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## Text as Afterthought: Jana Riess's Treatment of the Jacob-Sherem Episode

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# TEXT AS AFTERTHOUGHT: JANA RIESS'S TREATMENT OF THE JACOB-SHEREM EPISODE

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Duane Boyce

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Writing about prophets is a significant undertaking. Commissioned by the Lord to represent him in the highest mortal office, their status is unique. Because they are chosen by the Lord, and because they represent him, what people come to think about prophets can have deep and enduring consequences. That is why careful attention, both to detail and to context, is important in thinking about them.

A case in point is the confrontation between Jacob and Sherem in Jacob 7, to which the Neal A. Maxwell Institute recently devoted a book.<sup>1</sup> Jana Riess’s contribution to the discussion — “There Came

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1. A conference entitled “Christ & Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7” was held in June 2015 at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, cosponsored by the

a Man': Sherem, Scapegoating, and the Inversion of Prophetic Tradition” (pp. 1–17) — is a good example of the importance of careful attention both to detail and to context because, as manifested by its multiple errors, it exhibits far too little of either. Because the episode between Jacob and Sherem is a prominent feature of the Book of Mormon, it is worthwhile to consider these mistakes and to provide some correction.

### **Starting Out: Obvious Indications of a Casual Approach to the Text**

In examining the story of Jacob and Sherem, Riess pursues two major threads. One is the effort to tie this encounter to a pattern that appears in the Hebrew Bible, and the other is her attempt to locate the episode within René Girard’s conceptual framework of cultural scapegoating (both of which I will explain in due course).

Unfortunately, Riess makes several errors in these attempts. Two are so obvious that they tell us immediately that Riess’s approach to the Jacob-Sherem episode is more casual than careful. The first is Riess’s report that God “struck Sherem dumb” (p. 15) in his encounter with Jacob. As the text never indicates that Sherem was struck dumb, Riess seems to be confusing Sherem with Korihor, who appears some sixty chapters later in the Book of Mormon (Alma 30). Korihor is condemned by the Lord and cursed such that he cannot speak. Sherem, on the other hand, is smitten by the Lord and collapses to the earth (Jacob 7:15) with no mention of being unable to speak.

Riess also reports that God nourished Sherem in his weakened condition following the smiting he received, but the record says nothing like this. It tells us that God smote Sherem and that he required nourishing but says nothing to indicate that God provided the nourishing.

Basic as they are, these are far from Riess’s only errors. Rather, they are indicative of a casual approach to the text generally. To show this, I will consider a sample of Riess’s other claims in no particular order. Doing so will permit some clarifications of the Jacob-Sherem episode.

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Mormon Theology Seminar and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute; see <https://mi.byu.edu/2015-mts-seminar-schedule/>. The conference presentations were collected and published in Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer, eds., *Christ and Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2017); see <https://mi.byu.edu/book/christ-and-antichrist/>.

### Sherem and “Outmoded Theology”

In describing Sherem, Riess tells us that he dies “after a single episode of outmoded theology” (p. 9). She asserts that, although Sherem was mistaken in his religious beliefs, he was nevertheless sincere in holding them (p. 7). She says that he was “observant and pious” (p. 9), that he was “a deeply religious man” (p. 13), and that “Sherem comes into this text as a watchman over public piety, an outsider who is poised to rein in the people of Nephi from what he sees as a dangerous theological heresy” (p. 6). In speaking to Jacob, Sherem merely wants to “persuade him to embrace his point of view” (p. 7). Indeed, Riess remarks that Sherem does not anathematize Jacob in the way that Jacob anathematizes him. He just “believes Jacob has misunderstood the law and been delinquent in his duties” (p. 13). Riess thus describes Sherem’s ultimate confession as a simple matter of “coming to terms” with his “theological errors” (p.15).

As depicted in the text, however, this characterization of Sherem could hardly be less accurate. Sherem’s demise has nothing to do with a sincere but “outmoded theology.” Jacob tells us that Sherem resorted to crass flattery of the populace to influence them; that he relied on rhetorical talent “according to the power of the devil;” that he “labored diligently” to “lead away the hearts of the people;” that he claimed to know the future even though, in challenging Jacob, he denied the future was knowable;<sup>2</sup> that he denied Christ; and that he arrogantly demanded a heavenly sign in challenging Jacob (Jacob 7:2–4, 7, 9, 13).

We don’t have to take Jacob’s word for Sherem’s inauthenticity and wickedness, however. Sherem *himself* didn’t think he was sincere in his beliefs and that he had merely made theological errors. When he later confessed, he described himself as having lied to God, he worried that his state before God was “awful,” and he feared that he had committed the unpardonable sin (Jacob 7:17–19). Finally, the Lord slew Sherem, an extreme action if Sherem merely possessed sincere-but-mistaken religious beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

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2. In verse 7, Sherem asserts that no one can “tell of things to come,” and yet in verse 9 he explicitly denies there “ever will be” a Christ. Thus, in challenging Jacob, Sherem denies that anyone can know the future, whereas in asserting his own claims he declares that *he* knows the future. I am indebted to Nathan Mayhew for this observation. It is a further manifestation of Sherem’s fundamental dishonesty.

3. Riess denies that the Lord killed Sherem, but I will show at the appropriate point why this is a mistake.

Additionally, the claim that Sherem was guilty of only “a single incident” of his mistaken theology is a misreading of the text. Sherem had a history of preaching to the people and manipulating them to create a following (Jacob 7:2–4). Far from being limited to a single incident, the record depicts Sherem as exhibiting a pattern of cunning and deceit over time.

Riess also claims that Jacob “slanders” Sherem in the way Jacob speaks of him in this episode (pp. 12–13). Given Sherem’s own confession — in addition to the Lord’s slaying of him — there is actually every reason to believe that Jacob’s descriptions of Sherem are true. To say Jacob slanders Sherem, therefore, would actually seem to libel Jacob.

### **Sherem and *Ish Elohim*: “The Man of God”**

Riess’s efforts to paint Sherem as sincere appear during her attempt to place Sherem in the role of the biblical *ish elohim*: the “man of God” who comes among the people in ancient times. In the three biblical stories she shares, the man of God specifically corrects the behavior of a priestly or kingly figure who is doing wrong (1 Samuel 2:27; 1 Kings 13:1; 20:28). Riess considers Sherem a parallel figure since he, too, is said to “come among the people,” and he does so “as a watchman over public piety.” Riess thus says that Sherem enters the scene “as the mysterious man of God whose function is to be more priestly than the priest, to save the people from the brink of ritual disaster” (p. 6).

Now, although Riess does not believe Sherem is a man of God, she thinks the connection holds because, even if he was not exactly a man of God, he was like these Old Testament figures in his devotion to the law. Pious and sincere, he was only trying to correct the Nephites’ deviation from the proper worship of Yahweh. She considers him “an outsider” who wants to rescue the Nephites from what he sees as “a dangerous theological heresy” (p. 6). According to Riess, Sherem is “observant and pious” and sees the Nephites as “straying from the foundation of their religion, which is the law, and adding to it with this foreign god called the Christ.” In comparing Sherem to these biblical figures, Riess says “Sherem’s story begins with the very same set-up” (p. 6).

But Sherem’s story does not begin with “the very same set-up” at all. We have already seen that Sherem is neither a man of God *nor* mistaken-but-sincere in his beliefs. His own words contradict Riess’s view. Sherem is not similar to the *ish elohim* figures in the Old Testament up to a point, and then becomes their opposite later in the story. He is their opposite from the outset. Riess treats the Jacob-Sherem case largely

as a reversal of the biblical accounts, but her misreading causes her to overlook just how complete a reversal it truly is.<sup>4</sup>

### Reading Jacob's Mind

Riess also engages in an interesting bit of mindreading. Because Jacob gives us Sherem's name, she reports with certainty that "Jacob *wants* us to know who this stranger is, because to name Sherem is to have power over him" (p. 7; emphasis in original). There is no element of the text that indicates this motivation in Jacob, however. It is Riess's extrapolation. She offers no argument for the claim, though, and rests her case on simple assertion. All we can really gather from the assertion is what Riess sees as the most logical reason for the naming — it is apparently why Riess would mention Sherem's name if she were in Jacob's place. This tells us nothing about Jacob; it tells us only about Riess. Presumably, at least in order to be consistent, she would attribute the same motivation to Alma's naming of Nehor and Korihor (Alma 1 and Alma 30). Again, however, such attribution would be without a whisper in the text supporting such a motivation and would reveal more about Riess than about Alma

### Sherem's Death:

#### The Absence of an Explicit Declaration of Cause

Part of Riess's theory lies in her denial that the Lord killed Sherem (p. 15). It is true that the text never actually says something as declarative as, "Sherem died because God struck him down." However, the narrative thread proceeds uninterrupted from God's smiting Sherem so that he falls to the earth, to his requirement for nourishing, his announcement of his imminent death, his dying words, and his death itself (Jacob 7:15–20). This thread is not sufficient for Riess, however. She seems to want an explicit declaration of the cause of Sherem's demise.

This is an odd analytical standard; by the same logic, we would be unable to say the First Vision occurred because Joseph Smith prayed. All

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4. One difficulty in reading Riess on this score is her inconsistency. She tells us early on that Sherem is not the "man of God" who appears in the biblical episodes, "but something else entirely" (p. 1). But then she writes repeatedly of how similar Sherem is to these figures in terms of his devotion to the law, his religious nature, his sincerity, his concern about heresy, and his devotion to the proper worship of Yahweh — all of which contradict her own claim that Sherem is "something else entirely." A contradiction of this sort introduces confusion, making it more laborious than it should be to figure out what she is really trying to say and more difficult than it should be to represent her claims accurately.



the record tells us is that Joseph determined to pray, that he subsequently knelt in prayer, that he was then overcome by forces of darkness, that he struggled to pray, and that the Father and Son appeared to him (JS–History 1:13–17), but nowhere in the account are we told that “the Father and Son appeared to Joseph because he prayed.” We are not even told it was because he was praying that spiritual darkness overtook him.

The same is true of the martyr Stephen. The record reports that an angry crowd took him before the “council,” that he preached to them, that he announced seeing the Father and Son, that they then “ran upon him,” that they took him out of the city, that they stoned him, and that he died (“fell asleep,” Acts 6–7). Nowhere does the text say it was because he announced his vision that they “ran upon him.” It doesn’t even say he died because they stoned him.

Similarly, by Riess’s standard we could not say the vision in D&C 76 came to Joseph and Sidney because they were involved in translating the Bible, that Nephi’s vision of the tree came because he was pondering what he had heard from his father Lehi and desired to know more, or that the City of Enoch was translated because of the people’s righteousness. None of these stories includes a straightforward declaration of cause and effect. Instead, all we get is a simple narrative thread that identifies a sequence of events and an outcome; rather than a didactic declaration at the end, the cause-and-effect elements are built into these accounts in the very way their authors structure them. Recognizing these elements, we arrive at the *prima facie* reading of the text. In the absence of textual elements that suggest these were not the causes of the relevant effect, we take the plain meaning of the text as determinative. Thus, Joseph’s prayer triggered the First Vision, Stephen’s teachings triggered his stoning, his stoning caused his death, and so forth.

The Sherem story would appear to be no different. There is a straight, uncomplicated narrative line between Sherem’s smiting, his weakened condition, his announcement of his imminent demise, his dying words, and his death. There are no contravening events — no other variables in the account — that make us question the cause of his death, just as there are no other variables that make us question what triggered the First Vision or what caused Stephen’s death. In each case, the obvious elements of cause and effect are embedded in the narrative thread itself.

Riess is correct to note no declarative statement of cause and effect in Sherem’s case (p. 15). But if she wants to insist this is anything other than trivial — that such a declarative statement is required to determine cause-and-effect relationships — then she must either apply this standard

to every other scriptural story that does not include such an explicit declaration or explain why Sherem's case is exceptional and calls for such a declaration when the others do not. Riess attempts neither. She simply assumes this standard for identifying cause-and-effect relationships in Sherem's case — an assumption that is convenient but empty. The plain meaning of the text is that God killed Sherem, and despite her attempt, Riess gives us no reason whatever to imagine otherwise.

### **Sherem's Death: His "Recovery"**

However, there seems to be another reason Riess denies that God killed Sherem — namely, her belief that he *recovered* from his smiting. She speaks of God striking Sherem and then says "he recovers some days later" (p. 14). The inference is that even though God caused the smiting, God cannot be the cause of Sherem's death if Sherem recovered from it — the two events are disconnected in Riess's view. Thus, she says that although God struck Sherem down, this smiting was "a reckoning, but not a death" (p. 15).

While Riess does not make an explicit defense of this disconnection, there are two clues in her discussion (p. 15) that indicate why she might believe this. One is her report that God nourished Sherem in the aftermath of his smiting. If this is true, it makes sense that Sherem would return to normal health. The other is her claim that Sherem's smiting took the form of being struck dumb — since he was later able to speak, this would also be indicative of a recovery. Both readings would seem to support the conclusion that Sherem returned to normalcy sometime after his initial smiting.

There are three central problems with this conclusion, however.

### **Sherem's Advance Announcement of His Death**

First, and most importantly, Riess completely overlooks Sherem's advance *announcement* of his death. Sherem said to the people, "gather together on the morrow, for I shall die," and "I desire to speak unto the people before I shall die" (Jacob 7:16). This declaration seems to completely undercut Riess's belief that Sherem recovered. After all, if Sherem were healthy, there would be no reason for him to talk about *dying*, much less to know that he would die the very next day.

Sherem's announcement of his imminent death makes perfect sense on the *prima facie* reading of his demise, of course. The account simply tells us that God smote Sherem, that he fell to the earth, that he required nourishing, that he desired to speak to the people "on the morrow" before

dying, that he spoke to the people, and that he immediately expired upon finishing his words (Jacob 7:15–20). This is all a single, continuous thread indicating that Sherem was dying and he knew it.

### **God Did Not Nourish Sherem**

Apart from Sherem's own acceptance of his impending death, the suggestion that God nourished Sherem also fails. As we saw at the outset, the text never makes this claim. The absence of this claim is not dispositive, of course, since, as already discussed, cause-and-effect relationships do not require explicit declaration if they are clearly manifested in the narrative thread itself. But that's just the point — the idea that God nourished Sherem is *not* manifested in the narrative thread itself. Riess does not even try to show that it is. Her claim of God's nourishment is asserted out of thin air. And because it is vacuous in this way, it cannot then support *another* claim — that Sherem recovered from the smiting he received. That God nourished Sherem cannot be taken as evidence for Sherem's recovery if God in fact did not nourish Sherem.

### **Sherem Was Not Struck Dumb**

It is also a mistake to claim that Sherem was struck dumb. The text never says this, nor is it manifested in the narrative thread itself. It was true of Korihor but not of Sherem. As mentioned previously, Riess appears to have confused the two stories. The point, therefore, is the same here as above: that Sherem is not dumb at the end of the story cannot be taken as evidence of his recovery if he was not struck dumb in the first place.

Riess's claim that Sherem recovered from his smiting, therefore, is unsupported by the text. It follows that such a recovery cannot be used as proof that his death was not a result of his smiting at the hand of God. Literally everything indicates that it was.

### **Sherem's Death: The Search for Other Causes**

We are left, then, with what was clear from the text all along: God slew Sherem. Since this is the case, one of Riess's subsequent exploratory threads is entirely moot — namely, the quest to figure out who really killed Sherem. Although her effort is extraneous, it is nevertheless useful to consider since it teaches us more about the consequences of being casual in approaching the scriptural record.

## The “Surrendering” of Sherem’s Life Force

One possibility Riess suggests for Sherem’s death is that he simply “surrendered his life force,” that he was somehow in control of his own death and thus ended his life voluntarily (p. 15). In support of this view, she notices the description of Sherem’s passing: “and it came to pass that when he had said these words he could say no more, and he gave up the ghost” (Jacob 7:20). She observes that “giving up the ghost” is how the Savior’s (voluntary) death is described (Mark 15:37–39). For reasons I will mention later, she thinks the story of Sherem’s death serves “much the same function” as the Savior’s, and thus thinks that the similarity in language is more than a “literary coincidence” (p. 15).

This idea faces multiple problems, however. Most significantly, the Savior could surrender his life force because he was in full control of it: no one *could* take it from him. He was in control of his own death because he was inherently immortal. He was divine. But no one else is in control of his or her life force in this way. People who are in a healthy condition cannot simply surrender themselves and expire on the spot. For Sherem to do this, as Riess suggests he did, is to assume that Sherem had the same power over life and death the Savior had. So not only is Sherem similar to the Savior in the reasons for his death (again, a topic to be addressed later), but he is also similar to the Savior in his power over death.

There are other obstacles Riess fails to notice in addition to this extravagant (some would say absurd) claim. Note, for instance, that Jacob 7:20 tells us that once Sherem had spoken, “he *could* say no more.” This statement of inability clearly indicates Sherem’s lack of control; he was experiencing *incapacity*. Additionally, the expression “gave up the ghost” is a common biblical expression for describing death. It occurs in far more cases than the Savior’s and is used to indicate dying generally; it is never used to indicate a voluntary “surrender” of one’s life outside of the recounting of the Savior’s death.<sup>5</sup> It is even used to describe the deaths of Ananias and Herod, both of whom, like Sherem, offended God (Acts 5:5; 12:22–23). The description of Sherem’s death is thus hardly distinctive, which makes the comparison with the Savior’s death seem forced — even aside from the other problems with the claim.

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5. See, for example: Gen. 25:8; 35:29; 49:33; Job 3:11; 10:18; 13:19; 14:10; Lamentations 1:19.

## Killing by the Nephites

Riess is no more persuasive when she suggests the Nephites themselves might have killed Sherem — either of their own volition or as animated by God’s Spirit (p. 15). She is serious in considering these possibilities but provides literally no textual basis for doing so. The problem with this way of thinking, however, is that once we feel free to completely untether ourselves from the text in this way, it is hard to see why we should stop at just these possibilities. We could just as easily speculate that Sherem died by pure happenstance — from a stroke, from a lifetime of obesity, or, as one author speculates, from madness.<sup>6</sup> We could also speculate that he died from assassination by one of his followers, from falling into a river, or from hanging himself. If we are free to imagine any cause whatsoever, then clearly our imaginations may run free. Each of these speculations is as possible as Riess’s, which is exactly why an intellectual argument that relies on mere possibility does not actually qualify as an intellectual argument.

## A Sea of Suppositions

There is another problem with such freewheeling speculation. Suppose, for example, we consider seriously — as Riess does — the possibility that the Nephites killed Sherem of their own volition after he spoke to them. Well, one of the problems with this view, as we have already seen, is that Sherem knew *the day before* that he was going to die — that’s why he wanted to speak the next day — which raises the question of how he knew this. If he was in a recovered and healthy condition, how did he know he was going to die the very next day? The record tells us nothing about this, but since we need to account for it in some way, we could imagine that the Nephites simply had plans to kill Sherem, and Sherem somehow learned of these plans. That would explain how he knew.

But this explanation faces two problems of its own. First, if Sherem knew the Nephites were going to kill him the very next day, then why would he appear and speak to them at all? It’s hard to see why he wouldn’t avoid them and just live out his days in his recovered, healthy condition. Second, the Nephites were “astonished” the next day when Sherem spoke to them (Jacob 7:21). It is not apparent how the Nephites could have plans to kill Sherem, and to kill him as planned, if they were surprised by what

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6. See Jacob Rennaker, “Divine Dream Time: The Hope and Hazard of Revelation,” in Miller and Spencer, *Christ and Antichrist*, 43–54.

he ended up saying. It seems likely that any “plans” would have been changed by their “astonishment” at his words.

Now, it is possible to generate explanations to cover these problems, of course. To the first objection, we might say Sherem was brave and willing to die for the trouble he had caused. To the second, we might say the Nephites were determined to kill Sherem *no matter what* — and thus it didn’t matter that they were surprised at his words. In generating such possibilities for explanation, we are limited only by our imaginations.

But notice where we are at this point in trying to explain how Sherem died. Without any indication in the record, we first speculate that the Nephites might have killed Sherem. Then, because Sherem knew he was going to die, we speculate that the Nephites must have had *plans* they then carried out, which then requires us to speculate that he must have learned about these plans somehow. Then, because Sherem went to the gathering even though he knew the crowd was going to kill him, we have to speculate that he was brave and willing to die for his sins. And then, because the Nephites killed Sherem even though he didn’t say what they expected, we speculate that they were going to kill him regardless of what he said.

That’s five layers of speculation, all without any indication in the text. At the bottom of it all is the false conclusion that started the need for conjecture in the first place: the mistaken view that God did not kill Sherem.

The outcome, of course, would be no different if we examined any other possible cause of Sherem’s death. Every conjecture leads to the need for additional conjecture, all completely divorced from the text itself. If we pile up enough suppositions, we can suppose our way to any conclusion whatever. That’s the risk Riess’s approach helps us see. Once we depart from what the text says and start following the trail of our own non-textual suppositions, we find ourselves afloat in a sea of suppositions. That might be superficially satisfying for a time — and it might even tell us something about our capacity for imagination — but it is not intellectual argument and, in this case, it does not tell us anything about Jacob and Sherem.

### **Jacob and Conflict with the Nephites**

Key to Riess’s interpretation of the story of Jacob and Sherem is her assertion that Jacob was in conflict with the Nephites. She says Jacob “opens this chapter [Jacob 7] deeply at odds with his own people” (p. 10) and that he has “alienated” them by his teachings, specifically with his temple sermon in Jacob 2 and 3. There, Riess says, Jacob catalogs “all of the

people's sins — their greed and sexual transgressions and terrible pride” (p. 11). She lumps Jacob's Chapter 6 teachings in with this sermon, saying that together these chapters create a “doomsday scenario” in which the people's end (“probably by fire”) “may be nigh” (p. 11). By Chapter 7, the Nephites have “largely ignored his many warnings” (p. 8), she says, adding that, “Jacob's sermonizing has fallen on deaf ears.” Indeed, he may have created “an irreparable breach” in his relationship with the Nephites by comparing them unfavorably with their enemies, the Lamanites. “We can imagine,” she says, “the people's anger rising against Jacob” (p.12).

But Riess's description radically misstates the reality. Note that in his temple sermon, Jacob begins by congratulating his audience. He says, “as yet, ye have been obedient unto the word of the Lord” (Jacob 2:4). He characterizes them generally as righteous, not as unrighteous. Nevertheless, wickedness is beginning to seep in. But that's just the point: it is *beginning*. Jacob says the Nephites “*began* to grow hard in their hearts” (with some of them seeking to have many wives and concubines — Jacob 1:15), that they “*began* to search much gold and silver” (Jacob 1:16; 2:12), that they “*began* to be lifted up somewhat in pride” (Jacob 1:16), that they were “*beginning* to labor in sin” (Jacob 2:5), and that (in the Lord's words) “this people *begin* to wax in iniquity” (Jacob 2:23). Jacob also describes them as being lifted up “*somewhat* in pride” (Jacob 1:16). Both Jacob and the Lord describe the Nephites' unrighteousness as incipient.

Moreover, this unrighteousness was true of only some of the Nephites. Jacob specifically distinguishes those in his temple audience who are wicked from those who are pure in heart (Jacob 2:10; 3:1–2) and speaks specifically to “you that are not pure in heart ...” (Jacob 3:3). He speaks of some who have been wounded by the unrighteousness of others and of others who have *not* been wounded in this way (Jacob 2:9). Regarding riches and pride, he speaks explicitly to “some of you” (Jacob 2:13) and “those of you” (Jacob 2:20) so affected. Later, Jacob reports this of his people:

Wherefore, we search the prophets, and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy; and having all these witnesses we obtain a hope, and our faith becometh unshaken, insomuch that we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea. (Jacob 4:6)

Such a description suggests that, by Chapter 4, Jacob's people were unusually righteous, not unrighteous.

Riess is also mistaken in treating Chapter 6 as a companion piece to Jacob's sermon in Chapters 2 and 3, thinking that Jacob is applying his discussion there about "fire," "endless torment," and the end that "soon cometh" to his Nephite contemporaries. Jacob's sermon to his people actually ends in Chapter 3, though. In Chapter 4, he begins writing to his *future* readers and continues to do so in Chapter 5, where he includes a lengthy allegory about the Lord's dealings with Israel and the Gentiles over the history of the world (including the future), ending with the burning of the vineyard at the end of the Lord's work. Chapter 6 picks up at that point, emphasizing the restoration of Israel in the last days, the burning of the world with fire at the end, and the torment of the wicked following the day of judgment. None of this is part of Jacob's sermon to his people, nor is it intended for his people. It is written to the people of the last days. It is a mistake, therefore, for Riess to conclude from it that "chaos is encroaching and the people's end may be nigh" (p. 11).

It is simply not the case, then, that the Nephites as a group were wicked or that, at the time of Sherem, they were in opposition to Jacob. Indeed, contrary to Riess's claims that Jacob's teachings had fallen on deaf ears and that the people didn't "evinced any change until after Sherem's death" (p. 8), the record indicates that Jacob's teachings were actually successful. The people enjoyed remarkable miracles, and Chapter 7 itself begins "some years" after Jacob had written Chapter 6 (Jacob 7:1). Moreover, the wickedness that existed at this time is attributed to Sherem himself; it is not depicted as pre-existing him. All we are told of Nephite unrighteousness at this time is that Sherem "did lead away many hearts" (Jacob 7:3), and later, when we learn of the Nephites' repentance, this repentance appears specifically to be among those *who had followed Sherem* (Jacob 7:23). So Riess's picture of a generally wicked population in opposition to Jacob — and repentant only because of Sherem — is inaccurate. The unrighteousness identified in Chapter 7 is, to all appearances, limited to those who followed Sherem in the first place. *They* were those who repented.

### **The Relationship between the Nephites and Lamanites**

Riess also mischaracterizes the relationship between the Nephites and the Lamanites. She says Jacob blurs the difference between these two peoples when, early in his temple sermon, he announces that the Lamanites are superior to the Nephites (pp. 11–12) and then later sharpens the difference between them when he refers back to the old story of Lamanite aggression (p. 16).



This view of Jacob’s narrative rests on a false distinction, however, since the Nephites and Lamanites were fundamentally different in their styles of unrighteousness from the beginning. Whereas the Nephites struggled with pride and riches and personal morality, they never attacked the Lamanites militarily. Over nearly a thousand years of history, virtually every recorded engagement in war between the two peoples was instigated by the Lamanites.<sup>7</sup> So Lamanite unrighteousness was fundamentally different from Nephite unrighteousness: it consisted in frequent military aggression, and it did so from the start.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the Lamanites’ other sins might have been — and we are told they too

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7. The single example we have of Nephite aggression against the Lamanites is a rogue action conducted without legitimate Nephite leadership. The incident occurred very late in Book of Mormon history (“in the three hundred and sixty and third year”), at the time Mormon was refusing to lead them (Mormon 4:1–4). In all other recorded conflicts — over the entire Book of Mormon history — the Lamanites, not the Nephites, were the aggressors. Captain Moroni once threatened to become an aggressor (Alma 54:12), but he never followed through on his threat, even when he had occasion to do so (see, for example, Alma 55:20–24). The Nephites also employed offensive *tactics*, but they were always just that: like the Allies’ invasion of Normandy in WWII (along with a thousand other examples), they were offensive initiatives conducted in a war of defense against those who were attacking them. They started no wars of their own. The difference between the two societies is displayed even in those cases when Nephite dissenters led the Lamanites into war against the Nephites. Examples include Amlici (Alma 2), the Amalekites and Amulonites (Alma 24), the Amalekites (Alma 27), the Zoramites and Amalekites (Alma 43–44), Amalickiah (Alma 46–51), Ammoron (Alma 52–62), Coriantumr (Helaman 1), and other unnamed Nephite dissenters who were highly instrumental in Lamanite aggression (Alma 63:14–15, Helaman 4, and Helaman 11). Despite all these examples of Nephite dissidents agitating Lamanites into attacking the Nephites, however, there are no examples of Lamanite dissidents agitating the Nephites into attacking the Lamanites. The text depicts aggression between the two societies as thoroughly one-sided.

8. In the very earliest days, Nephi himself had to fight to defend his people from Lamanite assault (Jacob 1:10; also 2 Nephi 5:14), and aggressive wars are also reported by Jacob (Jacob 7:24), Enos (Enos 1:20), Jarom (Jarom 1:6), Abinadom (Omni 1:10), Amaleki (Omni 1:24), Zeniff (Mosiah 9, 10, 19–21), and Mormon (Words of Mormon 1:13–14). This is a record of aggression that spans the first four hundred and sixty years or so of Book of Mormon history. We also know from multiple reports that the Lamanites were motivated by hatred in their assaults on the Nephites (Jacob 3:7; 7:24; Enos 1:14, 20; Jarom 1:6; Mosiah 1:14; 4 Nephi 1:39; Alma 26:9) and that they “delighted in murdering the Nephites” (Alma 17:14). Moroni also reports at one point that the Lamanites are “murdering our people with the sword,” including “our women and our children” (Alma 60:17). Indeed, we learn that Moroni, and the Nephites generally, fought to prevent their wives and their children from being “massacred by the barbarous cruelty” of those who would

sought for riches, including plundering Nephites in order to obtain them (Alma 17:14) — they repeatedly invaded and attacked the Nephites. The Nephites did not do this to the Lamanites.

Thus, when Jacob talks to the Nephites about their sins, he holds up superior Lamanite family conduct as a point of comparison. But when he speaks to later generations of readers (us) specifically about the *Lamanites'* unrighteousness, he refers to their military aggression. This simply reflects what the text in general tells us about their respective forms of unrighteousness. Contrary to Riess's claim, it is not a change in Jacob's narrative.

### Girardian Analysis

A central piece of Riess's analysis is her use of the Girardian framework of cultural scapegoating to explain the story of Sherem. She begins by explaining the centrality of "mimetic desire" in this intellectual approach (pp. 9–10). The theory suggests that conflict arises when a person or group identifies something of value held by another person or group and forms a desire for that item of value. In other words, it is desire born of imitation, which leads to conflict over the object that each now values. The classic way to resolve this conflict (temporarily, at any rate) is for both parties to turn their aggression toward a convenient, third-party scapegoat. They reconcile with each other (again, temporarily) as they now focus their aggression on this third entity. In classic cases, this united aggression results in the scapegoat's death. It is a death that has served a specific function, however — namely, the reconciliation of the original parties and the cessation of their aggression toward each other. In this sense, it is a sacrificial death.

Riess tries to apply this conceptual framework to the story of Jacob and Sherem. She explains, for instance, that Jacob and the Nephites are deeply at odds with each other at the time Sherem enters the picture (pp. 8, 10–12). Jacob then "accuses" and "slanders" Sherem (pp. 12–13), and Sherem loses his life (pp. 14–15). As a result of this death the people repent and turn toward God with a new devotion, Jacob himself is reunited with the people, and all of them turn their attention, unitedly, to the aggressive Lamanites (pp. 16–17). No longer are the Lamanites superior to the Nephites, as Jacob had earlier indicated, but now are demonized. "Sherem's death unites the people against a common enemy," Riess declares. He has served as a convenient scapegoat, and order is

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destroy them (Alma 48:24) and that this was one of the Lamanites' explicit aims — to "slay and massacre" the Nephites (Alma 49:7).

restored. “It’s all thanks to Sherem,” Riess announces, for “Sherem has to die because the people need a scapegoat in order to become united and whole, at least for a time” (p. 9).

It is worth noting that Riess believes Sherem’s scapegoat role affects the rest of the Book of Mormon. She claims that Sherem’s death “galvanizes the Nephite people to greater righteousness,” adding that although Sherem is never mentioned again in the record, “Nephite religion changes after his sacrificial death” (p. 16). By this, she means that it changes permanently — as evidence of the religious change, she notes that the word “faith” is used in a higher proportion in the large plates than in the small plates. It is a word “that becomes more important going forward” (p. 16). So Sherem’s scapegoat experience is a pivotal event in the Book of Mormon; its effect is felt all the way to the end of the record.

For these reasons, Riess draws a parallel between Sherem’s death and the Savior’s. She says Jesus died as “a vicarious sacrifice to save humanity” and that his death “paved the way for sinful people to reconcile with God” (p. 15). The Sherem story, she observes, “has much the same function.” Sherem’s death was not able to “wipe out all human sin for all time,” but it was “the catalyst for a single group of people to become reconciled to God, if only for a while” (pp. 15–16).<sup>9</sup>

### Central Difficulties

While there are surface similarities between the Jacob-Sherem story and Girard’s theory of cultural scapegoating, the difficulties with Riess’s analysis are both readily apparent and deep. The first and most fundamental problem is that it is entirely extraneous. After all, the only reason to look for a cause of Sherem’s death in the first place — including a Girardian explanation — is if one fails to see that the text already tells us how Sherem died. Since the plain meaning of the text is that he died from God’s smiting him, and since Riess gives us no reason whatever to override this plain meaning, her Girardian analysis is moot.

There are other problems with Riess’s analysis as well. To begin, she never adequately explains the role of mimetic desire in this episode. She elucidates the concept at some length, but never directly applies it to this case. Exactly what item of perceived value were Jacob and the Nephites fighting over that put them at such odds, and who was imitating whom? Although these are core elements of Girard’s theory, Riess never identifies them here. In fact,

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9. This reconciling effect is why Riess thinks Sherem’s death is similar to the Savior’s and why she thinks the phrase “gave up the ghost” in both cases is more than a literary coincidence.

we have seen that Jacob and the Nephites were *not* at odds in the way Riess reports. And it is also false to say that Jacob “slanders” Sherem. It is true that Jacob accuses him, but since Sherem effectively affirms everything Jacob says about him, Jacob’s words hardly constitute slander.

It is also a mistake to describe Jacob as having a new attitude toward the Lamanites following Sherem’s death. This view relies on a false distinction between the Nephites and Lamanites: there is nothing at all new in Jacob’s narrative on this score. Additionally, there is no evidence from the record that anyone other than Sherem’s own followers repented in the aftermath of his death. The restoration of the “love of God” and the searching of the scriptures by the people are directly tied to their hearkening “no more to the words of this wicked man” (Jacob 7:23). There is thus no basis to say Sherem’s death galvanized “the Nephite people to greater righteousness” (p. 16), much less that it affected how prophets and others used the word “faith” over the next nine hundred-fifty years or so of Nephite history.

It is also important to remember that the only scriptural reference to unrighteousness at the time of Sherem is attributed to Sherem himself. *He* is the one leading away the hearts of the people. Riess wants us to see Sherem as the source of Nephite righteousness — more specifically, that the sacrificial death of this ‘pious and deeply religious man’ spurred the Nephites toward greater devotion to their Lord. In such a reading Sherem is both sympathetic and tragic. But the flaw in this interpretation, of course, is that — as far as the record gives any indication — Sherem was the source of their unrighteousness in the first place. This makes Sherem far from sympathetic and his death far from tragic. And finally, what all this shows is that Sherem’s death was nothing like the Savior’s: it did not serve any reconciling function and it was not sacrificial.

In the end, Sherem is simply not what Riess wants him to be. He is only what he himself claimed to be: a liar unto God.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Riess is not the first to apply Girardian concepts to Book of Mormon incidents. Eugene England and Joshua Madson, for instance, both apply the framework. See Eugene England, “Healing and Making Peace, in the Church and the World” and “Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon,” both in Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 1–22 and 131–55, respectively. See also Joshua Madson, “A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon,” in Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman, eds., *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 13–28. England and Madson are no more successful than Riess in their applications of Girard’s theory, however. I show

## Conclusion

There is nothing wrong, of course, with asking fresh questions about the story in Jacob 7. The process of questioning and letting imagination work on an initial read-through of a text can be an enjoyable way of interacting with the text and exploring possibilities. But such an approach should be the beginning point of thinking and not the final destination. A quick first-read must be followed by careful and thoughtful study. Joseph Spencer assures us that the process for gathering the essays in this book involved such careful and close reading of the text,<sup>11</sup> but this is far from evident in Riess's essay. She makes numerous errors that are traceable to nothing more than casual reading — claims that either find no support in the text or that are straightforwardly contradicted by it.

Before advancing propositions about a text in print, it pays to test them *against* the text. As far as I can tell, Riess failed to do this, as evidenced by the sizeable collection of errors her essay contains. One would expect an examination of the Jacob-Sherem episode to exhibit careful attention to the scriptural record, but it is hard to see how, in this case, the text is anything more than an afterthought.

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this at some length in *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2015), 143–47.

11. Joseph Spencer, “Introduction,” in Miller and Spencer, *Christ and Antichrist*, xi.