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RETHINKING THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN JACOB AND SHEREM

Loren Spendlove

Abstract: *The Book of Mormon story of Jacob and Sherem has been evaluated and interpreted from many different viewpoints over the years. In his retelling of the story, Jacob crafted a cautionary tale of religious hubris and self-importance that can serve as an important lesson for members of the church today. In this paper I use various methodologies to examine the interaction between Jacob and Sherem — including comparative scriptural analysis, semantics, and Hebraic syntax and structural elements — in an attempt to increase our understanding of the relationship between Jacob and Sherem.*

In this paper I endeavor to interpret the interaction between Jacob and Sherem in novel ways. I explore various elements of the story through comparative scriptural study, semantic analysis, and examination of Hebraic semantics and parallel structures. I demonstrate that Sherem was probably a resident of Jacob's Nephite community, that likely the two rivals knew each other well and engaged in repeated conversations with other, and that Jacob employed the use of Hebrew word repetition and parallel structures in his retelling of the story. While Sherem rebuked Jacob by accusing him of leading the people away from "the right way," we can observe that Sherem was the guilty party and not Jacob. Although Sherem demanded a sign from God, an act that culminated in his own death, I demonstrate that it was Sherem himself who became "a sign and a proverb" to the Nephites (see Ezekiel 14:8).

There Came a Man

The final chapter of the book of Jacob describes an encounter between Jacob and a man named Sherem, who came "among the people of Nephi."

And now it came to pass that some years had passed away and there came a man among the people of Nephi whose name was Sherem. And it came to pass that he began to preach among the people and to declare unto them that there should be no Christ. (Jacob 7:1–2)¹

Keith Thompson asked: “Who was Sherem, and where did he come from? Was he a Nephite, a Lamanite, or someone else, perhaps a wandering Jaredite or a Mulekite?”² Some Latter-day Saint scholars have proposed that the wording of this passage — “there came a man among the people of Nephi” — indicates that Sherem possibly came from outside the local Nephite community.³ Others have argued that Sherem did not belong among Jacob’s people even though he was also not “an outsider in any culturally or ethnically substantial way:”

Jacob introduces Sherem as someone who does not belong. “There came a man among the people of Nephi,” Jacob tells us, “whose name was Sherem.” Describing Sherem as someone who “came among” the Nephites, Jacob implies that Sherem was not, in some sense, already among them (Jacob 7:1). It seems unlikely, though, that Sherem is an outsider in any culturally or ethnically substantial way. Sherem arrives fully informed about Jacob, the law of Moses, and the doctrine of Christ, and he arrives with a clearly defined mission in relation to all three. More, Sherem arrives on the scene with “a perfect knowledge of the language of the people,” something unlikely for a foreigner (v. 4). Either way, the rhetorical force of Jacob’s implication is to position Sherem antagonistically as “not one of us.”⁴

I believe that a comparative analysis of select Book of Mormon passages supports the idea that Sherem was a Nephite from Jacob’s local community, and that the episode recounted in Jacob 7 represents an overt attempt by Sherem to overthrow Jacob’s authority in the community.⁵ The opening line of the story of Jacob and Sherem can be separated into the following three divisions:

- A) *Time*: “And now it came to pass that some years had passed away,”
- B) *There came X*: “and there came a man among the people of Nephi whose name was Sherem.”

- C) *Spoken Communication*: “And it came to pass that he began to preach among the people and to declare unto them that there should be no Christ.”

This same tripartite classification schema can be observed in other passages in the Book of Mormon as well:

#	Passage	Time	There Came X / X Came	Spoken Communication
1	1 Nephi 1:4	For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah	and in that same year there came many prophets	<i>prophesying unto the people</i> that they must repent or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed
2	Mosiah 12:1	And it came to pass that after the space of two years	that Abinadi came among them in disguise, that they knew him not	and began again to prophesy among them
3	Alma 30:6	But it came to pass in the latter end of the seventeenth year	there came a man [Korihor] into the land of Zarahemla and he was anti-Christ,	for he began to preach unto the people against the prophecies which had been spoken by the prophets concerning the coming of Christ
4	Ether 7:23	And also in the reign of Shule	there came prophets among the people, which were sent from the Lord,	prophesying that the wickedness and idolatry of the people was bringing a curse upon the land, in the which they should be destroyed if they did not repent
5	Ether 11:1	And there came also in the days of Com	many prophets	and prophesied of the destruction of that great people
6	Ether 11:12	And it came to pass in the days of Ethem	there came many prophets	and prophesied again unto the people

These six examples conform to the same tripartite classification schema as Jacob 7:1–2. First, some *measurement of time* is given by the author of the text. This measurement is expressed as either the passage of years or as occurring during the reign of a specific king. Second, we are told that an individual or group of individuals *came among* the people. Third, these individuals are described as engaging in *spoken communication* with their audiences, variously described as prophesying, preaching, and declaring. Including Jacob 7:1, five of these

passages describe the preaching of divinely authorized messengers while two introduce false messengers, the anti-Christ^s Sherem and Korihor.⁶

Several conclusions can be drawn from a comparison of these passages. First, when we are told that “there came X” among the people, there is little reason to believe that X was an outsider or new to the community. For example, the wording in Ether 7:23 — “there came prophets among the people” — is functionally identical to the language in Jacob 7:1 — “there came a man among the people.” Since the Book of Mormon is only aware of one group of people in the promised land throughout the book of Ether — the Jaredites — it is unreasonable to assume that the prophets mentioned in Ether 7:23 came from a community foreign to them. As such, I propose that the phrase “there came X among the people” in Ether 7:23 can serve as a type of messenger motif⁷ and that the identical formula in Jacob 7:1 adheres to this same motif, albeit of a false messenger.⁸

In like manner, the passage in 1 Nephi 1:4 that describes the “many prophets” who came “prophesying to the people” in the land of Jerusalem follows this same messenger motif. Almost certainly these “many prophets” were Israelites rather than foreigners, and were members of the community in which they preached. Likewise, the wording of Mosiah 11:20 — “there was a man among them whose name was Abinadi” — seems to indicate that Abinadi was one of king Noah’s subjects rather than an outsider.⁹ Based on these textual comparisons there is no reason to presume from the wording of Jacob 7:1 that Sherem came from outside the small Nephite community that existed during the time of Jacob.¹⁰ Rather than being sent by God to reclaim the Nephites, it appears that Jacob intentionally employed the messenger motif to introduce Sherem as a false messenger who came among the people. Jacob’s goal throughout the story seems to be to disprove that Sherem was a divinely authorized messenger, and to restore the people to a belief in the doctrine of Christ.

Sought Much Opportunity

The focal point of Jacob 7 is Jacob’s retelling of his *final* encounter with Sherem, a self-avowed anti-Christ. I use the word *final* because I propose that the specific phrase used by both Jacob and Sherem — “sought much opportunity” — reveals that the two engaged in a succession of doctrinal debates and discussions. I propose that this phrase — *sought much opportunity* — can have two mutually exclusive interpretations in Jacob’s account:

1. With the exception of the encounter recorded in Jacob 7, Sherem sought repeatedly, but unsuccessfully to talk with Jacob; or,
2. Sherem successfully sought out Jacob on multiple occasions, and the two had repeated conversations with each other.

Apparently accepting this first interpretation, but also expressing puzzlement over it, John Sorenson commented:

Upon first meeting Jacob, he [Sherem] said, “Brother Jacob, I have sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you; for I have heard ... that thou goest about much, preaching” (Jacob 7:6). Now, the population of adult males descended from the original group could not have exceeded fifty at that time. This would have been only enough to populate one modest-sized village. Thus Sherem’s is a strange statement. Jacob, as head priest and religious teacher, would routinely have been around the Nephite temple in the cultural center at least on all holy days (see Jacob 2:2). How then could Sherem never have seen him, and why would he have had to seek “much opportunity” to speak to him in such a tiny settlement? And where would Jacob have had to go on the preaching travels Sherem refers to, if only such a tiny group were involved. Moreover, from where was it that Sherem “came ... among the people of Nephi” (Jacob 1:1)?¹¹

Likewise, Adam Miller in a more recently published work commented:

Sherem, we’re told, “lead away many hearts” from the doctrine of Christ (Jacob 7:3). But Jacob doesn’t seek Sherem out. In fact, Sherem has to go looking for Jacob and, apparently, has a hard time finding him. Sherem, Jacob says, “sought much opportunity that he might come unto me” (v.3). Where is Jacob? Why is he so hard to find? Why isn’t he actively seeking out Sherem?¹²

The first interpretation — Sherem repeatedly but unsuccessfully sought to speak with Jacob — seems to be a logical reading of this passage. However, I propose that the second interpretation — Sherem successfully sought out Jacob on multiple occasions, and the two had repeated conversations with each other — is a more plausible reading of the text.

Nineteenth Century Usage of “Sought Opportunity”

A search of Google Books, limited to nineteenth century texts, resulted in dozens of relevant passages utilizing the phrase *sought opportunity*.¹³ In the body of the paper I only provide five examples, but in the Appendix I have included an additional ten citations.

In a memoir about the late Bishop George from 1830, the following example recounts his conviction and devotion:

Bishop George was a man of devotion, both in private and in public. In the sloop, the steamboat, the canal boat, the barn, the woods, as well as in the closet, he *sought opportunity* to pour out his soul to God in secret prayer. He lived not for himself only, but for Christ and his cause. When that cause prospered he rejoiced and gave thanks, and when it was wounded he mourned and wept.¹⁴

As demonstrated by this citation, Bishop George frequently *sought opportunity* to pray in varied locations and circumstances. Based on context, these were not missed or thwarted opportunities. Rather, they represent successfully completed prayers.

In a second example, William Wirt, who had previously served as U.S. Attorney General, delivered an address at Rutgers College in 1830. This address, along with an introduction authored by Theodore Frelinghuysen, was later published as a pamphlet. Referencing Wirt’s commitment to the “cause of temperance,” Frelinghuysen wrote:

He took great interest in the promotion of moral and religious institutions, in the missionary labors of the churches, in the extension of the Sunday-schools, in the success of the Bible societies; and was, at the time of his death, the President of the State Bible Society of Maryland. He was a most effective friend of the cause of temperance, and *often sought opportunity* to testify to the great importance which he attached to the labors of the societies connected with it.¹⁵

Frelinghuysen’s usage of the phrase *often sought opportunity* closely parallels Jacob’s use of *sought much opportunity*. Based on Frelinghuysen’s employment of this phrase it is apparent that the author intended to convey the idea that Wirt repeatedly testified on the “cause of temperance.”

Regarding Jacob’s and Sherem’s joint use of “sought much opportunity,” Stanford Carmack wrote: “I think much is an adverb in this sentence, modifying the verb sought. It doesn’t modify opportunity.”¹⁶

If Carmack's assessment is correct then the Book of Mormon's use of "sought much opportunity" can be understood as Sherem *often* or *frequently* seeking opportunity to speak with Jacob rather than seeking *many* opportunities. This interpretation of *often sought opportunity* matches the above usage by Frelinghuysen.¹⁷

The next example recounts the conversion of Stephen Bamford to the gospel of Christ, and his subsequent preaching to his fellow soldiers:

He became anxious for the conversion of his comrades, and *sought opportunity* to instruct and exhort them. For this he often suffered violent persecution, until his integrity and the purity of his motives secured for him the favour of many among his companions in arms.¹⁸

As this passage explains, once converted to Christ, Bamford preached to his fellow soldiers, even through persecution, until many of them began to accept his preaching. Again, this author's use of *sought opportunity* adheres to Interpretation Two.

In a fourth example, Bishop James Otey wrote the following concerning the late Reverend Hamble J. Leacock:

But it was not in his pulpit ministrations only that he *sought opportunity* to preach Christ. Whenever we stopped at night, during a tour of several hundred miles, and sought lodging in the log-cabin of the pioneer settlers, he never failed, either in the evening or morning, to call the members of the family, as well as the sojourners present, around the domestic altar, to read a portion of God's word, comment on it, and then invite all to unite with him in prayer.¹⁹

Otey's usage of *sought opportunity* clearly expresses the view that Reverend Leacock not only preached Christ from the pulpit but also "never failed" to preach while traveling. As with the other examples, Otey's usage of *sought opportunity* also conforms to the second interpretation.

The final example comes from *The Quiver*, a Christian magazine. In this essay by Reverend Everard we are told of a female missionary who was a passenger aboard a ship headed to China:

But she did not wait till she reached China. Amongst the large ship's company she lived for Christ, and witnessed for Him. She presented a Bible to the captain, and had many long conversations with him on the forgiveness of sins and the claims of the Lord Jesus. She *sought opportunity* from time

to time of speaking to the sailors individually, pleading with them to seek the Saviour at once.²⁰

Everhard's statement that this missionary "sought opportunity from time to time" is a clear reference to her repeated preaching to the sailors aboard the ship. These were not failed attempts but represent successful preaching opportunities.

All five examples cited above, as well as those included in the Appendix, support Interpretation Two over Interpretation One.²¹ In fact, I was able to find only a few examples in Google Books that could be understood as supporting Interpretation One.²² As a result, Jacob's and Sherem's use of *sought much opportunity* can be reasonably understood as Sherem approaching Jacob on multiple occasions, resulting in repeated conversations between the two.²³

If we accept that the phrase *sought much opportunity* in Jacob 7 should be understood following Interpretation One — Sherem sought repeatedly, but unsuccessfully to talk with Jacob — then Sorenson is correct: "Sherem's is a strange statement." On the other hand, if we accept Interpretation Two — Sherem sought out Jacob on multiple occasions, and the two had repeated conversations with each other — then Sherem's statement is no longer a strange one. Interpretation Two also provides answers to the questions that Miller posed:

- Question: Where is Jacob? Answer: Where he should have been; most likely he was teaching at the temple and going about his small community ministering to the people, probably as high priest over the church.
- Question: Why is he so hard to find? Answer: He wasn't. Sherem had ready access to Jacob and the two had many conversations.
- Question: Why isn't he actively seeking out Sherem? Answer: First, we do not know that Jacob did not seek out Sherem. Second, since Sherem actively sought out Jacob it would not have been necessary for Jacob to seek out Sherem.

Additional Support for Interpretation Two

There is a second reason to accept Interpretation Two over Interpretation One. Jacob wrote: "And he [Sherem] knowing that I Jacob had faith in Christ, which should come, wherefore he sought much opportunity that he might come unto me" (Jacob 7:3).²⁴ If we assume that Interpretation

One is correct then we would not be wrong in judging Jacob's behavior as less than Christlike:

Much of Jacob's treatment of Sherem feels shortsighted and unfair. And though Jacob successfully defends the doctrine of Christ, he doesn't seem to do it in a very Christlike way. In fact, he defends the doctrine of Christ against the letter of the Mosaic law in a way that, in itself, seems in lockstep with the letter of the law.²⁵

In my opinion, the portrait painted by this interpretation of Jacob's interaction with Sherem is that of a small, uncaring, and authoritarian ruler. On the contrary, if we accept Interpretation Two, this negative portrayal of Jacob disappears, and he emerges as a patient leader who actively engaged with Sherem over an extended period of time.

In addition, one reviewer observed that Jacob's usage of "might come unto me" in Jacob 7:3 — "he sought much opportunity that he might come unto me" — could mean that Sherem "hoped to come unto me," implying a single encounter between the two. In the KJV there is only one usage of this phrase "might come unto me." 2 Samuel 15:4 reads: "Absalom said moreover, Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man which hath any suit or cause might come unto me [יבוא ויעלי *ve'alai yavo*], and I would do him justice!" The Hebrew verb in this phrase יבוא (*yavo*), rendered "might come" in the KJV, is expressed as an imperfect, or *yiqtol*, in Hebrew. This verb form "generally designates an action which is continuous, incomplete, or open-ended. Rather than depicting an action as a single event, the imperfect depicts it as a continuing process."²⁶ Based on this definition, the use of the imperfect in this biblical passage expresses Absalom's desire for repetitive opportunities for judgment. It is likely that the phrase "might come unto me" in Jacob 7:3 follows this same pattern of usage. This interpretation strengthens the idea that Jacob and Sherem met repeatedly.²⁷

Finally, it can be observed that Jacob 7:3 begins and ends with parallel constructions: "And he labored diligently that he might lead away the hearts of the people ... wherefore he sought much opportunity that he might come unto me." *Labored diligently* and *sought much opportunity* can be seen as having parallel meanings. Both can be understood as representing the constancy of Sherem's efforts. Likewise, *that he might lead away* is grammatically parallel with *that he might come*. As such, his diligent labors to "lead away the hearts of the people" can be properly understood as Sherem's repeated, successful exertions, especially since Jacob confirmed that Sherem "did lead away many hearts." The parallel

nature of these beginning and ending phrases lends credence to the idea that Jacob and Sherem engaged in many repeated conversations with each other.

The Right Way

Jacob accused Sherem of “labor[ing] diligently that he might lead away the hearts of the people, insomuch that he did lead away many hearts” (Jacob 7:3). Sherem, likewise, made the counter claim that it was Jacob who was leading the people away from *the right way*.²⁸

And ye have led away much of this people, that they pervert *the right way* of God and keep not the law of Moses, which is *the right way*, and convert the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence. (Jacob 7:7)

Sherem contended that *the right way* was the law of Moses, and that Jacob was leading the people away through the worship of an unknown and unknowable being, Jesus Christ. While Jacob did not record his words of rebuttal to Sherem’s claim, his response could have mirrored the words of his brother, Nephi:

And the words which I have spoken shall stand as a testimony against you, for they are sufficient to teach any man *the right way*. For *the right way* is to *believe in Christ* and *deny him not*, for *by denying him* ye also *deny the prophets and the law*. And now behold, I say unto you that *the right way* is to *believe in Christ* and *deny him not*. And Christ is the Holy One of Israel; wherefore ye must bow down before him and worship him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul. And if ye do this, *ye shall in no wise be cast out*. (2 Nephi 25:28–29)

Nephi’s words, which seem tailored for Sherem, either foreshadow this future encounter of Jacob and Sherem, or they witness that Nephi had similar difficulties during his ministry. In this passage, Nephi twice tells us that “the right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not.” He also adds that by denying Christ we deny the prophets and the law of Moses. He finishes by telling us that if we worship Christ “with all [our] might, mind, and strength, and [our] whole soul” we “shall in no wise be cast out.”²⁹ This sermon seems aptly fashioned to counter Sherem’s accusation that Jacob was leading the people down the wrong path.

I Did Confound Him

Confronted by Sherem's accusations of blasphemy, Jacob tells us that "the Lord God poured in his Spirit into my soul, insomuch that I did confound him in all his words" (Jacob 7:8). Just as the Lord *confounded* [בלל *balal*, mixed up, confused] the language of the people while building the tower of Babel, being filled with the Spirit, Jacob was able to confound Sherem in all his arguments. Jacob's wording in this passage is similar to Lehi's and Nephi's encounters with Laman and Lemuel. As with Jacob and Sherem, Nephi tells us that Lehi confounded Laman and Lemuel using similar verbiage:

And it came to pass that my father did speak unto them in the valley of Lemuel with power, *being filled with the Spirit*, until their frames did shake before him. And *he did confound them* that they durst not utter against him. (1 Nephi 2:14)

Nephi also wrote of his own experience with his brothers:

And it came to pass that I Nephi said many things unto my brethren, insomuch that *they were confounded* and could not contend against me, neither durst they lay their hands upon me nor touch me with their fingers, even for the space of many days. Now they durst not do this lest they should wither before me, *so powerful was the Spirit of God*. And thus it had wrought upon them. (1 Nephi 17:52)

Like Lehi and Nephi, Jacob was able to confound Sherem, not through his own power, but through the power of the Spirit of God.³⁰ This contrasts sharply with Jacob's description of the source of Sherem's power: "And he was learned, that he had a perfect knowledge of the language of the people; wherefore he could use much flattery and much power of speech according to the power of the devil" (Jacob 7:4).

Deceiving, Denying, Lying, and Pretending

Among its varied meanings, the Hebrew verb כחש (*kachash*) can be translated as to *deceive*, *deny*, *lie*, *pretend obedience*, or *act falsely*.³¹ The following examples from the Bible demonstrate these varied meanings:

- Sarah *denied* [תכחש *tekhachesh*] it, however, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. And He said, "No, but you did laugh" (Genesis 18:15 NASB20).
- Also it will come about on that day that the prophets will each be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies, and

they will not put on a hairy robe in order to *deceive* [כחש *kachesh*] (Zechariah 13:4 NASB20).

- Or has found what was lost and *lied* [כחש *khichesh*] about it and sworn falsely, so that he sins regarding any of the things that people do (Leviticus 6:3 NASB20).
- Foreigners *pretend obedience* [יתכחשו *yitkachashu*] to me; As soon as they hear, they obey me. (2 Samuel 22:45 NASB95).
- You shall not steal, nor *deal falsely* [תכחשו *tekhachashu*], nor lie to one another (Leviticus 19:11 NASB20).

As in the biblical examples above, the Sherem narrative in Jacob 7 repeats these same English constructions. I propose that Jacob used this Hebrew verb, כחש (*kachash*), to create intentional repetitive wordplay for each of the following italicized English verbs:³²

- And I saith unto him: *Deniest* thou the Christ, which should come? And he saith: If there should be a Christ, I would not *deny* him (v. 9).
- And I said unto him: What am I that I should tempt God to shew unto thee a sign in the thing which thou knowest to be true? Yet thou wilt *deny* it because thou art of the devil (v. 14).
- And it came to pass that on the morrow that the multitude were gathered together, and he spake plainly unto them and *denied* the things which he had taught them (v. 17).
- And he spake plainly unto them that he had been *deceived* by the power of the devil (v. 18).
- And he saith: I fear lest I have committed the unpardonable sin, for I have *lied* unto God. For I *denied* the Christ and said that I believed the scriptures — and they truly testify of him. And because that I have thus *lied* unto God, I greatly fear lest my case shall be awful (v. 19).

After listening to Sherem's initial grievance, Jacob began his response by asking Sherem "Deniest thou the Christ, which should come?" Sherem responded that "if there should be a Christ" he would not *deny* him. Later, when Sherem asked for a sign, Jacob responded that Sherem would surely *deny* it. Finally, Jacob tells us that shortly before his death Sherem "denied the things which he had taught" to the people. These four occurrences of the English verb *deny* are followed by Sherem's claim "that he had been deceived by the power of the devil," and Sherem

twice added that he had “lied unto God.” Each of these English verbs can be properly derived from the Hebrew verb כחש (*kachash*).

While this narrative does not include any overt statement by Jacob that Sherem was *feigning obedience* or *acting falsely*, it seems apparent that this was Jacob’s overall attitude toward him. In verse 14 Jacob stated that Sherem was “of the devil,” and in the final line of the narrative, even following his alleged contrition and confession, Jacob still referred to Sherem as “this wicked man” (v. 23). Jacob’s multiple uses of כחש (*kachash*) — *deny* (4 times), *deceive* (1 time), and *lie* (2 times) — lead us to Jacob’s conclusion: Sherem was not sincere in his actions but was a *false actor*. Even as Sherem approached death Jacob appears to judge that Sherem had *acted falsely* [כחש *kachash*] in his public confession and alleged contrition.

As with many elements of the Sherem story, Jacob’s attitude relative to Sherem closely parallels Alma’s response in the story of Korihor. After he was struck dumb, Korihor “besought that Alma should pray unto God that the curse might be taken from him. But Alma said unto him: “If this curse should be taken from thee, thou wouldst again lead away the hearts of this people” (Alma 30:54–55). Like Jacob, Alma appears to judge Korihor to be a *false actor*, even in the face of his alleged contrition and public confession.

From Knowing (ידע *Yada*) to Confessing (ידיה *Yadah*)

The principle meaning of the Hebrew verb ידע (*yada*) is to *know* something or someone. It can also mean to be *learned* (literally, *knowing*) or to *understand*. As a noun, דעת (*daat*), it is rendered *knowledge*. Another noun derived from this same root is ידעני (*yiddoni*), and means to have the “spirit of divination,” or to be a soothsayer or fortune teller.³³ The following passages detail these interpretations:

- For God doth *know* [ידע *yodea*] that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, *knowing* [ידעי *yodei*] good and evil (Genesis 3:5 KJV).
- And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is *learned* [יודע *yodea*], saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed (Isaiah 29:11 KJV).
- *Understand* [ידעת *yadatta*] therefore, that the LORD thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiffnecked people

(Deuteronomy 9:6 KJV).

- But of the tree of the *knowledge* [דעת *daat*] of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (Genesis 2:17 KJV).
- A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a *wizard* [ידעני *yiddoni*], shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them (Leviticus 20:27 KJV).

In addition, the verb ידה (*yadah*), a near homonym of ידע (*yada*), carries the connotation of to *praise* or *confess*. The passages below demonstrate this understanding:

- And she conceived again and gave birth to a son, and said, “This time I will praise [אודה *odeh*] the Lord.” Therefore she named him *Judah* [יהודה *yehudah*] (Genesis 29:35 NASB20).
- I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my guilt; I said, “I will confess [אודה *odeh*] my wrongdoings to the Lord”; and You forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:5 NASB20).

In the back-and-forth dialogue between Jacob and Sherem, I propose that these two Hebrew roots — ידע (y-d-‘a) and ידח (y-d-h) — were used in significant ways (see below):

- And he *knowing* that I Jacob had faith in Christ, which should come, wherefore he sought much opportunity that he might come unto me. And he was *learned*, that he had a perfect *knowledge* of the language of the people (Jacob 7:3–4).
- Brother Jacob, I have sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you, for I have heard and also *know* that thou goest about much, preaching that which ye call the gospel or the doctrine of Christ (v. 6).
- And now behold, I Sherem declare unto you that this is blasphemy, for no man *knoweth* of such things; for he cannot *tell of things to come* (v. 7).
- I *know* that there is no Christ, neither hath been nor never will be (v. 9).
- And I saith unto him: Believest thou the scriptures? And he saith: Yea. And I saith unto him: Then ye do not *understand* them, for they truly testify of Christ (vv. 10–11).

- It hath been made manifest unto me — for I have heard and seen and it also hath been made manifest unto me by the power of the Holy Ghost — wherefore I *know* if there should be no atonement made, all mankind must be lost (v. 12).
- Shew me a sign by this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye *know* so much (v. 13).
- What am I that I should tempt God to shew unto thee a sign in the thing which thou *knowest* to be true? (v. 14).
- he spake plainly unto them and denied the things which he had taught them, and *confessed* the Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost and the ministering of angels (v. 17).
- I greatly fear lest my case shall be awful but I *confess* unto God (v. 19).

In the initial use of the root יָדַע (*y-d-‘a*) we are told that Sherem *knew* that Jacob had faith in Christ, that Sherem was *learned*, and that he had a perfect *knowledge* of the language. Following Jacob’s triple usage of this root, Sherem stated that he *knew* that Jacob was going about preaching “the gospel or the doctrine of Christ.” In Sherem’s next declaration — “no man knoweth of such things; for he cannot tell of things to come” — he essentially accused Jacob of being a יִדְּוֹנִי (*yiddoni*), also from the root יָדַע (*y-d-‘a*), and best rendered as *soothsayer* or *fortune teller* in English.³⁴ As outlined in Leviticus 20:27, being a יִדְּוֹנִי (*yiddoni*) was a capital offense. Oddly, in Sherem’s next use of this root he stated that he *knew* “that there is no Christ, neither hath been nor never will be.” In other words, Sherem gave his own prediction of the future even though he had just stated that no one “can tell of things to come.”³⁵ In essence, Sherem self-identified as a יִדְּוֹנִי (*yiddoni*), or fortune teller, with his counterclaim that the Christ would not come. Jacob then asked Sherem if he believed the scriptures to which he answered in the affirmative. Jacob responded that Sherem did not *understand* them, which can also be understood as “you do not know them.”

At this point the dialogue between the two became even more confrontational. Jacob told Sherem that he *knew* by “the power of the Holy Ghost” that the atonement of Christ was necessary. In return, Sherem mockingly demanded a sign “by this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye *know* so much.” Jacob responded that it would not be right for him to ask God for a sign about something that Sherem already *knew*. Jacob’s next statement handed the fate of Sherem over to God: “Nevertheless not my will be done; but if God shall smite thee, let that be

a sign unto thee.” As we all know, God smote Sherem with a debilitating affliction that caused him to fall to the earth, and which eventually led to his death.

After “the space of many days” Sherem requested that the people gather themselves together because he had something to tell them. Jacob informs us that Sherem “confessed the Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost and the ministering of angels.” “Confessed the Christ” can also be understood as “praised the Christ.” Jacob adds that Sherem’s final words were: “I greatly fear lest my case shall be awful; but I confess unto God.” Unlike the verb to *know*, from the root ידע (y-d-‘a), *confess* is from the root הוד (y-d-h), a near homonym. This shift from *knowing* to *confessing* is more than just a semantic switch. Sherem’s outward arrogance, his *knowing*, disappeared and a seemingly newfound humility, his *confessing*, was on public display. However, as discussed in the prior section, whether right or wrong in his final judgment of Sherem, Jacob was not convinced by this latent show of humility and contrition, and still viewed Sherem as a “wicked man.” In other words, Jacob considered Sherem’s public *confession* (הוד y-d-h) to be a *false act*, or *lie* (שח k-ch-sh).³⁶

Show Me a Sign (אוֹת ot)

After appearing to him in the burning bush, God told Moses to “Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me” (Exodus 3:16 KJV). Fearful of the elders’ response, Moses replied: “But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee” (Exodus 4:1 KJV). In reassurance, God provided Moses with two *signs* that he could perform before the elders: turning his rod into a snake and then back into a rod, and making his hand become leprous and then restoring it to health. And, just in case the elders did not believe either of those signs, God provided one additional sign that Moses could perform for them:

And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two *signs* [אוֹת otot], neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land: and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land. (Exodus 4:9 KJV)

Kevin Christiansen has plausibly hypothesized that Sherem was a Deuteronomist: “Sherem talks like a Deuteronomist, just as Jacob talks like a First Temple priest.”³⁷ Thompson added:

There are also “markers” in Jacob’s account of his meeting with Sherem which suggest that Sherem more likely was a Nephite than anyone else. Those markers include Sherem’s eloquence in the Nephite language, his familiarity with the law of Moses, and the resonance of Sherem’s doctrines with the ideas of the deuteronomists who some scholars say may have been part of the reason for Lehi’s flight from Jerusalem.³⁸

As a Deuteronomist,³⁹ Sherem would have revered Moses as the great lawgiver and deliverer of Israel. And just as Moses provided signs for the elders of Israel, Sherem may have felt entitled to a sign from Jacob. Sherem demanded: “Show me a sign [אֵיָּת *ot*] by this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye know so much” (Jacob 7:13). Jacob, on the other hand, viewed Sherem’s demand for a sign as tempting God, and he refused to comply.⁴⁰ However, perhaps reconsidering, Jacob added: “Nevertheless not my will be done; but if God shall smite thee, let that be a sign [חֵיָּת *ot*] unto thee that he hath power both in heaven and in earth and also that Christ shall come” (Jacob 7:14).

The prophet Ezekiel who was deported from Jerusalem to Babylon about 597 BCE, around the time that Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, wrote:

For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who reside in Israel, who *deserts Me, sets up his idols in his heart, puts in front of his face the stumbling block of his wrongdoing, and then comes to the prophet to request something of Me for himself*, I the LORD will let Myself answer him Myself. I will *set My face against that person and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will eliminate him* [הִכְרַתִּי *hikhrativ*]⁴¹ *from among My people*. So you will know that I am the LORD. (Ezekiel 14:7–8 NASB20).

The Lord’s words to Ezekiel are a good fit for Sherem. Jacob could have judged that Sherem had:

- *Deserted* the Lord since Sherem openly denied the Christ (Jacob 7:7, 9);
- Set up the law of Moses as an *idol*, as a substitute for Christ. Sherem considered the law of Moses to be “the right way” (Jacob 7:7) and “the doctrine of Christ” to be blasphemy (Jacob 7:6–7);
- Spread his false teachings to create a *stumbling block* for himself and for the people. Jacob wrote that Sherem

“labored diligently that he might lead away the hearts of the people, insomuch that he did lead away many hearts (Jacob 7:3); and,

- Asked Jacob, the Lord’s prophet, for a *sign* from God. However, as Jesus would later teach, “An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign” (Matthew 12:39 KJV).

As if in response to Sherem’s apostasy, the Lord told Ezekiel, “I the LORD will let Myself answer him Myself.” And answer him He did. As Ezekiel prophesied, the Lord *set his face against* Sherem: “the power of the Lord came upon him, insomuch that he fell to the earth” (Jacob 7:15). And rather than receiving his *desired sign* from the Lord, Sherem himself became a *sign* and a *proverb* to the people. Further verifying Ezekiel’s prophecy, Sherem’s story ends with his *elimination from among God’s people*. In the shadow of Sherem’s dramatic demise the people of Nephi returned to the correct worship of the Lord, and “peace and the love of God was restored again among the people” (Jacob 7:23).

Parallelisms

At the peak of their contentious encounter, Sherem demanded a sign from Jacob: “Shew me a sign by this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye know so much” (Jacob 7:13). Jacob’s response to Sherem and his recounting of the events that followed Sherem’s demand (verses 14 through 23) can be arranged into several parallel structures.

Jacob’s response to Sherem in verses 14–15 parallels the people’s reaction to the death of Sherem in verses 21–23:

- | | |
|----|---|
| A | thou art of <i>the devil</i> (v. 14). |
| B | Nevertheless <i>not my will be done</i> ; but <i>if God shall smite thee, let that be a sign unto thee</i> that he hath power both in heaven and in earth and also that Christ shall come. And <i>thy will, O Lord, be done and not mine</i> (v. 14). |
| C | <i>the power of the Lord came upon him</i> (v. 15), |
| D | insomuch that he <i>fell to the earth</i> (v. 15). |
| C’ | <i>the power of God came down upon them</i> (v.21) |
| D’ | and they were overcome, that <i>they fell to the earth</i> (v. 21). |
| B’ | Now this thing was pleasing unto me Jacob, for <i>I had requested it of my Father</i> which was in heaven, for he had <i>heard my cry and answered my prayer</i> (v. 22). |

A' this *wicked man* (v. 23).

The center of this parallel structure, lines C-D', is organized as a simple alternate. In lines C and D we are told that "the power of the Lord came upon" Sherem causing him to fall to the earth. Lines C' and D' explain that after Sherem's death the "power of God came down upon" the people, causing them to fall to the earth also. Lines A and A' inform us that Jacob considered Sherem to be "of the devil" and a "wicked man." In line B, which can be understood as a prayer, Jacob asks God to smite Sherem as a sign rather than granting him the sign that he had demanded. This request is bookended with the caveat that God's will rather than Jacob's was to be done. In line B' Jacob tells us that he was pleased that God had "heard my cry and answered my prayer," and adds that he had "requested it of my Father," a clear reference to his prayer in line B.

After Sherem fell to the earth he was "nourished for the space of many days." Sensing that he was going to die, Sherem requested to speak with the people. His words in this section can be organized into a chiasm:

A	<i>Gather together</i>
B	<i>on the morrow,</i>
C	<i>for I shall die</i> (v. 16);
C'	wherefore I desire to speak unto the people before
	<i>that I shall die.</i>
B'	And it came to pass that <i>on the morrow</i>
A'	that the multitude were <i>gathered together</i> (vv.16-17),

Jacob then summarized the key points of Sherem's words to the people in two separate sections. In the first section he organized Sherem's words into four expressions: a repudiation of incorrect teachings and three declarations of belief (B lines). In the second section Jacob provided four additional statements, each focusing on the negative outcomes of Sherem's apostasy (B' lines). Both of these sections begin with the phrase "and he spake plainly unto them," followed by an expression that includes the Hebrew verb כחש (*kachash*):

A	<i>and he spake plainly unto them</i>
B	and <i>denied</i> [כחש <i>kachash</i>] the things which he had taught them,
B	and confessed the <i>Christ</i>
B	and the <i>power of the Holy Ghost</i>
B	and the <i>ministering of angels</i> (v. 17).
A'	<i>And he spake plainly unto them</i>

- B' that he had been *deceived* [כחש *kachash*] by the power
of the devil.
B' And he spake of *hell*
B' and of *eternity*
B' and of *eternal punishment* (v. 18).

Sherem's final words to the people can be organized into the following chiasm. As just shown, this chiasm repeats the Hebrew verb כחש (*kachash*) in lines B and B':⁴²

- A And he saith: *I fear lest I have committed the unpardonable sin,*
B for *I have lied* [כחש *kachash*] *unto God.*
C For I *denied the Christ*
D and said that I believed *the scriptures* —
D' and *they*
C' truly *testify of him.*
B' And because that *I have thus lied* [כחש *kachash*] *unto God,*
A' *I greatly fear lest my case shall be awful* but I confess unto
God (v. 19).

Finally, Jacob records Sherem's death — giving up the ghost — as a simple alternate parallelism:

- A And it came to pass that when he *had said these words*, he
could say *no more* (v. 20)
B and he *gave up the ghost* (v. 20).
A' And when the multitude had witnessed that he *spake*
these things (v.21)
B' as he was about to *give up the ghost* (v. 21),

These parallel structures demonstrate that Jacob carefully crafted his retelling of Sherem's story. Interestingly, once Jacob spoke the fateful line "*thy will, O Lord, be done and not mine*" (verse 14), Jacob seems to distance himself from the events that unfolded. However, once Sherem "*gave up the ghost*" (v. 20), and observing that the people "*were overcome, that they fell to the earth*" (v. 21), Jacob once again reinserted himself into the story (vv. 22 and 23). I propose that Jacob intentionally removed himself from the final dramatic events of the story to show that it was God who was in control of Sherem's fate; it was not Jacob who smote Sherem, but God. And it was God who ultimately determined that Sherem would die. In essence, when Jacob reentered the story it was merely to give credit to God for removing "this wicked man" from among the people.

Conclusion

The story of Sherem is a compelling tale of the Book of Mormon's first documented anti-Christ. Although Sherem accused Jacob of two capital offenses — the sin of blasphemy and of being a ידעני (*yiddoni*), or soothsayer — in the end it was Jacob who prevailed over Sherem as he was made “a sign and a proverb,” and was eventually *eliminated* from among them (see Ezekiel 14:7–8). Various additional observations and insights can be garnered from an analysis of this story:

- Based on the language in Jacob 7:1 there is no reason to believe that Sherem came from outside the small Nephite community;
- Rather than Sherem seeking repeatedly, but unsuccessfully to talk with Jacob, their mutual use of the phrase *sought much opportunity* most likely informs us that Sherem successfully sought out Jacob on multiple occasions, and that the two had repeated discussions with each other;
- Sherem's *right way* — following the law of Moses and rejecting the doctrine of Christ — stands in direct opposition to Nephi's preaching of the *right way* which was to believe in Christ and deny him not;
- While Sherem relied on his “much power of speech according to the power of the devil,” Jacob was able to confound him through the *power of the Spirit of God*;
- Jacob possibly used repetitive wordplay in his retelling of Sherem's story, involving the Hebrew verbs כחש (*kachash*), ידע (*yada*), and ידה (*yadah*). כחש (*kachash*) can be translated as to *deceive, deny, lie, pretend obedience, or act falsely*. The root י-ד-ע (*y-d-‘a*) carries the meaning of *knowing, being learned, knowledge, or being a fortune teller* (ידעני *yiddoni*). ידה (*yadah*), a near homonym of ידע (*yada*), can be translated as to *confess*. Jacob likely used these Hebrew roots to tie his narrative together and to transition to different parts of the story;
- Just as Moses performed signs for the elders of Israel in Egypt, Sherem may have felt entitled to a *sign* from Jacob. However, Jesus' teaching that “an evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign” (Matthew 12:39 KJV) helps confirm Jacob's assessment that Sherem was a “wicked man.” God's ultimate judgment on Sherem was that he was *eliminated* or *cut off* from among the people;

- Jacob structured the last half of the Sherem story into a series of parallel structures.⁴³ These parallelisms help us observe that Jacob carefully constructed his retelling of the events surrounding the anti-Christ Sherem.

Rejecting a central tenet of the gospel, the doctrine of Christ, in favor of a law of carnal commandments, the law of Moses, Sherem found himself at cross purposes with Jacob, Nephi's spiritual successor and God's designated leader. Speaking to holders of the priesthood, but equally applicable to both male and female members of the church today, Joseph Smith wrote:

When we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man. Behold, ere he is aware, he is left unto himself, to kick against the pricks, to persecute the saints, and to fight against God (D&C 121:37–38).

These cautionary words could have been addressed directly to Sherem. Fighting against God and his prophet, Sherem was “left unto himself.” The prophet Ezekiel lamented: “Son of man, you live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear; for they are a rebellious house” (Ezekiel 12:2 NASB20). Sadly, Sherem's story ends with him being *cut off* (כרת *carat*) from God and from the people, becoming a *sign* and a *proverb* to all who have *eyes to see* and *ears to hear*.

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Appendix:

Additional Examples of “Sought Opportunity”

1. His whole heart was in his work, and his only desire was to glorify God and advance his cause. He *continually sought opportunity* to do good that he might help fallen humanity. As a pastor he visited, knew, and loved his people. He knew and called the children by name.⁴⁴
2. No sooner had Mary got possession of the throne, than she resolved to re-establish the old religion. Being of a revengeful disposition, she *sought every opportunity* of sacrificing those to her malice who had given the least encouragement to the reformation.⁴⁵
3. During his illness he was daily watched by his friend, who did everything to promote his comfort, and particularly *sought opportunity* to call his attention to the Word of God.⁴⁶
4. This was in 1861, and he had not found time to engage in business when Sumter was fired on. That “meant business,” indeed, and Mann was among the promptest to respond to the ominous summons. He enlisted as a private, “for three years or the war.” But, not content with enlisting himself, he *sought opportunity* to enlist others, and soon had a company raised for the Thirty-ninth Illinois Regiment, the historic “Yates Phalanx.”⁴⁷
5. At Rome, as in other cities where his people were represented, the apostle *sought opportunity* to preach first to the Jews. In response to his invitation, their “chief” or leading men assembled at his residence, and gave courteous attention to his speech.⁴⁸
6. But he did not content himself with being simply a student of God’s word, and an agent for its distribution. He *sought opportunity* to preach it also. Turning his attention to the English sailors at Cronstadt, he began to preach there regularly beneath the Bethel flag, going out on Saturday and returning on the Monday’s boat.⁴⁹
7. It was Paul’s custom, wherever he found Jews, to first attend with them at their worship, and explain to them the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and preach the gospel, and afterwards he *sought opportunity* to instruct the Gentiles.⁵⁰

8. Since the Greek drama had its origin in the celebration of the worship of Dionysus, the dramatists *often sought opportunity* to insert odes in their plays in honor of this god.⁵¹
9. I do not intend to enter minutely into the discussions of this subject, for the reason that we have no time to spare; but I will refer to a remark of my colleague, [Mr. Giddings,] in which, yesterday, he charged that I had proved recreant to the cause of freedom — that I was found acting with the foes of freedom. It is not the first time that my colleague has *sought opportunity* to assail me on this floor — not merely on this floor, but elsewhere.⁵²
10. St. Paul constantly changing his place of living, moving among large bodies of people, never overlooked individuals. In his speech to the elders of Ephesus he could challenge them to bear witness that he had taught not only publicly, but from house to house, and had warned every one night and day with tears. Like his Master he was moved by the sight of a multitude, and gladly *sought opportunity* to tell the Gospel story to many.⁵³

Endnotes

- 1 All Book of Mormon citations are from *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, ed. Royal Skousen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 2 A. Keith Thompson, “Who Was Sherem?,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 2, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/who-was-sherem/>.
- 3 John L. Sorenson uses the idea that Sherem came from outside the local population as potential evidence that there were others in the land when the Lehighites arrived. See John L. Sorenson, “I have heard that the sizes of the Nephite and Lamanite populations indicated in the Book of Mormon do not make sense. What do we know about their numbers?,” *I Have a Question*, *Ensign* 22, no. 9 (September 1992), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1992/09/i-have-a-question/what-do-we-know-about-the-numbers-of-nephites-and-lamanites>. John Tvedtnes takes a similar approach; see John A. Tvedtnes, review of “Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed.,

New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 6, no. 1 (1994): 28–29, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol6/iss1/4/>.

- 4 Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer, eds., “Summary Report,” *Christ and Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2017), xvii. A slightly different version of the book is available at <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1022&context=mi>. The differences between the online version and the printed version lie mainly in superficial grammatical errors.
- 5 Val Larsen has convincingly argued that Sherem, likely from the local Nephite community, enjoyed the support of the current Nephite king: “That Sherem was permitted to actively proselytize the Nephites to believe his theology is strong evidence that he had the support of the king. Were the king’s views the same as those of the high priest, Jacob, there is little chance that Sherem would have been allowed to teach an alternative theology even as an insider, let alone as an outsider.” Val Larsen, “Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021), 243, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni/>.
- 6 The following New Testament passage also conforms to this same tripartite classification schema: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:1–2 KJV)
- 7 “The core of Hebrew prophecy is its social significance, as the prophets claimed to have been sent by God in order to announce his word ... Indeed, the messenger motif is the common feature of the Hebrew Prophet.” Benjamin Uffenheimer, “Prophecy, Ecstasy, and Sympathy,” *Congress Volume Jerusalem 1986* (Leiden, ND: Brill, 1988), 259.
- 8 Utilizing a different set of arguments, Keith Thompson arrives at a similar conclusion, that Sherem was part of the local Nephite community. Thompson, “Who Was Sherem?”

- 9 In an interesting Sunstone article Roger Terry proposes that Amaleki, the final author of the small plates of Nephi, was the brother of Abinadi. He bases this theory principally on Amaleki's statement that he "had a brother which also went with" Zeniff's group to the land of Nephi. Terry also points out that the name of Amaleki's father was Abinadom which closely parallels the name Abinadi. Roger Terry, "Scripture Notes: Unearthing Abinadi's Genealogy," *Sunstone*, June 11, 2013, <https://sunstone.org/scripture-notes-unearthing-abinadis-genealogy/>.
- 10 One could make the argument that Korihor was not from the land of Zarahemla since Alma 30:6 states that he came "into the land of Zarahemla." However, there is no reason to suppose that he was not a Nephite by birth and that he may have resided in another part of the Nephite nation which was extensive at that time. On the other hand, during the time of Jacob and Sherem the Nephite nation would have been much smaller, both in terms of population and geography.
- 11 John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 4, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol1/iss1/2>.
- 12 Adam S. Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford, 2016), 27.
- 13 In addition to the story of Jacob and Sherem in the Book of Mormon, only the gospels of Matthew and Luke use this language, sought opportunity. The KJV informs us that Judas, one of the twelve apostles, sought opportunity to betray Christ unto the chief priests: "Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests, and said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him" (Matthew 26:14–16 KJV, see also Luke 22:6).
- 14 "Memoir of the Late Rev. Bishop George," *The Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review* 12 (1830): 434, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Methodist_Magazine_and_Quarterly_Review/wFM4AQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA434.
- 15 Theodore Frelinghuysen, "Introduction," *An Address Delivered July 20, 1830, Before the Peithessophian and Philoclean Societies of Rutgers*

College, by Hon. William Wirt (New Brunswick: A. Ackerman, Publisher, 1852), vii.

- 16 In a private conversation with the author, Stanford Carmack provided examples of Early Modern English usage showing the use of “sought much” with much being used as an adverb rather than as an adjective. The first example is from the 1570s and the second is from the 1670s: 1. “The King at this time was a widdower, & therefore he sought much the honor of the Princesse his daughter.” 2. “and to sustain much reproach, because he was so feeble a person, and of no great wit, nor sought much the Kingdom...”
- 17 A search of the phrase “sought opportunity” in *Early English Books Online* (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?page=simple;g=eebogroup>) revealed examples conforming to three categories of usage: 1) Efforts that resulted in a single, final outcome. Most of these relate to attempts to have someone killed, which by definition can only be a single, successful event, for example, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas; 2) Representations of multiple successful efforts; and 3) Failed attempts.
- 18 William Burt, “Biography: Memoir of the Rev. Stephen Bamford, of British North America,” *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 7 (1851): 450, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Wesleyan_Methodist_Magazine/f_kDAAAQAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA834.
- 19 Henry Caswall, *The Martyr of the Pongas: Being a Memoir of the Rev. Hamble James Leacock* (London: Rivingtons, 1857), 37.
- 20 G. Everard, “The Shield, the Sword, and the Battle,” in *The Quiver: An Illustrated Magazine for Sunday and General Reading* (London: Cassel, 1891), 363.
- 21 As one peer reviewer observed, present-day readers would probably not use the phrase sought opportunity to convey multiple events. Rather, “they would make it plural and say ‘sought opportunities.’ Not many today would consider ‘sought opportunity’ to be plural.”
- 22 For example: “Dinner was over: Adelaide had sat all the while silent and pensive; it was plain her feelings were deeply agitated. Vatillen and the chevalier both sought opportunity to speak with her alone but she purposely avoided this. At last as she stood in a group of several ladies, they went up to her together. “Lady!” said Vatillen, “my friend the chevalier and I, whom you have permitted to call ourselves you knights, set off hence to-morrow

- with the army. Permit us to wait on you and take leave of you to-day, and vouchsafe us a token of favour from our lady, which in battle and danger may strengthen [sic] and exalt our courage.” *The Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion, Music, and Romance* vol. 6 (London: Geo. Henderson, 1842), 385.
- 23 Whether consciously aware of the word choice or not, the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* observed that Mormon regularly sought opportunity to interject his own spiritual insights into his work of abridgment: “While making his abridgment, Mormon often noted that he could not include even a hundredth part of the source records (e.g., Helaman. 3:14). He regularly sought opportunity to draw spiritual lessons from the course of events experienced by his people.” Phyllis Ann Roundy, “Mormon” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 933, <https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Mormon>.
 - 24 Jacob’s independent confirmation that Sherem “sought much opportunity that he might come unto me” (Jacob 7:3) eliminates any possibility that Sherem may have been lying when he made a nearly identical claim (see Jacob 7:6).
 - 25 Adam S. Miller, “Reading Signs or Repeating Symptoms,” in *Christ and Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7*, eds. Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2017), 22, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/23>.
 - 26 The citation for this can be found through a complex series of clicks at the Blue Letter Bible website. First, visit https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/2sa/15/4/p0/t_conc_282004, then click the “HVql3ms” button to display the Hebrew Parsing information. Finally click the “Imperfect (yiqtol)” link to see the referenced definition.
 - 27 It should be noted that Jacob 7 is not a word-for-word transcript of Jacob’s encounter with Sherem. Jacob would have edited, rephrased, or rearranged Sherem’s words to fit his own purpose. When Jacob wrote “Brother Jacob, I have sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you,” his main purpose was likely to confirm his own prior statement, that Sherem “sought much opportunity that he might come unto me.” It is altogether possible that Jacob and Sherem exchanged greetings prior to Sherem’s initial recorded words. After all, Jacob’s intent was not to record history but to teach his people and future readers a valuable lesson.

- 28 Three Hebrew expressions are translated “the right way” in the KJV. These include: 1) דרך אמת (*dereck emet*), better rendered “true way” (see Genesis 24:48); 2) דרך הטובה (*dereck ha’tovah*), more properly “the good way” (see 1 Samuel 12:23); and 3) דרך ישרה (*dereck yesharah*), better translated as “straight way” (see Psalm 107:7). Nephi most likely used one of these Hebrew phrases to express the idea of “the right way.” In addition, Nephi’s “right way” could be understood as “the covenant path,” or דרך הברית (*dereck ha’brit*), see Russell M. Nelson, “The Power of Spiritual Momentum,” *Liahona*, May 2022, 98, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2022/04/47nelson>.
- 29 Nephi’s final written words reinforce this idea: “And now behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way. And there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. And now behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God without end. Amen” (2 Nephi 31:21).
- 30 As one reviewer noted, “Jacob’s knowledge comes because Christ ‘poured in his spirit into my soul.’ The use of ‘poured’ has all kinds of atonement and Eucharistic imagery. The real question here is such a modern one, or such a universal one. How do we know what we know? How do we know the things of God? Is knowing enough? What kind of knowing does Sherem achieve?”
- 31 Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, ND: Brill, 2001), s.v. “כחש,” 4215. (Hereafter referred to as *HALOT*.)
- 32 This Hebrew interpretation of the text requires a “reverse translation,” the process of retranslating a word or passage from the English of the Book of Mormon back to its source language. Moroni tells us that he and his father wrote their record “in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32). Likewise, Nephi informed us that he made his record “in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2), and it would be reasonable to assume that Jacob followed Nephi’s example. King Benjamin added that the brass plates were also written in an Egyptian script: “for he [Lehi] having been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these

- engravings” (Mosiah 1:4). However, even though these records were transcribed in an Egyptian script, the original “source language” of the brass plates, and almost certainly the small plates of Nephi, would have been Hebrew. Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob were preexilic Israelites. As such, their first and dominant language would have been Hebrew.
- 33 HALOT, s.v. “ידעני,” 3575.
 - 34 Jacob would have agreed with Sherem’s observation that “no man knoweth of such things,” unless it is revealed to him by God. Jacob wrote: “And no man knoweth of his ways save it be revealed unto him; wherefore, brethren, despise not the revelations of God” (Jacob 4:8).
 - 35 Duane Boyce observed: “He [Sherem] 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. Sherem denies and asserts the same proposition, according to the rhetorical needs of the moment.” Duane Boyce, “Reclaiming Jacob,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016), 110, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/reclaiming-jacob/>.
 - 36 Val Larsen argues the opposite, that Sherem had a real conversion to the doctrine of Christ: “Like Alma₂ and others who follow in the Book of Mormon, Sherem is struck down and then spiritually nourished by the power of God. Like Alma₂, after he regains consciousness some days later, Sherem addresses the people he had deceived and declares the faith in Christ he has gained through a first-hand experience of God’s power. He now declares that the scriptures, rather than denying the possibility of Christ, in fact testify of him.” Larsen, “Big Little Book of Omni,” 245.
 - 37 Kevin Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 87, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol16/iss2/5/>.
 - 38 Thompson, “Who Was Sherem?,” 3.
 - 39 The term *Deuteronomist* can be used to refer to a school of writers that advanced religious and temple reforms that began in the

late seventh century BCE. Margaret Barker explains that these “reforming Deuteronomists with their emphasis on history and law have evoked a sympathetic response in many modern scholars who have found there a religion after their own heart. Thus we have inherited a double distortion; the reformers edited much of what we now read in the Hebrew Bible, and modern interpreters with a similar cast of mind have told us what the whole of that Hebrew Bible was saying.” Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 28. With his emphasis on Mosaic history and law, Sherem can also fit into this camp of the Deuteronomists. Barker added: “King Josiah changed the religion of Israel in 623 BC. . . . An old law book had been discovered in the temple, and this had prompted the king to bring the religion of his kingdom into line with the requirements of that book (2 Kings 22:8–13; 2 Chronicles 34:14–20). There could be only one temple, it stated, and so all other places of sacrificial worship had to be destroyed (Deuteronomy 12:1–5). The law book is easily recognizable as Deuteronomy, and so King Josiah’s purge is usually known as the Deuteronomic reform of the temple.” Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 523, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/39/>.

- 40 A significant difference exists between the signs that Moses showed to the elders of Israel and the sign that Sherem demanded. While God prepared and instructed Moses to perform signs for the elders, Sherem demanded his own sign from God, which Jacob deemed as an offense toward God. This difference may be because Moses was coming among the Israelites as a true outsider. On the other hand, Jacob had been among the Nephites from the beginning and was already their recognized spiritual leader.
- 41 The verb כרת (*carat*) principally means to cut off or cut down. However, in the Hiphil form, as in Ezekiel 14:8, the verb means to exterminate. *HALOT*, 4441.
- 42 Donald W. Parry includes this chiasm in his book *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007), 147–48, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1060&context=mi>.

- 43 It is possible that additional parallel structures exist in Jacob 7.
- 44 *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1891), 68.
- 45 John Riles, *An Historical View of the Principal Sects, which have appeared in the Christian Church, from its First Rise to the Present Day* (Burslem, UK: John Tregortha, 1809), 204.
- 46 Alexander Haldane, *Memoirs of the Lives of Robert Haldane of Airthrey, and of his Brother, James Alexander Haldane* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854), 368.
- 47 Biographical Sketches of the *Leading Men of Chicago* (Chicago: Wilson & St. Clair, 1868), 375.
- 48 Frank G. Browne, “Paul’s Ministry in Rome,” *Western Christian Advocate* 64, no. 44 (November 3, 1897): 1389.
- 49 E. Henderson, *The Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets, Translated from the Original Hebrew. With a Commentary, Critical, Philological, and Exegetical* (Boston: W. H. Halliday and Company, 1868), 17–18.
- 50 F. N. Peloubet, M. A. Peloubet, *Select Notes on the International Sabbath School Lessons for 1877. Explanatory, Illustrative, and Practical* (Boston: Henry Hoyt, 1877), 153.
- 51 Martin L. D’Ooge, ed., *Sophocles’ Antigone Edited on the Basis of Wolff’s Edition* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1890), 135.
- 52 *Congressional Globe*, 34th Congress, 1st Session 133 (1856), 2119.
- 53 Rufus W. Miller, “Special Work for Young Men,” *Official Report of the Eleventh International Christian Endeavor Convention* (Boston: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1892), 63.