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And he was Anti-Christ: The Significance of the Eighteenth Year of the Reign of the Judges, Part 2

Daniel Belnap

For the Nephites, the sixteenth year of the reign of the judges was tremendously difficult. The arrival of the people of Ammon, in itself an incredible disruption of Nephite society, precipitated a battle, which Mormon describes as a “tremendous battle; yea, even such an one as never had been known among all the people in the land from the time Lehi left Jerusalem” (Alma 28:2). The dead, we are told, were not counted due to their enormous number. These events compounded the pre-existing struggles that resulted from the sociopolitical fallout from the reforms of Mosiah. Though Alma 30:5 suggests that all is well in Zarahemla during the seventeenth year of the reign of the judges, the events of the next year and half, the eighteenth year, belie this peace. Within this span, the Nephites exploded in two separate, but related, political conflagrations: (1) the secession of the inhabitants of Antionum from the greater Nephite community, and (2) the civil war spearheaded by Amalickiah. But prior to both of these events came Korihor.

Korihor appeared toward the latter end of the seventeenth year of the reign of the judges, and the rapid favorable response to his teachings suggests that he tapped into a sense of unease and insecurity experienced by at least some portion of the Nephite population. Korihor found an audience that believed that the current system of leadership—in particular the ecclesiastical structure—was flawed at best, and corrupted at worst in regard to its relationship to the Nephites’ ability to exercise their rights and privileges. While it does not appear that Korihor’s teachings led directly to the politically divisive events that would follow a few months later, there is no question that the teachings, as we have them now, outlined an ontological and epistemological philosophy that threatened the Nephite social and cultural traditions, legal and political systems, and church.

“And this Anti-Christ, whose name was Korihor”

We are introduced to Korihor by name in verse 12 of Alma 30, but he is referenced earlier in verse 6, where he is termed “Anti-Christ.” This designation, according to Mormon, is given because “he began to preach unto the people against the prophecies which had been spoken

2. Contra both Welch and Gardner, who see no real threat in the figure of Korihor. Welch writes: “Indeed, the text wants readers to see Korihor as an isolated individual defying the foundation of collective responsibility that undergirded the concepts of justice, ethics, prosperity, and well-being in Nephite and Israelite societies” (John W. Welch, The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008], 273). Also, Gardner: “Looked at realistically, Korihor probably has little impact on Nephite history. Unlike Nehor, he creates no organized movement. He may have influenced some in the first city where he preached, but failed utterly in Jerashon and Gideon. Korihor’s greatest value comes in Mormon’s use of his story. Literally, Korihor serves two functions. First, the failure of his mission to teach false doctrine contrasts with Yahweh’s power in strengthening the missionaries who taught true doctrine and reaped an impressive harvest. Second, and more important, Mormon juxtaposes Korihor, the Anti-Christ, to Alma, the Messiah’s defender and prophet” (Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Vol. 4: Alma [Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford, 2007], 418).
by the prophets, concerning the coming of Christ” (Alma 30:5). While the original Nephite word used for this designation is unknown, it may be assumed that Joseph Smith felt that the term “Anti-Christ” best communicated the original Nephite intention. Smith likely would have been familiar with the term from its origins in the Johannine Corpus in the New Testament. It is comprised of two Greek elements, the first being the prefix “anti.” “Anti” signifies “opposite, against,” but in the sense of “counterfeit, or simulating,” as in antivenom, which is similar to venom, but opposite to it in effect, or the star Antares, which is similar in size, color, and luminosity to Mars (Ares) but is not, of course, that planet. The second element in the designation is the Greek word Christos, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew māšiah, or “the one who has been anointed.” Thus, an anti-Christ is one who is in opposition to Christ, but does so by being similar to or by simulating Christ’s characteristics. It is this quality of similarity that makes anti-Christs dangerous and also acts as the impetus for assigning the title to Korihor. Though Korihor’s teachings are explicitly against Christ, as we shall see, Korihor appears to understand himself as a deliverer for the Nephite population. The question regarding what Korihor and that segment of the Nephite population adhering to his tenets believed the Nephites needed redemption from can be understood by looking more closely at Korihor’s ministry itself.

Yet before the actual narrative of Korihor begins, Mormon makes an intriguing editorial decision to insert five verses concerning Nephite law. Much has been written concerning this text both in regard to

3. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), s.v. “αντί”: “In its basic meaning of ‘over against’ it does not occur in the NT, but is mostly used in the sense of . . . ‘in place of: . . . In this respect it makes little difference whether the word denotes an actual replacement, or intended replacement, or a mere equivalent in estimation.” See also Glenn L. Pearson and Reid E. Bankhead, Building Faith with the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 74: “The Greek preposition anti, roughly translated, means instead of. It also carries the meaning of ‘face to face’ or mirror image. The image in the mirror, looking back at you, is face to face with you. It looks like you. Yet it has no substance. It is a counterfeit of you, in a sense. It only appears to be you.”
Nephite law generally and to the Korihor narrative specifically. But this section is not so much an explanatory passage of Nephite law as it is an explanation of one specific negative right: that no law should punish a man for his beliefs. We are told that no law existed that forbade or prevented a man from his beliefs, and that there should be no such law because it went “contrary to the commands of God that there should be a law which should bring men on unequal grounds” (Alma 30:7). This explanation suggests that the legal history concerning this right could be found in the commandments of God, and specifically in the law of Moses—and indeed the law of Moses does clarify the legal rights of individuals to such things as fair trials, the need of witnesses for judgments made, and so on. But Mormon does not quote a passage of the legal material; instead, in Alma 30:8, he provides a paraphrase of Joshua 24:15: “For thus sayeth the scripture: Choose ye this day, whom ye will serve.”

The specific context of the biblical verse finds Israel at Shechem at the behest of Joshua, who, prior to his death, wished to bestow his final instruction. His declaration mentioned above follows a recitation of God’s delivering acts on behalf of Israel and is itself followed by a covenantal renewal event by Israel. Though similar to other covenant-making or covenant-renewal events, this particular one differs in that it does not emphasize or even mention the negative consequences for failure to participate in the covenant. Joshua does warn the Israelites of the
negative consequences that will follow if they decide to serve other gods, but this warning precedes the official covenant-renewal; there is no such warning given should they choose not to enter into the covenant itself.

By choosing to paraphrase a text from this particular event, it appears that Mormon intended to validate legal tolerance for different beliefs within the Nephite community. The need for such tolerance arose from the institution of the judgeship, which, in turn, provided for more localized, independent, and equal representation of the disparate Nephite groups. The favored position of certain institutions, such as the Church (which was privileged under the legal and political authority of the last monarch), was no longer legitimated by any such political authority exterior to the institution itself. Indeed, it is possible that the devaluation of the privileged status of these institutions explains at least part of the overtly positive popular response to the reforms of Mosiah. The implementation of the reforms now meant that greater tolerance was needed if the reforms were to have any lasting influence.

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7. Welch, *Legal Cases*, 276–77: "With the reforms of Mosiah and the shift to the reign of the judges, however, came several changes in the Nephite legal system—innovations that particularly accommodated the needs of a society that had become home to Mulekites, Nephites, Zoramites, Nehorites, king-men, the followers of Alma, and Limhi’s refugees."

8. This does not mean that these institutions necessarily lost political power, merely that monarchical protection and privilege were no longer available.
Building on this paraphrase, Mormon then explains that if a man “desired to serve God, it was his privilege; or rather, if he believed in God it was his privilege to serve him; but if he did not believe in him [and therefore had no desire to serve him] there was no law to punish him” (Alma 30:9). Again, the emphasis here is on the absence of negative legal consequences for non-belief, but Mormon goes further by differentiating between thought (“believing”) and performance (“serving”), and implies that it is only the latter that is legally accountable. This approach harmonized religious practice with the rest of Nephite legal code; Alma 30:10 emphasizes that only the physical acts one performs received legal scrutiny: “But if he murdered he was punished unto death; and if he robbed he was also punished; . . . and if he committed adultery he was also punished; yea, for all this wickedness they were punished.”

Reiterating this legal principle again in Alma 30:11, Mormon repeats that an individual was held accountable only for the acts he performed, and not for his thoughts or beliefs, thus establishing equality regarding one’s legal standing: “A man was punished only for the crimes which he had done, therefore all men were on equal grounds.”

Moreover, as we shall see a few verses later, it appears that the sharing of one’s

9. See Welch, *Legal Cases*, 277–78: “The Nephites divided human conduct into three categories: words, actions, and thoughts (Mosiah 4:30). Alma’s teachings made it clear that God would impose punishments on people with respect to all three of these categories (Alma 12:14). The right of humans to inflict punishment on others, however, was limited. While people could be punished under the law for their actions (30:10), it was unlawful for the government to punish people for their sincere beliefs. That much is straightforward. Much more difficult, however, were two problems that had to be faced sooner or later under the law of Mosiah. One problem was evidentiary: how should a court determine whether a person sincerely believed what he taught? In other words, what evidence would be required to prove a person guilty? The second issue was conceptual: how were speech acts to be treated? Should speech be considered merely to be an assertion of one’s beliefs and therefore protected under the civil law and punishable only by divine justice, or should some speech acts be viewed as a type of overt action punishable by civil or religious authorities? Speech is a hybrid between thoughts and actions.”

10. The mention of “equal grounds” may be perhaps an allusion to Mosiah 29:38, which recounts the reaction of the Nephite population to Mosiah,’s reforms: “Therefore
beliefs or thoughts was not considered a “crime” (a negative physical act). Thus, even if one’s words should lead others to commit crime, there would not be any sense of culpability for the instigator—there was no legal requirement for punishment.

As noted earlier, Mormon’s biblical basis for this legal view was not the Mosaic Law itself, but the paraphrase of Joshua 24:15. This choice may be due to the fact that the Mosaic Law does not have provisions for disparate religious populations. Instead, it is oriented toward a religiously homogenized group in which alternate religious traditions are not allowed. The church as described within the Book of Mormon, however, had to coexist with at least one other major religious tradition—Nehorism—which also had the legally recognized right to assemble and organize. Thus, the use of the paraphrase from Joshua appears to indicate the existence of a Nephite legal innovation in response to their specific socioreligious reality.

“that every man should have an equal chance”

Having established this legal baseline, Mormon returns to the greater narrative, tying the legal background to the emergence of Korihor and his ministry among the Nephites and thereby establishing a tension that governs the later interactions between Korihor and the Nephite leadership. Even though Korihor as anti-Christ is destructive to the moral and ethical fabric of the Nephite society, legally he has done nothing wrong, having committed no actual, physical wrongdoing: therefore, “the law could have no hold on him” (Alma 30:12). Thus, a legal and

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they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land.”

11. Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 406–07: “The citation from Joshua is a prophet’s declaration that others had a right to choose, although Joshua was announcing a pragmatic, not legal, principle. Here, the pragmatic principle is expanded to a legal principle, both expanding and formalizing the scriptural episode. A single episode becomes an example and then a formal, legal model for social actions.”

12. Gardner believes that the excursion reflects differing perspectives on Nephite law and therefore possible conflict as to the nature of the Korihor narrative. See
political crisis arose when Korihor was bound and brought before the chief judges of Gideon and Zarahemla. The act of being bound suggested a crime has been committed, but Mormon makes it quite clear that Korihor, at least in the land of Zarahemla, had presumably done nothing criminal according to the legal definition.

One cannot underestimate the danger that this scenario presented to the nascent legal system and the fragile implementation of the “rule of law” engendered by the new judicial/political system. One of the consequences of the abolishment of the Nephite monarchy and its replacement with a legalized selection process for judges was the displacement of “rule by law” for “rule of law.” Rule of law reflects the political supremacy of the law in governance. On a more practical level, this process means that political and legal authority is ultimately formed from and founded by the law. On the other hand, rule by law reflects the use of law to further the designs of a given political authority. In other words, under rule by law, the law is subordinate to the political entity. A monarchy often reflects the latter, in which the law is used by the monarch to further his or her designs and thus often reinforces the monarch’s personal power.

It appears that these two concepts undergird the political reformation of Mosiah. While he notes that a monarchy could be a positive institution, “establishing the laws of God” and judging the “people

Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 407: “Why does Mormon deviate from his narrative to explain Nephite law? I hypothesize he expected his readers to be surprised at this tolerance of an offense to the majority religion. Therefore, Mormon’s greater society apparently did not share the concept of tolerating individual beliefs, or Mormon would not have needed to mention it.”

13. He is also bound in the territory of Jershon, but as this is Anti-Nephi-Lehite territory, the legal parameters are not necessarily Nephite.

according to [God’s] commandments” (Mosiah 29:13), if the monarch was unjust, “he teareth up the laws of those who have reigned in righteousness before him; and trampleth under his feet the commandments of God; And he enacteth laws, and sendeth them forth among his people, yea, laws after the manner of his own wickedness” (Mosiah 29:22–23). Mosiah’s solution to the potential problem of the unjust monarch was to raise the legal potency of the law so that it, and not the monarch, would ultimately be the governing force: “Choose you by the voice of the people, judges, that ye may be judged according to the laws which have been given you by our fathers” (Mosiah 29:25). Such a change in political thinking not only replaced rule by law with rule of law; it also placed greater political power into the hands of the populace, making them responsible for their own actions. This move initiated a rebalancement of political power within the Nephite sociopolitical ecosystem, such that, as Mosiah believed, “equality” was then established throughout the land: “I desire that this land be land of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges alike” (Mosiah 29:32).15

Yet such a shift in political thinking would have been difficult for a people with five hundred years of direct, monarchical history. Pro-monarchical forces continued to bubble up following the death of Mosiah.

15. Mormon suggests that this equality reflected not just political responsibility, but moral and ethical responsibility as well: “Therefore they relinquished their desires for a king, and became exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land; yea, and every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins” (Mosiah 29:38). See Waldron, “Rule of Law”: “But the Rule of Law is not just about government. It requires also that citizens should respect and comply with legal norms, even when they disagree with them. When their interests conflict with others’ they should accept legal determinations of what their rights and duties are. Also, the law should be the same for everyone, so that no one is above the law, and everyone has access to the law’s protection. The requirement of access is particularly important, in two senses. First, law should be epistemically accessible: it should be a body of norms promulgated as public knowledge so that people can study it, internalize it, figure out what it requires of them, and use it as a framework for their plans and expectations and for settling their disputes with others. Secondly, legal institutions and their procedures should be available to ordinary people to uphold their rights, settle their disputes, and protect them against abuses of public and private power.”
and the official implementation of his reforms and the challenges that followed: mass immigration, depopulation resulting from the worst military conflict yet experienced by the Nephites, and overall political instability as power was still being determined by the various cultural entities. Though monarchy could curtail individual agency and responsibility, it also functioned as a stable institution able to provide both political and economic security.\textsuperscript{16}

The growing influence of the Church following the abolition of the monarchy also seems to have complicated matters. Under Mosiah\textsubscript{2}, the church of God appeared to have enjoyed royal protection (for example, as represented in the proclamation that no unbeliever could persecute “any of those who belonged to the church of God” [Mosiah 27:2]). Following Mosiah\textsubscript{2}’s reforms, the Church prospered due to its “steadiness” (Alma 1:29), with its members becoming far wealthier than those who did not belong (Alma 1:31). What is meant by “steadiness” is not clear, though it appears to reflect the Church’s institutional stability. What is clear is that the Church was economically well-off: “They began to be exceedingly rich, having abundance of all things . . . an abundance of flocks and herds, and fatlings of every kind, and also abundance of grain, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious things, and abundance of silk and fine-twined linen” (Alma 1:29). This prosperity, we are told, was the result of their “industry” (Alma 4:6), and may have stemmed from Mosiah’s reforms, which now rewarded individual effort. It is clear that in the early years of the judgeship, the Church was wealthy, having accumulated not only basic goods, but luxury items as well.

What is also clear is that there were confrontations between members and non-members that occurred repeatedly through the first eight years after the institution of the reforms. In fact, within the first year the persecution of non-believers resulted in physical confrontation (Alma 1:21–22). Although the text does not give a specific reason as to why this persecution occurred, the report of this persecution follows the trial and execution of Nehor. While Alma stressed that this case was determined under the rule of law and not under ecclesiastic authority (Alma 1:14), Nehor was originally brought before Alma by “the people of the church” (Alma 1:10) and was eventually sentenced by Alma, who was also the high priest of the Church. From an outside perspective, the distinction between political and ecclesiastic authority was somewhat blurred, and this blurring may have led some non-members to believe that the Church was particularly situated to take advantage of the new system.17

By the eighth year of the reign of the judges, the disparity in prosperity was such that some members of the Church “began to be scornful, one towards another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe” (Alma 4:8), perhaps confirming the earlier fears of non-members concerning the relationship between the Church and the new political system. Alma himself appears to have been concerned with the “great inequality” present within the Nephite people and the Church.

17. Although Mormon views the events of these early years of the judgeship through a lens of righteous behavior vs. wicked behavior, he does appear to observe the difficulty that other religious traditions had with the new system. Alma 1:16–18 describes the legal relationship of “priestcrafts” (i.e., other religious traditions), stating that “they durst not lie, if it were known, for fear of the law . . . therefore they pretended to preach according to their belief; and now the law could have no power on any man for his belief. And they durst not steal, for fear of the law.” Mormon suggests that such institutions were insincere, and thus lying, but it is possible that what Mormon notes is the concern of these institutions with regard to their ability to express their beliefs under the new system, a concern that is not an apparent concern of the church of God at all: “Yea, they [the priestcrafts] did persecute them [the church], and afflict them with all manner of words . . . because they did impart the word of God” (Alma 1:20). Verses 30–31 further suggest that the new rule of law inversely affected non-members as “the law was put in force.”
It is this inequality that encourages Alma to make a significant change: he decides to step down as chief judge and retains only his position as high priest over the Church (Alma 4:15–19).

In light of the above, Korihor was concerned with what he saw as the inordinate influence the Church had upon its congregations, which he believed affected their critical thinking skills. For Korihor, religion, and in particular the belief in a Christ, represented an epistemic closure that limited a person’s ability to truly understand the surrounding world. Belief in Christ was a “foolish and a vain hope” that “bound” or “yoked” one to an inaccurate view of the world. Emphasizing the role of empiricism in the formation of knowledge, Korihor stated that “no man can know of anything which is to come” (Alma 30:13). Though it may be tempting to simply write off Korihor’s epistemology as a version of the childish taunt to “prove it,” further reflection suggests that Korihor’s epistemology is based on the universal experience of time’s arrow. For Korihor, belief in Christ was not only based on the belief that one could know the future, but also led to the belief that the future had a direct effect on the past, a process that simply did not reflect any experience of time and space. Thus, the belief that one could receive a remission of one’s sins due to the acts of an unborn, immortal being (i.e., the belief

18. The nature of the “inequality” is unclear. While on the surface, it appears to reflect the economic disparity between the wealthy and poor, equality was also the end goal of Mosiah’s reforms. Thus, it is possible that the inequality recognized by Alma reflected a growing imposition of the Church over all Nephites. One of the central tenets of the Church was no persecution of non-members (Alma 1:21), but the events of the eighth year suggest that church members had become so powerful that this was no longer a concern.

that a future event would effect a change in one’s own past) was symptomatic of a “deranged” or “frenzied” mind. This problematic mind itself was, according to Korihor, a direct consequence of “the traditions of your fathers” (Alma 30:16)—past traditions of a future promise that would effectively revise past, present, and future. This belief flew in the face of every experience provided in living a temporally oriented existence.

Korihor’s critique of Nephite epistemology, then, was one in which the “traditions of the fathers” produced a “foolish and vain hope” due to the way in which they led believers to expect past events to be rewritten or revised by a future event (Christ). From Korihor’s perspective (i.e., one in which the directionality of time had never been thus interrupted), an epistemological certainty based in a future event was simply untenable. This critique led Korihor to suggest a new epistemological approach, one that emphasized the acquisition of knowledge from one’s own senses, which in turn established a new ontology—that man was nothing but a “creature.” According to Korihor, a physical, tangible understanding of the surrounding world rather than a cosmic view through the eye of faith necessarily leads one to the conclusion that man is nothing more than a creature, similar to the other creatures that surround him. And, like those creatures, man as a creature “fared”

20. Lance, “Korihor, Psychology, and False Doctrine,” 62: “The implications of accepting a strictly empirical epistemology are further illuminated by Korihor himself, in another of his arguments against Alma. If we cannot gain knowledge from spiritual experiences, we are forced to question their very nature. Korihor does this by telling Alma that believing one has had a remission of sin ‘is the effect of a frenzied mind’ (Alma 30:15). Inasmuch as Alma’s knowledge of his own remission of his sins came from revelation (see Alma 36), this argument can apply to all revelatory experiences. To Korihor, having a religious experience is tantamount to insanity, or at least some form of psychopathology.” It is possible this epistemic challenge lies at the heart of a number of alternate theologies in the Book of Mormon, as the Book of Mormon prophets often explicitly noted that belief in Christ could lead to a remission of sins no matter the time—it was not necessary to wait for the performance of the atonement itself for it to be effective in one’s life. Thus, the atonement had retroactive efficacy. Or, to put it another way, the atonement had non-local effects in that it disregarded the normal strictures of time and space to allow for efficacy prior to its actual performance.
according the innate traits of the creature and the “management” of those traits. Thus, one’s experience was determined by the success one had utilizing those abilities: “Therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and [that] every man conquered according to his strength” (Alma 30:17).

While primarily a theological argument, Korihor’s new epistemology/ontology would have had serious implications for the purpose behind Nephite political, economic, and social structures. If, in fact, Korihor’s ontology was correct, along with its implied description of the “good life,” then society’s primary, perhaps even sole, function was to provide one with the opportunity to exercise one’s inherent right to succeed or prosper. Conversely, a society that restrained one from exercising such rights would have been corrupt. A society established on such principles would be the ultimate meritocracy in which excellence was rewarded with power. Such a system would not eliminate disparity; indeed, under Korihor’s system, any given individual has as much right to succeed as any other and thus, to succeed, one simply needed to find one’s area of excellence, be given the opportunity to develop this skill, and the opportunity to exercise it, regardless of the impact it would have on others.

Yet if Korihor’s ontology—that man was nothing more than a mere animal simply faring according to his genius or strength—was the foundation of a society, then, as the redactor rightly notes, “whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17). The line of reasoning that the writer appears to follow is thus: If man is merely a creature who has the right to prosper according to his innate skills, then there is no need for an artificial limit to be placed upon one with regard to the exercising

21. Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 410–11: “Korihor’s doctrine appears to be a form of social Darwinism. For Korihor, sin itself is not possible because there is no valid religious rule against which we might be judged. We are not responsible to a God but only to ourselves. By calling human beings ‘the creature,’ Korihor uses a rather animalistic term, thus further removing his listeners from a creator God. ‘Management of the creature’ means that each individual is responsible only to himself, not to other people (unless they are more powerful and able to enforce their will), and certainly not to the fiction of a God.”
of that right. Morality and ethics are thus superseded by this inherent right to prosper, since they represent just such unnecessary constraints. Similarly, the application of the term “crime” and the attendant penalties associated with acts designated as “crimes” suggest another form of constraint to a given individual’s right to prosper. Following Korihor’s principles to their end, it is conceivable that if one had the skill to perform spectacularly heinous acts that would promote oneself, then one should have every right to do so.22

In teaching about the necessity of atonement, the Church maintained the concept of sin. In doing so, the Church also maintained its position as an essential part of the formula through which sin could be overcome. Teaching about atonement, then, produced a set of moral and ethical standards that were regulated institutionally by the Church itself. For Korihor, religious institutions were detrimental because such belief systems could contradict knowledge garnered from experiential observation. The artificial moral and ethical standards imposed by the

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22. Gardner believes that the political and religious laws remained separate from one another. “His next statement, that ‘whatsoever a man did was no crime,’ could be read two ways. If Korihor is announcing that man’s actions may never be defined as a crime, then he declares himself a social anarchist. If he is referring to crime as a synonym for sin, then he is simply continuing his attack on the foolishness of the fathers. I see this interpretation as the more probable of the two, more consistent with Korihor’s discourse. Korihor is not attacking the civil law, but rather Nephite religious law” (Gardner, *Second Witness: Alma*, 411). But Mormon has tied the two together: “And many more such things did he say unto them, telling them that there could be no atonement made for the sins of men . . . and whatsoever a man did was no crime” (Alma 30:17), and it is Mormon’s account that we have. Thus, whether or not the two legal systems were officially separate, Mormon points out the difficulties in disentangling the two on the pragmatic level. If one says there is no sin, then one is ultimately saying there is no crime. In a similar vein, Gerald N. Lund notes that, regardless of their explicit specificity, Korihor’s teachings affect all aspects of public behavior: “From Korihor’s epistemology (the denial of revelation) and his metaphysics (there is only the natural world and man is the supreme reality in it), flows his axiology (the only good or bad is that which is decided by man himself). This is often the case. In other words, how we answer the questions, ‘How do we know what is true?’ and ‘What constitutes reality?’ often determines how we perceive what is good and bad, right and wrong” (Lund, “Anti-Christ in the Book of Mormon,” 112).
Church would thus inhibit an individual from achieving his or her potential, something that, in Korihor’s system, was highly problematic in that it denied access to a successful life. Moreover, if moral and ethical standards were regulated by the Church, and if adherence to such standards were an essential component to the individual’s ability to overcome sin, then the religious institution would have an inordinate amount of influence over all actions of the believers, including their political actions.

Whether or not Korihor truly believed that man as a creature should succeed or fail according to the results of his own efforts, and whether or not he believed this system should be the political and economic reality, is unclear. It is possible that Korihor was merely reacting in accordance with his antipathy to religion and not thinking through the horrific social consequences such an ontology would create if put into practice. Nevertheless, his system does suggest that Korihor would have liked to see social change on some level. Korihor’s doctrine does away with a moral/ethical social structure in which the well-being of the community is prioritized. Instead, Korihor replaces this structure with the imperative to promote the individual.

One social result of the Korihorian epistemology and ontology is described in Alma 30:18: “And thus he did preach unto them, leading away the hearts of many, causing them to lift up their heads in their wickedness, yea, leading away many women, and also men, to commit whoredoms.” We are not told anything regarding the social makeup of those who accepted Korihor’s precepts, but his disparaging of the “traditions of the fathers” suggests that perhaps his audience was comprised of a young cohort. This hypothesis would make sense particularly if Korihor sought to institute social change. As we shall see, Korihor was not only against religion in general, but also particularly against the “ancient priests” who made up the ecclesiastical leadership and who he believed had “usurped” the power of the younger generations (Alma 30:23). Thus, the message itself may have resonated with the younger generation who had lived with the chaotic first eighteen years of the reign of the judges.
Korihor’s teachings would have resonated with anyone who believed that societal constraints imposed by religious precept, legal principle, and informal cultural norms—the traditions and teachings of the fathers—constrained individuals such that they were not allowed to “enjoy their rights and privileges” promised to them through the reforms, thus keeping them from achieving what they might have considered as the good life. In light of this, the chaotic nature of the first decade and a half of the reign of the judges with its own various societal constraints would have appeared as proof that these forces were corrupt.

“Now this man went over to the land of Jershon”

Korihor’s success in Zarahemla appears to convince him to minister elsewhere, going to both Jershon and the city of Gideon. The selection of these two locations implies that Korihor believed they would have been particularly amenable to his teachings. Both were populated by groups that conceivably chafed under the Zarahemlan Nephite hegemony. Jershon was inhabited by the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (ANLs), who were recent immigrants. As such, they may have suffered Nephite animosity, both due to their cultural differences as well as the fact that they served as a cause for the latest military conflict, which resulted in the death of thousands of Nephite sons, fathers, and brothers. The city of

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23. That the writer mentions women first as particularly influenced may suggest that Korihor’s message resonated with a particular segment of the female population, possibly highlighting the disruption of social norms that Korihor’s teachings engendered.  

24. Welch suggests that Korihor may be assuming that ANLs are adherents or are at least sympathetic to Nehorism, the religious tradition that Korihor himself may have come from; see Welch, Legal Cases, 274–76: “It is unclear why Korihor went to Jershon. . . . Perhaps Korihor was unaware of [their] background, or perhaps he believed that these converts might be vulnerable because they were a displaced people and were young in the gospel. It is also possible that he believed that, as former Lamanites, the Ammonites would be receptive to his message as some of their former kinsmen had been to Nehorism (Alma 21:4, 24:28).” Gardner, on the other hand, sees no Nehorite influence, believing instead that Korihor represents another religious tradition altogether:
Gideon appeared to have been settled by the descendants of a group of nationalistic Nephites who had sought to reclaim the former Nephite territory of the land of Nephi. Though the colonization effort failed within three generations, the impetus for the attempt does not appear to have been fully erased. The survivors did not return to Zarahemla, but rather established their own city (Gideon) across the river Sidon. It is possible to read into this move an attempt to form a center of “pure” Nephite culture and influence, geographically separated and culturally distinct from the more blended society of Zarahemla.

“Korihor does not appear to be associated with the order of Nehors, even though he also denies the Atoning Messiah. His apostasy appears to extend even further, however, and Korihor may have rejected all Nephite traditions, including the law of Moses. I hypothesize that Korihor may have accepted one of the local religions and therefore combats the entire Nephite religio-political spectrum” (Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 406). Both Welch and Gardner assume that Korihor is religious in some sense, but while Korihor is clearly virulently anti-Christian, his teachings do not espouse any religious tradition.

25. For more on the Zeniff recolonization attempt, see Dan Belnap, “The Abinadi Narrative, Redemption, and the Struggle for Nephite Identity,” in Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise, ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2018), 27–66; see also Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 413: “Although the inhabitants of Gideon were Nephites, they had migrated from the land of Nephi after being converted from the apostate religion of Noah.” Gardner continues, suggesting that it was the Lamanites: “I hypothesize that Korihor thought that their previous expose to Lamanite beliefs would make it easy to persuade them to revert to those beliefs.”

26. While there is no explicit mention of such a cultural separation between the cities, the text does suggest that it did exist within Zarahemla itself; see Mosiah 25:2–4; also 1:10–11; for more on the cultural separation, see Dan Belnap, “And it came to pass,” 117–27. Moreover, at least one account suggests that the separation existed. Alma 59–61 presents an exchange of letters from Captain Moroni to Pahoran, the chief judge. In them, we find that a rebellion had occurred in Zarahemla in which Pahoran had been ousted and a king installed. We are not told the lineage of the king, but we are told that he sought to maintain the city of Zarahemla, abandoning the rest of the Nephite territories. Pahoran in the meantime had fled with the freemen to the city of Gideon. As noted in the study, this particular city appears to have been named after Gideon, one of the leaders from the failed recolonization community who left Zarahemla in the first place because they believed it did not represent the land of their fathers. Thus, it appears that, upon their arrival to the land of Zarahemla after the failed attempt, at least
In both cases, Korihor goes directly to the people rather than to a political or ecclesiastic center in order to make his case. In Jershon, Korihor is bound and brought to Ammon, the son of Mosiah. Ammon was also the high priest of the community, and he promptly extradited Korihor from the territory. The entire episode occurs in only two verses, but it highlights again the ambiguous nature of the narrative established earlier, namely, the tension between what Korihor is doing and the question concerning whether it was legal or not to do so, as he is bound in Jershon for nothing more than speaking his mind.

With this said, it is possible that, at least for the ANLs, Korihor’s binding was not against the law. While it may be that as immigrants into Nephite territory, the ANLs adopted the established Nephite laws, this assumption is not necessarily readily confirmed. In fact, a number of clues suggest that the ANL relationship with the Nephites was more of an alliance than an assimilation. To begin, the text of Alma 27 suggests that a formal treaty governed the Nephite-ANL relationship. The treaty established that (1) territory was to be provided to the ANLs in which they could settle, contingent upon them not picking up their weapons; (2) Nephite military personnel would be placed within this new territory, ostensibly for the protection of the ANLs as they would be stationed at the southern end of Jershon between the actual settlement and the Lamanites in the land of Nephi; and (3) it was expected that the new inhabitants would supply provisions to the Nephite military stationed within their borders (Alma 27:24).

What is not stated in this treaty is a declaration of explicit Nephite status for the ANLs, either culturally or legally. We are told that they were “among the people of Nephi” and that they were “numbered among the people who were of the church of God,” but that the community itself was known as “the people of Ammon,” and apparently retained its own monarchy.27 If the ANLs thus maintained some degree

some of these nationalist Nephites settled their own city, which then became a Nephite enclave to which Pahoran, a Nephite, could flee during the rebellion.

27. This is reinforced by Alma 53:10, 12–13, 19: “I have somewhat to say concerning the people of Ammon, who, in the beginning, were Lamanites; but by Ammon and
of political autonomy, then Korihor’s treatment in the land of Jershon may have been entirely legal under the laws and authority of the ANLs.\footnote{Welch, Legal Cases, 280–81: “It is significant that Korihor was taken to the high priest over the Ammonites. No civil judge is mentioned here at all, as happens when Korihor is prosecuted in Gideon and in Zarahemla (Alma 30:21, 29). In other words, the Ammonites perspicaciously framed this case as a religious matter and took Korihor directly to their high priest. In retrospect that was a wise move, since the case was eventually resolved primarily a religious matter. Second, it is also possible that the legal system of the Ammonites in Jershon was somewhat different or somewhat independent from the laws in the land of Zarahemla. Nothing in the record indicates that the Ammonites ever agreed to be bound by the law of Mosiah. Formal popular adoption of that law, essential for it to become binding upon the people had occurred several years before the Ammonites arrived in Zarahemla (Alma 1:14). It follows that the Ammonites may not have been bound by the progressive law of Mosiah and that, in carrying Korihor out of their independent land of inheritance, they were simply exercising a typical, traditional prerogative of excluding Korihor, as a foreigner, from taking up residence in their city without some local patron host. Taking another tack, perhaps the Ammonites were subject to the law of Mosiah but argued that expulsion or banishment was not a form of punishment that was prohibited by that law. In other
The physical constraint Korihor received among the people of Gideon, on the other hand, is another matter altogether.

Unlike the ANLs, the people of Gideon were Nephite by origin, and they had maintained that legal and cultural identity despite their geographical separation from their fellow citizens in Zarahemla. According to Mosiah 22, upon their arrival in the land of Zarahemla, the people of Limhi (from which the eventual settlers of Gideon would come) “joined Mosiah’s people, and became his subjects” (v. 13). This action makes the legal Nephite identification of the people of Limhi explicit, which would have meant that, unlike the ANLs, the Gideonites were subject to Nephite law. Thus, Korihor’s bondage in Gideon is much more problematic in terms of its legality than the event in which he is bound in Jershon. This tension is heightened considerably as he is taken before both the leading ecclesiastical and political leadership of the city, the high priest and chief judge, respectively.

We can explain the presence of the high priest through Korihor’s religious antipathy, but the presence of the chief judge suggests that this trial was more than a simple church matter. Indeed, his presence indicates the potential for legal and political problems presented by Korihor. As noted earlier, there was no indication that Korihor has done anything illegal under Nephite law. And yet, as indicated by Mormon, Korihor’s precepts would have serious ramifications for Nephite social and political structures if they were accepted generally. In light of these potential consequences, it is possible that the chief judge was in attendance in order to determine whether there had been any legal violations.

While it is reasonable that both political and ecclesiastic leaders were in attendance at Korihor’s trial, the apparent cooperation between the two may have actually reinforced Korihor’s accusation that the Church exerted undue influence on the general population. Established during the reign of Mosiah, the Church had enjoyed a quasi-official state status following the king’s edict recorded in Mosiah 28, which
guaranteed protection for the Church against any persecution. While this official security disappeared following the abolition of the monarchy, the Church remained a significant force in the early years of the reign of the judges, as it was led by a member of the Nephite social elite and was one of the most stable social institutions during a period of chaotic transition. Not surprisingly, each chief judge during the period in question was also a member of the Church. Thus, Korihor’s accusation against church doctrine and practice additionally serves as a veiled criticism of the political system, given that the latter apparently tolerated, and perhaps even supported, the Church and its tenets.²⁹

The dialogue between Korihor and the high priest begins with the high priest issuing a series of challenges, the first of which highlighted Korihor’s challenge to the teachings of the Church: “Why do ye go about perverting the ways of the Lord?” (Alma 30:22). The question presents an implied understanding among the church leadership, and presumably the secular leadership as well, that Korihor had some sort of prior relationship with the Church—he would need to have been familiar with the “ways of the Lord” first, in order to subsequently “pervert” them. Though the text is silent on his earlier years, it is possible that Korihor was a member at one point. More importantly, the query demonstrates that the leadership of Gideon recognized that Korihor’s doctrine, regardless of its anti-religious stance, was a perversion of the truth.

Though the similarities between Korihor’s doctrine and the doctrine of Christ taught by the Church has not been discussed in great

²⁹. It is unclear how or if state sponsorship is present during the reign of the judges. It certainly existed under the last Nephite monarch. In Mosiah 27:2–3, Mosiah, sends out a proclamation commanding that “there should not any unbeliever persecute any of those who belonged to the church of God.” This appears to have worked in conjunction with church policies that encouraged “no persecutions among them,” but it is telling that the latter is a directive originating within the church leadership and not the state. Following the political changeover, the Church continued to enjoy a privileged position as noted elsewhere; see Belnap, “And it came to pass,” 108–14. Though it no longer was under monarchical protection, the new system of judges privileged church leadership over other demographic groups (see Mosiah 29:11–13).
detail elsewhere, Mormon’s designation of Korihor as an anti-Christ suggests that parallels are significant. Certainly, Korihor’s emphasis on the individual’s right to act without coercion reflects Book of Mormon teachings on the nature of agency. The idea that an individual has the right to prosper by utilizing the skills and talents given to him also fits within the gospel. Yet the perversion noted by the Gideonite leadership may have been Korihor’s emphasis on the expression of rights without the commensurate recognition that exercising these rights also required one to recognize the responsibilities one had toward the well-being of others. Care for others constitutes an important element of gospel living; Korihor’s meritocratic ethics reveal problematic social and political implications and may begin to suggest the nature of Korihor’s guilt under Nephite law.

The second question the Gideonite authorities put to Korihor also reveals why they felt it legal to constrain him: “Why do you teach this people that there should be no Christ, to interrupt their rejoicings?” What the high priest means by “rejoicings” is not at all clear. On the one hand, it may refer to the positive emotional state of the Church experienced through their sincere worship. The term “rejoicing” is found eighty-three times in the Book of Mormon and often refers to the state of joy expressed by individuals or communities. Thus, Nephi is found rejoicing over the Lord’s blessings on his behalf, and King Benjamin’s people rejoice in the return of the self-exiled people of Limhi.

Yet the term is also often used to describe the emotional state of groups engaging in certain ritual behavior associated with joyful events such as deliverance or reunion.30 For instance, in 1 Nephi 5:9, upon the return of Nephi and his older brothers, the entire community “did rejoice exceedingly, and did offer sacrifice and burnt offerings.” In Mosiah 7:14, Limhi caused his people to rejoice by gathering them all together to hear

30. The 1828 Webster’s Dictionary defined rejoicing as “the act of expressing joy and gladness,” suggesting that rejoicing was a physical or mental act, not merely a state of being (American Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster, 1828, s.v. “rejoicing,” http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/rejoicing [accessed January 6, 2018]).
Ammon’s message from King Mosiah, while in Mosiah 18:14, rejoicing is associated with the act of baptism. A chapter later, a “ceremony” performed upon meeting the people of Gideon and some of the men who had fled with King Noah ended with the latter group rejoicing as they returned home. Finally, in Alma 45:1 the rejoicing of the Nephites is associated with the giving of thanks, fasting, and praying, all formal forms of worship. Thus, we find “rejoicing” is used to describe the emotional state of Church members engaging in ecclesiastical ritual.

If this is the case, then it is possible to justify the binding of Korihor as he may have physically interrupted formal religious festivals when he “interrupt[ed] their rejoicings” (Alma 30:22). Such an act would be against the law. As noted earlier, while Nephite law had no hold on one’s beliefs, or even the expression of those beliefs, it did apply to those who acted against others. Thus, while it was not illegal to preach, physically acting to disrupt others’ worship crossed the legal line between thought and performance. In crossing that line, Korihor could legally be bound for “disturbing the peace.”

The final question put to Korihor by the Gideonite high priest appears to simply repeat the first challenge, but on closer inspection again indicates concerns that Korihor’s teachings might affect more than the ecclesiastical authority of the Church, undermining instead the very identity of Nephite culture: “Why do you speak against all the prophecies of the holy prophets?” (Alma 30:22). Knowing Korihor’s epistemological stance on prophecy, this question is not surprising. However, it’s important to recall the cultural context for this question: Nephite history up to this point had been directly influenced and even directed by the prophecies of earlier Nephite patriarchs, Nephi and Lehi in particular. Textual evidence within the Book of Mormon suggests that Lehi’s dream served as the cultural narrative for the Nephites, and it was used by their later historians to retell the Nephite historical

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31. That the Nephites did practice the festivals of the law of Moses seems to be the case, as many have noted what appear to be events associated with such festivals; see Jacob’s speech of Jacob 2–3, King Benjamin’s discourse of Mosiah 2–6, and Jacob’s speech of 2 Nephi 6–10, for several examples.
experience (most notably, Mormon, but evidence for this reading is also found in the writings of Nephi, Jacob, Alma, and Helaman). Korihor’s attempts to interrogate the epistemological value of prophecy thus also put into question key components of Nephite cultural identity. Korihor’s questions are recognized by the Gideonite leadership as an existential threat to Nephite society as a whole in that he seeks to completely re-define what it means to be Nephite.

“Ye say that this people is a free people. . . . I say they are in bondage”

Korihor’s response, recorded in Alma 30:23–28, reveals that these concerns are not unduly grounded. He begins with an iteration of his earlier claim: “Because I do not teach the foolish traditions of your fathers” (Alma 30:23). This is the third time Korihor has mentioned the “foolish traditions of your fathers,” and his emphasis on “your fathers” suggests that he sees a distinction between himself and those Nephites who claim these fathers.


33. See Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 414–15: “What the judge does ask is why Korihor is preaching these things. Korihor ignores this question and instead explains what he believes. The judge’s question focused, not on the belief, but on Korihor’s actions to persuade others to adopt that belief. Nephite law protected belief, but not preaching dissident ideas with the purpose of fomenting social contention and division. The charge that Nephites are usurpers of power and authority is one that Lamanites typically make of Nephites. Perhaps Korihor is not simply a Nephite apostate but a Nephite-become-Lamanite on his own missionary journey—an interesting mirror to that of Mosiah’s sons. In fact, Mormon may have positioned this story immediately after that of Mosiah’s sons as a contrast. At this point, however, Korihor is not typical of what most Lamanites would have believed. He might have developed his own philosophy, perhaps being influenced by the Amalekites who were apostate Nephites living in Lamanite territory and with Lamanite affiliations.”
As early as 1 Nephi 3, we find mention of these fathers (as opposed to Nephi’s immediate father, Lehi) that apparently refers to Nephi’s Israelite forebears: “And behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers” (1 Nephi 3:19). This reference distinguishes between the language of the fathers and the words of the prophets. Similarly, in 1 Nephi 4:21, the term “fathers” refers to the Israelite company led by Moses. There is a shift in the referent that occurs once the Lehites cross the seas: by the time of Jacob, the term is used to refer to Nephite progenitors in the Promised Land. In his temple speech, Jacob declares that the Lamanites’ hatred toward the Nephites was the consequence “of the iniquity of their fathers.” In this reference, the term “their fathers” appears to refer directly to Laman and Lemuel, Nephi and Jacob’s older brothers, and not to distant Israelite forebears. Jacob’s son, Enos, speaks of the Lamanite desire to destroy the Nephites and is the first to use the phrase “traditions of (X) fathers”: “and they swore in their wrath that, if it were possible, they would destroy our records and us, and also all the traditions of our fathers” (Enos 1:14). By verse 19, “fathers” appears to refer to the Nephite progenitors, just as Jacob used the term to refer to the Lamanite counterparts, with the “traditions” being the belief system those individuals passed down to later generations.

This usage is the primary usage by the time we reach Mosiah, approximately 450 years later. In Mosiah 7:9, the fathers are specifically those Nephites who colonized the land of Nephi. This precise usage by the people of Zeniff may provide insight into the Isaianic challenge laid down by Noah’s priests when confronted by Abinadi. In Mosiah 12:20, immediately prior to their citation of Isaiah 52:7–10, they ask Abinadi: “What meaneth the words which are written, and which have been taught by our fathers”? The allusion to “our fathers” here suggests that this scriptural passage was part of the justification and validation for reclaiming the land of Nephi following the Nephite exodus to Zarahemla. In other words, it would appear that Zeniff’s people understood
their actions in terms of a prophesied historical trajectory explicitly taught by these “fathers.”

In Mosiah 26:1, we are again confronted with the Nephite traditions of the fathers. In this case, we are told that the younger generation, which did not enter into the covenant of King Benjamin, “did not believe the tradition of their fathers.” These traditions are described in the next verse, namely, the resurrection of the dead and the coming of Christ. These individuals were never baptized and never joined the Church. As such, they remained a “separate people as to their faith . . . ever after” (Mosiah 26:4). Yet, while they rejected these specific traditions, the verse does not suggest that they necessarily rejected their relationship to “the fathers.” In other words, while the traditions may not have been kept or believed, the concept of these “fathers” provided a critical sense of identity within the Nephite social consciousness.

Consider the usage of the term “fathers” in Amulek’s discourse to the Nehorite Ammonihahites: “Behold, O ye wicked and perverse generation, how have ye forgotten the tradition of your fathers” (Alma 9:8). In this instance, the traditions refer to the recounting of God’s power in delivering the fathers and the official remembrance of the promises the Lord made to the fathers concerning obedience and prosperity in the land. Amulek’s exhortations suggest that it is the interpretation of Nephite traditions and history that provided the distinctive characteristics between the Church and Nehorism;


35. This appears to distinguish them from Nehorites as well. Although those who followed Nehor were not members of the Church, there is nothing to suggest they didn’t believe in Christ or didn’t practice baptism. In fact, Nehorism espoused universal salvation and redemption, believing that all mankind would be saved in the last day “and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4). Thus, among the Nephites there were at least three religious movements: the Church of Christ, Nehorism, and this group described in Mosiah 26. Of course, there were other religious movements as well; see Alma 30 and the Zoramites.
as Amulek’s usage of the term implies, both Nephites and Nehorites shared the same “fathers.”

Yet this assumption is challenged by another intriguing reference that describes another group of Nehorites. In Alma 21, Aaron, the eldest son of Mosiah₂, engages a community of Nehorites who reject his message concerning the Christ who would “redeem mankind from their sins” (Alma 21:7). Instead, the speaker replies: “We do not believe that thou knowest any such thing. We do not believe in these foolish traditions. We do not believe that thou knowest of things to come, neither do we believe that thy fathers and also that our fathers did know concerning the things which they spake, of that which is to come” (Alma 21:8). What is striking here is the distinction drawn between two sets of fathers: the fathers of Aaron (“thy fathers”) and the Nehorite fathers (“our fathers”), both of which believed in the same traditions. The speaker is an unnamed Amalekite, a member of a group of estranged Nephites who left and joined up with the Lamanites, though they retained their own cultural identity (as indicated by the frequent separate identification of both Lamanites and Amalekites). The origin of the Amalekites is unknown, though many assume the Amalekites to be the same group as the Amlicites.³⁶ If this is the case, then this is the first reference by a group of Nephites indicating that they did not wish to be associated with traditional Nephite identity. Even though their fathers and Aaron’s fathers shared traditions, they did not self-identify as Nephites.

Thus, Korihor’s response that he does “not teach the foolish traditions of your fathers” (Alma 30:23) is notable due to his explicit use of the term “your fathers” rather than the traditional “our fathers.” The separation from the traditional Nephite cultural identity that results

from Korihor’s word choice is clearly a deliberate rhetorical move designed to distance himself from the received Nephite culture that he critiques. Korihor believes that the Nephites had subordinated the power of the greater population: “And because I do not teach this people to bind themselves down under the foolish ordinances and performances which are laid down by ancient priests, to usurp power and authority over them, to keep them in ignorance, that they may not lift up their heads, but be brought down according to thy words” (Alma 30:23). The association of “your fathers” with “ancient priests” implies that the church leadership was drawn from the original Nephite elite and therefore used Nephite cultural tradition to retain their economic and political superiority. Korihor believed that ecclesiastical practices/rituals functioned to consolidate the power of the upper echelon of the older elite Nephite society. The keyword here is “usurp.” Korihor believed that the religious leadership, by basing their authority in the “traditions of the fathers,” had “usurped” the legal power and authority of the people, power that they could exercise following the abolition of the monarchy. For Korihor, the Church threatened the stability of the new governmental structure by binding the people to a history and belief system established under monarchical rule that promoted a dependency upon the leadership of the Church, which in turn enhanced the power of the politically dominant Nephite elite.37

Korihor’s accusation continues in Alma 30:27 when he reiterates his earlier claim and adds: “Thus ye lead away this people . . . according to your own desires; and ye keep them down, even as it were in bondage, that ye may glut yourselves with the labors of their hands, that they durst not look up with boldness, and that they durst not enjoy their rights and privileges.” In other words, not only did the ecclesiastical

37. Robert E. Clark, “Notes on Korihor and Language,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/1 (1993): 198. “Korihor is less concerned with the true of the traditionally received teachings than he is with the role those traditions play in maintaining structures of dominion within the society. . . . Authority is shown to be the power to determine the boundaries of the language, to establish the words that will constitute communal discourse.”
ideology maintain the political power of the elite, but also consolidated their economic status by sublimating the people to give deference to “their traditions and their dreams and their whims and their visions and their pretended mysteries” (Alma 30:28). The people’s deference, reinforced by the religious rites and ceremonies (whose importance, in turn, was emphasized in order to maintain this control), kept the people from enjoying the various political, economic, and cultural rights and privileges that were legally theirs under the structure of judicial government. This self-reinforcing ideological loop thus maintained an inequitable power structure within Nephite society.38

These are serious accusations and may have been based in some aspect of reality. According to the law of Moses, the priests were in fact entitled to a portion of any given sacrifice offered at the sanctuary. Moreover, the Old Testament attests to the fact that this right, in some cases, led to priestly abuses. In Mosiah 18:24, we are told that priests should “labor with their own hands for their support,” but just four verses later, we find that the Church did share their substance with “those priests that stood in need” (Mosiah 18:28). Nehor taught that priests should be supported by the people, and in Alma 31–35, we see a community of Nephites who in fact had rigid social boundaries ruled by an ecclesiastical elite who do appear to have glutted themselves on the labor of the poorer class. The textual evidence is thus sufficient to claim that Korihor’s accusations were plausibly valid in the current configuration of Nephite society.

And it is here that Mormon’s designation of Korihor as anti-Christ may be understood. Korihor claimed that the current system stole individual liberty—“that they durst not look up with boldness, and that they

38. This would have been particularly egregious if those in ecclesiastical position were also in political positions of judges, as would have probably been the case. See Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 420: “Probably most Nephite priests were also community leaders. Alma had been a judge in addition to his responsibilities as high priest (v. 33). Thus, while the division between church and state existed, probably in many locales, the “natural” leader held both positions. As judge, they received compensation, and the people may not have made a clear differentiation between roles, and, therefore, reason for payment.”
durst not enjoy their rights and privileges”—which led to a state of fear and coercion in which “they durst not make use of that which is their own lest they should offend their priests” (Alma 30:27–28). If the elites and their attendant social systems keep the people in bondage via ignorance and overreliance on the said elites, then Korihor will free them by encouraging acceptance of an ideology that emphasizes an individual’s own experience as the basis for epistemology and an individual’s right to prosper without social constraints. Claiming the contemporary system is corrupt, Korihor depicts himself as a deliverer, a savior who will free those who are in bondage to the constraining system. He will then—in a society based on equality in which one’s rights and privileges may be exercised freely, without constraint, and where anyone may prosper—inaugurate the fulfillment of what was promised when Mosiah initiated the political reforms eighteen years earlier.

Korihor’s critique was more than a simple invitation to cultivate a meritocratic society. Rather, he issued a call to dismantle the Church and its political, economic, and cultural influence in order to establish a society free from the “traditions of the fathers.” In the social structure Korihor proposes, individual rights and privileges are emphasized, and an epistemology based on personal experience over the acceptance of ecclesiastical teachings is endorsed. In this interpretation of the Mosiah reforms, an emphasis on personal rights over social responsibilities would form a society stripped of any sense of community. The implications of such a society would be profound, including the inability for long-term planning, care of the poor and indigent, and the establishment of rule of law vs. rule of personality; all of which are necessary for beneficial social growth.39

Yet despite the promotion of social revolution, without specific action on Korihor’s part, the illegality of his teachings is not firmly established within the codified structures of Nephite law. Thus, the

39. Robert E. Clark, “Notes on Korihor,” 199: “In trying to tear down that power, and thereby ‘liberate’ the people, Korihor likewise tears down the order in which the powers of society are held, thus leading to such things as murder, robbery, theft, and adultery (Alma 30:10), working toward the disintegration of the community.”
Korihor narrative, to this point, reveals the central tension, for what is one to do when one whose teachings have the potential for utterly destroying the moral and ethical foundation of one’s society is not in fact breaking any law? 40

“You have all things as a witness”

The answer to the above question is the subject of the second half of Alma 30. Following his exchange with the leadership in Gideon, Korihor is taken before Alma and the chief judge of the land. Again, the difficult position Korihor represents to the new system is apparent in the presence of both secular and ecclesiastical leadership. 41 Again, it is the high priest who asks the questions. Alma’s participation is expected by virtue of his being the high priest, but his prior experience as the chief judge makes him uniquely qualified to deal with this growing crisis. 42

In this case, it appears that Alma, like Korihor, recognizes that a society’s ontological stance on the nature of God has a direct bearing on its understanding of the nature of man, which in turn determines the

40. Welch, Legal Cases, 277–78: “Korihor was clever. He was smart enough to understand these issues and bold enough to assert his right to ‘equality’ under the law (Alma 30:7, 11). Moreover, unlike Nehor, Korihor scrupulously avoided acting in any way that was expressly forbidden.”

41. Welch, Legal Cases, 278–79: “Another background factor that seems to have complicated this case was an issue of jurisdiction. With the establishment of a church and a separate civil administration in Zarahemla, priests were no longer involved in civil matters, which were instead heard by the judges. This, of course, raised the question of whether Korihor’s case should be considered a church matter or a public matter. He had directly attacked the teachings of the church, repudiating the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah (Alma 30:6), and thus he may well have been an apostate member of the church. Should he thus be taken to the high priest? On the other hand, he had also created a public disruption and incited others to break the civil law. Should he thus be taken to a civil judge? The fact that he was eventually taken to both may indicate that this point remained a preliminary issue in such a case.”

42. Gardner, Second Witness: Alma, 418: “Given the comparative youthfulness of the system of judges, Alma’s presence may represent both his former occupancy of the position and also, I hypothesize, a manifestation of his personal influence.”
function of the given society. Thus, Alma will do exactly what Korihor has done: build an epistemological framework to establish an ontology. This move keeps the problem within the ecclesiastical realm and avoids political entanglements even as it addresses political issues.

Alma begins with a refutation of Korihor’s accusations concerning the ecclesiastical leadership and economic bondage, emphasizing that Korihor himself knows the accusations are baseless: “Why sayest thou then that we preach unto this people to get gain, when thou, of thyself, knowest that we receive no gain?” (Alma 30:35). While recognizing that members of church leadership have also functioned as political appointees, Alma stresses that he and the others have received no payment for their ecclesiastical offices and ministries, which include extensive travel through the region. Instead, such expenses have been covered by the individual’s own funds. Moreover, the result of these ministries has been the increased joy experienced by the communities themselves.

Alma asks Korihor: “Believest thou that we deceive this people, that causes such joy in their hearts?” (Alma 30:35). Korihor’s monosyllabic response—“Yea” (Alma 30:36)—sounds petty and ignores the response from the communities themselves, especially since it appears that Korihor has recognized this joy himself, but has questioned its value, believing that it was the result of deception.43 Similarly, the positive experience of looking forward for a remission of sins was panned by Korihor because it resulted from the traditions of the fathers. Alma’s query brings Korihor’s suppositions into sharp relief and demonstrates that they are in fact as subjective as those Korihor complained about.

This same pattern is repeated beginning in Alma 30:37, the subject this time being the existence of God. Having asked if Korihor believed in God and having received his negative response, Alma declares: “I know there is a God, and also that Christ shall come” (Alma 30:39). Alma shifts the conversation, placing his knowledge and witness against

43. Korihor’s answer is a simple affirmative, but that response indicates he agrees with the general premise of the question, that is, that the joy of the people has been caused by the deception of the Nephite leadership. While this supposedly indicts the leadership, it also acknowledges that the people are experiencing joy.
that of Korihor. This move is followed by Alma's question: “And now what evidence have ye that there is no God, or that Christ cometh not?” (Alma 30:40). With this question, Alma arrives at the heart of Korihor's claims, which are based on a series of suppositions concerning the nature of God and man. Alma's question places Korihor in the position of having to prove his claim without in fact accusing Korihor of anything. And Korihor's lack of an answer suggests that he recognizes the epistemological problem that Alma's question presents. It is not that Korihor doesn't have evidence (though Alma's statement that there is no such evidence, “save it be your word only” [Alma 16:48], suggests that this may in fact be the case); it is that Alma has established that any such evidence is subjective. In other words, through Alma's observations, Korihor's epistemology is revealed as one that also fails to address all available information.

In light of the epistemic disagreement between Alma and Korihor, Korihor requires proof for Alma's claim. That the confrontation would ultimately result in this demand is not surprising, for if there is no clear-cut objective basis for either epistemological approach, then the only arbiter remaining is that of a mutually recognized “proof.” However, by asking for proof, Korihor inadvertently changes the contours of the argument itself. Rather than starting with the premise that “God” is utterly false, Korihor has now accepted that “God” is a valid claim. Significantly, Alma never asks Korihor for proof of his claims. Doing so would validate their premise. Instead, the focus is now on the sign of proof, not the legitimacy of claim. And this perhaps explains why Alma invokes the law of witnesses: “Will ye say, Show unto me a sign, when ye have the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets? . . . All things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator. . . . Will ye deny against all these witnesses?” (Alma 30:44–45).

On many levels, Alma's invocation of the law of witnesses changes the very nature of the confrontation between himself and Korihor. First,
the witnesses themselves span both time and space, including living witnesses apparently watching the interaction between Alma and Korihor, as well as deceased ecclesiastical eyewitnesses (i.e., the prophets) and the very order of the cosmos. This last witness is of particular interest since, in much of the ancient world, the orderly movement of cosmic objects provided *prima facie* evidence of the divine. Yet the importance of Alma’s invocation of the law is not so much in proving his point as it is in deconstructing Korihor’s epistemology, namely, that truth may only be understood via one’s senses. Alma’s inclusion of the movement of the Earth and the planets, which would be observable to both Alma and Korihor, is, to Alma, proof of divine presence, whereas, to Korihor, it is not proof. While it is very possible that Korihor would refuse to accept these witnesses as objective truth demonstrating Alma’s claim, there is no way to disprove Alma’s claim either. Instead, the reader is left with the understanding that even when two people see the same thing, the conclusions as to what they saw and the significance of it may be radically different. The logical implication behind this move is the recognition that an epistemology that prioritizes sensory experience can be just as fallible or subjective as one based on revelation or faith.  

44. Welch also points out that that Korihor is not able to respond in kind with his own witnesses. See Welch, *Legal Cases*, 285–86: “Alma warned him by naming the witnesses that would stand against him: Alma himself was a witness, testifying that he knew ‘there is a God, and also that Christ should come’ (Alma 30:39); and in order to give further evidence in support of that testimony, Alma asserted that ‘all things [are] a testimony that these things are true’ (v. 41), and he also cited the testimonies ‘of all these thy brethren’ (v. 44). By contrast, Korihor lacked any support for his accusations (v. 40), a serious deficiency.” Welch goes on to believe that this is the primary legal case Alma establishes against Korihor. Welch, *Legal Cases*, 286–87: “As part of the substantive warning to Korihor that he was lying, Alma also pointed out to him that he had only one witness for his position, namely, Korihor himself. In contrast, Alma had rebutted Korihor’s assertions and called a host of witnesses. . . . By doing this, Alma rhetorically showed that Korihor had failed, even nominally, to produce the minimum number of witnesses required by law—two. . . . Alma’s query, ‘What evidence have ye that there is no God, or that Christ cometh not?’ effectively turned the tables on Korihor, who suddenly found himself running the risk of being convicted of bearing false witness. . . . In this way, Alma was able to expose an objectively provable defect in Korihor’s case.
What follows is Korihor’s denial of these witnesses. While that could be expected, what is striking is that it changes the perimeters of the argument; instead of Alma being on the defensive concerning perceived wrongdoings by the Church, it is now Korihor who is defensive as to his epistemological claims. It also puts the confrontation squarely within the ecclesiastical sphere: the discussion centering on the reality of the divine. Korihor’s denial is contingent on a sign: “Yea, I will deny, except ye shall show me a sign” (Alma 30:45). While this denial is in harmony with his epistemology, it has also narrowed the complaints down to the reality of God, a purely ecclesiastical question, which now allows for an ecclesiastical solution. Or more accurately, a divine solution. As Alma himself notes, the disputation is now between Korihor and God directly: “If thou shalt deny again, behold God shall smite thee, that thou shalt become dumb, that thou shalt never open thy mouth any more, that thou shalt not deceive this people any more” (Alma 30:47).

This pronouncement was prefaced by Alma stating a principle found elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, that it is better that one man perish than a whole nation: “It is better that thy soul should be lost than that thou shouldst be the means of bringing many souls down to destruction, by thy lying and by thy flattering words” (Alma 30:47). The terminology here is almost word-for-word that spoken by the Spirit to Nephi at the slaughter of Laban: “Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13).45

Alma’s legal logic is based implicitly on the reasonable assumption that bearing sole witness was a form of judicial speech that Nephite law could still punish and, thus was an act not insulated from prosecution by the law of Mosiah.”

45. The similarities between the slaughter of Laban and the trial of Korihor are intriguing. In both, the ecclesiastical requirement is challenged by the (il)legal nature of the activity. While Nephi is in fact following the exemption to the killing of another human being, as outlined in Exodus 21, the event is a difficult one to reconcile. Similarly, Korihor, who has done nothing technically illegal, is a threat to the sociopolitical and legal fabric of Nephite society. The similar wording in the rendering of these two events indicates that Alma (or perhaps Mormon) found Korihor as potentially destructive to
Perhaps recognizing that the situation has changed, Korihor equivocates: “I do not deny the existence of a God, but I do not believe that there is a God; and I say also, that ye do know that there is a God” (Alma 30:48). Though it may appear as if Korihor is backtracking from earlier claims, or at least playing a semantic game, in truth, his response displays the essence of his epistemology informing his ontology. While he does not deny the possibility of divine existence, he himself has never experienced any phenomena that would indicate such. Moreover, he believes the same about all others, including Alma: “And I say also, that ye do not know that there is a God.” This response reflects the same position he held in the beginning of the chapter. Korihor ends his denial by reiterating his desire for a sign, which is promptly given, described succinctly in verse 50 in which Korihor loses the power of speech.

At this point, the chief judge, who has remained a silent figure, now addresses Korihor. However, he does not appear to do so in his role as chief judge. Rather, he emphasizes Alma’s authority as well as the legitimacy of his actions before asking Korihor if he wishes to continue to argue. The spontaneous nature of Nephihah’s outburst may reflect the chief judge’s religious background. In Alma 4:16–17, the chief judge was

Nephihah as the loss of the brass plates would have been if Nephi had let Laban live. Even the outcomes are similar. Though Korihor’s life wasn’t forfeited, if Korihor does not recant, then he will lose his ability to speak, and for a figure whose “much success” (Alma 30:53) has up until this point been dependent upon his skill with words, the loss of speech would be in essence take away his prior life.

46. Contrary to some (see Lund, “Anti-Christ in the Book of Mormon,” 107–28), this is not contradictory to Korihor’s suppositions. Since he espouses a strictly empirical stance, to admit that it is possible, some evidence somewhere could conceivably demonstrate that the validity of divinity is permissible, even as he declares that he does not believe such proof exists because he has not experienced it yet.

47. The event itself is couched in a volitive sequence followed by a perfective sequence of verbs. This verbal pattern reflects a common Semitic pattern of volitive verb sequence followed by active verb sequence found in ritual narratives, as the volitive declares the intent of the performer followed by the actual performance, in this case, noted by the injunction of God. The use of this grammatical structure, and its relationship with ritual descriptions, may suggest that the performance of this sign included the use of the priesthood.
chosen from among the elders of the Church. Regardless, in light of the legal conundrum established earlier in the chapter, his involvement here is problematic as it indicates a potential mixing of ecclesiastic and legal judgments.

More significant is Korihor’s written confession, provided in verses 52–54. The confession begins with his recant, in which he not only confesses that there is a God, but claims that he had always known this. This confession is followed by what is a simply stunning admission that reveals an unbelievable disconnect between what Korihor experienced and what he taught. According to Korihor, at some point, he had a supernatural encounter with the adversary who appeared as an “angel.” This being gave him the charge to “reclaim this people, for they have all gone astray after an unknown God” (Alma 30:53). Though it had been implied earlier, it is Korihor himself who admits to seeing himself as a religious reformer; the moniker of “Anti-Christ” applied by Mormon now makes sense. And yet the religious reform undertaken by Korihor was itself an effort to erase the belief in God altogether: “And he said unto me, There is no God” (Alma 30:53). Korihor’s confession confronts the reader with an event in which an angel appears to Korihor to tell him there is no God.

Part of the difficulty hinges on the meaning of the term “angel.” It is possible that its usage here reflects the modern English definition—that of a being sent from God, the Judeo-Christian deity. The challenge to this reading is that it is unclear how anyone could accept that a being defined as one sent from God would be believed if it said there was no God. Another possibility is that the term refers to supernatural beings generally and not necessarily to one that is subordinate to a higher order of deity.48 The text states that the being appeared in the form of

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48. Throughout history, syncretism between native traditions and beliefs invading other cultures and their religious systems has occurred, resulting in systems that had the semblance of the dominant culture while retaining native practices, albeit in new forms. This was the case of Christianity and pre-Christian Europe as well as Christianity and the pre-Christian New World. In both cases, terminology utilized by the dominant religious system was used to incorporate traditional beliefs. In the New World, this meant that traditional deities and beings, while originally considered demonic, could
an angel, which suggests that such a being could be differentiated from mortal beings, but it does not state that the being functioned as an emissary from another being. If Korihor understands the angel as a type of supernatural being not attached to the Nephite God, then he appears to espouse a type of animism. Local, supernatural worship is alluded to in the Book of Mormon, suggesting that both alternate deities and worship systems would have been available to Korihor. It may also explain how the angel could state that people, having gone astray after an unknown God, need to be reclaimed (i.e., irrespective of local divinity), and that there is no God (i.e., no overarching deity).

While this possibility may make sense of the two contradicting elements, it creates other problems, such as why a being like this would be concerned with reclaiming the Nephites. Korihor does not appear to espouse any religious belief or suggest that the Nephites are worshiping the wrong god. In fact, his doctrine demonstrates a conception of man as independent of any divine intervention. It is possible that the angel was meant to represent a local spirit or deity and thus reflect the belief system of the native population that had been subverted by the invading Nephites three to four generations earlier. This theory would correlate with the political message of Korihor—that it was the Nephite elite, particularly those of the Nephite church—who were corrupting the general population, leading them astray from the true intent and purpose of Mosiah’s reforms. But if this were case, then the return to the earlier, native religious tradition is missing completely. Either way,

become “angels” and “saints.” See Manuel M. Marzal, *The Indian Face of God in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); also James Merrell, *The Indian’s New World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989; also James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). While the text identifies the being as the adversary, the being itself does not appear to give an identification during the encounter and does not construct its identity in terms of opposition to another being, that is, Satan vs. God. Instead, the being is simply presented as a supernatural being.

Korihor’s account of this angel is difficult to reconcile with his actions and message.

And perhaps that is the point. The experience may have been irrec-
c oncilable for Korihor as well, but it gave license to an appealing moral and ethical laxness. As he tells the gathered congregation, it was the carnally pleasing nature of the teachings that led to his acceptance of them: “[The devil] taught me that which I should say. And I have taught his words; and I taught them because they were pleasing unto the carnal mind” (Alma 30:53). What he means by “carnal mind” is not explicit in the text itself, but when put into the context of his teachings, the phrase *carnal mind* suggests a belief system divorced from a divine order as well as from any social responsibilities for an individual’s actions. This “freedom” from consequences or limitations to behavior coupled with the innate desire to excel and be only concerned with the present mortal life (there is no life after death, man is a creature, etc.) is the carnal mind.50

But perhaps the most important part of his admission is his expla-
nation as to how he convinced himself that the devil’s teachings were true. Korihor admits that he knew these teachings to be false: “I taught them, even until I had much success, insomuch that I verily believed that they were true” (Alma 30:53). A number of insights arise from this admission. First, as Korihor notes, his frequent teaching of these prin-
ciples and their subsequent popularity rendered the given subjects “true” regardless of whether or not they were truth. It is this understanding of the creation of truth, or even the nature of truth, that is, ultimately, the epistemic question of the Korihor narrative. Such an epistemological approach denies the concept of innate, inherent truth and replaces it instead with a definition of truth that is relative to circumstances or belief. In this version, truth is based on the way things seem.

50. The term “carnal” stems from the Latin root “carne,” meaning flesh. While often used to describe the particular “fleshly” sins associated with sexuality, the term, as used here, appears to ultimately refer to any mental process in which the things of this earth are emphasized over the eternal perspective. Thus, believing that man’s existence ends at death is as much a carnal principle as immorality.
Though it is merely one sentence, this part of his admission ties Korihor’s narrative into other narratives associated with truth and wisdom. Five hundred years earlier, Jacob taught that truth was in the purview of the Spirit, revealing “things as they really are, and of things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). This definition contrasts with the definition implied in Korihor’s doctrine that one’s observations of the way things seem—that is, empiricism—determines truth. Later, Jacob confronts an individual named Sherem who also seeks to abolish worship of a Messiah (espousing instead the sole observance of the law of Moses). Sherem, too, is confronted with the power of God, punished accordingly, and finally recants his previous position, admitting to being deceived.

Though he is more concerned with the proper application of truth, or wisdom, Alma throughout his discourses alludes to the importance of recognizing truth. His confrontation with the inhabitants of Ammonihah was one that centered around truth and the denial thereof (Alma 9:19–20). Similarly, the missionary effort among the Zoramites described in Alma 31–35 is also centered around the acquisition of wisdom (Alma 32:12). Thus, the epistemic definitions provided in Alma 30 can be viewed through the lens of greater Nephite history and suggest that Mormon found this particular theme significant as he crafted the final form of the text.

Returning to this specific narrative, following his confession, Korihor petitions Alma to lift the curse from him. While there is nothing to suggest that Korihor was changed by the immediate events one way or other, it is possible that Sherem’s emphasis on the law of Moses came in response to Nephite interactions with other cultures. Appearing so soon after the arrival, Sherem’s stance may have reflected his concern that the Nephites had veered so quickly from the law. That such a concern would be a real threat so soon could be noted by the observing the Lamanites who, according to Enos, were already “full of idolatry and filthiness” (Enos 1:20). Belief in Christ was not syncretic, nor is it intuitive as to how belief in Christ interacted with the law of Moses, as witnessed by almost all of the apostate systems found in the Book of Mormon as well as the theological challenge Christ presented to the Jewish leadership as attested in the New Testament gospels.

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52. See Alma 29:8; 32:12; 37:35; 38:9.
another, Alma indicates that if there was any positive change, it would be temporary and therefore ineffectual. In fact, Alma declares plainly that if Korihor were to be released, he would go back to his old ways and would continue to lead others astray. Instead, Alma indicates that Korihor’s future from this point on will occur according to the will of God. Although this leaves the impression that Korihor’s fate is set and that his wickedness engrained, Alma’s declaration actually highlights the merciful nature of Korihor’s punishment.

While the loss of speech is traumatic, it bears noting that Korihor is not dead, which means his fate is not etched permanently in stone. In essence, Korihor retains his agential status as a living individual. Since the duration of the curse is based on the Lord’s will, the actual duration is undecided and, if the rest of the Book of Mormon is to be any guide, determined largely by Korihor himself. Ironically, Korihor is allowed to retain his individual rights and privileges; whether or not he prospers under this new set of circumstances is up to him. As an individual agent who has recently confessed, it is possible for Korihor to choose to cultivate a direct relationship with God. He has asked for and received a sign, but it is in a certain sense an empty sign, void of signifying content, just as Korihor himself is now silent in his voiceless state. Korihor’s own actions will determine how the conveyed meaning of the sign will be formed: Will the sign be a blessing? Or a curse?

The sign is ever-present, giving Korihor the time to reflect on the error of his epistemology as well as the time to ponder on the truth as revealed by God himself. In other words, though a negative consequence, the sign gives Korihor the circumstances to contemplate and ponder. In essence, the sign is a tangible opportunity to know the sweet by experiencing the bitter. He could now experience fully and completely the very agency he believed to be missing among the Nephite people. We are also told that, in his current state, Korihor’s well-being was now dependent upon the generosity of others: He “went about from house to house begging for his food. . . . [He] did go about from house to house, begging food for his support” (Alma 30:56, 58). Begging for his food could lead Korihor to re-examine his belief that one only fared
according to the management of the creature. Now dependent upon the charity of others, reliant upon their recognition of social responsibilities, the weaknesses inherent in Korihor’s ideal meritocratic state could now be seen by Korihor himself, bringing about humility and a requisite change to his epistemological claims.

The final scene in this narrative is the proclamation made by the chief judge following Alma’s declaration, which includes both an account of the confrontation between Korihor and Alma and a warning that a similar punishment awaited those who attempted the same activities as Korihor (Alma 30:57). The chief judge’s involvement at this point in the narrative serves as an additional recognition of the political threat that Korihor represented. As has been noted often earlier in this study, the social, political, and economic ramifications of Korihor’s doctrine, if not addressed, had the potential to disrupt the complex relations that structured the Nephite culture. The fact that the “proclamation was sent forth by the chief judge” (Alma 30:57; emphasis added), rather than being distributed through the lines of ecclesiastic authority and communications, underscores the fact that this event was understood by Alma and the chief judge to be just as politically dangerous as it was religiously problematic. While the solution to Korihor personally occurred under the auspices of ecclesiastic authority, the solution to Korihor’s effect upon Nephite society was ultimately one that rested upon the legal and lawful authority of the governing political body. The challenge had been, of course, that, as Mormon pointed out, the doctrine and the teaching of it was not illegal; thus, the nascent system of judges was caught in a catch-22: if they imprisoned Korihor and punished him via state power, the rule of law established under the new system of government was undermined, which would in turn destabilize the entire system and potentially alienate segments of the population. But if they let him go unchecked, his moral and ethical teachings would have corrupted the social fabric of the Nephites, including the new political system, while simultaneously destroying the spiritual influence of the Church. The genius of Alma’s cross-examination lay in the way he neutralized
these threats by guiding the debate to the point that Korihor himself re-configured the entire problem as a theological one in which the only possible resolution would be through an act of God.

Thus, the chief judge is able to marginalize potential threats without resorting to breaking the law. The entire exchange had demonstrated the paucity of Korihor’s epistemology, which the chief judge, who appears to have understood the negative social ramifications inherent in the adoption of said epistemology, alluded to in the proclamation. While the action of the divine sign is noted, the chief judge does not explicitly ally the Nephite political power with that of the Church. This fundamental separation between political and ecclesiastic authority is a requisite move in the diverse population of the Nephite nation.

“And thus we see”

Yet, for all of Alma’s and the other Nephite leaders’ success here, Korihor and his doctrine remained and would continue to remain a threat to the Nephite civilization. The resolution with Korihor did not resolve the underlying social tensions. While it is clear that the Nephite leaders did not agree with Korihor’s approach, concerns over the new political system continued to percolate among the Nephite population during the successive decades. Accusations that the church leadership, in collusion with the political leadership, interfered with the expression of individual rights and privileges would be repeated eighty years later, and the emergence of the Gadianton Robbers with their claims of abused rights all reflect the influence of Korihor’s doctrine in later generations.

More immediately, the introduction of the people of Antionum—Zoram’s followers—in the final verses of Alma 30 foreshadows the missionary discourses by Alma and Amulek to these selfsame people that will take place in the following chapters. There, in chapters 31–35, we will find a people who are in fact actually practicing many of the principles advocated for in Korihor’s philosophy and who, like Korihor, do not understand the nature of God and nature of man. That Korihor dies
there among these people in an ignominious fashion is the final irony of the narrative.53

Mormon closes the chapter with a final observation: “And thus we see the end of him who perverteth the ways of the Lord; and thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60). This principle is reinforced by Korihor’s isolation and literal death via trampling. But, of course, recognizing that the adversary abandons all of his partners eventually is not the only lesson to be garnered from the account. The inclusive summation “thus we see” refers to the entire narrative, not just the immediate end of Korihor. Consequently, Mormon’s observations concerning the potential social and political instability that resulted from Korihor’s powerful but empty doctrine serve to emphasize what Mormon thought were the principles by which the adversary destroys both individuals and communities. For Mormon, when a community abandons an ontology established around a divine-mortal interaction, or establishes a moral/ethical environment more concerned with individual expression of rights rather than responsibilities for those rights, or believes that all truth is relative based only on what one senses, the consequences will be destructive, a state that he himself experienced in his own life.

Each of these elements is deliberately included by Mormon in his narrative construction and is meant for his audience. To be sure, the ministry of Korihor came at a crucial juncture in Nephite history and took advantage of the fracturing that lay concealed under the surface of the Nephite civilization. In doing so, the Korihor narrative thematically introduces the intra-societal conflict that would define the Nephite experience for the next forty years. But for the modern Latter-day Saint, Mormon’s message speaks to our own experience. As Mormon states later, Nephite history is not important for solely its own sake, but also

53. As Welch points out, though, “Korihor’s antiestablishment political views undoubtedly would have been unwelcome among the leaders of the truly oppressive oligarchy in Antionum, who burdened the poor mercilessly and notoriously” (Welch, Legal Cases, 298).
because it may act as a warning to the later generations who will read Mormon’s record. It is in this, then, that the full significance of Korihor’s narrative is revealed, for if it really was written for our day, the Mormon believed that we were to be held responsible for the lessons provided within.

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