

# The "Decapitation" of Shiz

"And it came to pass that when Coriantumr had leaned upon his sword, that he rested a little, he smote off the head of Shiz." (Ether 15:30)

Ether 15:29–32 describes the gory end of the last Jaredite battle. Exhausted, Coriantumr propped himself up with his own sword, gathered his last ounce of strength, and "smote off the head of Shiz," his archrival who had fainted beside him from the loss of blood. The smitten Shiz then "raised up on his hands and fell; and after that he had struggled for breath, he died," and Coriantumr himself collapsed.

People have long wondered how Shiz could raise himself up, fall, and gasp for breath if his head had been cut off. Dr. M. Gary Hadfield, M.D., professor of pathology (neuropathology) at the Medical College of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond, Virginia, published in *BYU Studies* in 1993<sup>1</sup> the following diagnosis:

Shiz's death struggle illustrates the classic reflex posture that occurs in both humans and animals when the upper brain stem (midbrain/mesencephalon) is disconnected from the brain. The extensor muscles of the arms and legs contract, and this reflex action could cause Shiz to raise up on his hands.<sup>2</sup> In many patients, it is the sparing of vital respiratory and blood pressure centers in the central (pons) and lower (medulla) brain stem that permits survival.<sup>3</sup>

The brain stem is located inside the base of the skull and is relatively small. It connects the brain proper, or cerebrum, with the spinal cord in the neck. Coriantumr was obviously too exhausted to do a clean job. His stroke evidently strayed a little too high. He must have cut off Shiz's head through the base of the skull, at the level of the midbrain, instead of lower through the cervical spine in the curvature of the neck. . . . Significantly, this nervous system phenomenon (decerebrate rigidity) was first reported in 1898, long after the Book of Mormon was published.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the account of the staggering death of Shiz is not a figment of dramatic imagination, but the Book of Mormon account is plausibly consistent with medical science.

Moreover, linguistic analysis sustains the foregoing clinical analysis by confirming that the words *smote off* need not mean that Shiz's head was completely severed by Coriantumr. In Judges 5, an equally gruesome account is given of Sisera's death at the hands of Jael, the wife of Heber. The English translation of the relevant verses reads:

She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen's hammer; and with the hammer she smote Sisera, she *smote off* his head, when she had pierced and stricken through his temples. At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead. (Judges 5:26–27; emphasis added)

This text shows that the English words *smote off* need not refer to a total decapitation, for surely Jael did not cleanly chop off Sisera's head using a hammer. Instead, the English words *smote off* here simply mean that Jael struck Sisera extremely hard. Indeed, both the Hebrew and Greek words translated as *smote off* mean "to hammer" or "to strike down with a hammer or stamp," but not generally to smite *off*, and accordingly the New English Bible reads, "with the hammer she struck Sisera, she crushed his head." No more necessarily does Joseph Smith's

translation in Ether 15:30 need to mean that Shiz's head was completely cut off. Fifty or sixty percent off would easily have been enough to get the job done, leaving Shiz to reflex and die.

Research by M. Gary Hadfeld and John W. Welch, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (November 1994):

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### Notes

1. See M. Gary Hadfield, "Neuropathy and the Scriptures," *BYU Studies* 33/2 (1993): 312–20.
2. Hadfield, "Neuropathy and the Scriptures," 324–25; see A. B. Baker and L. H. Baker, *Clinical Neurology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 1:40, 65.
3. Hadfield, "Neuropathy and the Scriptures," 328 n. 25; see J. Adams and L. W. Duchon, eds., *Greenfield's Neuropathology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 195–200.
4. Hadfield, "Neuropathy and the Scriptures," 325; see C. S. Sherrington, "Decerebrate Rigidity, and Reflex Coordination of Movements," *Journal of Physiology* 22 (1898): 319.