

# INTERPRETER

— ∞ —  
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 14 · 2015 · Pages 1-15

## Who Was Sherem?

A. Keith Thompson

Offprint Series

© 2015 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at [MormonInterpreter.com](http://MormonInterpreter.com)

# WHO WAS SHEREM?

---

**A. Keith Thompson**

*Abstract: The Book of Mormon's first anti-Christ, Sherem, "came among" the Nephites before their first generation was ended. Because he was an eloquent believer in the Law of Moses, there has been a variety of surmise as to his background. Was he a Lamanite, or a Jaredite or Mulekite trader? Was his presence among the separated Nephites evidence of early interaction between the Nephites and other civilisations in Nephite lands from the time of their first arrival? This short article reviews the various suggestions about Sherem's identity and suggests he was most likely a descendant of the original Lehite party but that his identity was purposely suppressed so as not to give him more credibility than he deserved.*

Sometime after Nephi's death,<sup>1</sup> Jacob's doctrinal teaching and priestly authority were challenged by an eloquent believer in the Law of Moses named Sherem.<sup>2</sup> Sherem maintained that Jacob had perverted the Law of Moses into the worship of a future Redeemer to be named Jesus Christ,<sup>3</sup> a gospel<sup>4</sup> that Sherem claimed was blasphemous.<sup>5</sup> Jacob's record of Sherem's background has left many unanswered questions, since Jacob

---

1 Jacob 1:12.

2 Jacob 7. The 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon estimates this interchange took place between 544 and 421 BC. However, since there is no suggestion that Lehi or any of his sons lived extended lives, it is doubtful that these events took place later than the sixth century BC.

3 Jacob 7:7. While Jacob does not report the full name of Christ in these verses, he knew that name and preached it after an earlier revelation which he documented in 2 Nephi 10:3.

4 Jacob 7:6. W. Cleon Skousen suggests that the "gospel" concept is much older than the Latin and Anglo-Saxon etymology of the word itself. He has referred to use of the same term in Moses 6:58, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City, Utah: Ensign Publishing, 1971), 1452.

5 Jacob 7:7.

says simply, “there came a man among the people of Nephi, whose name was Sherem.”<sup>6</sup>

Sherem’s objection to Jacob’s interpretation of the Law of Moses raises the question of what interpretation of that law was orthodox in Jerusalem in the seventh century BC. That subject is beyond the immediate purpose of this article, but the writer<sup>7</sup> and others<sup>8</sup> have begun to explore elsewhere the influence of Judaism in the Book of Mormon, and there is no doubt that as a subject it has only begun to attract scholarly attention.

In this article, however, the primary focus is on the preliminary question of Sherem’s identity. Who was Sherem, and where did he come from? Was he a Nephite, a Lamanite, or someone else, perhaps a wandering Jaredite or a Mulekite? Each of these ideas for Sherem’s background has been proposed, as the reader will see in the discussion that follows. Sherem’s identity seems the more mysterious when his “arrival” is compared with Alma<sub>1</sub>’s account of Abinadi’s presence among the people of King Noah in the land of Lehi-Nephi. For when Alma<sub>1</sub><sup>9</sup> originally introduced Abinadi in his record, he did not say that Abinadi “came ... among them”<sup>10</sup> but that Abinadi was “among them”<sup>11</sup> and that he “went forth among them and began to prophesy.”<sup>12</sup> Despite the slightly different descriptions of their origins, is it possible that, like Abinadi, Sherem was a Nephite; but the scripture editors had reasons to

---

6 Jacob 7:1.

7 “Nephite insights into Israelite Worship Practices before the Babylonian Captivity,” *Interpreter, A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013), 155.

8 See, for example, *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, John W. Welch, and David R. Seely, eds. (Provo, UT: Brigham Distributing, 2004), where various authors explore the cultural and religious environment that obliged Lehi’s departure. Similarly, John Welch, *Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, has explored what he called “the interconnections between legal and religious material in the ancient Near East, the Bible and the Book of Mormon including the norms and practices of Judaism” (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2008), xxiv-xxv).

9 The writer has assumed that the original author of the record from which Mormon made his abridgement of Mosiah 12 is Alma<sub>1</sub>. That assumption follows Zeniff’s conclusion of the previous chapter with the words “therefore I say no more” (Mosiah 10:22), since Alma<sub>1</sub> presents as the only person with sufficient knowledge to record the facts that appear between Mosiah 12 and 18, even though the record is presented in the third person. However, it is unlikely that Alma<sub>1</sub> provided the primary material underlying Mormon’s abridgement in Mosiah 19-22 since his people had separated from those of Limhi during this period.

10 Jacob 7:1.

11 Mosiah 11:20.

12 Ibid. Note, however, that in Mosiah 12:1, when Abinadi returned among the Nephites in disguise, Alma/Mormon uses exactly the same phrase (“came among them”) as Jacob/Mormon used in Jacob 7:1.

downplay those connections in Sherem's case. Reasons why the Book of Mormon editors may have wanted to downplay any Nephite connections that Sherem had include that they did not wish to provide Sherem with credibility, since in their eyes, his message was apostate. In contrast, Abinadi was a preacher of whom those editors were proud.

Other reasons why Sherem was more likely a Nephite than a Mulekite or a Jaredite include the text of the Book of Mormon itself, which suggests that the first Nephite contact with or knowledge of those peoples came more than three hundred years later.<sup>13</sup> In fact, there is no mention of any direct Jaredite contact with the Nephites or Lamanites at all in the existing Book of Mormon text — the Book of Mormon suggests that the Nephites became aware of the Jaredites only when King Mosiah<sub>1</sub> translated their record<sup>14</sup> after he joined the Nephite and Mulekite societies together sometime during the second century BC.<sup>15</sup> There are also “markers” in Jacob's account of his meeting with Sherem which suggest that Sherem more likely was a Nephite than anyone else. Those markers include Sherem's eloquence in the Nephite language,<sup>16</sup> his familiarity with the law of Moses,<sup>17</sup> and the resonance of Sherem's doctrines with the ideas of the deuteronomists who some scholars say may have been part of the reason for Lehi's flight from Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> Those doctrines are said to have morphed into the literal rabbinism that Christ decried during his mortal ministry more than six hundred years later.

This article therefore discusses the various existing theories about Sherem's identity, discounts them for the reasons summarized above, and concludes that Sherem was more likely a Nephite than a Lamanite, a Jaredite, a Mulekite or a member of any other group with whom these recorded peoples may have mixed when and after they arrived in the new world.<sup>19</sup> As one of my anonymous reviewers has said, “It's like Sherlock Holmes: eliminating all the possibilities (though without all

---

13 Omni 1:15-19, which again the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon suggests took place sometime between 279 and 130 BC.

14 Omni 1:20.

15 Omni 1:19-21.

16 Jacob 7:4.

17 Jacob 7:7.

18 See for example the essays of Kevin Christensen and Margaret Barker in Welch and Seely, entitled, respectively, “The Temple, the Monarchy and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker” and “What did Josiah Reform?”

19 Note that the author accepts the Nibley/Sorenson view that none of the groups which emigrated to the New World as recounted in the Book of Mormon found an uninhabited continent.

the evidence) and accepting what remains, however improbable it may at first have seemed, as the real answer.”

After I have discussed the reasons why Sherem was likely a Nephite, I then consider how he might have learned his heretical anti-Christian ideas, since Nephi made it very clear that he had not taught his people the dark and abominable ways of the Jews.<sup>20</sup> I then suggest that Sherem was likely a son or more remote descendant of Zoram, since though Zoram was a friend to Nephi,<sup>21</sup> he was also a scribe<sup>22</sup> and likely familiar with those dark Jewish ways which were abominable in the eyes of his friend.<sup>23</sup> I also explain that later Zoramite practice and theology, which is treated as apostate and heretical in the Book of Mormon,<sup>24</sup> has a distinctly Deuteronomist and even rabbinical flavor. After reviewing the likely reasons for that “familiar spirit,” I suggest that many of the anti-Christian threads in the Book of Mormon likely also have Zoramite origins. I also suggest that those anti-Christian connections may be the reason why Korihor died among the Zoramites,<sup>25</sup> and why many Zoramites denied the Christ.<sup>26</sup>

### Was Sherem a Jaredite or a Mulekite?

The idea that Sherem may have been a Jaredite was suggested by Hugh Nibley in his classic *Lehi in the Desert & The World of the Jaredites*. He wrote that “Jaredite proper names have a peculiar ring of their own. Their most characteristic feature is the ending in –m. This is called *mimation* and is actually found among the most ancient languages of the Near East.”<sup>27</sup>

---

20 2 Nephi 25:2.

21 2 Nephi 1: 30.

22 1 Nephi 4: 20, 22-27.

23 2 Nephi 25:2.

24 Consider the view of Zoramite theology and practice recounted in Alma<sub>2</sub>'s mission to the Zoramites in Alma 31-35.

25 Alma 30:59.

26 Alma 31:16.

27 Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert & The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Second Collector's Edition Printing, 1988), 243. Nibley also says that every Nephite who bore a Jaredite name “has a Mulekite background and is a leader of subversive movements against the Nephite state and religion” (ibid. 244); and he doubts that Coriantumr was the only Jaredite who overlapped with Nephites and the Mulekites. He adds, “We have proof that the Jaredites made a permanent cultural impression on the Nephites *through Mulek*, for centuries after the destruction of the Jaredite nation we find a Nephite bearing the name of Coriantumr, and learn that this man was a descendant of Zarahemla, the illustrious leader

Alan C. Miner also points out,<sup>28</sup> with an additional citation to Catherine Thomas,<sup>29</sup> that “Sherem is similar to the name ‘Shelem’ (Ether 3:1), the name given to the mountain upon which the brother of Jared came to know the true nature of Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup> But Nibley’s “ancient languages of the Near East” comment does not exclude non-Jaredite Near Eastern connections for the name “Sherem,” and Catherine Thomas’ additional comments suggest the name more likely has Hebrew antecedents than anything unequivocally Jaredite.<sup>31</sup> It also seems unlikely that a Jaredite would be well versed in the niceties of Mosaic law (since Moses was given that law after the Jaredites had left the Old World) or be superbly competent in the Nephite language, as Jacob said that Sherem was.<sup>32</sup> Nor is Sherem’s competence in the Nephite language and religion answered by Professor Sorenson’s well-respected hypothesis that the Lehitites and Mulekites did not arrive in uninhabited lands.<sup>33</sup> That is because it is unlikely that even the intelligent members of any other preexisting cultural group present in the Promised Land when the Lehitites arrived could have become as competent as Sherem was in the Nephite language and religion within one or two generations.

---

of the Mulekites” (ibid). But none of this proves that Sherem was a Jaredite or even that a Jaredite background was likely.

28 Alan C. Miner, *Step by Step Through the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996), [http://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob\\_7](http://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob_7).

29 “The Brother of Jared at the Veil,” *Temples of the Ancient World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1994), 390–391.

30 Miner, [http://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob\\_7](http://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob_7).

31 Alan Miner acknowledges that Catherine Thomas finds “three main Hebrew consonants” in the name “Sherem,” connoting, among other meanings, “peace, tranquility, contentment, safety, completeness, being sound, finished, full or perfect” (ibid, fn 205). Indeed, Shelem (the name of the Jaredite mountain) is very close to the familiar Hebrew greeting “shalom,” since vowels did not matter as much (were interchangeable) in ancient Hebrew as they do in modern English (see, for example, [http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit\\_Two/Introduction/introduction.html](http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_Two/Introduction/introduction.html)). Miner also notes that Thomas suggests that words ending in “-m” in ancient Near Eastern languages connote submission to God, as more recently in the words *islam* and *muslim* and in the concept of atonement, where individuals, including the brother of Jared, seek closer fellowship with the Lord (Miner, [http://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob\\_7](http://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob_7), fn 205).

32 Jacob 7:4, 7.

33 See, for example, John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 146–148; John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived, Did They Find Others in the Land?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992); and John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, “Before DNA,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003).

Kevin Christensen's suggestion that Sherem may have been a Mulekite trader<sup>34</sup> has more inferential material to support it. First, since Jacob was born shortly after his parents left Jerusalem around 600 BC, and since the Mulekite party likely left soon afterwards, this Jacob-Sherem meeting would have taken place within the first or second generation after both parties arrived in the New World. Since both parties would still have shared the same language and the Law of Moses, then Sherem might have been a Mulekite, save for the fact that the Book of Mormon does not document any contact between either the Nephites and Lamanites on the one hand, and the Mulekites on the other, until Mosiah<sub>1</sub> joined the Nephites and the Mulekites around the beginning of the second century BC.<sup>35</sup> Christensen says that "Sherem talks like a Deuteronomist" and Jacob "like a First Temple priest,"<sup>36</sup> meaning that Jacob looks like an Israelite traditionalist who resisted the Deuteronomic reforms which Sherem was advocating. And it is this Deuteronomic message that Christensen can feel in Sherem, which leads him to his thesis of a Mulekite origin for Sherem, since he finds it unlikely that an orthodox Nephite would have promoted Deuteronomic heresy.

While Christensen's solution to the identity of Sherem is better than Nibley's, since it provides Sherem with excellent Nephite language skills and religious understanding, his explanation for this Nephite-Mulekite contact 300 years before the Book of Mormon says it happened is less satisfactory. To shore up his "Sherem was a Mulekite" hypothesis, Christensen cites Brant Gardner.<sup>37</sup> Referring to the likely social history of the Nephites, Christensen says that Jacob may have been opposed to trade as the generator of the Nephite materialism, which he decries in his temple sermon.<sup>38</sup> Christensen suggests that Sherem may have sought audience with Jacob to break down the trade barriers which Jacob's interpretation of the Law of Moses was supporting. While Christensen's reasoning is imaginative, Sherem's alleged trade concern forms no part of Jacob's report of their dialogue. That is surprising if trade barriers

---

34 Kevin Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," *FARMS Review*, 16/2 (2004), 86-88.

35 Omni 1: 19.

36 Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," 87.

37 Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," 88, citing Brant Gardner, "A Social History of the Early Nephites," <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/fair-conferences/2001-fair-conference/2001-a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites>.

38 Gardner, "A Social History of the Early Nephites," where Gardner discusses Jacob's teaching in Jacob 1 and 2.



were the real focus of the Jacob-Sherem meeting, since preaching against materialism was indeed a prominent part of Jacob's ministry, as evidenced in Jacob chapters 1 and 2. Jacob prefers to report for his righteous posterity that the purpose of his meeting with Sherem was limited to the correct interpretation of the Law of Moses. For Sherem, Jacob says that the Christ-centred gospel was blasphemy,<sup>39</sup> but for Jacob it is the non-negotiable core of true religion. Jacob testifies that he has received his knowledge of this gospel by revelation<sup>40</sup> — and Jacob had the last word, since he was the author of the record and reported that Sherem was smitten<sup>41</sup> and died following his request for a sign<sup>42</sup> and his confession.<sup>43</sup>

### Was Sherem a Lamanite or a Nephite?

Alan Miner dismisses the suggestion that Sherem might have been a Lamanite, since Sherem responded affirmatively to Jacob's question as to whether Sherem believed the scriptures.<sup>44</sup> For Miner, this answer is "damning," since the only scriptures known in the New World were the brass plates; Laman and Lemuel had never indicated any interest in them, and they were in Nephite custody at the time of the Jacob-Sherem meeting.<sup>45</sup> This logic also weighs against Christensen's argument that Sherem was a Mulekite trader, for three reasons. First, Amaleki's record says that the Mulekites "had brought no records with them."<sup>46</sup> Second, Amaleki says the Mulekites had lost their knowledge of their Creator because they brought no written scriptures with them;<sup>47</sup> and finally, the Mulekites were solely reliant on their oral genealogy<sup>48</sup> for their knowledge of their origins when Mosiah joined the two peoples together

---

39 Jacob 7:7.

40 Jacob 7:5.

41 Jacob 7:14, 15.

42 Jacob 7:20.

43 Jacob 7:16-19.

44 Jacob 7:10.

45 Miner, [http://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob\\_7](http://stepbystep.alancminer.com/jacob_7). Note however that Mosiah 10:11-17 records the traditional Lamanite cultural view of the Nephites. Zeniff suggests that the Lamanites were interested in all the sacred relics and viewed them as their property by virtue of Jewish rules of inheritance and primogeniture (v. 16). The reason the Nephites had difficulty with the Lamanites before the missionary outreach of the sons of Mosiah<sub>2</sub> was that the Lamanites saw the Nephites as rebels and usurpers, a very credible interpretation of Nephite behavior if you were a Jewish cultural traditionalist.

46 Omni 1:17.

47 Omni 1:17.

48 Omni 1:18.

300 years later. While a Deuteronomist Mulekite trader<sup>49</sup> contemporary with Jacob might have retained some memory of the literal pre-rabbinic tradition before his forbears departed from Jerusalem, it is unlikely that anyone could have been as articulate and well briefed as Sherem seems to have been<sup>50</sup> without detailed familiarity with the records held only by Nephi and his spiritual heirs.

Is it then possible that Sherem could have been a member of the Nephite community that had separated from the Lamanites?<sup>51</sup>

There is controversy over the size of the Nephite party at the date of their separation from the Lamanites, and the date of the meeting between Jacob and Sherem.<sup>52</sup> And the Book of Mormon text does not provide much material from which readers can draw a conclusion. It says that the Nephite party comprised Nephi and his family, “Zoram and his family, and Sam mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, and all those who would go with me.”<sup>53</sup> These seven to ten or twelve families composed the original Nephite group.<sup>54</sup> These were “those who believed in the warnings and revelations of God”<sup>55</sup> and “hearkened unto ... [Nephi’s] words.” Even though a third generation could have been well established before Sherem “came among” them, the core Nephite group appears to have originated from fewer than fifteen families.

The reasons why Sherem likely was a Nephite arise by elimination from the preceding discussion of whether Sherem could have been a Jaredite, a Mulekite, or a Lamanite.

---

49 Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” 86–88. This is Christensen’s profile of Sherem.

50 Jacob 7: 7.

51 2 Nephi 5: 1–8. The current editors of the Book of Mormon estimate that this separation occurred sometime between 588 and 570 BC.

52 See for example [http://nephicode.blogspot.com.au/2011\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](http://nephicode.blogspot.com.au/2011_10_01_archive.html), where a blogger named Del criticizes both Professor Sorenson’s well-respected thesis that there were other people living in the “promised land” when the Nephites arrived; and his view that there would only have been a “few dozen adults” in the Nephite settlement at the time of the Jacob-Sherem confrontation. “Del” appears to refer to Professor Sorenson’s article “Before DNA,” though he does not cite the article. Del’s conclusion is that the population of the Nephite settlement by 520 BC could have been around 1336 from purely natural increase without polygamy (which Jacob had earlier condemned — Jacob 2:28-32) by the time of the confrontation.

53 2 Nephi 5:6.

54 2 Nephi 5:6.

55 2 Nephi 5:6.

First, he was more likely a Nephite than a Jaredite, Mulekite or Jaredite because as a Nephite he would have had access to the scriptures that set out the Law of Moses in which he was so well versed. Second, if he was a Nephite, it is less difficult to explain his eloquence and persuasiveness, because the Nephite language and cultural tradition were his native element. If he was a Nephite, he need only have been an intelligent member of the small Nephite community. And finally, there were two male members of the original separated Nephite party whose names ended, per Nibley, with the letter “m” — Sam and Zoram!<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps logically more important in this “process of elimination” is the absence of any need to explain Nephite connections with either the Jaredites or the Mulekites before the Book of Mormon text reports them. However, this logic does not signal any dispute with Professor Sorenson’s well-respected belief that there were other peoples in the land where the Nephites, the Lamanites and the Mulekites came to dwell.<sup>57</sup> Nor does the suggestion that Sherem was a Nephite require us to jump through hoops to explain why Sherem was so eloquent and persuasive in a language and religion that were not his own.

### What If Sherem Was a Nephite?

But if Sherem was a Nephite, does Jacob’s record of their encounter or any other part of the Book of Mormon text provide us with any indication of which family he came from? The answer to this question is a qualified yes.

The contextual keys that unlock an answer to this question include a close consideration of what Sherem taught.

Sherem’s doctrine is summarized in just two verses in Jacob 7.<sup>58</sup> While it seems obvious Jacob had no wish to give Sherem’s heresies much “air-time,” he still recorded that Sherem objected to 1) Jacob’s teaching as “the gospel,” the “doctrine of Christ,”<sup>59</sup> and 2) Jacob’s supposed

---

56 See Nibley’s comments about Near Eastern names ending with the letter “m” (Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert & The World of the Jaredites*, 243, and in the supporting text). Hugh Nibley has also suggested that the Nephite name “Sam” is of Egyptian provenance (Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 286). John Tvedtnes prefers Nibley’s earlier view that the name “Sam” has Arabic origins. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 2004), 88, citing Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 75-76, and Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 41-42.

57 Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, 146-148.

58 Jacob 7:6, 7.

59 Jacob 7:6.

perversion of “the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence.”<sup>60</sup>

Sherem’s position boils down to his assertion that Jacob’s teaching was “blasphemy,”<sup>61</sup> since no one could know of such things, or indeed of anything that lies in the future.<sup>62</sup>

Sherem’s “doctrine” bears a striking resemblance to the Jewish hopes that had turned prophecies of the coming Messiah into expectations of a second political David by the time that Christ was born among them in time’s meridian. And this resemblance resonates with Jacob’s earlier warning against Jewish stiffneckedness, which “despised words of plainness, ... killed the prophets”<sup>63</sup> and generally had become blind by “looking beyond the mark.”<sup>64</sup> Sherem may simply have been the most eloquent advocate of these Jewish doctrines with which Jacob had been wrestling for some time.

Where did these doctrines come from if Nephi was as studious as he says he was *not* to teach his people “many things concerning the manner of the Jews ... [since] their works were works of darkness and their doings were the doings of abominations”?<sup>65</sup>

Since it seems unlikely that Jacob and Joseph would have been less discrete with Jewish teaching than Nephi,<sup>66</sup> someone else in the Nephite party must have known and taught it. Zoram presents as the most likely candidate.

### What Do We Know About Zoram?

Zoram was the servant of Laban who made covenant with Nephi and went down with him and Nephi’s brethren into the wilderness. Brother Nibley’s insightful observations about Zoram’s faithfulness in keeping his oath to Nephi<sup>67</sup> may, however, have blinded us to the dilemma which Zoram faced when Nephi gave him a choice whether to come with him and his brothers, or, we presume, to stay in Jerusalem — the proverbial choice between Charybdis and Scylla. The absence of any satisfactory alternative for Zoram when Nephi gave him “a choice” does not,

---

60 Jacob 7:7.

61 Jacob 7:7.

62 Jacob 7:7.

63 Jacob 4:14.

64 Jacob 4:14.

65 2 Nephi 25:2.

66 2 Nephi 5: 26; Jacob 1:18.

67 Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 128-130.

however, mean that Zoram immediately changed his belief system so that it accorded with that of Lehi and his family.

Nephi says that Zoram was the servant of Laban “who had the keys of the treasury.”<sup>68</sup> It is unlikely that Laban had entrusted those keys to just anyone, for the treasury, and the brass plates in particular, were the tokens of Laban’s wealth and station in Jerusalem. It is likely that Zoram was both a trusted servant and that he had some knowledge of the records of which he was custodian. Indeed, he may even have been a scribe to Laban.<sup>69</sup> That he was politically knowledgeable is manifest from Nephi’s record of their conversation as they took the records to Nephi’s “elder brethren . . . without the walls.”<sup>70</sup> For Nephi says that while Zoram thought that Nephi was his master Laban, “he spake unto me concerning the elders of the Jews, he knowing that . . . Laban, had been out by night among them.”<sup>71</sup>

How willing was Zoram’s departure from Jerusalem? Logically, he had no choice. Even if he was not a captive,<sup>72</sup> from the moment he realized that Nephi was not Laban, he must have perceived that he was in a catch-22 situation. If he did manage to escape from Lehi’s four sons, the brass plates were gone and Laban was dead. Who would believe him if he reported the theft and its perpetrators? Was it not more likely that he would be taken as the murderer/thief himself?<sup>73</sup> And if Lehi’s sons were gone without trace, and Zoram held pending trial, what chance would he have to prove his innocence? Though Hugh Nibley says that Nephi and his brethren were safe in relying on Zoram’s oath,<sup>74</sup> it is doubtful that Zoram’s departure from Jerusalem was completely willing, for the record implies that he had no chance to bid his family farewell; he was

---

68 1 Nephi 4:20.

69 Brother Nibley suggests that Zoram “knew a good deal” about “the elders of the Jews (1 Nephi 4:27)”; was Laban’s private secretary and “himself an important official.” Nibley further suggests that Nephi may have intended to denote that Zoram was Laban’s “official representative” when he used the title “servant,” rather than that he was serving in some menial role (*An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 127-128).

70 1 Nephi 4:27.

71 1 Nephi 4:22.

72 1 Nephi 4:31.

73 Note Amalackiah’s use of this fast judging historical oriental habit when he successfully shifted the blame for the murder of the Lamanite king in Alma 47:22-30 (ca 72 BC); and in the hasty Nephite conclusion that the five messengers sent to test the veracity of Nephi’s prophecy of the murder of the Chief Judge Seezoram were themselves the murderers (Helaman 8: 27-9:38, ca. 20 BC).

74 Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 128-130.

relinquishing a sinecure<sup>75</sup> for a dubious nomadic existence in the desert; and if he was *ad idem* with Laban in his regard for Lehi and his family, he was being forced to fall in with a group of religious zealots.<sup>76</sup> However, once Zoram left Jerusalem with Nephi, there was no return, for he was a fugitive from that moment on.

If Laban was familiar with Lehi's teachings, then Zoram was likely familiar with them as well. But that does not mean that Zoram agreed with all of them. As Nephi's predecessor as custodian of the brass plates, Zoram was likely familiar with the Jewish interpretation that had become orthodox in Jerusalem at the time of his departure and may well have shared it with his family. Though he may have been personally loyal and faithful to Nephi<sup>77</sup> until the first Nephi died, it is likely that he taught his family other methods of scriptural interpretation and the mainstream Jewish idea which disclaimed a spiritual Messiah, especially one named Jesus Christ. Though Zoram may have been converted by the Spirit during the many years he heard Nephi teach and prophesy, that does not mean he did not teach alternative scriptural interpretation privately at home. Such teaching would easily explain the rise of an intelligent son or grandson who was well schooled in alternative methods of scriptural interpretation.

Kevin Christensen's case that Sherem was a Mulekite Deuteronomist<sup>78</sup> relies on the Deuteronomists' strict regard "for the written law"<sup>79</sup> of Moses. But Christensen's reasoning is just as valid if Sherem was a Nephite, or an early Zoramite, rather than a Mulekite. For even though we do not have enough detail in the Book of Mormon to confirm whether Sherem opposed the pre-deuteronomic ideas that Elohim and Yahweh were separate beings<sup>80</sup> or that pre-Josiah High Priests had a Melchizedek as well as an Aaronic Priesthood role,<sup>81</sup> it is clear that Sherem was

---

75 Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 127-128.

76 In his article suggesting that Zoram may have been a Mulekite Deuteronomist, Kevin Christensen explains in detail, with citations from Margaret Barker, how orthodoxy in religion was transformed by an elite scribal group in that period immediately before Lehi left Jerusalem ("The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," 56).

77 2 Nephi 1:30.

78 Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," 56.

79 Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," 65.

80 Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," 68-72.

81 Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," 81-83.

completely wedded to the idea that the Law of Moses was an end in itself<sup>82</sup> and did not include any concept of an atoning Messiah to come.<sup>83</sup>

### Zoramite Religious Practice

Commenting on an earlier and unpublished version of this article, John Welch observed that “if Sherem . . . was a Zoramite, then the rift between the Zoramites and the Nephites that erupted into warfare in the days of Alma<sub>1</sub><sup>[2]</sup> had roots as far back as the contention between Sherem and Jacob.”<sup>84</sup>

Certainly the most memorable catalogue of Zoramite religious practices is that which Alma<sub>2</sub> documented during his mission among them<sup>85</sup> more than 400 years after Sherem’s ministry, and shortly after Alma<sub>2</sub> had dealt with the later anti-Christ Korihor.<sup>86</sup> Alma<sub>2</sub> said these Zoramites did not “keep the commandments of God and his statutes, according to the law of Moses,”<sup>87</sup> but it is likely that Alma<sub>2</sub> meant they did not keep the Law of Moses as it was taught in the church established among the Nephites by his father, Alma<sub>1</sub>. And the distinctive Zoramite prayers upon the Rameumpton and Alma<sub>2</sub>’s criticism that they were prayers “to be heard of men”<sup>88</sup> unmistakably recall Christ’s criticism of hypocritical Jewish religious practice by a people who purported to live the Law of Moses and yet prayed to be seen of men in synagogues and on street corners!<sup>89</sup>

There is also a connection between the Zoramites and the Book of Mormon’s most memorable anti-Christ, Korihor. Recall that Korihor met his final end in a road accident among the Zoramites.<sup>90</sup> Though Mormon implies that the justice of God was manifest in Korihor’s unfortunate

---

82 Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” 65-68, 75.

83 Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” 6264, 67, 76-80.

84 Welch, *Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, 108-109, n. 6. Note further that Zoramite and Nehorite beliefs seem to have discrete origins. For while the Zoramites considered contra Alma<sub>2</sub> that they observed the Law of Moses faithfully, the Nehors focused more on clerical remuneration, universal redemption without regard to the morality of personal conduct, and the denial of divine punishment, judgment or resurrection (*ibid.*, 219).

85 Alma 31-35.

86 Alma 20.

87 Alma 31:9.

88 Alma 31:3.

89 Matthew 6:5.

90 Alma 30:59.

end,<sup>91</sup> it is fairly observed that the deaf<sup>92</sup> are more vulnerable to pedestrian accidents than the nonhearing impaired. The point of the observation in this article is that if Korihor was living among the Zoramites when he died, he may have been a son of theirs who had returned to his own when he fell on hard times.

## Conclusion

Prophetic wrestling with anti-Christ's and others in the Book of Mormon who would not accept that the Law of Moses was intended as a schoolmaster<sup>93</sup> to prepare them for the Redeemer's coming seems connected with the carried-over Jewish notion that the Law of Moses was properly understood and followed as a simple precedential tradition. But it is surprising to find prequels to rabbinic theology in the Book of Mormon context when Nephi had been careful to censor them out.<sup>94</sup> Finding these prequels in the Book of Mormon provides additional intertextual evidence of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith could not have known of the work of the so-called Deuteronomic reformers in the 1820s when scholars only started to grapple with these matters towards the end of the twentieth century.<sup>95</sup>

Kevin Christensen has translated the Deuteronomic reform literature for LDS consumption and has explained that it accords with the Book of Mormon teaching that many "plain and precious things"<sup>96</sup>

---

91 Alma 30:60.

92 However, the scriptures record only that Korihor was dumb (Alma 30:49-52). Perhaps he was also rendered deaf at the same time, though that would likely have been stated by the author of the account.

93 Galatians 3:24. The term *schoolmaster* is Paul's, but it captures precisely the teaching of orthodox pre-Christian Nephites. Note that Christensen says that the Israelite view that "the Law was not an inferior replacement for the gospel they were unworthy to live" (quoting and disagreeing with Melodie Moench Charles and her article "The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament," which appeared in *Sunstone* magazine in 1980 under that title and then again in *The Word of God* in 1990) did not become predominant until after the exile (Christensen, n. 33, p. 75).

94 2 Nephi 25:2.

95 Kevin Christensen cites the work of Margaret Barker, Robert Alter, Richard Elliot Friedman and William Doorly as representative of the scholarship which now universally accepts that the Deuteronomic editorial school actually existed ("The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament," 60-61). Barker's first book touching the subject was published in 1987. Friedman published the same year, and the works of Doorly and Alter which Christensen cites followed respectively in 1994 and 1998 (*ibid.*)

96 1 Nephi 13: 29. See also Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker" and "What did Josiah Reform?"



were taken from the Hebrew Bible that has come down to us from the Jews. He has explained Margaret Barker's particular insight that massive redactions in the name of a new orthodoxy immediately before and during the Jewish exile led to the rabbinic tradition that replaced the old theology and its core Messianic teachings.

Though it cannot be conclusively demonstrated from the current Book of Mormon record, there is circumstantial evidence that Sherem, that canon's first anti-Christ, was a son or later descendant of Zoram, who came out from Jerusalem with Nephi and his brothers after the death of Laban and the recovery of the brass plates. If Zoram had indeed preserved some of his memory of Jewish religious practice and doctrine and handed it down to his posterity, it is not surprising that there is resonance between apostate religious practice among the Nephites and that which Christ met and criticized during his mortal ministry.

**A. KEITH THOMPSON** LLB (Hons); M Jur; PhD is the Associate Dean at the University of Notre Dame Australia School of Law, Sydney. He also practices commercial and property law in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia. He formerly served 20 years as International Legal Counsel for the Church in the Pacific and Africa Areas and has also served in the Church as Bishop, Stake President, and Mission President. He and his wife, Anita, have eight children and eight grandchildren so far.





