

# Notes on Korihor and Language

*“Behold, ye cannot know of things which ye do not see.” (Alma 30:15)*

The story of Korihor is often cited as an example of how the Book of Mormon can be used to identify the enemies of the Church, as well as a paradigm for how to deal with them. I would suggest that the story itself is very subtly textured and has much to say about the very nature of such paradigms. Note first the recurrence of words with linguistic connotations: *sign, denote, utterance, testify, flattering words*, etc. At issue is the role of language in maintaining order and power within a community, and what steps can be taken to counter one who would undermine that order, that language.

Korihor is less concerned with the truth of the traditionally received teachings than he is with the role those traditions play in maintaining structures of dominion within the society. In binding “themselves down under the foolish ordinances and performances,” he tells the high priest, they are “brought down according to thy words” (Alma 30:23). Authority is shown to be the power to determine the boundaries of the language, to establish the words that will constitute communal discourse. Inasmuch as the use of other words places one outside of the linguistically constituted community, Korihor sees this as a way of escape from the constraints imposed by orthodox discourse. We can see this in a pattern that is repeated four times: “Ye say that this people is a free people. Behold, I say they are in bondage” (Alma 30:24). Note the effort, not to disprove, but to question the solidity and knowability of the received prophecies: “They are foolish traditions of your fathers. How do ye know of their surety? Behold, ye cannot know of things which ye do not see” (Alma 30:14–15). “This derangement of your minds comes because of the traditions of your fathers” (Alma 30:16). The ground is linguistically prepared for their “delusions.”

In what follows, however, we can see the consequences of radical doubt concerning the authority of language’s structure. For one thing, it is impossible to escape dependence on some linguistic structure or other, which will be authoritative in its own sphere. Alma points this out when he asks Korihor, “What evidence have ye? . . . I say unto you that ye have none, save it be your word only” (Alma 30:40). And Korihor’s language, no less than that of the tradition, is subject to the critique he offers.

That being the case, listen to the overtones of the following request: “If thou wilt show me a sign, that I may be convinced that there is a God, yea, show unto me that he hath power, and then I will be convinced of the truth of thy words” (Alma 30:43). For all his questioning the value and authority of an arbitrary linguistic system, a system that he claims represents only the interplay of strivings for power, in the end such a system is what he himself asks for, a system of signs that will bring to bear God’s power upon him. Alma’s response, of course, is not to deny the basic value of signs, of linguistic communication, but only to point out that such signs have already been given. The way he presents his argument is particularly appropriate: “The scriptures are laid before thee, yea, and all things denote there is a God; yea; even the earth, and all things . . . do witness that there is a supreme Creator” (Alma 30:44). God himself is the referent of all things in the prophetic tradition of the scriptures. The received linguistic structure does not serve primarily to maintain power, but to testify to the power of God as supreme creator. Even the earth and the planets in their regular, traditional structure serve as “witnesses.”

True enough, a certain power is maintained by all this. But 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 (see Alma 30:10), working toward the disintegration of the

community. And all the while, he never manages to escape the linguistic constraints he had found so repulsive. Rather than escaping from power, it turns out that “the devil has power over [him]” (Alma 30:42). Rather than liberating the people through abolition of linguistic constraint, he becomes “the means of bringing many souls down to destruction, by [his] lying and by [his] flattering words” (Alma 30:47).

He himself is nothing but a “means,” a sign through which is communicated the language of doubt. “He [the devil] taught me that which I should say” (Alma 30:53). It is therefore appropriate that when God does, through Alma, declare the sign he will give, it is Korihor’s dumbness. When a person really takes seriously the desire to find liberation from language’s constraints, it soon enough becomes impossible for him to say anything at all, at least if he tries to be consistent. And it is only fair that this should be his sign from God, the revelation of the futility and danger of his quest. As Alma asks him, “Would ye that he should afflict others, to show unto thee a sign?” (Alma 30:51).

Speech and language are a given; Korihor is no more free of their constraints than anyone he presumes to liberate. And yet, the aims to which that language may be put can differ, along with the effects that flow from conformity or nonconformity to the received standard. And so the scripture is quoted at the beginning of the chapter: “Choose ye this day, whom ye will serve” (Alma 30:8). The various dimensions and contingencies of that choice, of course, remain to be investigated, but the story of Korihor gives us, in the language it uses, a good paradigm in which to start dealing with it.

*Research by Robert E. Clark, originally published in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/1 (1993): 198–200.*