

A Proposed Reinterpretation of Jacob 2:30

by Steve Reed

In Jacob chapters 2-3 we find one of the most passionate and heart-wrenching sermons in the Book of Mormon. Jacob, the brother of Nephi, observes the following concerning his people:

And now it came to pass that the people of Nephi, under the reign of the second king, began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices, such as like unto David of old desiring many wives and concubines, and also Solomon, his son.¹

This is a problem because Lehi himself received a commandment from God that men should have only *one* wife and *no* concubines.²

Throughout an entire sermon, both the Lord himself and Jacob condemn the practice of having many wives and concubines as gross (vulgar; obscene; indelicate) crimes, sins, iniquities, whoredoms, fornication, lasciviousness, filthiness, and abominations. The deep heartache and damage to the women and children because of this practice are detailed.³

Yet, right in the middle of these condemnations in Jacob 2:30, there is a single verse that is said to be an *exception* to God's commandment to have only one wife.

¹ Jacob 1:15

² Jacob 2:27,34, 3:5-6

³ Jacob 2:31-35

Although this practice is condemned in great detail, an official interpretation of verse 30 suggests that the Lord might command men to marry many wives and concubines anyway, even though he acknowledges that it breaks the hearts of wives and causes sorrow, mourning, sobbings, and deep wounds.

This seems to be a paradox at best and a contradiction at worst.

What I am seeking to demonstrate here in this essay is that Jacob 2:30 contains no exception to the commandment that men should have one wife and no concubines.

As with any post on this site, I am open to corrections if I am in error at any point. I don't speak for the Church, I am not a scholar, and nobody should feel any obligation to believe anything I say. This blog is simply a place where I share some of the things I'm exploring.

Why try and reinterpret this particular verse?

I used to never give this verse a second thought as I read past it over and over because I always understood through various Sunday School lessons, the official church website, and manuals that Jacob 2:30 taught that there was an exception to the commandment of monogamy.

When I took a closer look at the verse from time to time and tried to understand how that interpretation could apply, it seemed to fit but never totally seemed to sit quite right and I could never put my finger on why.

If the verse is actually saying something different, how would you know? What could it be possibly saying other than the official interpretation? Who am I to say that the official interpretation is wrong after people have seen it that way for likely over a century?

I didn't set out on any particular mission to try and deeply analyze this verse. I have a large collection of notes where I save everything I can find because the information of the past often becomes useful in the future. Around 2015, I was learning about Hebrew literary patterns from Avraham Gileadi's work on Isaiah and I think this is what got me looking closer at the specific words and phrases in Jacob 2:30.

I found some very interesting things. I added them to my notes and after several months I found some other insights. Later on, and after about 2 years had passed, I reflected on these notes and noticed that the actual meaning of that verse was beginning to take shape. I began to compile the information into an essay and found more and more pieces of evidence. After publishing this essay, I am still updating it as new information keeps coming.

In my attempts to unravel a paradox, what I discovered instead was a contradiction. The official interpretation is incorrect and I believe that this can be objectively proven.

The Book of Mormon condemns the practice of having multiple wives and concubines in every instance it occurs, even among the Jaredites who predate Lehi and were living on another continent likely before Abraham was even born:

1. Riplakish the Jaredite⁴
2. The rising generation of Nephites⁵
3. King Noah and his wicked priests⁶

Although The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will take disciplinary action against any persons engaging in these practices, the Church teaches that having more than one wife (polygamy) is valid when authorized by God.

Jacob 2:30 has long been used as the sole reference in the Book of Mormon to justify the practice of polygamy among the early members of the Church. If the information presented here is correct, this verse should not be used to imply something that it doesn't.

I want to be clear that my intent in publishing this essay is not to attack or defend the practice of polygamy.

All I am seeking to do is correctly interpret a verse of scripture. The consequences of the interpretation I am proposing upon the theological landscape are outside the scope of this essay.

Examining the official interpretation's premise

Let's begin by looking at Jacob 2:30 all alone and outside of the context of the sermon.

“For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things.”⁷

To justify the practice of polygamy among the early Latter-day Saints, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints references Jacob 2:30 to explain how God can command this practice and even a reason *why* he would in the first place:

The Book of Mormon identifies one reason for God to command it: to increase the number of children born in the gospel covenant in order to “raise up seed unto [the Lord].” [the cross-reference here is to Jacob 2:30]⁸

⁴ Ether 10:5

⁵ Jacob ch. 2-3

⁶ Mosiah 11:2-14

⁷ Jacob 2:30

⁸ <https://bit.ly/39IKoyY>

I believe that the current interpretation of Jacob 2:30 is an example of a fallacy known as proof-texting. An external meaning is being read into the verse that isn't supported by the internal context of the sermon.

“A proof text is a passage of scripture presented as proof for a theological doctrine, belief, or principle. Proof-texting (sometimes “proof-texting” or “proof texting”) is the practice of using quotations from a document, either for the purpose of exegesis, or to establish a proposition in eisegesis (introducing one’s own presuppositions, agendas, or biases). Such quotes may not accurately reflect the original intent of the author, and a document quoted in such a manner, when read as a whole, may not support the proposition for which it was cited.”⁹

Since Jacob 2:30 is being explicitly used to provide a theological justification for the practice of polygamy, I want to address the claim that this practice increases the number of children born under the covenant.

Does a single man fathering many children with many women actually produce a net increase in the population? Of all the population data you could look at, surely the practice of polygamy among the early Latter-day Saints should show that polygamous families increased the population more than monogamous families. Well, the data on that has been examined and the opposite is true.

After studying the marriage and birth data¹⁰ from 186,000 Utah adults and their 630,000 children from the 1800s, evolutionary biologist Michael Wade concluded:

“Although [polygamy is] great in terms of number of children for successful males to have harems, the data show that for every new woman added to a male’s household, **the number each wife produced goes down by one child or so**”¹¹

At the time of his death, Brigham Young had married 56 women, but only 16 of these women actually bore children. In total, Brigham fathered 57 children, 46 of which grew to maturity.¹²

If we divide the total number of children born (57) by the number of mothers (16) we get 3.5 children per mother on average (that number drops to 2.8 if you are counting those that survived). The average number of children born to a woman between 1840 and 1880 was roughly 5.21 children per woman.¹³

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prooftext>

¹⁰ <https://bit.ly/3HED3gi>

¹¹ <https://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/16939.html>

¹² <https://bit.ly/3xFJJ9s>

¹³ <https://bit.ly/3bgjC1e>

Brigham was married to 56 women, and the number of children produced per woman was quite a bit less than the average at that time, 3.5 versus 5.1. If those 56 women had each been in a monogamous marriage and produced children at the average rate, there could have been 291 children versus the 57!

Even if we only count the 16 that bore children, at the average rate, they could have produced 83 children versus 57.

Recently, a man named Ziona Chana passed away (June 13, 2021) and he was survived by 38 widows. Incredibly, this man had 94 children with these women.

He married his first wife at age 17 in 1964. The birth rates in India from 1964 range from 5.85 children per woman to 2.18. That's an average of 4 births per woman during the time that Ziona was having children but Zion's wives were producing 2.41 children per woman on average.

If his wives were all married monogamously and produced children at the average birthrate, there could have been around 156 children instead of 93! There also would have been far fewer widows and fatherless children when he passed.

Seeing one man produce a high number of children with many women is only an illusion that the practice itself creates a net increase in population. Because when one man is fathering many children through many women, the birthrate drops below the average. These are just two examples, but if you analyze other cases you will find that the trend continues.

On the other hand, note how successful the monogamous Nephites were at increasing the number of children born under the covenant throughout the millennium of their history:

And it came to pass that we began to prosper exceedingly, and to **multiply** in the land.¹⁴

And we **multiplied exceedingly**, and spread upon the face of the land...¹⁵

And there were a great number, even so many that they did not number them; for they had **multiplied exceedingly** and waxed great in the land.¹⁶

...and we did begin to **multiply** and prosper in the land.¹⁷

And it came to pass that they did **multiply** and prosper exceedingly in the land of Helam;¹⁸

And they did prosper exceedingly, and they became exceedingly rich; yea, and they did **multiply** and wax strong in the land.¹⁹

¹⁴ 2 Nephi 5:13

¹⁵ Jarom 1:8

¹⁶ Mosiah 2:2

¹⁷ Mosiah 9:9

¹⁸ Mosiah 23:20

¹⁹ Alma 50:18

And the people of Nephi began to prosper again in the land, and began to **multiply and to wax exceedingly strong** again in the land.²⁰

And it came to pass that **they did multiply and spread**, and did go forth from the land southward to the land northward, and did spread insomuch that they **began to cover the face of the whole earth**, from the sea south to the sea north, from the sea west to the sea east.²¹

And thus it did come to pass that the people of Nephi began to prosper again in the land, and began to build up their waste places, and began to **multiply and spread, even until they did cover the whole face of the land**, both on the northward and on the southward, from the sea west to the sea east.²²

And now, behold, it came to pass that the people of Nephi did wax strong, and **did multiply exceedingly fast**, and became an exceedingly fair and delightsome people.²³

And now I, Mormon, would that ye should know that **the people had multiplied**, insomuch that **they were spread upon all the face of the land**, and that they had become exceedingly rich, because of their prosperity in Christ.²⁴

The evidence suggests that a strong reason the Lord was against the Nephites taking on many wives and concubines is that it actually decreases birthrates, slows down population growth, and is antithetical to the Lord's desire to "raise up seed."

For this reason, God commands monogamy not only because it follows the divine pattern set forth in Eden, but also because it is a *far more effective way* to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth."²⁵

The Lord commands his people to raise up seed²⁶ under monogamy and they multiply "exceedingly fast" and "spread upon all the face of the land." If you want more children born under the covenant, you would do it through faithful monogamous families which are capable of producing far more children.

²⁰ Alma 62:48

²¹ Helaman 3:8

²² Helaman 11:20

²³ 4 Nephi 1:10

²⁴ 4 Nephi 1:23

²⁵ Genesis 1:28

²⁶ 1 Nephi 7:1-2

Brian C. Hales is the author of *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, which is a three-volume record containing every known document relating to this practice in Latter-day Saint history. Yet, in addressing if polygamy would ever 'be commanded again,' he says:

“Do we know that polygamy will ever be commanded again? In the 6000 years of religious history, the only adherents to be commanded were the Latter-day Saints between 1852 and 1890. Upon what basis does anyone assert that it will be commanded again?”²⁷

If men fathering children with multiple women is such an effective way to increase the number of births under the covenant, then why don't we see examples of this throughout history? Because it decreases the fruitfulness of the people and limits their ability to multiply.

The premise of men taking multiple wives and concubines to increase covenant populations is demonstrably incorrect.

The meaning of “otherwise”

Now let's dig into the verse itself by examining the word “otherwise” because this is one of the biggest clues as to the meaning of Jacob 2:30.

This is roughly how I understood the verse under the traditional interpretation:

“If I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, increase the number of children born in the gospel covenant unto me by having them take many wives and concubines, I will command my people to do so; until then, they should follow my commandment to have just one wife.”

One official source from the Church newsroom sums up Jacob 2:30 this way:

The standard doctrine of the Church is monogamy, as it always has been, as indicated in the Book of Mormon (Jacob chapter 2): “Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none. ... For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things.”

In other words, the standard of the Lord's people is monogamy **unless the Lord reveals otherwise**.²⁸

²⁷ <http://blog.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Lending-Clarity-to-Confusion.pdf>

²⁸ <https://bit.ly/3N2TRhX>

Here's the problem, the Church newsroom uses the word otherwise here as an ordinary adverb in their explanation, but in Jacob 2:30, the word otherwise is being used as a conjunctive adverb.²⁹

This is an extremely important distinction to make because it has a dramatic effect on the meaning. A conjunctive adverb is used with a semi-colon to *connect two independent clauses together*. To illustrate the difference, here is the word otherwise being used as a regular adverb like the Church newsroom example:

Adverb: Under the Bill of Rights, a person is presumed innocent until proved **otherwise**.

And a conjunctive adverb with a semi-colon the same way it is used in Jacob 2:30:

Conjunctive adverb: We must hurry; **otherwise** we'll miss the train.

The Cambridge Dictionary³⁰ explains that when used as a conjunction, the word otherwise is “used after an order or suggestion to show what the result will be if you do not follow that order or suggestion.”

Merriam-Webster states that otherwise can also mean “if not” and gives two examples that match the way Jacob 2:30 uses it as a conjunctive adverb: “do what I tell you, otherwise you'll be sorry” and “Tickets can be bought in advance at a discount; otherwise they can be purchased at the door for full price.”

This means that by using the conjunctive adverb “otherwise,” the verse is indicating an **intended outcome** for an order given, or else there will be an **undesirable outcome** as the result.

But does the Book of Mormon contain other examples of otherwise being used as a conjunctive adverb and is the usage consistent? The answer is yes and here are several examples.

Notice in these verses there will be first, the **intended outcome**, then the word **otherwise (but if not)**, and then an **undesirable outcome**. Here are several examples:

“Verily, verily, I say that I would that ye should do alms unto the poor; but take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen of them; otherwise ye have no reward of your Father who is in heaven.”³¹

“And behold, there were divers ways that he did manifest things unto the children of men, which were good; and all things which are good cometh of Christ; otherwise men were fallen, and there could no good thing come unto them.”³²

²⁹ <https://bit.ly/3zRyFZB>

³⁰ <https://bit.ly/3zQY7y3>

³¹ 3 Nephi 13:1

³² Moroni 7:24

“And we did magnify our office unto the Lord, taking upon us the responsibility, answering the sins of the people upon our own heads if we did not teach them the word of God with all diligence; wherefore, **by laboring with our might their blood might not come upon our garments; otherwise their blood would come upon our garments, and we would not be found spotless at the last day.**”³³

“But there is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; **otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God.**”³⁴

“If thou wilt grant that my brethren may be cast out of prison, and also that Lamoni may retain his kingdom, and that ye be not displeased with him, but grant that he may do according to his own desires in whatsoever thing he thinketh, **then will I spare thee; otherwise I will smite thee to the earth.**”³⁵

“Behold, here are our weapons of war; we will deliver them up unto you, but we will not suffer ourselves to take an oath unto you, which we know that we shall break, and also our children; but take our weapons of war, and **suffer that we may depart into the wilderness; otherwise we will retain our swords, and we will perish or conquer.**”³⁶

Here are a few more examples with Jacob 2:30 included in the mix. Note the very similar structure and how the desired outcome begins with an “if” followed by a comma or semicolon, then the word otherwise, and concludes with the undesirable outcome:

“And now, **if ye say this in your hearts ye remain guiltless, otherwise ye are condemned;**”³⁷

“Inquire of the Lord, and **if he saith unto us go, we will go; otherwise we will perish in the land.**”³⁸

“For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; **otherwise they shall hearken unto these things.**”³⁹

³³ Jacob 1:19

³⁴ Alma 42:22

³⁵ Alma 20:24

³⁶ Alma 44:8

³⁷ Mosiah 4:25

³⁸ Alma 27:10

³⁹ Jacob 2:30

Of the 13 times that the word otherwise appears in the text of the Book of Mormon, 9 of them are conjunctive adverbs, *and in every single case*, they follow this pattern:

“[intended outcome]; **otherwise**, [undesirable outcome].”

The big question here is why would the word otherwise be set in Jacob 2:30 as a conjunctive adverb *and mysteriously not follow the same grammatical rules as all the others*.

This means that the second half of Jacob 2:30 which states: “they shall hearken unto these things” must be referencing an *undesirable* outcome and not *another* desirable outcome such as: “until then, they should follow my commandment to have just one wife.”

What comes after “otherwise” must mean something undesirable; otherwise, the grammar makes no sense. (I will explain how later)

This inconsistency reveals one of many problems with the current interpretation of the verse.

Placing the current interpretation into the grammar rules for this verse suggests that the people are being ordered to follow an existing commandment (monogamy) as the undesirable outcome (as indicated by “otherwise”) for an explanation about a commandment God could hypothetically give but never does throughout their entire history?

That doesn’t make any sense, but it is what the traditional interpretation appears to imply here.

Now that we see that verse 30 is divided by a conjunctive adverb into two clauses, let’s look at what these clauses are and what they mean.

Clause 1: God’s intended outcome: to raise up a righteous branch

If we go back to the verse itself with this particular interpretation, that “raise up seed” involves “increas[ing] the number of children born into the gospel covenant” then some issues arise.

The first part of the verse begins with the words “If I will...” and ends with “...I will command my people.” Is the “if” conditional and implying that the Lord has *not yet* commanded his people to take “many wives and concubines” but that he could require it if he wanted to? That is what the official interpretation is suggesting.

If so, we could read the verse this way:

“If I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, increase the number of children born unto me in the gospel covenant, I will command my people to take many wives and concubines...”

If the Lord is speaking hypothetically here, this would mean that the Nephites have *not* been commanded to “raise up seed.”

There is just one big glaring problem with that interpretation: the Nephites have indeed been commanded to “raise up seed,” but, get this, under a very clear *commandment* to do so *monogamously*.

What does “raise up seed” mean?

If we go back to 1 Nephi chapter 7, we see the Lord literally *command* Lehi’s people to “raise up seed unto the Lord.”

...it came to pass that the Lord spake unto him again, saying that it was not meet for him, Lehi, that he should take his family into the wilderness alone; but that his sons should take daughters to wife, that they might **raise up seed** unto the Lord in the land of promise. And it came to pass that the Lord **commanded** him that I, Nephi, and my brethren, should again return unto the land of Jerusalem, and bring down Ishmael and his family into the wilderness.⁴⁰

Since Lehi’s party had been commanded to “raise up seed” using the exact wording of Jacob 2:30, then wouldn’t the men in Lehi’s party have had many wives and concubines?

If there was ever a time that increasing the number of children would be a need, it would certainly be among this small party of individuals seeking to form a new nation in another land. Wouldn’t this be a perfect time for the Lord to command his people to “increase the number of children born in the gospel covenant?”

⁴⁰ 1 Nephi 7:1-2

Apparently not, since Lehi was given a specific commandment that his people should “raise up seed” but monogamously. How do we know? Jacob mentions this commandment four times in his sermon:

1. Wherefore, my brethren, hear me, and hearken to the word of the Lord: For there shall **not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none;**⁴¹
2. And now behold, my brethren, ye know that these commandments were given to our father, Lehi; wherefore, ye have known them before; and ye have come unto great condemnation; for ye have done these things which ye ought not to have done.⁴²
3. [the Lamanites] have not forgotten the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto our father—that **they should have save it were one wife, and concubines they should have none**, and there should not be whoredoms committed among them.⁴³
4. And now, this commandment they observe to keep; wherefore, because of this observance, in keeping this commandment, the Lord God will not destroy them...⁴⁴

The Nephites were commanded to “raise up seed” but under a commandment that they should only have one wife and no concubines. We actually see a more detailed version of what the Lord means by “raise up seed” just before verse 30 in Jacob 2:25:

Wherefore, thus saith the Lord, I have led this people forth out of the land of Jerusalem, by the power of mine arm, that I might **raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph**. Wherefore, I the Lord God will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old.

Jacob 2:25 points out that the Nephites have already been commanded to “raise up seed” or “a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins (seed) of Joseph” by perpetuating Joseph’s posterity and establishing a righteous branch of it in a new promised land.

If taking many wives and concubines is a way for more children to be born under the covenant then why did God condemn it as a gross crime, a whoredom, and an abomination for the entire thousand-year history of the Nephites?

Even the one mention of it among the Jaredites was a king who did “not do that which was right in the sight of the Lord.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Jacob 2:27

⁴² Jacob 2:34

⁴³ Jacob 3:5

⁴⁴ Jacob 3:6

⁴⁵ Ether 10:5

If we replace the phrase “raise up seed” with the synonymous language in verse 25 the verse is clarified:

“For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, *raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph*, I will command my people...”

We need to look closer at the phrase “If I will,” because it is not being understood correctly. It is a rare phrasing that I only found in about three places in all of scripture. In John 21:22, we see the same phraseology that closely mirrors Jacob 2:30:

“Jesus saith unto him, **If I will** that [John] tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.”

Jesus wasn’t implying that he might *hypothetically* permit John to tarry at some point in the future; he had already decided that John would tarry.

The King James English is just a little confusing here so if we read the same verse in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and many others, you’ll see it rendered like this:

“Jesus said to him, “**If it is my will** that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!”

“If” can be a transitive verb where it is used as the sign of a condition, but it can also be used (as it is in Jacob 2:30 and John 21:22) to express something that is already true.

A hypothetical sentence starting with “if” could be: “If I’m going to make dessert, you had better eat your dinner.” The dessert hasn’t been created yet and won’t be unless dinner is finished.

You can also start a sentence with “if” to mention something already in progress and not hypothetical: “If you want your pet fish to stay alive, you have to keep feeding it.” The fish is already alive and you are simply trying to keep it that way.

The ‘if’ here is not referencing a future condition that may or may not happen, it is illustrating the conditions involved in his establishment of a people. If he is going to raise up this righteous branch, he will command them.

The word “will” is also being misunderstood. Webster’s 1828 Dictionary defines will one way as: “divine determination” which is the context that I believe is being used here.

It's also the dynamics between "if" and "will" that are being misunderstood here. The Lord isn't saying "If someday I want to..." He is saying, "If it is my *divine determination* to do this..." or "if I *will* this to be." Now, let's look at the verse again in that light.

"For if it is my will to [...] raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph, I will command my people..."

If he is going to raise up this righteous branch that he has already planted in the promised land, he must be the one to command them, *or else* there will be an undesirable outcome.

In the context of the rest of the sermon, the understanding of the first part of verse 30 is quite clear, let's compare these two verses by side and look at the three elements that I have marked off in blue, red, and green:

"For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, **raise up unto me** a **righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph**, I will command my people..."

"For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, **raise up seed unto me**, I will command my people..."⁴⁶

The point here is that while God would likely love more Nephite children born in the gospel covenant, *his vision is much larger than that*.

Inclusion in the gospel covenant isn't only attainable by birth, neither is birth within the covenant superior to adoption *into* the covenant. Consider the following words from Abinadi:

And now I say unto you, who shall declare his generation? Behold, I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin **he shall see his seed**. And now what say ye? **And who shall be his seed?** Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets, yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord—I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that **these are his seed**, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God.⁴⁷

The righteous branch that God is seeking to establish consists of those who heed the words of the holy prophets and receive the blessings that God has promised. The Book of Mormon speaks elsewhere about becoming the sons and daughters of God and being born again through Christ.

Does it still make sense to understand verse 30 as referencing a program where, at the command of God, men would need to impregnate many women to increase covenant birthrates especially when such a program is never commanded by God in the Book of Mormon or the Bible for that matter?

⁴⁶ Jacob 2:30

⁴⁷ Mosiah 15:10-11

To paint verse 30 in this fashion ignores a host of other evidence that there is *another* interpretation that actually fits the context of the sermon.

I propose that the first part of verse 30 is clear, if God seeks to raise up a righteous *branch* unto himself, he must also be in command of that branch.

It is *his* work, and *he* must be at the helm for his purposes to be successful, or else they are under the command of something or someone else.

“I will command my people”

What about the “I will command my people” line? We have already shown that the word “will” when used by God can indicate “divine determination.” Is he saying that he will give his people a future command? Or is he saying here that he is actively determining to take command of his people?

He is, after all, threatening them with imminent destruction.

Taking back command immediately would certainly be a big priority to prevent that from happening. The word *command* can represent future, past, or present states.

“I am going to command”, “They ignored the command”, or “I command you” all reference different points in time. There are a lot of references to the Lord and his commands in Jacob’s sermon:

- I will **command** my people⁴⁸
- we truly can **command** in the name of Jesus⁴⁹
- O then, why not able to **command** the earth, or the workmanship of his hands⁵⁰
- O that ye would listen unto the word of his **commands**⁵¹
- to be obedient unto the **commands** of God⁵²
- Wherefore, this people shall keep my **commandments**, saith the Lord of Hosts⁵³
- ye know that these **commandments** were given⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Jacob 2:30

⁴⁹ Jacob 4:6

⁵⁰ Jacob 4:9

⁵¹ Jacob 2:16

⁵² Jacob 4:5

⁵³ Jacob 2:29

⁵⁴ Jacob 3:34

- they have not forgotten the **commandment** of the Lord⁵⁵
- this commandment they observe to keep; wherefore, because of this observance, in keeping this **commandment**⁵⁶

In all of these examples, it is Jacob speaking, save one, verse 30, *that is the Lord* speaking.

He determines to *command* his people and for his people to keep his commandments. This isn't the only time the Lord has spoken like this, here are some other examples:

- For I **command** all men...⁵⁷
- I will also **command** the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.⁵⁸
- ...he shall do none other work, save the work which I shall **command** him...⁵⁹
- And at my command the heavens are opened and are shut; and at my word the earth shall shake; and at my **command** the inhabitants thereof shall pass away, even so as by fire.⁶⁰
- If I shut up heaven that there be no rain, or if I **command** the locusts to devour the land⁶¹

There are many, many more examples so it isn't unusual for the Lord to use that phraseology. The word "command" is a strikingly bold word to use and considering the seriousness of the sermon as a whole.

God is declaring an ultimatum that details a covenant curse that hangs over the people. He does this by invoking a strategically-placed title that is found around verse 30 in the highest concentration in the Book of Mormon: The Lord of Hosts.

“The Lord of Hosts”

We cannot ignore the placement and frequency of the title “Lord of Hosts” in Jacob’s sermon. When we see the Lord talking about how he determines to “command” his people, that sounds very militaristic and rightly so, because the title *Lord of Hosts* means:

“Jehovah or God when regarded as having the angelic forces at his command”
(lord of hosts. (n.d.).⁶²

⁵⁵ Jacob 4:5

⁵⁶ Jacob 4:6

⁵⁷ 2 Nephi 29:11

⁵⁸ 2 Nephi 15:6 quoting Isaiah

⁵⁹ 2 Nephi 3:8

⁶⁰ Ether 4:9

⁶¹ 2 Chron. 7:13

⁶² Collins English Dictionary – Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition)

In the Book of Mormon the title “Lord of Hosts” occurs 52 times and is found most frequently in verses that were actually from Isaiah and Malachi:

Quoting the Old Testament: 39

- Isaiah: 29
- Malachi: 10

In the writings of only three other Book of Mormon individuals do we see this phrase being used and only two of them are actually quoting the Lord himself.

Unique to Book of Mormon figures: 12

- Nephi: 1
- Nephi (quoting The Lord): 2
- **Jacob (quoting The Lord): 6**
- Samuel: 3

In Jacob 2 we find by far the most frequent use of this title in verses that are unique to Book of Mormon figures. All six occurrences in Jacob 2 are clustered together in the small span of just five verses and again, this is the Lord speaking and referring to *himself* as “the Lord of Hosts.”⁶³

Note that in between each set of three, we have the curse mentioned.

- saith the **Lord of Hosts**
 - saith the **Lord of Hosts**, or cursed be the land for their sakes.
 - saith the **Lord of Hosts**
 - I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things.
 - saith the **Lord of Hosts**
 - saith the **Lord of Hosts**. [...] I shall visit them with a sore curse, even unto destruction;
- saith the **Lord of Hosts**

⁶³ verses 27-33

As noted, the title Lord of Hosts implies that God is the commander of angelic forces.

The six times this title is invoked hearkens back to examples the Nephites might have been aware of from the Brass Plates such as when Elisha prayed for his servant's eyes to be opened and he saw, "the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha."⁶⁴

Isaiah is quoted heavily in the Book of Mormon and in Isaiah 37, King Hezekiah prays and addresses God as the "Lord of Hosts"⁶⁵ to obtain protection from the Assyrians. God then replies through Isaiah referring to himself as the "Lord of Hosts"⁶⁶ and promises his protection.

During the night, "Then the angel of Jehovah went out and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. And when men arose in the morning, there lay all their dead bodies!"⁶⁷

We see that destruction is indeed being threatened for this practice, in contrast to the Lamanites who will be protected because they keep the commandment to have only one wife and no concubines:

But, wo, wo, unto you that are not pure in heart, that are filthy this day before God; for except ye repent the land is cursed for your sakes; and the Lamanites [...] shall scourge you even unto destruction. Behold, the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you; for **they have not forgotten the commandment of the Lord**, which was given unto our father—that **they should have save it were one wife, and concubines they should have none**, and there should **not be whoredoms** committed among them. And now, **this** commandment they observe to keep; wherefore, because of this observance, in keeping this commandment, the Lord God will not destroy them, but will be merciful unto them; and one day they shall become a blessed people."⁶⁸

The obedience to this one particular commandment was granting the Lamanites a stay from destruction. Since the breaking of this commandment will lead to national destruction, the Lord is declaring war upon the Nephites.

Taking all this into account, the language "I will command my people" or "I *determine* to command my people" is not at all out of place and entirely appropriate given the gravity of the situation.

⁶⁴ 2 Kings 6:17

⁶⁵ Isaiah 37:16

⁶⁶ Isaiah 37:32

⁶⁷ Isaiah 37:36 Isaiah Institute Translation

⁶⁸ Jacob 3:3,5-6

There are only two other places in the Book of Mormon where the people take many wives and concubines *and they both suffered the wrath of the Lord of Hosts: King Noah*⁶⁹ and Riplakish.⁷⁰

This brings us to the second part of the verse, the other half of the clause.

Clause 2: The undesirable outcome: a sore curse, even unto destruction

From my research it appears that only the first clause of the verse is ever commented on in Church publications, the second half doesn't seem to ever be addressed.

I propose that the second clause of this verse contains the “undesirable outcome” which is a curse of destruction rather than just a recommendation for the Nephites ‘follow the standing monogamous instructions.’

As evidence, I would like to point out verse 29 which, when joined to verse 30 forms a parallelism (a connection of meaning through an echo of form). Note that both verses contain two clauses that follow the same pattern, a desirable outcome and then an undesirable outcome:

“Wherefore, **this people shall keep my commandments, saith the Lord of Hosts,**
or cursed be the land for their sakes.”⁷¹

“For if I will, **saith the Lord of Hosts,** raise up seed unto me, **I will command my people;**
otherwise they shall hearken unto these things.”⁷²

It may not seem clear how “cursed be the land” and “they shall hearken unto these things” are parallel ideas but that is what I will attempt to explain next.

⁶⁹ Mosiah 11:2-14

⁷⁰ Ether 10:5-8

⁷¹ Jacob 2:29

⁷² Jacob 2:30

“They shall hearken”

At first blush the words seem pretty innocuous, God is saying “they shall hearken unto these things” so one could assume that he’s simply telling them to do as he has instructed, after all, even I am making the case that the main issue is the people not obeying God’s commands.

The first clause of Jacob 2:30 states that if God seeks to raise up a righteous branch unto himself, he must be in command. In a previous verse, Jacob states:

“Wherefore, my brethren, **hear me**, and **hearken** to the word of the Lord...”⁷³

One could say that the phrase “hearken to the word of the Lord” matches up with the first clause of verse 30 which says, “I will command my people.” Both suggest cooperation between God and his people. As the word indicates an “if not” scenario, watch what happens when we place these words in the first clause and include the second:

“**hearken** to the word of the Lord; **otherwise**, they shall **hearken** unto these things.”

We can see that there are two outcomes being presented, the first being an outcome where the people are obedient and hearkening to the word of the Lord, and a second undesirable outcome where they shall hearken unto “these things” which we assume here *are not* the word of the Lord.

If they are not the word of the Lord, then what are “these things?”

What are “these things”

The Nephites were directly violating God’s commandment to have only one wife and no concubines. Note that in Jacob’s commentary in chapter 1 before his sermon he very specifically talks about *that practice itself* as being wicked:

“And now it came to pass that the people of Nephi, under the reign of the second king, began to grow hard in their hearts, and indulge themselves somewhat in **wicked practices**, such as like unto David of old desiring many wives and concubines, and also Solomon, his son.”⁷⁴

What was wicked was not the Nephites “acting without authorization,” but the *practice itself* of desiring many wives and concubines.⁷⁵

⁷³ Jacob 2:27

⁷⁴ Jacob 1:15

⁷⁵ Jacob 1:17

Curiously, the Church changed the chapter heading of Jacob 2 in 2013. Prior to that date, the chapter heading said:

“Jacob denounces the love of riches, pride, and unchastity—Men may seek riches to help their fellow men—**Jacob condemns the unauthorized practice of plural marriage**—The Lord delights in the chastity of women. About 544–421 B.C.”

Those who made the edits removed the portion that said “unauthorized practice” and replaced it with this:

“Jacob denounces the love of riches, pride, and unchastity—Men may seek riches to help their fellowmen—**The Lord commands that no man among the Nephites may have more than one wife**—The Lord delights in the chastity of women. About 544–421 B.C.”

While that doesn't prove anything, I thought it was interesting that they made the decision to alter just that part of the chapter heading.

In Jacob's sermon, the words “which thing”, “the things”, “this thing” or “these things” and the negatives, the curses, or the condemnations that follow are revealing. Consider the following verses of the sermon and what is being referred to as “things.”

“And now, my brethren, do ye suppose that God justifieth you in **this thing**? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. But he condemneth you, and if ye persist in **these things** his judgments must speedily come unto you.”⁷⁶

Do you not suppose that **such things** are abominable unto him who created all flesh?⁷⁷

“But the word of God burdens me because of your grosser crimes. For behold, thus saith the Lord: This people begin to wax in iniquity; they understand not the scriptures, for they seek to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms, because of **the things** which were written concerning David, and Solomon his son. Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, **which thing** was abominable before me, saith the Lord.”⁷⁸

“For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto **these things**. For behold, I, the Lord, have seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of my people in the land of Jerusalem, yea, and in all the lands of my people, because of the wickedness and abominations of their husbands.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Jacob 2:14

⁷⁷ Jacob 2:21

⁷⁸ Jacob 2:23-24

⁷⁹ Jacob 2:30-31

“And now behold, my brethren, ye know that these commandments were given to our father, Lehi; wherefore, ye have known them before; and ye have come unto great condemnation; for ye have done **these things** which ye ought not to have done.”⁸⁰

If in *every single instance*, the phrase “these things” is referring to the wicked practices of the Nephites, namely, desiring many wives and concubines.

Wouldn't it be consistent to understand that “these things” in verse 30 are referring to those same “wicked practices” as well? If not, why would there be an exception in this one verse?

I propose that hearkening unto “these things” and becoming cursed is the undesirable consequence of rejecting God's command. This means that word otherwise (as a conjunctive adverb) is now consistent with all of the other examples in the Book of Mormon.

After the death of Sherem, Jacob noted a reversal of circumstances when they chose not to hearken to the words of wicked men and turned back to God.

And it came to pass that peace and the love of God was restored again among the people; and they searched the scriptures, and **hearkened no more** to the words of this wicked man.⁸¹

The curse

In Jacob 2 verse 29 we see the curse directly and clearly mentioned:

“Wherefore, this people shall keep my commandments, saith the Lord of Hosts, or **cursed be the land for their sakes.**”⁸²

Verse 30 is re-emphasizing verse 29 about keeping the commandments but adds a portion about raising up seed, meaning the “righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph” mentioned in verse 25.

The Lord shows that the effects of the curse are already among them by following “otherwise they shall hearken unto these things” and continuing to explain what “these things” are beginning with a “For behold...” and invoking the curse once again:

...otherwise they shall hearken unto these things. (vs.30) **For behold**, I, the Lord, have seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of my people in the land of Jerusalem, yea, and in all the lands of my people, because of the wickedness and abominations of their husbands. And I will not suffer, saith the Lord of Hosts, that the cries of the fair daughters of this people, which I have led out of the land of Jerusalem,

⁸⁰ Jacob 2:34

⁸¹ Jacob 7:23

⁸² Jacob 2:29

shall come up unto me against the men of my people, saith the Lord of Hosts. For they shall not lead away captive the daughters of my people because of their tenderness, **save I shall visit them with a sore curse, even unto destruction**; for they shall not commit whoredoms, like unto them of old, saith the Lord of Hosts.⁸³

Jacob observed that the Nephite men were:

“[indulging] themselves somewhat in **wicked practices**, such as like unto David of old desiring many wives and concubines, and also Solomon, his son. Yea, and they also began to search much gold and silver, and began to be lifted up somewhat in pride.”⁸⁴

Jacob must have had access to the book of Deuteronomy via the brass plates because it says there that the kings of Israel shall:

Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, *that his heart turn not away*: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.⁸⁵

Multiplying wives and gold, and silver, exactly what they were told not to do. Yet this is exactly what the Nephite men were doing, as were King Noah and his priests, and Riplakish the Jaredite king.

Doing these wicked practices caused *their hearts to turn away*, but this was not the only damage to hearts; just look what happened to the hearts of their women and children:

Ye have **broken the hearts** of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them; and the **sobblings of their hearts** ascend up to God against you. And because of the strictness of the word of God, which cometh down against you, **many hearts died**, pierced with deep wounds.⁸⁶

It has already been shown that the words of Lehi were accepted and taught as the word of the Lord, and the phrase “they shall hearken unto these things” may also be referencing strikingly similar language found in the writing of Jacob’s brother Nephi.

...they have all gone astray save it be a few, who are the humble followers of Christ; nevertheless, they are led, that **in many instances they do err** because they are taught by the precepts of men.⁸⁷

In this verse, we find a situation very similar to Jacob’s people. They are falling into error because they are not hearkening to the Lord, but rather to the precepts of men.

⁸³ Jacob 2:31-33

⁸⁴ Jacob 1:15-16

⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 17:17

⁸⁶ Jacob 2:35

⁸⁷ 2 Nephi 28:14

There were Nephite men justifying taking many wives and concubines for themselves because of what was written concerning David and Solomon.

They were not doing this to help increase the population, the Lord saw their hearts and said: “they seek to **excuse** themselves in committing whoredoms...”⁸⁸

Compare that with this warning from Nephi’s words:

Yea, wo be unto him that **hearkeneth unto** the precepts of men...⁸⁹

In the same chapter, just a few verses later, we actually see the word “curse” being associated with those that *hearken* unto the precepts of men.

Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or **shall hearken** unto the precepts of men...⁹⁰

Now see how well this fits in with Jacob’s sermon by looking at verses 29 and 30 together. Notice how the *or* and the *otherwise* join two ideas:

Wherefore, this people shall keep my commandments, saith the Lord of Hosts, **or** cursed be the land for their sakes.⁹¹

For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; **otherwise** they shall hearken unto these things.⁹²

Mormon spoke more plainly about who you are really hearkening unto when you hearken unto the precepts of men:

O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil, and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men; yea, how quick to **hearken unto the words of the evil one**, and to set their hearts upon the vain things of the world!⁹³

You are really only hearkening unto the commands of God or the words of the evil one, there’s no middle ground.

⁸⁸ Jacob 2:23

⁸⁹ 2 Nephi 28:26

⁹⁰ 2 Nephi 28:31 2 Nephi 28:31

⁹¹ Jacob 2:29

⁹² Jacob 2:30

⁹³ Helaman 12:4

The Proposed Reinterpretation Compared

Let's take one more look at the version that represents the traditional understanding of Jacob 2:30:

“If I will increase the number of children born unto me in the gospel covenant, I will command my people to take many wives and concubines; in other respects, they shall hearken unto these standing instructions.”

That is the meaning that is being *read into* the verse but with the evidence provided in this essay from the context of Jacob's sermon, the Book of Mormon as a whole, and grammatical analysis, the Lord, in Jacob 2:30, is actually saying something closer to the effect of:

“For if it is my will to raise up unto me a righteous branch, I must command my people; otherwise, they shall hearken unto the words of the evil one.”

Especially today, when God is not the one in command of his people, consider all the *things* they choose to hearken unto instead.

I am not suggesting that there is any ill intent with the current interpretation. I cannot say why this current interpretation exists other than it has been passed down for so long that it has just become something that is casually accepted.

Meaning can be read into *anything*, a gesture, a shape, a symbol, etc. You can even do this with scripture, but what if the meaning is not supported by the grammar, word patterns, and internal context? What if instead, all of these things pointed to an entirely different meaning?

Ultimately, it is up to the reader to decide which interpretation best communicates the meaning of Jacob 2:30.

As I went through the process of trying to understand the meaning of this verse and it pulled me deeper into the message of Jacob, I discovered how important and timely his teachings are today.

The physical and virtual harems of the modern world

Is the problem of people having many wives and concubines widespread today? We may see it in practice among splinter groups in small populations but what if it was more widespread and in a different form?

What if there is a deeper problem stemming from the mindset that seeks after these things?

King Benjamin taught that: “The natural man is an enemy to God,” and he must be, “willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.”⁹⁴

This is why God must command his people, he must protect them from the natural man and his precepts that are, “carnal, sensual, and devilish, by nature”.⁹⁵ because “Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men”.⁹⁶

While the phrase “many wives and concubines” clearly refers to the practice of having more than one wife, the fact that concubines are always included raises some questions about how concubines are even relevant today.

Concubinage was practiced differently among the cultures of the world, and the concubine was always inferior to the wife. It was often entered into voluntarily but sometimes it involved sexual slavery.⁹⁷

The evils of concubinage may have a modern parallel not only in cohabitation and fornication but in the realm of pornography and masturbation. C.S. Lewis once wrote a letter where he spoke of a harem of imaginary brides and the influence this has on the mind of a man.

For me the real evil of masturbation would be that it takes an appetite which, in lawful use, leads the individual out of himself to complete (and correct) his own personality in that of another (and finally in children and even grandchildren) and turns it back: sends the man back into the prison of himself, there to keep **a harem of imaginary brides**. And this harem, once admitted, works against his ever getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attractions which no real woman can rival. Among those shadowy brides he is always adored, always the perfect lover: no demand is made on his unselfishness, no mortification ever imposed on his vanity. In the end, they become merely the medium through which he increasingly adores himself...⁹⁸

While Lewis makes a compelling case for how destructive a virtual harem of women can be to a man, imagine what an *actual* harem does not only to the man but the women and children involved as well.

In the creation of pornography today, many men and women submit themselves to being photographed and recorded to become a kind of virtual concubine to an innumerable host of men who crave their images to satisfy their lustful urges.

⁹⁴ Mosiah 3:19

⁹⁵ Alma 42:10

⁹⁶ 2 Nephi 28:31

⁹⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concubinage>

⁹⁸ Letter C. S. Lewis sent in 1956 to Keith Masson

Modern technology allows for the creation of virtual harems that make Solomon's actual harem pale in comparison.

This becomes acted out as well in actual sexual slavery and human trafficking out there in the world where men, women, and children are held captive while being bought and sold to satisfy the appetites of the natural man.

These ancient and modern horrors of human behavior prove once more that without God to command his people, "they shall hearken unto *these things*"⁹⁹ and bring curses upon every civilization that embraces them.

I'm reminded of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's words as he reflected on the unfathomable death and destruction he witnessed in his life and concluded:

But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: **Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.**

What is more, the events of the Russian Revolution can only be understood now, at the end of the century, against the background of what has since occurred in the rest of the world. What emerges here is a process of universal significance. And if I were called upon to identify briefly the principal trait of the entire twentieth century, here too, I would be unable to find anything more precise and pithy than to repeat once again: **Men have forgotten God.**¹⁰⁰

In Jacob's day, God pointed to the state of the women and children as the measure of how wicked the people have become.

One need only look to the women and children of today and compare them with those of the past.

Where the fruits of evil are present, a sore curse unto destruction isn't far behind unless we begin again to remember God.

⁹⁹ Jacob 2:30

¹⁰⁰ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Godlessness: the First Step to the Gulag". Templeton Prize Lecture, 10 May 1983 (London)