

Summary Report

1. Who is Sherem?

Jacob introduces Sherem as someone who does not belong. “There came a man among the people of Nephi,” Jacob tell us, “whose name was Sherem.” Describing Sherem as someone who “came among” the Nephites, Jacob implies that Sherem was not, in some sense, already among them (7:1). It seems unlikely, though, that the Sherem is an outsider in any culturally or ethnically substantial way. Sherem arrives fully informed about Jacob, the law of Moses, and the doctrine of Christ, and he arrives with a clearly defined mission in relation to all three. More, Sherem arrives on the scene with “a perfect knowledge of the language of the people,” something unlikely for a foreigner (7:4). Either way, the rhetorical force of Jacob’s implication is to position Sherem antagonistically as “not one of us.” Given the difficulties faced by Jacob himself as a preacher (see Jacob 1–3), his wariness regarding his rival is expected and understandable.

Jacob also reports that Sherem is a preacher, that he did not accept the “doctrine of Christ,” that he had a perfect knowledge of the language of the people, that he spoke persuasively, that he quickly gathered a following, and that he labored diligently. In short, Sherem is a popular, hard-working, talented, and eloquent preacher who is committed to defending the law of Moses. Jacob immediately frames Sherem’s missionary efforts in terms of “flattery,” “leading away the hearts of the people,” and “the power of the devil” (1:4). However, unlike others in the Book of Mormon who oppose the doctrine of Christ, Sherem explicitly does so in defense of the law of Moses, what he calls “the right way of God.” Backed by key Mosaic prohibitions, Sherem defends God and charges Jacob with the crimes of blasphemy (misappropriating God’s name and law) and divination (claiming to tell the future). In light of these elements, together with the story’s rhetorical dynamics, it is plausible to read Sherem as a preacher who is well-meaning but wrong, rather than someone who is evil.

Sherem, arguing against the doctrine of Christ and in defense of the law of Moses, would surely have reminded Jacob of similar arguments made by those in Jerusalem against Lehi’s messianic prophecies and by Laman and Lemuel against Nephi’s own prophecies (cf. 1 Nephi 17:22). Throughout their encounter, Jacob automatically assumes, like Nephi does with Laman or Lemuel, that Sherem acts in bad faith and with the worst possible motives. Rather than offering instruction or correction (at least as he tells the story), Jacob moves immediately to condemnation. And, most tellingly, Jacob is convinced that, even if Sherem were given a sign from God, Sherem would doubtless deny that sign and refuse to repent (7:14). But, it turns out, Jacob is wrong on this last point. When the sign is given and Sherem is smitten, Sherem not only repents, he immediately “confessed the Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost” (7:17). And it is then Sherem’s preaching—not Jacob’s—that is ultimately witnessed by the multitude, that astonishes them, and that calls down the power of God such that they, too, are overcome, fall to the earth, and are converted (7:21). It is Sherem’s preaching rather than Jacob’s that inaugurates a fundamental transformation among the Nephites, with the result that “the love of God was restored again among the people” (7:23).

For his own part, Sherem fears that he has “lied unto God” because he “denied the Christ and said that [he] believed the scriptures,” but, in context, this confession reads more like a retroactive acknowledgment of his failure to understand the scriptures than an admission of a malicious intent to deceive the people from the beginning (7:19). Of course, Jacob’s strident and unyielding evaluation of Sherem as a “wicked man” (cf. 7:23) should not simply be discounted. Certainly he failed to understand the practical and theological importance of Nephite messianic prophecy. But the significant differences between Jacob’s evaluation of Sherem and Sherem’s

own stated goals and morally significant actions, together with the obvious dynamics that may have unfairly colored Jacob's own judgments, indicate that readers should seriously consider reassessing Sherem's words and actions in a more charitable light. The important limitations to his religious outlook can be instructive without vilifying him, and details in the narrative suggest that charity is called for.

2. *Where is Jacob?*

Sherem dominates the narrative in Jacob 7. Where Sherem is an active, driving presence, Jacob is, curiously and suggestively, passive and peripheral. Note that it is Sherem who comes among the people, Sherem who preaches and labors diligently, and Sherem who has to seek out Jacob for an opportunity to confront him. "He sought much opportunity that he might come unto me," Jacob reports (7:3). Why is this necessary? Where is Jacob? Why is he so hard to find? Why does Sherem have to seek much in order to come unto him—especially in such a young society that would likely have been relatively small and intimate at this point? More, why is Sherem allowed time and freedom to "lead away many hearts" without any resistance from Jacob (7:3)? Why doesn't Jacob take action, seek out Sherem, confront him, and himself put a stop to Sherem's efforts to "overthrow the doctrine of Christ" (7:2) long before he has sustained success?

In Jacob's telling, Sherem ironically plays the traditionally prophetic part, signaled by the use of the formula "there came a man" at the outset of the narrative (7:1). (This formula is most often used in scripture to describe a prophet figure who arrives with an unwelcome message.) Sherem comes among Jacob's people as a prophetic rebel, preaching and organizing, moving the populace to remember the law of Moses, calling them to repentance, and confronting those in power with charges of blasphemy. Jacob oddly plays the part normally assigned in such stories about prophets to a King David or King Noah, while Sherem gets to play the part of a Nathan or Abinadi, delivering hard truths to a figure of established power. In this way, the typical prophet-priest power dynamic is, at least at the outset of the Sherem narrative, neatly reversed. It is possible that Jacob's age and institutional power play a more practical part in isolating him from Sherem. Is Jacob too old to take to the streets? Has he withdrawn from his people in light of previous failures (cf. Jacob 1-3)? Has he withdrawn because of his "overanxiety" for his people as a result of their failure to understand the "mystery" that is the doctrine of Christ (4:18)? Might he, in his role as a priest in the Nephite temple, effectively live behind the temple walls, insulated from the daily business of his people (cf. 1:17-19)?

Whatever answers might be given to these questions, even when Jacob does arrive on the scene for his decisive confrontation with Sherem, he is passive. Sherem seeks him out, and Sherem speaks first, leveling the charge of blasphemy. Jacob counters with a series of questions, but Sherem is the one who actively solicits the sign that ends up smiting him. Jacob somewhat passively gives his blessing to whatever God wills. Sherem is felled by "the power of the Lord" for "the space of many days," and it is Sherem's sincere repentance and preaching that spark the mass conversion that returns the people to the scriptures and their love of God (7:15). Jacob figures into this decisive conversion that reboots Nephite society as a whole primarily by way of his belated comment that all this happened because he had, earlier and off-stage, "requested it of my Father which is in heaven, for he had heard my cry and answered my prayer" (7:22). Further, verse twenty-four then recounts, in the passive voice, that "means were devised" to reclaim the Lamanites, perhaps spearheaded by Jacob, but these efforts "all were in vain" (7:24). The chapter then concludes with Jacob's melancholic reflections on his old age, suffering, and mourning, all framed by a sense of life passing "away like as it were unto us a dream" (7:26). The overall effect of these themes is striking: Jacob's explicit commentary on the narrative action (he is the good prophet and Sherem is the wicked man) is consistently in tension with the narrative actions themselves and, in particular, by Jacob's own framing of that

narrative action. Jacob presents himself as passive and peripheral, as both being and not being the hero of his story. This ambiguity, perhaps intentional, may itself be of central theological importance.

3. What, in Jacob 7, is the “doctrine of Christ”?

Concluding his record, Jacob reports that their “lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation in a wild wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore we did mourn out our days” (7:26). Jacob mourns because he and his people have lost Jerusalem and, having lost the holy city, they are lonesome and hated by their brethren. Jerusalem is, for Jacob, a focal point. Jacob and his people had lost Jerusalem for the same reason they were hated by their brothers, Laman and Lemuel. As Laman and Lemuel put it: “And we know that the people which were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people, for they keep the statutes and the judgments of the Lord and all his commandments according to the law of Moses; wherefore we know that they are a righteous people. And our father hath judged them and hath led us away because we would hearken unto his word” (1 Nephi 17:22). Laman and Lemuel align Jerusalem with the law of Moses, but they find themselves lost in the wilderness because, rather than keeping the law of Moses, they heeded the words of their father, “a visionary man” (1 Nephi 5:4). Being a visionary man, Lehi dreamed dreams. Without these dreams he would not have “seen the things of God in a vision” or “known the goodness of God,” but would have “tarried at Jerusalem” and “perished with my brethren” (1 Nephi 5:4). This visionary intrusion of dreams into everyday life is the fault line that organizes the whole of Book of Mormon history and, ultimately, distinguishes the law of Moses from the doctrine of Christ.

This same drama—this argument about the law of Moses and the doctrine of Christ that Lehi plays out with Jerusalem and Nephi plays out with Laman and Lemuel—is repeated again in Jacob 7 with Sherem and Jacob. Sherem defends the law of Moses and takes Jacob’s visionary assimilation of that law to be a perversion of the law’s purity. Echoing Laman and Lemuel, Sherem claims that Jacob has “led away much of this people, that they pervert the right way of God and keep not the law of Moses, which is the right way, and convert the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence” (7:7). For Jacob, however, the right way of God is not grounded directly in the law itself but in visions and revelations, and apparently in a rather specific sort of visions and revelations. He claims that his hope in Christ could not be shaken because of his “many revelation”: “for I had truly seen angels and they had ministered unto me. And also I had heard the voice of the Lord speaking unto me in very word from time to time” (7:5). This revelatory power that cannot be confined within the bounds of the law is, as Jacob says, “the power of the Holy Ghost” (7:12). More, this phrase, “the power of the Holy Ghost,” is used consistently in Nephi’s writings in connection with his visions of the larger history of Israel, God’s covenant people. Nephi promises that anyone can gain access to apocalyptic visions of that history (see 1 Nephi 10:17–22). As with Jacob’s talk of “the doctrine of Christ” (Jacob 7:2; see 2 Nephi 31), his references to the power of the Holy Ghost seem to be part of a larger prophetic heritage passed on to Lehi’s children.

Significantly, the basic point of contention in each case is time. According to Sherem, Jacob perverts the law by using his messianic visions to break time’s frame and, thus, to pervert the orderly, temporally normative operation of the law. He “pervert[s] the right way of God” and “convert[s] the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence” (7:7). This visionary subordination of the law to a promised messiah “is blasphemy, for no man knoweth of such things; for he cannot tell of things to come” (7:7). Jacob’s visions are, in effect, destroying or killing the orderly succession of cause and effect imposed by the law with their present tense enactment of future tense events. On this score, Sherem is, in part, correct. The law is dying. Nephi and Jacob both advocate a doctrine of Christ that reorders time by treating the law as if it were already fulfilled in Christ. As Nephi puts it: “And notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses and look forward with steadfastness

unto Christ until the law shall be fulfilled, for for this end was the law given. Wherefore the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith, yet we keep the law because of the commandments” (2 Nephi 25:25). By converting the law into a machine for reordering time—for treating the past as forgivable, the present as open for action, and the future as already accomplished—the law becomes dead to them and eternal life becomes possible. Sherem experiences this kind of abrupt temporal reeducation personally when, smitten “by the power of the Lord,” he lies comatose for many days (7:15). Asleep to the world, he is exposed to eternity: “he spake of hell and of eternity and of eternal punishment” and he “confessed the Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost” (7:18, 17). The doctrine of Christ, perhaps initially to our terror, superimposes eternity onto time—that is, it superimposes Christ onto the law—and allows life and law to be seen and lived from the far side of their own completion in Christ. And then, in this visionary space of superposition, it is only natural that our lives should pass away as in a dream.

4. *How does Jacob 7 fit into the larger structure of the Book of Jacob?*

The Book of Jacob is Jacob’s unique contribution to the Nephite record. (However, it should be noted that a substantial and significant sermon delivered by Jacob is also included by Nephi in his own record in 2 Nephi 6-10.) Contemporary versions of the Book of Jacob break the text into seven chapters. However, the earliest version of the text breaks it more cleanly along thematic lines into just four chapters: Jacob 1, Jacob 2-3, Jacob 4-6, and Jacob 7. Jacob 1 functions as a kind of preface to the book, introducing key themes and providing historical context. Jacob 2-3 records a sermon delivered by Jacob to the Nephites at the time of Nephi’s death. Jacob 4-6 introduces, delivers, and then comments on Zenos’ world-historical allegory of the olive tree. Jacob 7 concludes the book with Jacob’s confrontation with Sherem regarding the doctrine of Christ. Jacob 7 itself segments into three parts: Jacob 7:1-23 narrates Jacob’s confrontation with Sherem; Jacob 7:24-25 recounts an failed attempt to “reclaim and restore the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth”; and Jacob 7:26-27 concludes the record with some general reflections on the Nephites’ condition as a people, while Jacob formally charges his son, Enos, with care of the small plates. One noteworthy feature of the book’s overall structure is that Jacob 7 appears to be Jacob’s third (and finally successful) attempt to end his record. Jacob initially brings his record to a close at the end of chapter 3, at the conclusion of the sermon delivered at the time of Nephi’s death. After concluding the sermon proper in 3:11, Jacob takes a stab at a formal ending for the book in 3:12-14, concluding that: “These plates are called the plates of Jacob, and they were made by the hand of Nephi. And I make an end of speaking these words” (3:14). Chapter four then reopens the record with an explanation that, though it is difficult to write many words, Jacob hopes now to preserve for his people some “small degree of knowledge concerning us or concerning their fathers” (4:2). In particular, he wants future readers to know “that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming” (4:4). Jacob’s supplementary attempt to preserve this knowledge in the record suggests that his attempts at teaching the doctrine of Christ to his own people during his own life may have had limited success. Jacob 7:7 indirectly suggests the same. There, Sherem suggests that Jacob has “led away much of this people,” implying that Jacob has not managed to lead *all* of the people to embrace the doctrine of Christ. More, these hints raise, in general, the question of the extent to which Lehi’s, Nephi’s, and Jacob’s personal revelations concerning the doctrine of Christ were available to the Nephite people at large. Regardless, Jacob attempts to bring the record to a close a second time in Jacob 6:12-13. Wrapping up his comments on Zenos’ allegory, Jacob simply concludes: “O be wise! What can I say more? Finally, I bid you farewell until I shall meet you before the pleasing bar of God, which bar striketh the wicked with awful dread and fear” (6:12-13). It appears, then, that Jacob intended to firmly conclude his record with Jacob 6 but that, in the years that followed, his encounter with Sherem so moved him as to motivate the addition of one final coda to his brother’s plates. Having recounted this confrontation, chapter 7 concludes with a formal charge of transmission, leaving the plates in his son’s hands and, directly addressing the reader, offering a final goodbye: “And to the reader I bid farewell, hoping

that many of my brethren may read my words. Brethren, adieu" (7:27). Jacob's profoundly melancholy concluding reflection on the Nephites' situation as a people—"our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and solemn people, wanderers cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation in a wild wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore we did mourn out our days"—together with the "anxiety" that he frequently ascribes to himself (cf. 2 Nephi 6:3, Jacob 1:5, 2:3, 4:18), may supply some crucial context for his apparent inability to cleanly bring his record to a close (7:26). More, insofar as melancholy and anxiety are potentially significant affects with respect to a life lived in Christ, the tripartite stop-and-go structure of Jacob's book may itself be of theological significance. Further, in its final form, the Book of Jacob ends with an unmistakable turn for the better. After Jacob's apparent inability to sway the whole of his people toward righteousness after Nephi's death (see Jacob 1–3), he seems to have largely given up hope of seeing his people return, generally, to righteousness. The story of Sherem, in all its complexity, tells the story of at least a temporary refocusing of the Nephites on their religious and spiritual duties. Jacob 7, in its supplemental fashion, allows the Book of Jacob to end on a happy note, anticipating the wider-spread Christian following on display in subsequent narratives in the Book of Mormon.