what Sherem had assumed and Jacob had rejected. The sign the Lord has in mind is distinctive, and it has a distinctive purpose. Subsequent events, therefore, do not falsify Jacob's prediction; the Lord's decision to kill Sherem simply renders Jacob's prediction moot. It no longer applies because the situation in which Jacob made the prediction no longer exists.

Thus, even though Jacob uses the word "sign" both times, he uses it in two different senses, just as the Lord does. That, it seems, is why he says the second time, "let *that* be a sign unto thee" (Jacob 7:14). He is expressing exactly the principle the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith. In

essence he is saying: "You're not getting the kind of sign we were talking about. Instead, as a result of his wrath and his condemnation of you, God is going to smite and kill you. But you can *count* that as a sign since signs matter so much to you." To all appearances Jacob is completely ironic: using a word of Sherem's choosing but, because it is a word that has different meanings, he uses it to mean something different from what Sherem means. It is the kind of irony employed more than once by the Savior in his earthly ministry.[10]

In short, there are important and compelling reasons to reject the conclusion that Jacob was wrong in his prediction. This conclusion overlooks the role of the Spirit in Jacob's conduct, the shifting context in the discussion about signs, and the distinction the Lord himself draws regarding the signs he delivers. By overlooking such matters, the conclusion gives Jacob too little credit and is, I think, unfair to him.

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10 For instance, in speaking to a blind man whom he had healed, the Savior said (in the presence of Pharisees): "For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind" (John 9:39). Jesus equivocates on the meaning of the word "see," sometimes using it one way and sometimes another, all in condemnation of the Pharisees' spiritual blindness. Hearing his statement to the blind man, the Pharisees ask of Jesus: "Are we blind also?" whereupon the Savior answers: "If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (John 9:40–41). Here Jesus adds another layer of equivocation, using "not seeing" or "blind" to mean "not accountable" — and since the Pharisees claim to "see," it follows from their own implied assertion that they *are* accountable and therefore that their sin "remaineth." All of this is deftly ironic. Jesus alters the meaning of terms mid-conversation and even mid-sentence, all in order to convey something different from what both he *and the Pharisees* are saying literally and all in order to condemn the Pharisees. We will think Jesus is contradicting himself if we fail to notice the irony in this — i.e., if we think he is speaking literally in every use of the word "see" or "blindness." But since we appreciate that he is equivocating in his use of these terms — and equivocating even in the meaning he applies to the Pharisees' use of their *own* term — we see that he is not contradicting himself but speaking ironically in order to condemn the Pharisees. He is similarly speaking ironically when he says, "they that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick" (Matthew 9:12) and "he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than [John the Baptist]" (Luke 7:28). Taken literally his words mean one thing, but underneath, their meanings are entirely different. In all these cases Jesus is using language ironically in order to condemn those who rejected him.

Reliance on a Strand of Psychoanalytic Theory

A "Brand" of Analysis

The final matter I will mention is Miller's reliance on psychoanalytic theory for framing and informing his analysis of Jacob and Sherem. I will address this directly in a moment, but I think it helps to appreciate that this approach is a species of a more general intellectual phenomenon — a basic "brand" of analysis. It is the style of picking a cardinal notion of one kind or another (from philosophy or psychology, for example) and then, without demonstrating why that particular concept is correct in the first place, reading the scriptural text through its lens. This *a priori* reliance on ideas from non-scriptural disciplines can seem appealing, but it is always risky. While the approach can appear promising and innocent enough to begin with — and can seem to produce useful insights — it is all too easy for the purpose of our study to morph unwittingly from examining carefully what the text itself says to subtly imposing our intellectual notion *on* the text. To the degree this occurs, the imposition inevitably ends up distorting some elements of scripture and overlooking others. This becomes evident when we examine the claims carefully and from a comprehensive point of view: the more we consider all the relevant elements of scripture the less plausible the claims seem. The discoveries we appear to have gained come to appear less and less like genuine insights *into* the text and more and more like unintentional alterations *of* the text.

This kind of thing happens when authors seek to impose a pacifist template on scripture, for example. To sustain the standard pacifist view — namely, that "participation in and support for war is always impermissible"[11] — too many elements of scripture must be overlooked or distorted; it is a forced fit. That people sometimes persist in their pacifist claims despite the insuperable difficulties demonstrates their dedication to be *a priori* in nature: it is less derived from scripture than imposed on it.[12] The same kind of phenomenon is evident in the attempt to apply René Girard's sweeping theory of cultural scapegoating to Nephi's slaying of Laban. The effort is based on a logical error that renders the application vacuous, but some nevertheless prefer this conceptual template as the

11 Martin Ceadel, *Thinking about Peace and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5.

12 This matter is treated at length elsewhere. See Duane Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015).

lens through which to understand Nephi, despite its ultimate futility.[13] In a similar vein, not long ago two authors viewed Joseph Smith through a psychoanalytic lens, seeking to explain his life through that conceptual framework.[14] Unfortunately, there is too much about the Prophet that must be distorted or overlooked to explain his life in psychoanalytic terms. Moreover, there is too much that is intellectually questionable about psychoanalytic theory itself to justify this as a starting point in the first place.[15]

A Strand of Psychoanalytic Theory

All this — the adoption of a key concept that supplies the lens through which we view a subject and the unhappy consequences that follow from it — seem to be evident in Miller's analysis of Jacob and Sherem. An ever-present element in his discussion is his reliance on a particular strand of psychoanalytic theory. Nowhere, however, does Miller seem to argue for the soundness of psychoanalytic theory in general, much less for his favored version of it. We encounter a string of statements explicating the point of view, but we get no arguments for why we should accept them. Since multiple psychological constructs exist that purport to provide a deep explanation of human behavior, one wonders why Miller chooses this one. For that matter, one wonders why he chooses one at all. What reasons can be given for viewing any psychological construct as so near the truth that we are willing to adopt it as our organizing principle for understanding the scriptures? If there are such reasons, Miller does not appear to offer them.

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13 For example, see Eugene England, "Healing and Making Peace, in the Church and the World" and "Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon," in Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995) 1–22 and 131–55, respectively. See also Joshua Madson, "A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon," in Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman, eds., *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 13–28. I address the vacuity of the application in *Even unto Bloodshed*, 142–47.

14 Richard D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1999); and Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

15 Two reviews challenge these biographies as well as their reliance on psychoanalytic theory (which, of course, has encountered withering criticism down the decades). For the reviews, see Michael D. Jibson, "Korihor Speaks, or the Misinterpretation of Dreams," *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1 (2002): 223–60; and Andrew H. Hedges and W. Dawson Hedges, "No, Dan, That's Still Not History," *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005).

In any event, Miller takes a particular psychoanalytic approach to investigating Jacob and Sherem. If I understand him, we comprehend Jacob if we comprehend the "hole" created in him by the wound in his family — the psychological fissure between Laman and Lemuel and the rest of Lehi's household. This original wound, or "primal scene," provides the psychological template for the rest of Jacob's life. Fundamentally, his subsequent interactions with others are reenactments of the formative conflict with Laman and Lemuel. His relationships with these later figures are manifestations of transference — the psychological conveyance of the dynamics of that early relationship into these later ones. Thus, we understand Jacob when we understand that, in treating Sherem the way he does, Jacob is simply reenacting his conflictual relationship with Laman and Lemuel. That is why Sherem is a mere abstraction to Jacob — why Jacob can't really "see" him. (It is also why Sherem similarly can't see Jacob. Whatever its origins, Sherem is merely reenacting a primal scene of his own.) Jacob fails to see Sherem because, psychologically, he is not really dealing with Sherem but rather with the ghosts of his own brothers.

Attempting to Explain Jacob's "Un-Christlike" Behavior

All this is thought to explain why Jacob treats Sherem in an un-Christlike way: his doing so is the natural outgrowth of the original family wound Jacob has borne throughout his life and that he continues to bear. His mistreatment is a species of psychological reenactment tragically displayed.

The core difficulty with this approach, however (although there are secondary difficulties I will ignore), is that it is intended to explain something that doesn't exist. It purports to explain why Jacob is so un-Christlike toward Sherem, but once we read the text carefully, we see there is nothing to explain. As already illustrated, Jacob is *not* un-Christlike toward Sherem. For reasons previously mentioned, Sherem is not an innocent and sympathetic figure whom Jacob mistreats. Sherem is a spiritually dangerous charlatan who ends up confessing his life of deceit and who dies at the hands of the Lord himself. Jacob treats Sherem the way Christ treats the Pharisees.[16]

16 Of course, if one were *totally* committed to applying this psychoanalytic approach to all matters spiritual, it would seem one could argue that Christ's conduct toward the Pharisees was itself a manifestation of the same psychological dynamic. His harsh treatment of them was simply a reenactment of his own formative conflict in the pre-earth life — with a difficult brother of his own — and

But it is not only that this approach ends up explaining something that doesn't exist — i.e., Jacob's un-Christlike behavior — it is also that this approach seems to have created the idea of Jacob's un-Christlike behavior in the first place. The elements of the text outlined earlier seem evident enough, for example. These include all the reasons for understanding Sherem to be wicked and all the reasons for understanding Jacob not to be un-Christlike. But this makes it hard to imagine that such reasons would have been overlooked if they had not been obscured by the very way the text was read — the lens through which it was seen in the first place.

The problem with such distortion is that if our psychological theory creates what we see in Jacob's behavior in the first place, it is not much of an achievement that it then seems to explain what we see. It is true that the theory tells us how to explain what we see, but only after it has already told us *what* to see. In cases like this the theory itself is the source of what it is thought to explain and therefore is effectively (and surreptitiously) only explaining itself. Such theoretical circularity might, to some degree, be an unavoidable property of the most sweeping and complex theories, but at least in empirical disciplines these theories are tested against their capacity to predict new observations. That is less the case when the task is merely to analyze a handful of verses in one scriptural account. Here, what circularity exists seems less justifiable and therefore would also seem to be less acceptable from an intellectual perspective.

Attempting to Explain Jacob's "Newfound Concern and Hope"

A similar difficulty is apparent in the claim with which Miller ends his discussion of Jacob and Sherem: "Then [following the death of Sherem], for the first time in decades, Jacob dares to hope that his brothers [Laman and Lemuel] aren't lost forever. This is the doctrine of Christ" (33).[17] Miller opens this section by saying the ideas in it will be speculative. Nevertheless, he proceeds on the basis that he is reading the text itself straightforwardly and speculating only in his inferences from it. Thus he notes that immediately after recording the episode regarding

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of the wound this primal scene constituted for him even as he passed from the pre-earth existence to this earthly one. The Pharisees simply bore the brunt of the Savior's unresolved animosity toward his brother. Scripturally, this is absurd, but it is not hard to imagine someone seriously entertaining the idea.

17 In the same paragraph Miller makes two other claims about what Jacob did "for the first time in decades." Although my objection applies to all three instances, for brevity's sake I will address only one.

Sherem, Jacob reports that "many means were devised to reclaim and restore the Lamanites" (Jacob 7:24). Miller finds this concern with the Lamanites significant because it seems to be a new concern for Jacob, a concern which Miller sees as tied to a newfound hope that Jacob also has regarding Laman and Lemuel: namely, that they aren't lost forever. We are told that all of this is true "for the first time in decades" and that all of it is explained by the theory Miller applies to the text: because of Sherem's role as psychological surrogate for Laman and Lemuel, his confession permits Jacob to see his brothers afresh, giving birth to a newfound hope for them.

But there would seem to be a difficulty with this approach. After all, it is one thing to speculate on one matter or another based on what a text *says*. That is fair enough and completely legitimate if we take into account all the other statements and episodes in scripture related to it. But it is another matter to speculate on what we have only *speculated* that the text says, particularly when that speculation seems to be unwitting.

That would seem to be the case here. The text itself never says or even suggests that Jacob's concern for the Lamanites is new or that he has this hope "for the first time in decades." Since this is the first time Jacob mentions reclaiming the Lamanites in his brief etchings on the plates, Miller assumes it must be the first time in decades he has even thought about it. But this seems to be a pretty clear non sequitur. Jacob pens only a few thousand words in the Book of Mormon, whereas over the course of his life to this point he has had millions of thoughts — if not billions. Based on the infinitesimal ratio of Jacob's engravings to Jacob's thoughts, it is impossible to know what concern/hope Jacob has had "for the first time in decades" — or for that matter, what previous attempts he has made to reclaim the Lamanites. Any assertion of this sort is a huge logical leap without any substantiation in the text.

This means that here, too (just as in the effort to explain Jacob's un-Christlike behavior), Miller appears to apply his psychoanalytic theory in order to explain something that doesn't exist. The appeal to a psychological dynamic — one that renders Sherem a role player in the larger subliminal drama unfolding between Jacob and his brothers — is intended to explain why Jacob suddenly develops a new concern for the Lamanites and new hope for Laman and Lemuel in the aftermath of Sherem's confession. But the text actually reports no such change in Jacob. The only reason Miller has for asserting it would thus seem to be that he is in possession of a theory that *invites* him to assert it: the idea

is not found in the actual record but in the interpolation Miller makes based on the theory he is applying to the record.

This manifests the same kind of circularity we saw in the previous section. The theory seems to provide an explanation for something in the text, but that feature of the text wouldn't exist if the theory itself hadn't planted it there through its influence on our reading in the first place. The theory is used to provide insight into something that doesn't exist *without* the theory. Thus, again as seen in the previous section, the theory tells us how to explain what we see but only after that very conceptual framework has already told us *what* to see — which means that what we see actually presupposes the very theory then claimed to provide an independent explanation for it. In a tight logical circle, the theory is effectively doing nothing more than explaining itself — and *that's* why it appears to be insightful: it is confirmation bias all the way down.

In the end it seems unlikely that many will find such self-validation in scriptural interpretation to be satisfying.

The examples of Jacob's purported un-Christlike behavior and of his newfound concern/hope both demonstrate the risks inherent in Miller's approach. All analyses face the same risks when they begin with some concept from the academic world and then adopt it *a priori* as the lens through which to read and understand scripture. The lens itself can exercise a distorting influence — for example, by imposing a certain view on our very reading of the text — and thus destine us to conclusions that are mistaken. As we read more carefully, the discoveries we seem to have gained gradually appear less and less like insights, and more and more like oversights and even mistakes.

Additional difficulties could be identified that also manifest this risky approach to interpretation, but those I have mentioned should suffice to give a flavor of the kind of difficulties they would be.

Perspective in Thinking about Jacob

In the final analysis, it would seem that any discussion of Jacob should begin with context — with an appreciation of who this man was. He was a prophet, he saw angels, he saw the Lord, he received revelations, he was filled with the Spirit, the Lord spoke to him audibly, and his words have been canonized as part of God's beckoning to the world in the latter days.[18] He was also someone who could report that "our faith becometh

18 See, for example: 2 Nephi 6–10; 2 Nephi 11:3; Jacob 7:5; and Jacob 1–7. Although the Book of Mormon does not specifically designate Jacob as a "prophet,"

unshaken, insomuch that we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea" (Jacob 4:6).

It seems impossible to have perspective on anything Jacob did without having this perspective on who he was. Most people have not been called as prophets, have not seen angels, have not had the Lord appear to them, have not performed miracles with trees and mountains and "the waves of the sea," and have not had their words canonized as part of God's word to the world. It would seem that people who have had no such experiences are not well situated to comment on those who have. It can be done to a degree, but it is not easy. Certainly it is folly to do so without careful examination and appreciation of the person being examined *and* of (1) God's eternal purposes, (2) his dealings with mortals generally, and (3) the workings of the Spirit. (The most obvious example of this, of course, is found in critics of Joseph Smith. Not understanding who he was, they have no hope of understanding what he did. Yet still they try.) In thinking about what constitutes Christlike behavior, for example — and in evaluating if a prophet meets that standard — a large number of incidents and passages must be considered. A vague sense about the Lord's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, would be wholly inadequate. To consider the actions of a prophet in light of the standard of Christ, one must know a lot about the prophet (including his circumstances) *and* a lot about Christ.

In short, an immense gap typically exists between prophets and the persons who decide to write about them. It is not possible to close that gap completely, but in the case of ancient prophets, at an absolute minimum one must at least *try* by: (1) first appreciating who the prophet *was*, (2) paying close attention to what the text itself expresses, and (3) accurately reporting what the text expresses. When we do all these, I think we will find it difficult to report, for example, that Jacob took credit from

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this is not sufficient to disqualify him from that designation. Nephi, for example, specifically says that the Nephite records would be kept by prophets (1 Nephi 19:4), a class that obviously includes Jacob. Moreover, Nephi himself is nowhere specifically designated as a prophet, nor are Mormon, Moroni, the brother of Jared, Adam, Enoch, Isaac, or Isaac's son Jacob. Our view of what constitutes a prophet is not determined by whether or not scripture uses that specific *word* to identify people; it is determined by how the Lord uses those *persons*. Did they have spiritual authority over a people, for example? Are they treated as official representatives of God? Are their teachings canonized and considered authoritative? These kinds of questions determine whether we classify individuals as prophets, not whether they are specifically so designated.

Sherem and improperly attributed spiritual success to his own prayers rather than to Sherem who is the one who really deserves it. It is hard to comprehend fully the prayers of a man who has seen the Lord, received significant revelations, entertained angels, and experienced miracles regarding trees, mountains, and the sea. Whatever else we do, we cannot afford (can we?) to be casual in dismissing the prayers — and the reports — of a man like *that*.

This leads me to say: Attempting moral evaluations of prophets' conduct might not be inherently illegitimate from an academic perspective, but surely the risks are high in doing so. Gaining the appropriate perspective on someone who has qualified to stand in the presence of God would seem to pose inherent and unusually challenging difficulties. How does one who has not qualified to stand in the presence of God take the measure of one who has? It is a cause for marvel, and the Lord seems to me to share this same sense of wonder. Aaron and Miriam once thought to criticize Moses, for example. In response to their censure the Lord simply rehearsed his intimate relationship with that great prophet, and then asked them: "Wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (Numbers 12:8) Wherefore, indeed.

"Deep" Reading of Scripture

Finally, it is a matter of interest that one reviewer refers more than once to Miller's reading as "deep,"[19] and it is possible that others feel the same. But this is a claim to be made with care. An unconventional reading of scripture is not equivalent to a deep reading of scripture. The treatment considered here of Jacob and Sherem is an example. It is not the only one, of course, since unconventional readings are not inherently difficult to create. If someone wants to try, all he or she really has to do is ignore parts of the text.

Some, for instance, have thought that Nephi in later years came to regret his slaying of Laban and to feel remorse for it. Others have come to consider Nephi's killing to be an act of murder — indeed, as an act that was responsible for centuries of subsequent violence in Nephite society.

19 Jeff Lindsay, "A Brighter Future for Mormon Theology: Adam S. Miller's Future Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture,* 21 (2016): 120–22. http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-brighter-future-for-mormon-theology-adam-s-millers-future-mormon/. See also Jeff Lindsay, "Review of Adam S. Miller's Future Mormon," *Mormanity*, July 24, 2016. http://mormanity.blogspot.com/2016/07/review-of-adam-s-millers-future-mormon.html

Although these are atypical readings of the text, the difficulty is that they cannot be sustained at all *by* the text.[20] They are not comprehensive and they are not fair. While unconventional, they would appear to be the opposite of deep.

Such, it seems, is also the case in Miller's reading of Jacob 7. It is surely unconventional, definitely atypical, but — as I have attempted to demonstrate — it is also seriously defective, and thus it is hard to see how it can possibly qualify as deep.

Conclusion: Falling for Sherem's Lies, Again

It is true enough that prophets are not perfect and that we should not be dismayed at whatever failings we find in them. We should recognize and embrace this reality when the evidence makes errors of one kind or another obvious. (After all, the failings we might find in them do not remotely compare to the failings we find in ourselves.)

But that is not really the point in the episode between Jacob and Sherem. This is a story in which Jacob's views and actions are completely supported — both by God and by Sherem. God lethally smites Sherem and before he dies Sherem admits to being a liar and in dread of God's judgment. Sherem's initial self-portrayal as a mistreated innocent convinced multitudes that he was earnest and that he was only defending the right way of coming unto God. Only those who were sensitive to the Spirit could see through Sherem and recognize him for the self-serving dissembler he was. It would seem that Jacob tells us this story as a warning — there is much to learn from such high-profile charlatans and their tactics. And yet, 2500 years later — while knowing God's opinion of Sherem, and even knowing Sherem's opinion of Sherem — we find ourselves in jeopardy of falling for the same dishonest story.

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20 I address such matters at length in *Even unto Bloodshed*.

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