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JACOB DID NOT MAKE A FALSE PREDICTION

Duane Boyce

Review of Adam S. Miller, “Reading Signs or Repeating Symptoms,” in *Christ and Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7*, eds. Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2017), 10 pages (chapter), 174 pages (book).

Abstract. *The Neal A. Maxwell Institute recently published a volume on the encounter between Jacob and Sherem in Jacob 7. Adam Miller’s contribution to this book is a reiteration of views he published earlier in his own volume. One of Miller’s claims is that Jacob made a false prediction about the reaction Sherem would have to a sign if one were given him — an assertion that is already beginning to shape the conventional wisdom about this episode. This shaping is unfortunate, however, since the evidence indicates that this view of Jacob’s prediction is a mistake. Once we see this, it is easier to avoid other mistakes that seem evident in Miller’s approach.*

In a previous article, I examined some features of Jana Riess’s contribution to a volume published by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute on the encounter between Jacob and Sherem in Jacob 7.¹ The errors in Riess’s essay provided opportunity to clarify that confrontation. The need for clarification also arises in considering Adam

1. Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer, eds., *Christ and Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7* (Provo, UT: Neil A. Maxwell Institute, 2017). Riess’s chapter in that volume is entitled “‘There Came a Man’: Sherem, Scapegoating, and the Inversion of Prophetic Tradition.” My review of Riess’s chapter is: “Text as Afterthought: Jana Riess’s Treatment of the Jacob-Sherem Episode,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 33 (2019): 123–40.

Miller's treatment of this episode, which appears in the same volume.² I will discuss two issues from Miller's contribution — his view of Jacob's prediction about Sherem's reaction to a sign and the wider implications that might seem to follow from his view of Jacob's prediction.

Jacob's Prediction

One of the topics Miller addresses in the Jacob-Sherem episode regards the sign given to Sherem. Miller believes Jacob made a false prediction: Jacob says that Sherem will deny a sign if it is given to him, but when Sherem actually does receive a sign, he acknowledges it and confesses his deceit and other sins because of it (vs. 14–19). The conclusion Miller draws is that Jacob's prediction was therefore false.

Miller first made this claim in his own volume,³ and I responded to it, in somewhat condensed form, as part of a much longer review of a chapter in Miller's book.⁴ I stand by what I said in that review about the inadequacies in Miller's full treatment of Jacob 7 and wish to further emphasize this specific matter, as Miller's view seems to be gaining traction in some quarters. Joseph Spencer of the Maxwell Institute, for instance, has adopted Miller's claim about Jacob's "misprediction,"⁵ and so has Jeff Lindsay.⁶ These examples of acceptance indicate that the idea may be on its way to becoming part of the conventional wisdom about Jacob and Sherem.

This is an important development because the claim actually appears to be a mistake. This is not insignificant. Viewing prophets accurately is essential to appreciating them and their role in representing the Lord. Although everyone recognizes that prophets are flawed, that is not a license to see flaws where they *don't* exist nor for such phantom faults to become accepted interpretations among scholars. Yet, that is

2. Adam S. Miller, "Reading Signs or Repeating Symptoms," in Miller and Spencer, *Christ and Antichrist*, 18–27.

3. Adam S. Miller, "Reading Signs or Repeating Symptoms: Reading Jacob 7," in his book *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2016), 25–33.

4. Duane Boyce, "Reclaiming Jacob," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 107–29, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/reclaiming-jacob/>.

5. Joseph Spencer, "Introduction," in Miller and Spencer, *Christ and Antichrist*, ix–xvi.

6. Jeff Lindsay, "A Brighter Future for Mormon Theology: Adam S. Miller's *Future Mormon*," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 21 (2016): 121–22, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-brighter-future-for-mormon-theology-adam-s-millers-future-mormon/>.

the current risk with regard to Jacob. Thus, although I addressed this issue somewhat briefly in my earlier review, because of its repetition in a BYU publication and its (apparently) growing acceptance, I see value in a more complete treatment.

Three Types of Signs

The first matter to notice in getting clear about Jacob’s discussion of signs is that multiple religious terms in scripture have more than one meaning. We see this with words such as “Israel,” “Jew,” “Gentile,” “eternal,” “Father,” “salvation,” and “faith,” among others: what these words mean in one place or another depends entirely upon their context.⁷ To ignore such context and to apply the same meaning to every appearance of any of these words would be fatal to any hope of actual understanding.

Understanding the meaning of the word “sign” seems to be no different. For example, the Lord speaks of signs that “come by faith, unto mighty works” and then of the signs he gives to those with whom he is *angry* — signs that he shows in “wrath” and “unto their condemnation” (Doctrine and Covenants 63:10–11). The Lord uses the word “sign” in both instances, but the word indicates two very different actions on his part. Clearly, not all signs are the same.

Once we recognize this difference, we can look at the scriptural record to see if there are general patterns to the ways the word “sign” is used. My study suggests there are three such broad patterns. Appreciating these different categories can help us understand what happens between Jacob and Sherem.

Signs that Testify Universally

One use of the word “sign” is evident in the confrontation between Alma and Korihor (Alma 30). Alma declares to Korihor that the cosmos itself serves as a testimony of God and his work (Alma 30:44)⁸ and says that the long history of prophets’ testimonies does the same (Alma 30:44). He

7. Except perhaps in the case of “faith,” the differences in how these terms are used in scripture are very familiar to Latter-day Saints. For an introduction to how “faith,” too, is used differently at different times, see my article “Faith as a Holy Embrace,” *The Religious Educator*, 13, no. 2 (2012): 107–27, <https://rsc.byu.edu/es/archived/volume-13-number-2-2012/faith-holy-embrace>.

8. He says that “all things” serve as a testimony of God and his work, including “the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form.” All of these “witness that there is a Supreme Creator” (Alma 30:44). In Alma’s mind, the cosmos itself is a sign that testifies of God. This would seem to be why the Lord said in a revelation that “the Spirit enlighteneth every man *through* the world” (D&C 84:46): because

reports that he personally has all these as a testimony of God and of the coming of Christ and says that Korihor, too, has them “as a testimony unto you that [Alma’s teachings] are true” (Alma 30:41).

That Alma considers all these matters to be “signs” is evident in what happens next. Korihor demands a sign, and Alma says simply: “Thou hast had signs enough” (Alma 30:44). Alma considers Korihor’s demand for an additional sign to be dishonest because he already has plenty of signs at his disposal. Indeed, he says Korihor believes, based on all the testimonies available to him, but he is “possessed of a lying spirit” (Alma 30:42). He is resisting “the spirit of truth” (Alma 30:46) and indeed has “put off the Spirit of God” (Alma 30:42), which is why Korihor rejects all the signs that are available to him.

Signs like those mentioned by Alma serve primarily to testify. Everyone can view the heavens and the workings of nature, and everyone who wants to can examine the scriptural testimonies of Christ and his Father; such testimonies are available generally. Samuel the Lamanite spoke of similar universal signs and of their testifying function. He prophesied of signs that would precede the Savior’s birth as well as those that would attend his death, and he taught that they would be given specifically so the people might believe (Helaman 14:12, 20–29); they would serve as a divine testimony to everyone.⁹ If they believed, he said, they would repent and be saved, but if they did not, it would be to their condemnation. “Whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself,” he observed (Helaman 14:29–30). Testifying signs thus give observers a choice — either to respond to them or to resist them.¹⁰

Signs that Follow Belief

Perhaps the most common use of “sign” refers to miracles intended specifically for those who accept the Lord. The scriptures tell us that such miraculous gifts “follow” those who believe. They include healing

the cosmos is the work of God, it inherently carries a spiritual testimony of God to those who “hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit” (D&C 84:46).

9. Other passages that speak of signs for such events include: Matthew 2:1–2; 1 Nephi 19:10; 2 Nephi 26:3; 3 Nephi 11:2.

10. The same is true of the signs that will appear before the Second Coming of the Savior. These range from the appearance of the Book of Mormon, to the establishment of Zion, to various upheavals and wonders right up until the Lord appears. See, for example: Joel 2:30–31; 3:15–16; Revelation 11:3–12; 3 Nephi 21:1–7; JS–Matthew 1:4, 36; D&C 29:14–16; 34:7–9; 45:39–42; 77:11, 15; 88:84–97. All of these, in their way, testify of God and of his works and give people a reason to consider, believe, and repent.

the sick, casting out devils, speaking with a new tongue, restoring sight to the blind, and, in general, performing “many wonderful works” (D&C 35:8; 84:64–72; Mark 16:17–18; Mormon 9:24). Regarding such miraculous gifts, Jacob wrote of his time 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).

Divine signs of this sort are not, as a general principle, available to those who do not accept the Lord. The Savior said to the early Saints that he would show signs to those “who believe on my name” (D&C 35:8). He later said that “faith cometh not by signs,” but instead “signs *follow* those that believe” (D&C 63:9). The purpose of such signs is not to turn doubters into believers, but for the “profit and for salvation” of those who already believe (D&C 84:73). The gifts of the Spirit, which are addressed at length three times in scripture (1 Corinthians 12; Moro. 10; D&C 46), would seem to be among the miraculous signs that attend believers, and they are given “for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments, and him that seeketh so to do” (D&C 46:9).

Because such signs follow those who believe, faith is a precondition for experiencing them. Indeed, it is such a strong precondition that both Mark and Matthew tell us the Lord could “do no mighty work” in his home area — aside from a few healings — because of the people’s “unbelief” (Mark 6:5–6; Matthew 13:58). Similarly, following one miraculous outpouring of the Spirit while among the Nephites, the Lord said that he had never seen such faith among the Jews, “wherefore I could not show unto them so great miracles, because of their unbelief” (3 Nephi 19:35). Ether, too, taught that if people have no faith “God can do no miracle among them” (Ether 12:12). Indeed, so closely is faith tied to signs/miracles that Mormon tells us the absence of miracles among a people is one of the indicators of unbelief among them (Moroni 7:37–38). His son Moroni later says the same (Mormon 9:20; Moroni 10:24).¹¹

At times, of course, unbelievers are present when believers experience the signs intended for their blessing. This was often the case in the Savior’s earthly ministry. For those who did not already accept

11. To say that the Lord “could not” perform miracles under such circumstances does not indicate that he was personally incapable of doing so. Rather, it seems to be an instance of the principle that a blessing comes to us only by our obedience to the law upon which that blessing is predicated (D&C 130:21). If miracles are predicated on satisfying a divine law regarding faith, and if the degree of our faith doesn’t satisfy that divine law, then the Lord can’t — consistent with that law — perform miracles for us. It is not a matter of inability; it is a matter of maintaining consistency with the divine principles he has established.

him, these miracles served as “testifying” signs.¹² They provided an intellectual basis for observers to begin considering divine claims. Many at the time of the Savior asked with sincerity: “How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles?” (John 9:16). Ultimately, however, accepting the Lord is a spiritual matter, not an intellectual one, and that is why the signs were intended for those who already believed; others were merely looking on.¹³ The Lord knew many of them would never believe, since they sought the honors of men and not the honor of God in the first place (John 5:44). Nevertheless, these onlookers had these miracles to testify to them and to provide a starting place for their belief, if they so chose. Indeed, Jacob had declared centuries earlier that any other nation *would* accept the Savior and repent based on the miracles he would perform during his earthly ministry. Nevertheless, he foresaw that because of their “priestcrafts and iniquities,” the people of Jerusalem would “stiffen their necks against him, that he be crucified” (2 Nephi 10:3–5).

Signs that Condemn

Finally, the word “sign” can refer to the Lord’s condemnation of the wicked. The Lord said to Joseph Smith that he shows signs to those who merit his anger, but that he does so “in wrath unto their condemnation” (D&C 63:7, 9, 11, 12). This is consistent with his earlier declaration that in the absence of faith he will not show “great things,” except “desolations upon Babylon” (D&C 35:11). These passages seem to indicate that the

12. On one occasion Jesus said to the Jews who sought to stone him for blasphemy: “If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him” (John 10:37–38). He had made the same point earlier, saying that “the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me” (John 5:36). On another occasion the Savior also appealed to works (John 14:10–11), but this incident was different in two ways. First, the Lord was speaking to the disciples who were with him at the last supper and who thus already believed in him. Second, the intent was to make a doctrinal point. It was not just to show that Jesus was divine and had the Father in him, but to show that he was the *personification* of the Father: for all intents and purposes, whoever had seen him had seen the Father.

13. That acceptance of the Lord is ultimately spiritual, not intellectual, is evident in many ways in scripture. On one occasion during his earthly ministry, for instance, the Savior was asked to provide a sign, just as Moses had provided with manna. But the Savior did not provide one. He pointed to himself as the only sign: “I am the bread of life,” he declared (John 6:30–35). And later he said simply: “My sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me” (John 10:27). Convincing power is found in the voice of the Spirit, not in outward manifestations that appeal to the intellect.

Lord does not show the “following belief” kinds of signs to the wicked, to those who are subject to his anger. Those miracles are intended specifically to bless those who already accept and follow him. The wicked, rather, receive miracles that express his wrath and condemn those who are (spiritually) of Babylon.¹⁴

The Case of Korihor

This seems to be the case with Korihor. As mentioned earlier, Korihor had plenty of experience with “testifying” signs, and Alma said that although Korihor actually believed, he rejected these signs because of his “lying spirit.” Having “put off” the Spirit of God, Korihor had become an instrument of Satan, who was now using him to “destroy the children of God” (Alma 30:42).¹⁵

Korihor thus insisted on seeing signs in addition to those he already had before him. But the Lord specifically condemns such sign-seeking, calling those who demand them “evil” and “adulterous” (Matthew 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:29). Demands for signs are seen as “temptings” of the Lord (Isaiah 7:10–12; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16; Alma 30:44), and in our day he has said that “he that seeketh signs shall see signs, *but not unto salvation*” (D&C 63:7). He added that, “signs come by faith, not by the will of men, nor as *they* please, but by the will of God” (D&C 63:10). He has also said that his children are not to seek signs “that they may consume it on their lusts” (D&C 46:9). We are not to seek miracles to satisfy curiosity, pleasure, or pride; we are not to feed our

14. Some signs of this sort also serve a “testifying” function. As we saw earlier, Samuel the Lamanite taught the Nephites that if they did not respond righteously to the signs, they would serve for their condemnation. The same was true of the Egyptians in Moses’ day, when the Lord performed dramatic miracles prior to the Egyptians’ releasing the children of Israel from bondage (Exodus 7–12). The Lord said he would “multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt” and that “the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 7:3, 5). This was true even of the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea: by this “the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord” (Exodus 14:4, 18). But these signs and wonders were hardly to the blessing of the Egyptians. Untold numbers suffered and died because of them. In their case, the signs came not only to testify, but, because of their hardness, to condemn them. One can imagine that the miracles employed to protect the city of Enoch from its enemies similarly testified of the Lord to those assailants. These miracles included the earth’s trembling, mountains fleeing, rivers turning out of their course, and a mass of land arising “out of the depth of the sea” (Moses 7:13–15).

15. Alma was correct in all of this, of course. Korihor later admitted that he had known the truth and that he had taught falsehoods because he had been deceived by Satan and because what he taught was “pleasing unto the carnal mind” (Alma 30:53).

arrogance by placing a demand on God. To those who seek such things, he said, “it shall turn unto your condemnation” (D&C 88:65).

Korihor approached Alma arrogantly, placing a demand on God for a sign. And by “sign,” he obviously meant the pleasant kind of miracle that follows those who believe — healing, speaking with tongues, and the like. He certainly wasn’t demanding a sign that would *punish* him. But Alma refused Korihor’s demand. Korihor didn’t qualify for such signs: far from being a humble believer, he was strident in his rejection of Christ. Alma thus said that if Korihor continued to insist on a sign, the only sign he would receive would be a smiting from God. Since Korihor continued, he was struck dumb. Rather than receiving a pleasant miracle for the purpose of blessing him — which is what Korihor was demanding — he received a disabling miracle for the purpose of condemning him (Alma 30:45–50). Korihor’s demand turned to his condemnation.

So in the end Korihor did receive a sign. It just wasn’t drawn from the category of signs he had in mind.

Temporary Repentance

Of note in this incident is that neither Alma nor the Lord would remove this curse, even after Korihor confessed his sins and implored Alma to remove it (Alma 30:52–55). Instead, Alma declared that if the curse were removed, Korihor would simply return to his old ways “and again lead away the hearts of this people” (Alma 30:55). Apparently, he believed that Korihor’s lying spirit would cause him to continue as he had before, despite experiencing the power of God. Alma thus left the matter to the Lord (“it shall be unto thee even as the Lord will,” Alma 30:55), and the Lord *didn’t* remove it.

This seems to indicate that the Lord knew Korihor was not going to change. Korihor is hardly alone, however, in being unchanged despite claims of repentance. Laman and Lemuel relented, and even repented, more than once after experiencing divine manifestations, and yet their repentance never lasted (1 Nephi 3:28–31; 7:16–21; 17:48–55; 18:6–21). Indeed, they continued to seek Nephi’s life until Nephi and his followers finally fled from them in the New World (2 Nephi 5:1–7). Pharaoh, too, relented multiple times following the miracles the Lord performed in his presence, including determining to free the children of Israel — and yet each time he quickly re-hardened his heart and rescinded his decision (e.g., Exodus 8:8–15; 9:27–35; 12:31; 14:5). In one case, Pharaoh confessed to sinning “against the Lord your God, and against you” and asked for forgiveness, and then quickly reverted to his previous hardness of heart (Exodus 10:16–20). This was his pattern and it wasn’t going to change.

Korihor, then, is not alone in being unchanging despite his appearance of repentance. Korihor had a “lying spirit” and, evidently, removing his curse was not going to change that, despite his claim of repentance.

Why Jacob’s Prediction Was Not False

Understanding these three broad categories of signs in scripture helps us consider the confrontation between Jacob and Sherem. The encounter begins with Sherem confronting Jacob and denying Christ, to which Jacob responds by testifying of Christ and of matters that he knows “by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Jacob 7:6–12).

At this point, just as Korihor does with Alma, Sherem challenges Jacob to show him a sign “by this power of the Holy Ghost, in the which ye know so much” (Jacob 7:13). Now, it is relevant that Jacob has written in his record of dramatic miracles, saying, “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). In speaking to Sherem, Jacob also refers to numerous divine experiences by saying, “I have heard and seen” (Jacob 7:12). When Sherem demands a sign, he speaks from this context.

Yet, these miracles all fall in the “following belief” category of signs. They are for the benefit of those who already accept the Lord, and are based on their faith in him. They are not for Sherem, who vocally and insistently denies him and who has no faith in him. It is in this context that Jacob refuses to give Sherem the sign he demands. He says: “What am I that I should tempt God to show unto thee a sign in the thing which thou knowest to be true?” (Jacob 7:14) He then predicts that Sherem would deny the sign he is asking for in any case, because, as he told Sherem earlier, “thou art of the devil” (Jacob 7:14). (Sherem himself later admits to such an association (Jacob 7:18–19).)

After making this prediction, however, Jacob changes the subject. He has said he won’t supply the miracle Sherem is demanding, but then he says, “nevertheless, not my will be done.” He is personally unwilling to give Sherem a sign, but if the Lord is willing to give him one, so be it. He thus adds that “if God shall smite thee, let *that* be a sign unto thee” (Jacob 7:14).

This is the second time Jacob uses the word “sign,” but we have now shifted to a different category of signs altogether — now Jacob is talking about “smiting.” Jacob wouldn’t comply with Sherem’s demand for a “following belief” type of sign (say, with “the waves of the sea” or “mountains” or “trees”); he could not, for Sherem did not satisfy the precondition of faith required for that type of sign. Nevertheless, if the Lord wanted to deliver a different kind of

sign to Sherem — a condemning type of sign — then so be it. Of course, that is exactly what happened.

Jacob's prediction, then, seems far from false. He simply made it in the context of a certain category of signs — the kind of sign Sherem himself was expecting and even demanding. Once the context shifted to a different kind of sign, however — one that was entirely distinct in its nature, its purpose, and the character of its recipients — this prediction became moot. The prediction was not false; it simply no longer applied because the context in which Jacob had made it no longer existed.

We cannot fault Jacob for a prediction made in one context regarding a specific category of signs when the sign Sherem received occurred in a completely different context and came from a completely different category of signs. If we overlook this difference and instead conflate the various types of signs the Lord provides, we are destined to reach a false conclusion about Jacob's prediction. But if so, the error is ours, not Jacob's.

A Secondary Matter: Sherem's Repentance

An additional difficulty in Miller's approach is the likelihood that Sherem's repentance was not genuine and lasting in any event. Miller's argument assumes that Sherem's repentance was real and deep, but there is actually strong reason to doubt this. As we have seen, Laman, Lemuel, and Pharaoh all appeared to repent, and yet their changes were not lasting. The same was true of Korihor. Alma believed Korihor's repentance was temporary at best and that, if his curse were removed, he would simply return to his old ways — and the Lord appears to have believed the same thing.

This provides ample precedent for doubting Sherem's repentance as well. Not only are there multiple examples of temporary repentance in the scriptural record, but Jacob called Sherem a "wicked man" to the very end, and the Lord himself refused to heal him — just as he refused to heal Korihor. Miller fails to address all this, a significant oversight since Miller believes Jacob's prediction was false precisely because he assumes that Sherem changed when Jacob said he wouldn't. This assumption is not hard to doubt, however, and, although it is a secondary matter, Miller's failure to address it is an additional weakness in his argument.

Once we appreciate the different categories of signs in the scriptural record, and that the confrontation between Jacob and Sherem referenced two of these categories (not just one), we can reject the claim that Jacob made a false prediction. There is also reason to question the permanence

of Sherem's change in any event. Despite musings and academic momentum to the contrary, the idea of Jacob's false prediction seems clearly to be an error and should be rejected.

A Look at Some Implications

Getting the facts straight about Jacob's prediction is valuable for its own sake. It is better to be correct in our reading of prophets than incorrect. But it is also valuable because of its wider implications. After all, if we decide that Jacob was wrong about Sherem's reaction to a sign, we might conclude that he could also have been wrong about Sherem in other ways. For example, we might come to agree with Miller that Sherem was sincere in his beliefs and that Jacob was actually un-Christlike in the way he behaved toward him. These might seem like possibilities to us if we think that Jacob has already been shown to be wrong about Sherem's reaction to a sign.¹⁶

This pattern of thought fails in two central ways, however. First, it now seems clear that Jacob was not wrong in his prediction about Sherem — and no other aspects of the account follow from a false prediction by Jacob if his prediction was not, in fact, false. Second, the text itself belies Miller's other claims. I have addressed this matter at greater length previously,¹⁷ but two aspects are worth brief mention here as well.

Sherem as “Sincere”

Consider Miller's assertion that Sherem was sincere in his beliefs, even if mistaken. On one hand, this is countervailed by Jacob's description of Sherem as a crass flatterer of the people, as an instrument of the devil, as determined to overthrow the doctrine of Christ, and as a “wicked man” (Jacob 7:1–4, 23). But we don't have to take Jacob's word for all this: Sherem effectively says the same of himself. In his subsequent confession, he admits that he “lied unto God,” he believes that his situation before God is “awful,” and he fears that he has “committed the unpardonable sin” (Jacob 7:19). Sherem does not describe himself as having been merely sincere-but-mistaken; he describes himself as having been a liar *to God*.

16. This line of thinking is present in Jeff Lindsay's review of Miller's first writing on Jacob. See Lindsay, “A Brighter Future for Mormon Theology: Adam S. Miller's *Future Mormon*,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 21 (2016): 121–22, <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/a-brighter-future-for-mormon-theology-adam-s-millers-future-mormon/>.

17. Boyce, “Reclaiming Jacob.”

We don't even have to take Sherem's word for this, however. The Lord's own estimation of Sherem is clear in the sign he gave him — the type of sign specifically intended to condemn the wicked and that ended in Sherem's death.¹⁸ To consider Sherem sincere overlooks the ways that Jacob, the Lord, and Sherem himself affirm the exact opposite.

Jacob as “Un-Christlike”

The assertion that Jacob was un-Christlike toward Sherem also overlooks features of the scriptural record. For example, the text holds that Jacob is able to confound Sherem because he is filled with the Spirit (Jacob 7:8). Since the Spirit is the instrument of Christ (e.g., John 16:13–14; 2 Nephi 32:3), it would seem implausible for Jacob to have the Spirit “poured” into his soul and simultaneously be un-Christlike in his actions. The significant presence of the Spirit in Jacob should at least raise a serious question about Miller's claim.

But more importantly, Miller's comments assume a standard of “Christlike” behavior that would appear to exclude Christ himself. The Lord has spoken far more forcefully to sinners and hypocrites than Jacob speaks to Sherem, for example.¹⁹ The Lord has also destroyed countless wicked people over the history of the earth,²⁰ and he will destroy countless more at his Second Coming.²¹ He will also commit the wicked to a condition of deep suffering for their sins that, for some, will last throughout eternity.²² And in the case of Jacob and Sherem, whereas Jacob is merely unsympathetic toward Sherem, the Lord smites and kills him.

The conclusion from all this would seem to be that if Jacob is un-Christlike, then so is the Savior: by the standard Miller presupposes, Christ himself fails to qualify as Christlike. Miller certainly does not believe this, but it is the logical conclusion of what he says. The standard he uses to criticize Jacob is thus simply mistaken.

18. Jana Riess denies that God killed Sherem, but I show why this is an obvious mistake in my review of her paper. See Boyce, “Text as Afterthought,” 127–31.

19. See Matthew 23:13–33 and D&C 19:15–20 for just two instances.

20. See Gen. 7:21–22; Moses 7:34; Exodus 9, 12, 14; 3 Nephi 9:3–12.

21. See Malachi 4:1; Isaiah 11:4; 13:9; 1 Nephi 22:15, 23; 2 Nephi 23:9; 30:10; D&C 1:13; 29:9, 17–21; 45:50; 63:34; 133:50–51.

22. See, for example, Revelation 21:8; 2 Nephi 9:16; 28:23; D&C 19:15–18; 43:33; 63:17; 76:30–49.

Conclusion

Despite good intentions, it is important to be careful in our approach to understanding prophets. Because they are chosen by the Lord and because they represent him, what we come to think about prophets can have deep and enduring consequences. What we believe about them matters, which means that thinking carefully matters. And when we think carefully it seems completely evident that Sherem was not sincere in his beliefs, that Jacob was not un-Christlike toward him, and that Jacob did not make a false prediction.

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