

Reading Signs or Repeating Symptoms

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1. The Scene

Jacob and Sherem meet but they never connect. They circle the same sun but on wildly divergent planes. This isn't unusual. People talk past each other all the time. Our meetings are framed and spaced by layers of circumstance, ignorance, and protocol. The things that worry me are not the things that interest you. What you'd hope to see in me isn't the profile I wanted to show. And so we feel alone even when we're together.

Some of this is our own fault, but some of it isn't. Part of the problem is language itself. Language helps put us in relation but it also structures those relations, and language, in order to be dependable, must be predictable. The way verbs are conjugated, the way words are ordered, the way certain kinds of statements or questions solicit a certain kind of response—these regularities give language its consistency. But these regularities also give language its rigidity. These words and forms give shape to the lives that we share but, too, the mechanical character of that language invests all of these ready-made words and prefabricated forms with a life of their own. They acquire an almost automatic character such that, rather than speaking a language, language often ends up speaking us.

Some of language's prefabricated forms are common and generic. Think of how greetings have a predictable formality. Or think of how the basic elements of a conversation between strangers at a party are already choreographed—the kinds of questions that can be asked, the kinds of answers that can be given. Most of what we say everyday is just a slight variation on what we said yesterday.

But some of these prefabricated forms are very specific to each person. These specific forms are shaped by the details of our personal histories, the idiosyncrasies of our genealogies, and, especially, by the constellations of need and desire that structured our earliest relationships. The patterns that structure these relationships—patterns that, to this day, situate me in a certain way with respect to my mother, that shape my expectations in relation to a friend, that make me hungry for my father's approval—these originally specialized patterns end up functioning as general templates for my relationships with other people.

These specialized patterns get recycled as all-purpose widgets and so I end up repeating with my boss elements of my relationship with my father, repeating with my wife elements of my relationship with my mother, repeating with my bishop elements of my relationship with my brother, etc. With some concretion, but generally with little awareness, these primal scenes get acted out again and again, automatically, mechanically, in my head, in my dreams, and in real life. At the heart of these scenes is a missing piece—a hole, a need—that fuels the drive to rigidly, symptomatically repeat them with whoever happens to be on hand.

Much of this repetition is futile: the hole never gets filled. But there is also a kind of utility here. Widely applied, the repetition of these scenes can make it easier to deal with people. Rather than needing to respond to the particulars, I can, without reflection, slot people into pre-assigned roles and then, focused on what I need, I can just respond to the generic features of the roles themselves. Rather than responding to you, I can respond to your role in the story I'm compelled—once again, today—to retell. In psychoanalysis this is called transference. In religion we often just call it sin. Sin: when we get bolted into patterns of transference that stubbornly keep us from seeing (and, thus, loving) someone else.

2. Jacob's Symptom

A lot of what happens between Jacob and Sherem in Jacob 7 has this feel. They talk right past each other. They can't quite see each other. They don't respond to each other as people but as types. Their projections lock orbits and their symptoms form a complementary pair.

Consider Jacob first. As Jacob narrates their encounter, the story has a stark, didactic simplicity. Jacob is good and Sherem is bad. Where Jacob displays "the power of the Lord" (Jacob 7:15), Sherem displays the "power of the devil" (Jacob 7:4).²⁴ On the face of it, this isn't wrong. But there is something disappointing about how this unfolds.

When Sherem confronts Jacob with a charge of blasphemy and perversion, Jacob responds in kind. Throughout, Jacob appears more interested in defending a certain kind of Christian doctrine than with enacting a certain kind of Christian behavior. He seems invested in and sharply limited by a certain pattern of speaking and thinking. To be sure, Sherem does the same with Jacob. But where this is predictable in Sherem's case, it feels tragic in Jacob's because the doctrine that Jacob is defending does itself maintain that Christian behavior is more important than any Christian ideas. The idea of Christ's love is not the thing at stake, Christ's love is. It's true that Jacob defends the idea of Christ's love with both force and effect, but it's also true that we hardly see him enacting that love.

Sherem, we're told, "lead away many hearts" from the doctrine of Christ (Jacob 7:3). But Jacob doesn't seek Sherem out. In fact, Sherem has to go looking for Jacob and, apparently, has a hard time finding him. Sherem, Jacob says, "sought much opportunity that he might come unto me" (Jacob 7:3).

Where is Jacob? Why is he so hard to find? Why isn't he actively seeking out Sherem? Or, consider how things play out during and after their confrontation. When Sherem finds Jacob, he immediately levels an apparently sincere charge that Jacob's doctrine of Christ is perverting the law of Moses and misleading the people. Sherem sees himself as defending God's law. Jacob isn't impressed. He responds with some leading questions, invites God to smite Sherem as a sign, and then (wham!) "the power of the Lord came upon [Sherem], insomuch that he fell to the earth" (Jacob 7:15). But immediately following this sign, Jacob again disappears from the text and, in the aftermath, there is no mention of his being present to "nourish" Sherem as he lays stricken or of his being present to hear Sherem's deathbed confession. Essentially, Jacob shows up in the narrative only for the smiting itself.

Perhaps most telling, though, is Jacob's unquestioned confidence that Sherem's request for a sign is disingenuous. Jacob testifies that he knows, "by the power of the Holy Ghost," that "if there should be no atonement made, all mankind must be lost" (Jacob 7:12). Sherem asks for the same revelation:

"Shew me a sign by this power of the Holy Ghost" (Jacob 7:13). But Jacob, without any hesitation, declares that, even if God were to show Sherem a sign, "yet thou wilt deny it because thou art of the devil" (Jacob 7:14). This is strong language and a boldly categorical prediction: even if the Holy Ghost were to intervene, Sherem will deny it, Jacob promises. There is no hope for Sherem.

But Jacob is wrong. The sign comes and—even though the sign comes in the form of a smiting— Sherem confesses Christ and repents. More, his testimony of Christ is sufficiently powerful that the multitude gathered to hear his testimony is "astonished exceedingly, insomuch that the power of God came down upon them and they were overcome, that they fell to the earth" (Jacob 7:21). In turn, this mass conversion is itself so profound that "the peace and love of God was restored again among the people" (Jacob 7:23). Sherem's deathbed preaching appears to be massively successful in a way that Jacob's own preaching was not.

But this isn't how Jacob frames it. Jacob undercuts any part Sherem may have had in sparking this transformation by claiming that all of the above happened because "I had requested it of my Father which was in heaven, for he had heard my cry and answered my prayer" (Jacob 7:22). Here, Jacob's prayers are assigned the role of prime mover and Sherem won't be allowed out of the box Jacob has put him in. And so, with a final parting jab, Jacob baldly concludes the whole story by *still* referring to Sherem as "this wicked man" (Jacob 7:23).

3. Sherem's Position

Much of Jacob's treatment of Sherem feels shortsighted and unfair. And though Jacob successfully defends the doctrine of Christ, he doesn't seem to do it in a very Christ-like way. In fact, he defends the doctrine of Christ against the letter of the Mosaic law in a way that, in itself, seems in lockstep with the letter of the law. What's going on here? If Jacob is slotting Sherem into a prefabricated role in a scene that Jacob's own life compels him to replay, what role is this? What position does Sherem occupy?

Something about Sherem sets Jacob off. Something about him reopens an old wound. Jacob clearly bears a such wound. Only moments after recounting his unmitigated victory over Sherem, Jacob drifts right back into melancholy and tell us that, until his dying day, he mourned: "We did mourn out our days" (Jacob 7:26). What is the cause of Jacob's persistent mourning? What can't he put it behind him? The Nephites, Jacob recounts, were "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" (Jacob 7:26). Jacob is the bearer of this old wound, his father's wound, a family wound. He mourns for Jerusalem. He mourns for the loss of a city he never knew. But, for Jacob, this wound has some additional specificity. He is also "hated of his brethren," and this is not "brethren" in the abstract. As a first generation Nephite, Jacob means something much more immediate: he means his actual brothers, Laman and Lemuel.

Jacob's lonesome tribulation in the wilderness is framed on the one hand by the loss of a city he never knew and, on the other, by the fact that his brothers hate him. The catalyst for both these losses is the same: the doctrine of Christ. From the start, Nephi reports, the Jews hated and "did mock [Lehi] because of the things which he testified of them" because he "testified that the things which he saw and heard, and also the things which he read in the book, manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world" (1 Nephi 1:19). And from the start, Nephi continues, Laman and Lemuel "were like unto [those] who were at Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 2:13).

These are the lines that frame Jacob's primal scene. And this is the scene that will, with a telling mechanicity, repeat itself not only in Jacob's life but, for the next thousand years, in the bodies of his people—again and again, generation after generation—until the repetition itself destroys them all. When Jacob looks at Sherem, why can't he see him? I think the answer is straightforward. When Jacob looks at Sherem all he can see is Laman and Lemuel. He can't engage with Sherem because, throughout their encounter, he's too busy shadow-boxing his brothers.

Sherem, like Laman, Lemuel, and the people in Jerusalem, is a defender of the received tradition. In particular, Sherem, like Laman and Lemuel, is keen to defend the primacy of the law of Moses against the imposition of any novel dreams, visions, or messianic revelations. But these are, as Nephi noted, exactly the objections lodged by Laman and Lemuel against Lehi. "Thou art like unto our father," they tell Nephi, "led away by the foolish imaginations of his heart . . . we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; wherefore we know that they are a righteous people" (1 Nephi 17:20, 22). Sherem mirrors exactly these claims:

And ye have led away much of this people, that they pervert the right way of God and keep not the law of Moses, which is the right way, and convert the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence. And now behold, I Sherem declare unto you that this is blasphemy, for no man knoweth of such things; for he cannot tell of things to come. (Jacob 7:7)

On Sherem's account the "law of Moses" is itself the "right way of God," not a shadow of it, not a sign of things to come. For Sherem, Jacob's doctrine of Christ looks beyond the mark and ignores the plainness of the law. It "converts" the law of Moses into an apparatus for worshipping a future Messiah and, as a result, it interferes with the law's operation as what structures and orders our everyday lives and relationships.

It's on this score that Sherem's position is more consistent than Jacob's. Sherem's position that the law is what structures and orders our relationship to the world is consistent with his own willingness to submit to and massage the structures imposed by language. But Jacob's willingness to do the same is not consistent with the doctrine of Christ he's defending. Sherem is a master of the law. And, in particular, he is a master of how the law organizes our desires and locks us into repeating certain scenes. Sherem, Jacob tells us, "was learned, that he had a perfect knowledge of the language of the people; wherefore he could use much flattery and much power of speech according to the power of the devil" (Jacob 7:4). Sherem's learning and power are pegged directly to his "perfect knowledge of the language of the people." He understands how language works, he recognizes the constraints that language imposes, and he knows that, at the heart of our compulsion to repeat these primal scenes, is a wound, a need, a desire. Sherem recognizes these templates as symptoms. As a result, Sherem can position himself in a way that is flattering to the stories that people need to repeat.

This is what flattery amounts to: the power to position yourself as a willing mirror for whatever image others hope to see reflected back to them. In this sense, flattery isn't just a name for a certain way of speaking, it's a general name for smoothly functioning transference. When flattery succeeds, it creates order. It gathers people up. It stabilizes the images we project onto each other. Flattery shows us what we want to see. It reflects back to us what we expected. When this happens, a reassuring consistency reigns. But this compelled, mechanical consistency is also quite stifling and, ultimately, lonely. A regulated economy of mirror images is exhilarating but empty.

This is where Jacob and Sherem find themselves: hamstrung by flattery. They are compelled by their wounds to repeat complementary scenes, scenes that bind them together as a pair of prefabricated images but prevent them from connecting as people. Sherem doesn't address Jacob, he addresses only a "law-breaker." And Jacob doesn't address Sherem, he addresses only a "Christ-denier." Though adversarial, these roles collude to reinforce the mutual exclusion of the actual people attached to them.

4. Signs from Heaven

What, then, can be done? It's not as if we could do without these structures that order and regulate our relationships. It's not as if we could do without law and language. Without law and language we would be even more isolated and alone than we are when we're trapped within their confines. What we need, rather, is a doctrine of Christ that can enact a new relation to the law, a doctrine that can retain these structures but give us room to move in relation to them.

The key to this doctrine of Christ is a spirit of prophecy that can read the law itself as sign. Rather than just repeating it as a symptom, a spirit of prophecy can read in the staging of a primal scene the truth about the too-

human wound that compels the repetition in the first place. This spirit can, as Jacob puts it, recognize that “none of the prophets have written nor prophesied save they have spoken concerning this Christ” (Jacob 7:11).

Now, at one level, what Jacob claims about scripture is clearly false. Most of scripture is straightforwardly, like the law itself, about something *other* than Christ. In order to point to Christ, the law and prophets must themselves be read as signs that, at heart, testify to the truth of the world’s original wound and, especially, to the manifestation of Christ in that wound as the lamb slain from the foundation of the world (cf. Revelation 13:8). This is the doctrine of Christ:

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. And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law; and they, knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ, and know for what end the law was given. (2 Nephi 25:24-27)

The law must be kept and its structures preserved, but they must be kept in such a way that they become “dead unto us.” When this happens, the spell is broken.

In sin, the law takes on a life of its own and we feel dead in relation to it. We feel excluded from our own lives and isolated from other people. But the doctrine of Christ inverts this scenario. When the law becomes dead, when the law no longer has a life of its own, when it loses its automatic and mechanical character, then we discover a new life in Christ. We’re freed from sin. We’re no longer locked into repeating the same futile, bloodless scenes. The key, again, is that the law must start functioning as a sign. We have to learn to read the performance of these scenes not, like Sherem, as a symptom available for manipulation but, like a prophet, as a sign that displays the human wounds that animate them.

This is hard to do. The templates that structure our relationships are themselves a defensive gesture meant to compensate for the wound that compels them. But there is, here, a general lesson to be drawn from Sherem’s own experience of a sign. When signs come, they inevitably come, to one degree or another, as they did for Sherem. As Jacob puts it: “if God shall smite thee, let that be a sign unto thee” (Jacob 7:14). Every sign is smiting. Every sign that reveals Christ reveals him by touching the wound that we were working to conceal. These signs break the tight circle of transference, of collusion and vanity. They collapse our prearranged games. They open us to something beyond the prefabricated scenes and ready-made meanings we work so hard to impose on the world. And they make room for these scenes to be redeployed, instead, as signs of the very wounds they’d been hiding. Signs open us to the possibility of revelation, ministering angels, prophecies, visions, and dreams. Signs, revealing the doctrine of Christ, open us to the possibility of a world where we are not alone.

5. Reclamation

In conclusion, allow me to speculate on a final point. When God smites Sherem such that he falls to the earth, this is a sign. But, it seems to me, this sign isn’t just for Sherem. This sign is also meant for Jacob. Granted, the sign wakes Sherem up such that he “confessed the Christ and the power of the Holy Ghost and the ministering of angels” (Jacob 7:17). But the sign gives Jacob a bracing shake as well. It may be true that Jacob never truly sees

Sherem—Sherem dies before they really have a chance—but Jacob clearly signals that, even if he never manages to see Sherem, Sherem has put him in a position to see Laman and Lemuel again.

Note that after Sherem confesses Christ and “the love of God” is restored among the people, Jacob immediately turns his attention to the Lamanites: “And it came to pass that many means were devised to reclaim and restore the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth” (Jacob 7:24). These effort fail, but the fact that Jacob is moved to *try* is significant. When he looked at Sherem, Jacob could only see the ghosts of Laman and Lemuel. He saw these ghosts so clearly that he was sure that even if God gave Sherem a sign, Sherem (like Laman and Lemuel) would harden his heart and never repent.

But the sign came and Sherem *did* repent. He did confess Christ. And then something happens to Jacob. For the first time in decades, Jacob can see his own brothers more clearly. He can see Laman and Lemuel, not as players in his story but as flesh and blood people. For the first time in decades, Jacob can read in their anger the wound that compelled *them* to repeat their own primal scene. Then, for the first time in decades, Jacob dares to hope that his brothers aren’t lost forever. This is the doctrine of Christ.

NOTES

24. All citations of Jacob 7 in this essay refer to the Royal Skousens critical edition of the text, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2009).