

Sherem's Accusations against Jacob

"I, Sherem, declare unto you that this is blasphemy; for no man knoweth of such things; for he cannot tell of things to come."
(Jacob 7:7)

An interesting encounter is reported in Jacob 7 between Sherem and Jacob. In light of the ancient Israelite criminal law that was in force among the Nephites at this time and at least up to the time of the reforms of Mosiah (see 2 Nephi 5:10; Jarom 1:5; Mosiah 17:7–8; Alma 1:17), it is evident that Sherem's accusations were serious allegations. On three accounts, he accused Jacob of offenses punishable by death:

Ye have [1] 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. And now behold, I, Sherem, declare unto you that this is [2] blasphemy; for no man knoweth of such things; for he [3] cannot tell of things to come. (Jacob 7:7)

Each of Sherem's accusations can be traced to specific provisions in pre-exilic Israelite law:

1. *Causing public apostasy.* Leading other people or a city into apostasy was recognized as a serious infraction under the law of Moses and the Talmud. Deuteronomy 13:1–18 condemns to death any person, whether a prophet, or brother, or son, or wife, who says to the inhabitants of their city, "Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known" (Deuteronomy 13:13; see 13:2, 6). "Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; . . . but thou shalt surely kill him" (Deuteronomy 13:8–9).

In essence Sherem first claimed that Jacob had led the people away, i.e., into a state of apostasy from the way of God. Sherem claimed that Jacob had caused the people to pervert the right way of God, to keep not the law, and to convert the law into the worship of an unknown god. Indeed, the law of Moses defines the crime of causing apostasy as trying to thrust the people "out of the way which the Lord [their] God commanded [them] to walk in" (Deuteronomy 13:5).

Moreover, Sherem's point that Jacob had converted the observance of the law of Moses into the worship of an unknown future being seems to have been based on the Deuteronomic prohibition against turning to serve new gods "which ye have not known" (Deuteronomy 13:2, 6, 13).

2. *Blasphemy.* Sherem's second accusation also raised a capital charge. It was a felony under the law of Moses to blaspheme (see Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 24:10–16). Leviticus 24 established that any person who blasphemed, even in a brawl, was to be stoned to death. Sherem raised the charge of blasphemy against Jacob when he formally accused him, saying, "I, Sherem, declare unto you that this is blasphemy" (Jacob 7:7).

While the ancient history of the crime of blasphemy is obscure, this offense apparently embraced many forms of insolent or seditious speech, whether against God, against the king (see 1 Kings 21:10), against another man, or against holy places or things, including the law (compare Acts 6:13).

3. *False Prophecy.* Sherem's words also advanced a claim of false prophecy. The test for whether a prophet had spoken truly or falsely was usually to see "if the thing follow not, nor come to pass" (Deuteronomy 18:22). Apparently Sherem tried to preclude this defense when he objected that Jacob had spoken of things too far

distant in the future. When Sherem asserted categorically that “no man knoweth of such things” (Jacob 7:7), he seems to be arguing that prophecies of that nature should not be easily tolerated under the law. With shorter-term prophecies, one has the chance to test them within a reasonable time.

Deuteronomy 18:20 requires that a man shall be put to death if he speaks “in the name of other gods.” One can understand how Jacob’s “preaching . . . the doctrine of Christ” (Jacob 7:6) could have been deviously characterized by Sherem as a form of speaking “in the name of” another god, for the Nephites had begun worshipping God in the name of Christ (see 2 Nephi 25:13–19; Jacob 4:5). Perhaps Book of Mormon prophets insisted so emphatically that God and his Son were but “one God” (2 Nephi 31:21; Alma 11:28–29, 35), partly to affirm that speaking in the name of one was not to be construed legally as speaking in the name of any other god.

Thus Sherem’s allegations were not merely vague rhetorical criticisms; they were well-formulated accusations, logically derived from specific provisions of the ancient law. Sherem’s words put Jacob’s life in jeopardy. If allowed to stand, these accusations would have justified Jacob’s execution.

At the same time, Sherem also put his own life on the line. The ancient punishment for a false accuser was to suffer that which “he had thought to have done unto his brother” (Deuteronomy 19:19). Not only does this show that Sherem was deeply committed to his views and dead serious about the charges he raised against his “brother Jacob” (Jacob 7:6), it also explains the sense of legal justice that exists in the fact that, in the end, Sherem was smitten by God and he himself soon died.

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