

Jacob 2:30 and the Exception Clause: A Contextual Reassessment

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Jacob 2:30 occupies a unique place within Book of Mormon studies. The conventional reading holds that at the center of a powerful condemnation sits an exception that would grant divine authorization for the very behavior being condemned. In other words, the standing rule is monogamy, but God may command the men of his people to take many wives and concubines for the purpose of raising up seed.

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 (Jacob 2:30).

This understanding of the verse has proven durable, appearing in various commentaries, curricula, and apologetic arguments over the years. When the verse is cited, the conventional reading of the verse is assumed as a given, while the resulting discussion moves right into implications. In 2013, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints revised the chapter heading of Jacob 2, replacing “Jacob condemns the unauthorized practice of plural marriage” with, “The Lord commands that no man among the Nephites may have more than one wife.”¹ This revision states the command without the same conditional implication that the earlier version

*Links in this paper are live at journalofmormonpolygamy.org.

¹The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Jacob 2,” *Book of Mormon*, [LINK](#). The previous version was from the 1981 revisions, which too had revised the previous 1920 version of the chapter heading, which said, “Plurality of wives forbidden because of iniquity.”

carried, which suggests that the conventional reading may be less fixed than long assumed.

The consequences of that conventional reading extend beyond the verse itself; for example, if God does authorize men to have many wives and concubines whenever he commands it, Jacob's condemnation becomes conditional, rather than moral. This qualifies not just the sermon's condemnation, but God's own anguish. The suffering that God himself articulates in verses 31–35—the cries, the mourning, the broken hearts, and children losing confidence in their fathers—is no longer an indictment, but an acceptable cost. The sermon draws a direct connection from committing whoredoms by having many wives and concubines to the captivity and suffering of the women, with no indication that divine authorization could have prevented it. The conventional reading bases the distinction between condemned and acceptable plurality on divine authorization; but in the sermon, the concept of divine authorization is foreign to the sermon's own account of the harm. Without any account or explanation indicating that divine authorization rectifies the harm caused by the condemned practice, one can conclude that the harm to women is perpetrated with or without divine authorization.

The conventional reading has served those with an investment in the historical practice of plural marriage, while the reading being proposed may serve those with an interest in dismissing it. Jacob's sermon warns that his people “understand not the scriptures,” which is a caution that should apply to readers on both sides of this question. The reading proposed in this paper considers the verse's grammar, lexical context, and placement within the sermon to reveal a declaration of divine authority over a covenant people rather than a conditional license to have many wives and concubines.

One of the things that can make verses in the Book of Mormon difficult to interpret is the book's writing style, which echoes King James English, full of archaic words and structures that have shifted in meaning over time. Even if one accepts the conventional reading, Jacob 2:30 is a very unusual verse of scripture. It features a unique combination of phrases: an archaic idiom (“if I will”), a rare verbal phrase (“raise up seed”), a conditional clause whose scope is disputed (“otherwise”), and a demonstrative object with

no clear antecedent (“these things”). When examined, each of these phrases is more complex than it first appears; when put together, the difficulty compounds. A casual reader may solve this problem by choosing a meaning that feels the most natural today, or by deferring to sources they consider authoritative. This paper explores a different approach, by systematically engaging each component of the verse and examining context and patterns found elsewhere in the Book of Mormon and in King James English usage, to determine what meanings are possible, and which is most likely. When this method is used, a new reading of the verse appears, one supported by context rather than treated as a proof-text put forth to serve a conclusion decided elsewhere.

The Conventional Interpretation

The conventional reading of Jacob 2:30 presents the verse as articulating an exception to the commandment in verse 27 to have only one wife and no concubines. In this reading of the verse, God may suspend that commandment and instead command the men of his people to “raise up seed,” which—the interpretation goes—would mean having many wives and concubines, to allow more children to be born within the covenant. This interpretation can be found in contemporary institutional and scholarly discussions of plural marriage alike. The LDS Church’s *Gospel Topics* essay on plural marriage states:

Latter-day Saints do not understand all of God’s purposes in instituting, through His prophets, the practice of plural marriage. 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].”²

The Mormon apologetics organization FAIR (Faithful Answers, Informed Response) agrees:

Those who cite this as a condemnation of plural marriage generally refrain from citing the very next verse:

²The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Plural Marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, 2016, [LINK](#).

“30 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. (Jacob 2:30). The Book of Mormon makes it clear that the Lord may, under some circumstances, command the practice of plural marriage.³

Many others also defend the conventional interpretation; for example:

[T]he Book of Mormon prophet Jacob taught that monogamy was God’s rule generally but that on occasion, when God would “raise up seed” unto himself, he would command his people to practice some form of plural marriage (Jacob 2:30).⁴

It is easy to see why this reading feels plausible and has been favored over time. It is a single, short verse in the Book of Mormon that apparently provides doctrinal support for the validity and perhaps the necessity of the practice of plural marriage in Latter-day Saint history. There are at least three likely reasons why verse 30 has been interpreted to appear as if it articulates an exception rather than sustaining the categorical prohibition of the sermon.

First, the clause “if I will . . . raise up seed unto me” is thought to describe the possibility of increasing posterity by a people committed to following God, or within the covenant, by men having many wives and concubines. Second, the clause “I will command my people” suggests that this should only happen under a subsequent divine command. Third, readers who are familiar with the Bible are already familiar with trusted figures who themselves had many wives and/or concubines that appear to be divinely sanctioned or, at least, not condemned. The conventional reading has a kind of theological symmetry. It not only allows Jacob to condemn the people for authorizing themselves to have many wives and concubines, but it also upholds God’s sovereign authority to

³FAIR, “Plural Marriage in the Book of Mormon,” *FAIR Answers*, [LINK](#).

⁴Andrew H. Hedges, “Eternal Marriage and Plural Marriage,” in *Raising the Standard of Truth: Exploring the History and Teachings of the Early Restoration*, ed. Scott C. Esplin (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2020), 309–22, [LINK](#).

command his people according to his will. Taken together, these considerations can explain why the conventional interpretation has been accepted among prudent readers and theologians alike. It appears to have arisen from a desire to fill the gap between broader scriptural passages and practices that have been viewed as paradoxical.

The remainder of this paper argues that the conventional reading inserts a meaning the text does not require, one that misses a more coherent contextual reading that is available within the Book of Mormon's own pages. The conventional reading of Jacob 2:30 as an "exception clause" to monogamous marriage where divinely sanctioned polygamy is commanded has not gone entirely unexamined. A few writers have assessed the subject directly, and this paper will also explore their claims and provide an analysis of detected vulnerabilities.

To guard against a misunderstanding of the stakes, it is important to clarify that this paper should not be seen as an attempt to undermine the historical practice of plural marriage in the LDS Church. Neither the legitimacy of the historical practice of plural marriage, nor its foundations, necessarily depend upon how Jacob 2:30 is read. Brian Hales, a defender of that history, has observed that Joseph Smith never cited this verse to justify the restoration of polygamy.⁵ The meaning of verse 30 can therefore be pursued as a textual question, with any historical stakes set to one side. The question at hand is what this verse, in its own grammatical and contextual context, most plausibly says.

The Literary and Rhetorical Context of Jacob 2–3

Any interpretation of Jacob 2:30 must account for the placement of the verse within one of the Book of Mormon's most intense and rhetorically sustained condemnations. The sermon, which spans two chapters, addresses a community of Nephites that have begun to "indulge themselves somewhat in wicked practices, such as...desiring many wives and concubines," where those desiring such cite the examples of David and Solomon as a scriptural

⁵Brian C. Hales, personal communication to Jeff Lindsay, March 2023, and follow-up communication, June 7, 2023, both quoted in Jeff Lindsay, "What Does Jacob 2:30 Say About Polygamy? Is the Church's Traditional Interpretation Wrong?" *Arise from the Dust*, June 7, 2023, [LINK](#).

precedent that justifies the practice (Jacob 1:15; 2:23). Jacob and the Lord describe these actions as “gross crimes,” “whoredoms,” “lasciviousness,” “filthiness,” and “abominations” (Jacob 2:22–28). The Lord is quoted as being a witness to the “sorrow” and hearing the “mourning,” the “cries” and the “sobblings” of the women affected (Jacob 2:31–35).

Throughout the text, there is no suggestion that the described practices are acceptable or could be under certain conditions. The deep and abiding harm recorded in verses 31–35, such as broken hearts, the lost confidence of children, and hearts “pierced with deep wounds,” is not attributed to the absence of divine authorization, but to the practices themselves. Any reading of verse 30 that suggests otherwise has a significant contextual burden in the sermon alone to overcome. Jacob’s sermon reveals that the condemnation for having many wives and concubines was not a unique restriction intended only for the Nephites. The sermon chastises the Israelite kings David and Solomon, along with the people that the Nephites had fled from in the land of Jerusalem; after all, verse 31 makes clear that the Lord had seen the sorrow and mourning of the women “in the land of Jerusalem, . . . and in all the lands of [his] people, because of the wickedness and abominations of their husbands” (Jacob 2:31). It is particularly important to notice the referenced language, “in all the lands of my people,” as demonstrating that the Lord in Jacob’s sermon is concerned about these practices everywhere. The Book of Mormon text outside of Jacob’s sermon reinforces, rather than relieves, this burden. References to men having many wives and concubines appear in at least two other places: Riplakish the Jaredite and King Noah and his priests, who are also condemned for having many wives and concubines (Mosiah 11:2–4), with no suggestion that their conduct enjoyed divine sanction.

The example of Riplakish is worth further consideration. He is described as one who “did not do that which was right in the sight of the Lord, for he had many wives and concubines” (Ether 10:5). The Jaredite civilization, according to the text, broke away from the Near East around the time of the tower of Babel, which was earlier than, and thus separated from, the Abrahamic and Mosaic traditions and covenants. The condemnation of Riplakish’s conduct cannot be situated within the later covenantal structures found in the Old Testament or any future covenantal structures

that may have originated with Lehi and his posterity. Hence, the narrative of the Book of Mormon treats the act of having many wives and concubines as corrupting, independent of any Israelite legal framework. The text of the Book of Mormon does not include instances of men having many wives and concubines as divinely commanded or faithfully implemented. The conventional reading of Jacob 2:30 lacks any corresponding examples elsewhere in the record. It is therefore puzzling why the sermon introduces such an anomalous exception that undercuts Jacob's consistent condemnation of, and his own empathetic rejection of, the practice.

The Connectives “Wherefore” and “For” in Verses 23–33

If Jacob 2:30 introduces an exception to the commandment that was just given, there should be an identifiable shift in how the sermon links its clauses together. The conventional reading locates that shift at “otherwise,” but it is worth asking whether the connective that opens the verse, “for,” carries any of that weight on its own. Before turning to the individual clauses of verse 30, this paper will examine how the sermon connects ideas together as a whole. From verses 23 to 33, Jacob's account of the Lord's words proceeds through a tight, repeated pattern of two important words: “wherefore” and “for,” as follows:

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 (Jacob 2:23; emphasis added).

Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord. *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 (Jacob 2:24–25; emphasis added).

Wherefore, I the Lord God will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old (Jacob 2:26; emphasis added).

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; (Jacob 2:27; emphasis added).

For I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women. And whoredoms are an abomination before me; thus saith the Lord of Hosts (Jacob 2:28; emphasis added).

Wherefore, this people shall keep my commandments, saith the Lord of Hosts, or cursed be the land for their sakes (Jacob 2:29; emphasis added).

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 (Jacob 2:30; emphasis added).

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 (Jacob 2:31; emphasis added).

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, 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 (Jacob 2:32–33; emphasis added).

“Wherefore” draws a conclusion from what precedes, and “for” grounds or explains what precedes. Verse 23 opens clauses with “for,” twice, grounding Jacob’s statement that the word of God burdens him because of the people’s grosser crimes. Verse 25 opens with a “wherefore,” drawing the Lord’s stated purpose from the condemnation of David and Solomon in verse 24. Verse 26 opens with “wherefore” again. Verse 27 opens with “wherefore” and then, mid-verse, with “for,” which specifies what the command that was just announced consists of. Verse 28 opens with “for,” explaining why the command exists. Verse 29 opens with “wherefore,” drawing the consequence. Verse 30 opens with “for,” as do verses 31 and 33.

Examining this entire stretch, every “wherefore” draws a conclusion and every “for” supplies a ground or explanation; but none of them turns against what came before it. The word “but” does that work elsewhere in the chapter; and within this stretch of verses, “but” shows up just once, at the opening of verse 23, which is where Jacob shifts from the subject of pride to “a grosser crime.”⁶ Thus, the sermon appears to mark its pivots when it intends a pivot. No such marker shows up at verse 30. Verse 30’s opening word is “for,” the same word that opens verses 27, 28, 31, and 33; and in every one of those cases, it grounds or explains what has just been said rather than turning against it. Some conventional readings assume that “for” does the work that “but” does elsewhere in the chapter, which indeed would seem to create a genuine exception to what has just been commanded, yet the text gives no signal that an exception is coming. Instead of the opening word functioning as though it were the “but” the sermon does not use, the “for” carries the identical explanatory chain running from verses 23 to 33.⁷

Looking at the pattern in a careful, detailed manner shows clarity. “For” not only begins verse 30, but it’s the same word that opens verses 27 and 28 (in both cases, grounding the command just given instead of qualifying or excepting it): verse 27’s “for”

⁶See verses 10 and 14 for where the word “but” is used elsewhere in the chapter in contrast to what came before it, with verse 10 saying that Jacob would like to console and heal their wounds and feast upon the pleasing word of God, *but*, he must tell them concerning their wickedness; and verse 14 saying that God does not justify the people; *but* instead, he condemns them.

⁷Even verses 34 and 35 are still part of the same explanatory chain. Verse 34 has an “And” and then a “wherefore” and refers to “these things which ye ought not to have done.” Verse 30 in the middle of that chain seems to stand out as a “sore thumb” if it is meant to be an exception.

specifies what hearkening to the Lord requires, and verse 28's "for" explains why. Verse 30 continues that pattern rather than breaking it, and nothing signals a shift from explanation to exception at this critical point in the sermon. This does not in itself resolve the question of how verse 30 functions, and it would be incorrect to claim that it does. The conventional reading places its key point at "otherwise." A reader who holds that conventional view could reasonably argue that demonstrating that "for" behaves consistently does not necessarily undermine their primary claim. While showing this pattern serves a narrower purpose than claiming to dismantle the entire conventional argument, it is still worth considering: verse 30 begins in exactly the same way as the surrounding verses, with a word that serves to ground rather than interrupt. The question of whether "otherwise" overcomes that opening and causes the interruption that "for" never does, will be addressed later in the paper.

Reading "If I Will" and "I Will" as Resolve Rather Than Contingency

The beginning of Jacob 2:30 contains two clauses that use the word "will." At a glance, the first clause, "if I will...raise up seed unto me," states the Lord's aim, a desired outcome; the second clause, "I will command my people," states the settled means by which that aim, whenever realized, will be pursued. In isolation, "if I will...raise up seed unto me" reads as ordinary conditional English, and the conventional reading's premise that it introduces an actual contingency is not unreasonable. The word "if" usually describes a condition that may or may not be met, and, on the surface, there is not anything in the phrase's grammar alone that would rule out that reading. However, an alternative, non-conditional reading of the clause is not only possible, but likely, upon examination of scriptural, lexical and textual context.

Scripture uses "if I will" at least twice elsewhere without functioning as an open contingency, and Jacob 2:30's own first clause may work the same way. In 3 Nephi 24:10, there is a direct quotation of Malachi, where the Lord says:

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in my house; and prove me now herewith,

saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it (3 Nephi 24:10 quoting Malachi 3:10).

Here, “if I will not” is not a hypothetical that the Lord is entertaining; it is a challenge for the people to test what he has already resolved to do, and it is framed under the same militaristic title, “The Lord of Hosts,”⁸ that is present in Jacob 2:30. The other scriptural reference can be found in John 21:22, where Jesus says of John, his beloved disciple, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?” This is not a hypothetical based upon a future contingency, either; the phrase is instead being used to express something more like, “If I determine that he will tarry till I come, . . .” Thus, the King James Version’s rendering of “if I will” as a settled intention—using “if”—is a recognized feature of the idiom.

A similar construction is found in Jacob’s own book, where Jacob gives a full account of the allegory of Zenos, an earlier prophet whose writings were available on the brass plates, in which the Lord of the vineyard says, “I will graft them whithersoever I will” (Jacob 5:8). In this statement, the word “will” occurs twice within the same sentence, and the second use refers to the speaker’s own personal determination rather than being conditional. It lacks the conditional “if” found in Jacob 2:30, but the underlying usage matches 3 Nephi 24:10 and John 21:22, where the Lord uses “will” to indicate divine determination, not contingency. Five verses later, in the very same allegory, it says, “And these will I place in the nethermost part of my vineyard, whithersoever I will, it mattereth not unto thee” (Jacob 5:13). This is the identical “whithersoever I will” construction repeated by the same speaker. The very next verse reinforces the same idea, but in different words: the Lord of the vineyard hides the branches “according to his will and pleasure”

⁸The Hebrew term *Yahweh Sabaoth* translates to “The Lord of Hosts” or “The Lord of Armies.” Trygve Mettinger outlines *Yahweh Sabaoth*’s warrior character in relation to cosmic and national enemies (148–51) and explains how that same title is invoked when the Lord directs Assyria against Jerusalem itself in judgment (139–41). A similar posture appears in Jacob’s sermon where the Lord of Hosts threatens the Nephites with “a sore curse, even unto destruction” (Jacob 2:33) for their own covenant unfaithfulness. Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names*, trans. Frederick H. Cryer (Fortress Press, 1988), 138–43, accessed via Internet Archive, [LINK](#).

(Jacob 5:14), describing the action as governed by nothing beyond his own discretion. The same “will and pleasure” phrase is also found in Mosiah 8:33 where Alma tells Limhi’s people that the Lord “will, according to his own will and pleasure, deliver you out of bondage,” describing a future divine act as governed in the same kind of unconditional discretion. And while it is not a grammatical twin because it lacks the “if,” Helaman 13:19 is also notable because it features the same “I will” construction and its clause begins with “For” and ends with “unto me” just like Jacob 2:30: “For I will, saith the Lord, that they shall hide up their treasures unto me.” The Jacob 5 instances are important because Jacob chose to preserve and transmit this construction in the same book, only two chapters away from his own sermon in chapters 2 and 3. Helaman 13:19 and Mosiah 8:33 are notable for a different reason: they show the same pattern recurring independently, across the record in prophets and time frames unconnected to Jacob, which suggests that the construction is not an outlier unique to Jacob’s record but part of a broader scriptural form of speech.

These scriptural parallels alone do not confirm the grammatical usage, or meaning, of “if I will” in Jacob 2:30, but they do show a potential alternative to the conventional reading. Webster’s 1828 Dictionary, which is roughly contemporaneous with the Book of Mormon’s translation, defines “will” in several ways that apply to this verse. As a noun, “will” can mean “choice; determination,” “command; direction,” or “divine determination; moral purpose or counsel.” In the last definition, Webster uses the Lord’s Prayer to illustrate: “Thy will be done.” As a transitive verb, Webster defines “will” as “to decide in the mind that something shall be done or forborne, implying power to carry the purpose into effect,” adding: “In this manner God wills whatever comes to pass.”⁹ As the example that Webster goes to first, it cannot be considered to be a special case. This demonstrates that when “if I will” is used as the voice of the Lord in scripture, it can carry assertive force. When “the Lord” is the subject, “will” used as a noun and “will” used as a transitive verb appears to be the same: whether referring to God’s will, or whether referring to God willing something, it will be done. In this sense, “if I will . . . raise up seed unto me” reads

⁹Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “will,” accessed at [LINK](#).

as an assertion of settled purpose instead of as an open question the Lord has yet to resolve: “if I determine to raise up seed unto me”—and the Lord has already determined that that is what he is doing. The Webster’s entry goes further and addresses this exact grammatical form. Under “will” as an auxiliary verb marking future tense, Webster says its force depends on emphasis: “‘I will go,’ is a present promise to go; and with an emphasis on ‘will,’ it expresses determination.”¹⁰ Applied to Jacob 2:30, the emphasis in the first clause appears to be on “will.” The break in the sentence puts the emphasis on “will”: “For if I *will*, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me . . .”

This understanding of the language in the “will” clauses of Jacob 2:30 is further clarified by looking at the definition of “if” in Webster’s 1828 dictionary. Here it means “grant, allow, admit, cause to be.” The dictionary categorizes “if” as a transitive verb without a specified nominative and indicates that it was formerly followed by the substitute pronoun “that.” The entry then uses the example of “if that John shall arrive in season, I will send him a message.” It then states that since the word “that” is now omitted, “the subsequent part of the sentence, proposition or affirmation may be considered as the object of the verb.”¹¹ Then Webster’s says:

Give John shall arrive; grant, suppose, admit that he shall arrive, I will send him with a message. The sense of *if* or give, in this use, is grant, admit, cause to be, let the fact be, let the thing take place. *if* then is equivalent to grant, allow admit. ‘If thou wilt, thou canst make me whole,’ that is, thou canst make me whole, give the fact, that thou wilt.”¹²

Thus, the 1828 definition of “if” seems to delineate the first clause in Jacob 2:30 as a given, and the second clause, consequently, also as a given, and not as a future contingency dependent upon the condition of the first clause being met. It looks like it would read as follows: “For let it be, saith the Lord of Hosts, that I will raise up seed unto me, I will [therefore] command my people” or, “Given

¹⁰Webster, *An American Dictionary*, s.v. “will.”

¹¹Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “if,” accessed at [LINK](#).

¹²Webster, *An American Dictionary*, s.v. “if.”

that I, the Lord of Hosts, will raise up seed unto me, I will command my people.”

Exactly where the emphasis lies in the second clause of verse 30, “I will command my people,” is less clear and exact. The conventional reading puts the emphasis on “will,” suggesting a potential future state where the Lord may command men to have many wives and concubines to raise up seed, and it can be read this way:

“For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts [increase the number of children born under the covenant], I *will* command my people [to have many wives and concubines]. ”

In the conventional reading, the emphasis on “will” assumes a future command. However, there are alternative ways of seeing the verse, with and without the emphasis on “will,” that would be understood as expressing determination and resolve, rather than expressing a future command. For example, even if the clause is seen as emphasizing “will”: “I *will* command my people,” this emphasis doesn’t have to be understood as something that will be carried out in the future. The fact that the second clause ends abruptly after “people” especially seems to signal that the command has already been made. Thus, when the emphasis is on “will,” the second clause can be read as, “I am determined to command my people,” again, signaling a settled resolve rather than a promise waiting on some unstated condition. With no “if” before the “I will” in the second clause, it seems that the command itself, or purpose, is fixed.

Under this possibility, these first two clauses of Jacob 2:30 could be compared to an army commander saying (after having scolded his soldiers for not following orders, telling them their lives are at stake, and insisting that they must follow his orders exactly): “For, if I will...bring this army home alive, I *will* command my soldiers [to obey the orders that I’ve given with exactness].” In this example, the commander is expressing determination and settled resolve to bring his soldiers home safely; therefore, he will determinedly make sure that his soldiers obey his already given orders. The language is not expressing a future contingency.

Any reading of the clause with an emphasis on “will,” however, requires an inserted object, since “I will command my people” does not say what gets commanded. Although such emphasis can still reflect determination and resolve, it appears even more likely that

the emphasis in the second clause of Jacob 2:30 is on the word “I”: If I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, *I* will command my people.” This especially looks to be a likely reading, given that the phrase ends right after people—there is no object complement for a command. In verse 27, the Lord has just commanded His people, and in verse 30, the Lord seems to be declaring that *He* determinedly commands his people in order to raise up a righteous seed.

Under this reading, this asserts the Lord’s exclusive authority to command, and the content of the command is not the point. The overarching context of the sermon depicts a people that have shifted from hearkening to the Lord’s commandments to their own prerogatives. Because this course of action is leading them to destruction, the Lord is seeking to reassert his command over his people. As “the Lord of Hosts,” he makes a series of declarations around verse 30 where the emphasis is on the “I.”

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 (Jacob 2:25; emphasis added).

I the Lord God will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old (Jacob 2:26; emphasis added).

I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women (Jacob 2:28; emphasis added).¹³

I, the Lord, have seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of my people (Jacob 2:31; emphasis added).

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, shall come up unto me

¹³This instance carries the same stress on “I” despite functioning differently, as a stated disposition rather than an act of command.

against the men of my people (Jacob 2:32; emphasis added).

I shall visit them with a sore curse, even unto destruction (Jacob 2:33; emphasis added).

The pattern of emphasis does not stop with the Lord's own statements. Right after the series of "I" statements in verses 25 to 33, the sermon turns directly to the listeners: "*ye* have known them before," "*ye* have come unto great condemnation," "*ye* have done these things which *ye* ought not to have done" (Jacob 2:34; emphasis added), "*ye* have done greater iniquities than the Lamanites," "Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives" (Jacob 2:35; emphasis added). The close group of first-person assertions is replaced by a similarly dense set of second-person accusations. This pairing illustrates the sermon's structure: the Lord first establishes his exclusive authority to command, then turns to charge the people who ignored it.

That same emphasis, carried into verse 30's second clause, would read "*I* [and no other] will command my people." This reading needs nothing supplied from outside the verse because its claim is about *who* commands, not *what* is commanded. It is also not needed because he just commanded his people to "have save it be one wife" and no concubines in verse 27. This new perspective on "if I will," and "I will," can be illustrated by going back to the army commander analogy. In this example, an army commander who has just learned that his soldiers set aside his orders in favor of someone else's, putting their lives on the line as a result, calls them together and says: "If I will accomplish this mission, *I* [and no other] will command this army." Instead of promising a future outcome, the commander is asserting exclusive authority over his troops, right now, regardless of what happens next in the field. Placing the emphasis on the "I" also works well with how the rest of the verse is constructed, especially with the "otherwise" that follows: "I [and no other] will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things." As the sole commander of his people, the Lord uses "otherwise" to introduce the consequence that results when the Lord's command is defied, a consequence explained later in this paper.

Read together, these clauses do not support the certainty that the conventional reading assumes. The first clause acts as a settled determination rather than an open contingency, a feature seen in Malachi, in John, and in Jacob's own account of the vineyard allegory, and confirmed by Webster's own definitions of "if" and "will." Whether the second clause's emphasis is on "will" as fixed resolve or on "I" as exclusive authority, the sermon's surrounding context indicates that the Lord is asserting his authority to command, rather than indicating that he might make a future command. Neither clause suggests that polygamy is involved in any way. Both clauses state the Lord's own determination and his own exclusive claim of authority over his people, a foundation very different from the one the conventional reading assumes.

Despite these compelling arguments, even if one still believes that "if I will...raise up seed unto me" states a genuine future contingency, and "I will command my people" names a resulting future command, the verse still never says what the command will be. Nothing specifies a command to have many wives and concubines. That content would have to be imported from outside the sentence, along with an assumption that "raise up seed" equates to "having many wives," which contention will be challenged in the following section. The conventional reading needs two things to go its way: first, "if" has to be a real contingency, and second, polygamy has to fill a gap the verse leaves empty. Though it appears that the first has failed, the alternative reading of the verse could survive conceding the first, but the conventional reading still fails on the second.

The Covenantal Meaning of "raise up seed"

The passage in Genesis 38:8 uses the phrase "raise up seed" when explaining a practice referred to as "levirate marriage," a custom where a man marries his deceased brother's widow to preserve his brother's lineage if the brother died without having children. This passage is mentioned in Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the New Testament by Sadducees who are questioning Jesus (Matthew 22:24, Mark 12:19, Luke 20:28). Because a man could technically be married to two living women at once under levirate marriage, it has led some readers to the conclusion that God

sanctions plural marriage. But the purpose of this law was not to grant men the liberty to multiply wives unto themselves; it was designed to resolve a specific tragic circumstance. When a brother died before he and his wife were able to have a child, it became the obligation of a living brother, rather than a stranger, to marry the widow and act as proxy for his deceased brother in providing the couple with posterity. The firstborn child of that engagement would be considered the deceased brother's child and his rightful successor.¹⁴ This precedent does not introduce a polygamous connotation into "raise up seed"; it introduces a covenantal one. The covenant line is preserved by obedience to specific legal and familial obligations of a covenant people; it is not about a man seeking to increase his personal household by multiplying wives unto himself. This is the same covenantal meaning that governs how the phrase is used in the Book of Mormon.

In the only published peer-reviewed analysis to date of the meaning of Jacob 2:30, Brian J. Baird focuses on the levirate marriage provisions in the Law of Moses, and argues that levirate marriage was a well-established institution that Lehi's family would have been familiar with since they lived the Law of Moses.¹⁵ Therefore, according to Baird, the allowance given in verse 30 can be best understood as a provision for the levirate obligation to raise up an heir for a deceased brother. In this context, "raise up seed" carries a specific biblical meaning: the preservation of a deceased man's bloodline, rather than a mandate for men to have many wives and concubines.

Baird's analysis is valuable, and the present argument agrees with a substantial part of it. The phrase "raise up seed" has a legitimate connection to levirate obligations, which separates it from the practice condemned in Jacob's sermon. Each reading, however, diverges on what Jacob 2:30 does with that meaning. Baird finds

¹⁴"If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her. And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel" (Deut. 25:5-6). See Albert Barnes, "Deuteronomy 25:5," in *Notes on the Old Testament: Deuteronomy* (New York: Leavitt, Trow, & Co., 1847), 310–11, accessed at [LINK](#).

¹⁵Brian J. Baird, "Understanding Jacob's Teachings about Plural Marriage from a Law of Moses Context," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 227–37, [LINK](#).

within the verse a narrow, levirate-shaped door through which a form of polygamy might find allowance under divine command. The reading proposed here finds no such door; rather, the covenantal meaning of “raise up seed” is established in 1 Nephi 7:1-2 and referenced in the sermon itself in verse 25. Each instance points to the establishment of a righteous covenant people under the Lord’s direct command. Baird preserves the exception and defines its scope, while the present reading finds no exception to define.

Baird clarified his thesis in a response to a reader’s question about whether the monogamy commandment might have overruled levirate practice among the Nephites. He suggests that general plural marriage can be restricted while levirate marriage remains a distinct issue that Jacob would have to address separately. That distinction, however, is not present in the text, and the commandment as stated is unqualified: “there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none” (Jacob 2:27), a rule Baird attributes to a specific commandment given to Lehi (Jacob 3:5) rather than any provision in the Law of Moses. No levirate exception is stated or implied in the sermon, which suggests that whatever standing levirate marriage had under the Law of Moses generally, it was overruled by the commandment given to Lehi.

The levirate reading and the covenantal reading proposed here can be distinguished by identifying the beneficiary in each case. In the biblical levirate formula, the beneficiary of the seed being raised up is the deceased brother, not his living brother. Genesis 38:8 has Judah instruct Onan to “raise up seed to thy brother.” Matthew 22:24, quoting the law, reads, “his brother shall marry his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother.” Deuteronomy 25:5-6 does not use the phrase “raise up seed,” but names the same beneficiary: the firstborn son “shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead.” In every case, the seed belongs to the deceased brother.¹⁶

Jacob 2:30 does not use this formula. The beneficiary named is not a deceased brother, but the Lord himself: “raise up seed unto me.” A defender of that reading might argue the beneficiary shifts from kinsman to God in Nephite adaptation, but the text

¹⁶This insight regarding the distinction between raising up seed unto a brother and raising up seed unto the Lord was gained with the assistance of Gary Arnell’s research files.

never signals such a shift. The only other occurrence of this exact construction, “raise up seed unto [divine beneficiary]” is 1 Nephi 7:1, where Lehi literally receives a divine command to “raise up seed” through monogamous marriage:

[I]t 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 (1 Nephi 7:1-2; each son of Lehi being paired with one daughter of Ishmael).

This phrase indeed invites a biological reading, as “seed” often refers to physical offspring in scripture. The command to Lehi to “raise up seed” includes the instruction to “take daughters to wife,” not to multiply wives or involve concubines in the process. To be commanded to “raise up seed unto the Lord” in this inaugural setting is to raise up a commandment-keeping posterity—a covenant people under the direct command of the Lord. This is the first time the phrase appears in the text, and its meaning here is controlled by monogamous instruction given to this same founding party. It would seem reasonable to expect that under the conventional reading, this would be a perfect opportunity for God to increase his covenant people by having Lehi bring not just Ishmael’s daughters, but perhaps many other women to serve as wives and concubines for his sons. What happens instead is monogamous marriage, which Jacob says was the pattern explicitly commanded by the Lord (Jacob 2:27, 34; 3:5–6). “Raise up seed” in 1 Nephi 7 imposes strict monogamous constraints, even in circumstances that would seem to favor the kind of demographic expansion the conventional interpretation would be a good fit for. The reappearance of the phrase in Jacob 2:30 therefore requires evidence that its semantic meaning has shifted from what the text has already established, in the monogamous context of 1 Nephi 7, to one involving multiple wives and concubines, and no such evidence exists.

The argument proposed here is further reinforced by the sermon’s internal gloss on what it means for the Lord to “raise up seed”:

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 (Jacob 2:25).

The verse substitutes “a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph” for the phrase’s shorthand form. The substitution specifies that the Lord’s concern is with a covenant people defined by righteousness and faithfulness, not merely by biological generation via many wives and concubines.¹⁷ Abinadi’s later exposition in Mosiah 15:10–11 makes the same point: those who are God’s “seed” are defined not just through descent but by hearkening to the words of the prophets and looking forward to the redemption of Christ. If verse 30 is read in light of verse 25, the opening clause, “if I will . . . raise up seed unto me,” points to the establishment of a righteous people who hearken to the Lord’s command, rather than a particular reproductive strategy. Furthermore, verses 26 and 27 that follow verse 25 clearly suggest that, in this sermon, practicing monogamy is a central requirement for a people to be considered the Lord’s seed, or a righteous branch.

This way of interpreting the text also meets another objection. Someone supporting the conventional reading might say that verse 30 sets out a general principle: self-initiated plurality is condemned, but divinely ordered plurality will always remain a possibility if the Lord decides to command it. This principle by itself appears internally consistent; however, its apparent consistency is found lacking when looking at the surrounding context. Since the verse itself does not say what a future divine command would allow, the content of what might be commanded must be obtained from somewhere else in the text. The only examples that the surrounding passages provide are the cases of David and Solomon, those whom the men in Jacob’s time referred to in order to “excuse themselves in committing whoredoms” (Jacob 2:23), which the Lord called

¹⁷Even if “raise up seed” did refer purely to the biological generation of many children, research has shown that polygamy does not in fact increase the total number of children: while each polygamous male may have more seed, fewer children per female are born. A full treatment of this line of research is outside of the scope of this paper. See Jacob A. Moorad, Daniel E. L. Promislow, Ken R. Smith, and Michael J. Wade, “Mating System Change Reduces the Strength of Sexual Selection in an American Frontier Population of the 19th Century,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 32, no. 2 (2011): 147–155, [LINK](#).

“abominable” (Jacob 2:24). It is the very practice which the sermon has just condemned that the conventional reading introduces as the hypothetical content of a future divine command.

Nothing in the passage calls for that content: no one talks about the need for an exception, raises concerns about monogamy, discusses increasing the size of the covenant people, mentions growth as a rationale, or suggests that having more wives could ever be justified or needed. The reading proposed in this paper draws its content from the only other place “raise up seed” appears in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 7:1-2), and in Jacob’s sermon just five verses earlier (Jacob 2:25), both of which describe the term “raise up seed” as something carried out via monogamy. Given the choice between content imported from a condemned precedent, or content drawn from the phrase’s already established usage, the latter has the stronger claim.¹⁸

“I Will Command My People” as an Assertion of Sovereign Authority

The grammatical case made earlier established that “I will command my people” is a fixed assertion of the Lord’s settled resolve rather than an open future contingency. This section explores what that fixed resolve looks like in practice. It is an assertion of the same sovereign authority that runs throughout Jacob’s writings and the broader text, and something the record shows the Lord actually carrying out once before.

And, O that ye would listen unto the word of his *commands*, and let not this pride of your hearts destroy your souls! (Jacob 2:16; emphasis added).

¹⁸Jacob’s condemnation may carry additional legal force if read against Deuteronomy 17:17, which prohibits multiplying wives and is part of the Mosaic law the Nephites possessed on the brass plates (1 Ne. 5:11). On that reading, the Nephite appeal to David and Solomon invokes as precedent men who were themselves in violation of a law the Nephites possessed. Jacob is not only rebutting a moral argument; he may be pointing out that the precedent his people cite is legally incoherent on its own terms. The Damascus Document, with fragments dating to 100 B.C., endorses the monogamous pairings in the creation and ark accounts, but excuses David’s wives because he had never read the sealed book of the Law which modern scholars identify as Deuteronomy. Thus, the Nephites who had the law were mistakenly appealing to the examples of kings who lacked it. (Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, rev. ed. (HarperCollins, 2005), 55–56.)

[E]ven as it was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the *commands* of God in offering up his son Isaac (Jacob 4:5; emphasis added).

[W]e 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; emphasis added).

Wherefore, if God being able to speak and the world was, and to speak and man was created, O then, why not able to *command* the earth, or the workmanship of his hands upon the face of it, according to his will and pleasure? (Jacob 4:9; emphasis added).

For I *command* all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them (2 Nephi 29:11).

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 (Ether 4:9).

In Jacob's sermon, the title "Lord of Hosts" appears six times in just five verses, the highest density used by the Book of Mormon's own writers. The militaristic frame portrays the Lord as the commander of heaven's armies who, having witnessed the violation of His commands, stands ready to deliver the destruction His covenant has named. He has personally heard the sorrow and mourning that the conventional interpretation would make an acceptable cost. The Lord of Hosts asserts that He is and must remain the commanding authority over his covenant people. The righteous branch that the Lord desires to raise up is dependent upon him commanding His people; there is nothing hypothetical about that. As was shown earlier, when the word "will" is taken to mean divine determination, the phrase can be read as, "I am resolved to command my people," which is a statement about purpose at the present time, and not about future contingency.

Jacob has been calling upon his people to “hearken to the word of the Lord” (Jacob 2:27), with the Lord asserting that obedience to his command is precisely what constitutes and sustains the covenant people as his “seed.” First Nephi 7:1–2 also demonstrates what meaning “I will command my people” would carry if the conventional reading’s hypothetical command were ever given. The command to “raise up seed” is given to Lehi’s sons, and it is fulfilled through monogamous marriage with no involvement of additional wives or concubines. This happened in a small founding community where a population-driven reading would have every reason to apply. If “raise up seed” retains a consistent meaning across its only two occurrences in the Book of Mormon, the one instance where the Lord has actually done what verse 30 describes supplies the meaning that Jacob 2:30 carries: a righteous branch raised up, accomplished monogamously, not through a practice that Jacob and the Lord have spent the chapter condemning.

The Meaning and Impact of the Conjunction “Otherwise”

In 2023, a public exchange took place between Jeff Lindsay and the author, about the author’s earlier proposed reinterpretation of the conventional reading.¹⁹ That exchange also featured an analysis by linguist Steve Bonta.²⁰ The present paper develops and revises an argument first advanced by the author in that earlier essay, which proposed that verse 30 has long been misread and that its first two clauses state God’s divine determination to command his people, and its third clause, introduced by “otherwise,” describes the consequence when that command is not hearkened to. Both Lindsay and Bonta raised several objections. One is valid and granted here; the others are examined below to see if they hold, and it will be demonstrated that they do not hold.

The original essay leaned on the distinction between the word “otherwise” as an ordinary adverb and the word as a conjunctive adverb due to the placement of the semicolon in verse 30. Bonta correctly observed that adverbs are unusually flexible in their

¹⁹Lindsay, “What Does Jacob 2:30 Say About Polygamy?” [LINK](#); Steve Reed, “A Proposed Reinterpretation of Jacob 2:30,” *OneClimbs*, January 5, 2017, [LINK](#).

²⁰Lindsay, “What Does Jacob 2:30 Say About Polygamy?” Lindsay’s post incorporates an analysis from linguist Steve Bonta.

position, both in English and across languages, and “they shall hearken unto these things otherwise” carries the same ambiguity as “otherwise they shall hearken unto these things.”²¹ The meaning of the clause is not affected by where the adverb sits. That line of argument can be set aside here because nothing in what follows depends upon it.

Beyond this concession is the pattern of usage that does not depend upon the position of the adverb at all. Though when read on its own, “otherwise” can be a flexible word, and, in isolation, nothing about it rules out the conventional reading, any claim about how it functions in Jacob 2:30 has to be earned from usage, not assumed from the word alone. The word “otherwise” appears thirteen times in the Book of Mormon. Of the ten conditional occurrences of “otherwise” in the Book of Mormon, nine of them follow a consistent pattern: a stated condition, then “otherwise,” then what prevails when that condition is absent, regardless of whether the condition, or premise, expresses an open contingency or a settled determination.²² In each case, that absence (or the clause that follows “otherwise”) articulates a worse (or less favorable) state (or outcome) relative to the expressed condition, demonstrated as follows:

And we did magnify our office unto the Lord...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 (Jacob 1:19; emphasis added).

²¹Lindsay, “What Does Jacob 2:30 Say About Polygamy?” quoting Steve Bonta’s analysis of adverb placement in Jacob 2:30.

²²The remaining three occurrences of “otherwise” in the Book of Mormon do not share the conditional conjunction structure analyzed here. In Mosiah 8:17, “otherwise” functions as an adverb meaning “by any other means” (“things which otherwise could not be known”). In Alma 5:18, “or otherwise” serves as a rhetorical transition meaning “alternatively, consider this,” pivoting between two scenarios without the condition-consequence structure. In Alma 60:5, “otherwise” again functions adverbially, meaning “differently” or “turned out another way” (“it might have otherwise been”). All three are adverbial rather than conjunctive uses and bear no structural relationship to Jacob 2:30 or the nine other occurrences analyzed above. Their exclusion from the pattern analysis reflects a grammatical distinction any reader can verify independently.

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 (Jacob 2:30; emphasis added).

And now, if ye say this in your hearts ye remain guiltless, *otherwise* ye are condemned (Mosiah 4:25; emphasis added).

Now when Ammon saw that he had wrought upon the old king according to his desire, he said unto him: 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 (Alma 20:24; emphasis added).

Inquire of the Lord, and if he saith unto us go, we will go; *otherwise* we will perish in the land (Alma 27:10; emphasis added).

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 (Alma 42:22; emphasis added).

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 (Alma 44:8; emphasis added).

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 (3 Nephi 13:1; emphasis added).

And in the second year the word of the Lord came to Ether, that he should go and prophesy unto Coriantumr that, if he would repent, and all his household, the Lord would give unto him his kingdom and spare the people—*Otherwise* they should be destroyed, and all his household save it were himself. And he should only live to see the fulfilling of the prophecies which had been spoken concerning another people receiving the land for their inheritance; and Coriantumr should receive a burial by them; and every soul should be destroyed save it were Coriantumr (Ether 13:20–21; emphasis added).

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 (Moroni 7:24; emphasis added).

Lindsay’s strongest challenge to this pattern is Alma 27:10 (included above), which he offers as a structural twin, “if he saith unto us go, we will go; otherwise we will perish in the land.” But on inspection, the parallel does not hold because the clause after “otherwise” in Alma 27:10 describes the undesirable outcome of perishing in the land, which is exactly the pattern the reinterpretation identifies. The conventional reading of Jacob 2:30 requires a special condition that the text does not do anywhere else: making the clause after “otherwise” the good and commanded outcome. Alma 27:10 confirms the suggested pattern rather than breaking it, leaving Jacob 2:30, when read the conventional way, as the lone case in which the post-“otherwise” clause names the desired state.

The conventional reading of Jacob 2:30 asks the tenth occurrence to function differently. Under that reading, the clause

preceding “otherwise” declares a hypothetical that the Lord may or may not act upon in the future, while the clause following it names the people’s continuing obligation to a commandment already given. In every other instance, the clause after “otherwise” names a worse (or less favorable) state, but the conventional reading has it name the better (or more favorable) one.

While nine instances may be a strong pattern, it is not grammatical law. A defender of the conventional reading could argue that Jacob 2:30 is different from the other nine in a specific way: in each of those nine cases, the first clause is directed at a people, or an action already underway. In Jacob 2:30, the first clause instead describes the Lord’s own discretionary action. So their argument would be that rather than a command awaiting obedience, it states a standing prerogative, a category that does not appear in the other nine examples. Though possible, this line of thinking still does not supply what the conventional reading needs: an object complement for the command. Explaining why “otherwise” might behave differently here says nothing about what “I will command my people” would command.²³ Even if Jacob 2:30 is structurally unique, that uniqueness does not tell the reader that the content of the reserved command is “many wives and concubines.” The reading proposed here does not require reassigning what “otherwise” does. The preceding clause states the desired condition: the Lord’s intention to command the covenant people he has raised up. “Otherwise” introduces the adverse state that prevails in that condition’s absence: the people hearkening unto the practices the sermon has been condemning.

“They Shall Hearken” and the Precepts of Men

Steve Bonta points out a claim that the verb “hearken” overwhelmingly refers to heeding the Lord or his servants. He performed a “quick count” and identified fifty-five occurrences, where all but three carry that righteous pattern. On that basis, he argues that reading “hearken unto these things” as heeding something condemned proposes a rare exception, and that any reading would need a named object for the people to hearken

²³The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Gary Arnell’s research files for the insight of there being no newly mentioned object [complement] for the word command in verse 30.

to, which is not supplied by the immediate context.²⁴ While the reinterpretation argument also leans on patterns to assist in interpretation, Bonta's objection deserves a closer look. A detailed search of the text that includes various forms of "hearken" such as "hearkened," "hearkeneth," and "hearkening" returns roughly one hundred occurrences, not fifty-five, and at least thirteen of them denote hearkening to a source other than God or his servants. This negative hearkening occurs across the record, and rather than being a few exceptions, it is an established usage.

Lehi prophesied to his posterity that violating the commandments of God would bring captivity and curses upon the people and their land:

And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore, they shall never be brought down into captivity; if so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes, but unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever (2 Nephi 1:7).

Lehi's prophecy establishes the pattern this sermon draws upon, that covenantal disobedience brings captivity and cursing. Jacob 2:33 applies that same pattern at a smaller, domestic scale, where the men's own sins threatened the prophesied curse of destruction upon themselves:

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 (Jacob 2:33).

Four of the thirteen instances of "negative hearkening" appear in a single discourse by Nephi, Jacob's own brother and contemporary, in 2 Nephi 28, where "hearken unto the precepts of men" is used twice and tied directly to a curse: "cursed is he that . . . shall hearken unto the precepts of men" (2 Nephi 28:31). This is negative

²⁴Lindsay, "What Does Jacob 2:30 Say About Polygamy?" quoting Bonta's count of "hearken" occurrences and his objection regarding a named object.

hearkening, in a curse context, from one of the closest possible sources to Jacob's sermon, and it invokes the same covenantal curse that Jacob raises in verse 29 of chapter 2, just one verse before the verse in question.

Hearken unto us, and hear ye our precept; for behold there is no God today (2 Nephi 28:5; emphasis added).

Yea, wo be unto him that *hearkeneth* unto the precepts of men, and denieth the power of God (2 Nephi 28:26; emphasis added).

Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall *hearken* unto the precepts of men (2 Nephi. 28:31; emphasis added).

In 2 Nephi 28, Nephi, Jacob's brother and contemporary, wrote that "hearkening unto the precepts of men" is explicitly associated with being cursed, the same covenantal consequence that is being invoked in Jacob 2:29. Jacob's people are already doing exactly what Nephi's discourse warns against: rather than hearkening to the Lord's command, they are "seek[ing] to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms, because of the things which were written concerning David, and Solomon" (Jacob 2:23). They are, in the language of 2 Nephi 28, hearkening unto the precepts of men. A survey of the word "hearken" and its various forms across the Book of Mormon identifies at least thirteen occurrences where the word denotes hearkening to a source other than God or his servants.²⁵ The word is not exclusively reserved for righteous hearkening. Jacob 7:23, for instance, shows the word taking a false teacher's words as its object: "hearkened no more to the words of this wicked man," the same pattern and flexibility with the word the reading proposed here requires of Jacob 2:30.

²⁵The full-text survey was conducted using an online edition of the Book of Mormon at [LINK](#). Inflected forms counted include "hearkened," "hearkeneth," and "hearkening." The thirteen instances in which the word denotes hearkening to a source other than God or his authorized representatives are: 1 Ne. 3:28; 2 Ne. 12:6; 28:5, 6, 26, 31; Jacob 7:23; Alma 5:41; 50:32; 51:3; Hel. 4:3; 12:4; 3 Ne. 3:12. If the reading proposed here is correct, Jacob 2:30 supplies a fourteenth instance of this same pattern, consistent with usage already established elsewhere in the corpus rather than standing as an exception to it.

Some may point out that just two verses prior to verse 30, verse 27 in Jacob 2, says, “*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” (Jacob 2:27; emphasis added). Because the word “hearken” is used in both verses, their argument is that verse 30 is also referring to the same righteous hearkening. However, the counter-argument to that is that righteous hearkening usually names the word of the Lord or the Lord himself; the fact that the curse is outlined in verse 29, in between the two verses, and the naming of “hearkening unto these things” instead of “hearkening unto the Lord,” or “the word of the Lord” seems to signal that verse 30 falls into the pattern of negative hearkening. Reading verse 30 as referring to negative hearkening also makes sense precisely because in verse 27, the Lord explicitly references “the word of the Lord” as “there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none.” It does not make much sense to expect the reader to believe the ambiguous language is the Lord suddenly shifting to make a command that goes against His very own word.

Read in relation with the described pattern of negative usage of the word “hearken” rather than as a raw count across the text, “hearken unto these things” in Jacob 2:30 would not be an outlier. It would be consistent with how the word is used by the one Nephite writer whose subject matter and proximity most resemble Jacob’s own. When the word “otherwise” is applied in a grammatically correct way, and the meaning of “these things” is contextually valid, the clause in Jacob 2:30 is easily understood. The verse names the condition for covenant faithfulness and the consequence of its failure.

Identifying the Antecedent of “These Things”

Steve Bonta brings up the shift from “or” in verse 29 to “otherwise” in verse 30, suggesting that the change may be deliberate, a signal that the two verses function differently.²⁶ This observation cuts both ways; both verses pair a stated condition with the consequence of its failure. Verse 29 warns that failing to keep the

²⁶Lindsay, “What Does Jacob 2:30 Say About Polygamy?” quoting Bonta’s explanation of the shift between “or” and “otherwise” in verse 29.

commandments of the Lord brings a curse upon the land, and verse 30 appears to warn that absent the Lord's command, the people will hearken unto the precepts of men. The change in conjunction does not require a change in logic, and the parallel reading is at least as natural as the contrasting one.

A defender of the conventional reading might note that Jacob's condemnation of David and Solomon in verse 24 is not absolute when read against the wider Latter-day Saint standard works. Doctrine and Covenants section 132:38–39 states that some of David's wives "were given unto him of me, by the hand of Nathan, my servant," and that "in nothing did they sin save in those things which they received not of me." Two distinct questions arise from this. First, being given wives is not the same as being commanded to have them. In the ancient Near Eastern context, a king's wives functioned as a part of the transferred royal household alongside the throne and estate, so the verse by itself does not establish that David was commanded to take more wives, rather than merely inheriting them as part of his kingship.²⁷ Second, even if it did establish a command, importing that command into Jacob 2:24 would be circular for the purpose of this paper. Further, there is a direct contradiction between Jacob 2 that condemns the many wives and concubines of David and Solomon, and D&C 132 that excuses nearly all of them. It would also be circular for the purposes of this paper to import the acceptability of commanding what has been condemned into the verse in question. Whether God ever commands men to have many wives and concubines is the very question that a reading of Jacob 2:30 is meant to help test. Reading D&C 132 back into Jacob 2 settles the question in advance rather than testing it. The argument here takes the condemnation in Jacob 2:24 as the Book of Mormon states it. Settling the legitimacy of what D&C 132 does or does not authorize is a separate issue and outside of this paper's scope.

²⁷A king's wives and concubines functioned as part of the transferred royal household in the ancient Near East. When Absalom rebelled against David, he publicly took his father's concubines specifically as a claim to the throne (2 Sam. 16:20–22). After David's death, Solomon had Adonijah executed for requesting Abishag in marriage, reading the request as a renewed bid for the kingdom (1 Ki. 2:13–25). Abner's relationship with Saul's concubine, Rizpah, after Saul's death, carried the same significance (2 Sam. 3:6–8).

Since “hearken” can take either a righteous or an unrighteous object elsewhere in the text, the word alone does not settle the question. What settles it has to come from context, and verse 23 supplies it directly. The men “seek to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms, because of *the things* which were written concerning David, and Solomon his son” (Jacob 2:23; emphasis added). That is the antecedent, named seven verses earlier, the precedent that the men are hearkening to in violation of the Lord’s commandment. The Nephites are putting the recorded examples of ancient kings in place of the commandment of the Lord they were given: “For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none” (Jacob 2:27). In this reading, “these things” refers to the things written concerning David and Solomon, just seven verses before, as the source the people have hearkened to in error. Verse 24 reiterates the reference: “Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which *thing* was abominable before me, saith the Lord” (Jacob 2:24; emphasis added).

That antecedent is not just named once and left behind. The phrase “them of old” brackets this entire section that contains verse 30. Verse 26 names it first: “I the Lord God will not suffer that this people shall do like unto them of old,” pointing back to the practices of David and Solomon just condemned in verses 23–24. Verse 33 closes the section by naming the same thing again: “they shall not commit whoredoms, like unto them of old.” The sermon opens this stretch and closes it on the identical referent through “them of old”; “these things” in verse 30 sits inside that frame, not outside of it or after it. Because the section begins and ends by condemning “them of old,” the most natural reading is that everything inside that frame, including verse 30’s “these things” is still talking about that same condemned practice rather than introducing a different, permitted one.

That bracket is reinforced by a second, independent pattern: the word “things” in Jacob 2 is neutral on its own and takes its meaning from context. Verse 13 is a good example, where Jacob speaks of “the things which God hath given you,” clearly meaning divine blessings. The noun here carries no moral weight by itself because the context supplies it. The phrase in verse 30, however, appears without qualification: “otherwise they shall hearken unto

these things.” What “these things” refers to must be determined the same way, from context; and within the section that addresses many wives and concubines, the context is consistent. Earlier in the sermon, Jacob refers back to the Nephites’ prideful seeking of gold and silver and persecution of the poor by referring to those actions as “these things”: “But if ye persist in these things his judgments must speedily come unto you” (Jacob 2:14).

In verse 22, there is a transition; Jacob says that he is making an end of speaking to them about their pride and the context shifts entirely to the subject of their “grosser crime.” This grosser crime is described in detail throughout the rest of chapter 2 in verses 23–35. Jacob refers to “the things which were written concerning David, and Solomon his son” (Jacob 2:23), and then to the Nephites’ imitation of their actions as “these things which ye ought not to have done” (Jacob 2:34). The phrase operates as a shorthand designation for conduct Jacob identifies as abominable throughout. Given that pattern, “these things” in verse 30 names the same gross crime, and hearkening unto it is what the people do in place of hearkening to the Lord’s command.

A Reassessed Reading and Its Implications

The evidence presented and considered leads to a reading of Jacob 2:30 that better fits the sermon’s context and grammar than does the conventional reading. Verse 30 is not an exception or loophole to the commandment for men to have only one wife and no concubines, but a fundamental component of a consistent narrative that defines the terms of God’s relationship to his covenant people. Its meaning, rendered more explicitly, is as follows:

For if I will [given that I will], saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed [a righteous branch] unto me, I [and no other] will command my people [which includes the command to have save it be one wife and no concubines]; otherwise [absent my command] they shall hearken unto these things [the precepts of men, namely their mistaken reliance on the things written concerning David and Solomon, to excuse themselves].

This reading rests on eight interlocking observations:

1. Verses 23 through 33 proceed through an unbroken pattern of “wherefore” and “for,” with each drawing a conclusion from, or grounding, what precedes it. Verse 30 continues this pattern rather than breaking it. In this span of verses, the one use of “but” introduces genuine contrasts elsewhere, but none appear at verse 30, which is the one place the conventional reading would need it to.
2. Scripture repeatedly uses the self-referential phrase “will” to express settled resolve rather than open contingency, in 3 Nephi 24:10, John 21:22, the Zenos allegory Jacob preserves in his own book, and independent parallels in Helaman 13:19 and Mosiah 8:33. In 1828, the word “if” meant, “grant, admit, cause to be, let the fact be, let the thing take place.” When applied to Jacob 2:30’s first clause, “if I will . . . raise up seed unto me,” the clause looks to be accepted as given fact, and not a future contingency. When applied to Jacob 2:30’s second clause, “I will command my people” carries that same settled force, whatever the first clause states about the Lord’s aim. Even granting that the first clause states a genuine, open aim, the verse still does not say what the resulting command would be. That content must be supplied from outside the verse.
3. “Raise up seed” in its foundational Nephite usage (1 Nephi 7:1–2) was carried out under a strict commandment of monogamy and featured no implication that many wives and concubines were involved in any way. There is nothing in the reappearance of this phrase in Jacob 2:30 that implies that the meaning has changed from what was already established.
4. The condemnation of the Nephite men’s justification, their appeal to the precedent of David and Solomon (Jacob 2:23), with the resulting command to have save it be one wife and no concubines (Jacob 2:27), supplies the only content for a hypothetical command. The conventional reading imports having “many wives and concubines” as that content regardless, even though nothing in the situation calls for it, and the precedent it draws on is the very thing Jacob and the Lord have just condemned.

5. The concentrated use of “Lord of Hosts,” six occurrences across five verses (28–30, 32–33), forms a militaristic description of the covenant violations that will result in their destruction. The one time the Lord actually gave the kind of command verse 30 describes, in 1 Nephi 7:1–2, the result was monogamous marriage, not many wives and concubines. The conventional reading defies both this context and this precedent and inserts an exception that undermines the force of the condemnation.
6. Of the ten conditional occurrences of “otherwise” in the Book of Mormon, nine follow a consistent framing: a stated condition, then the less favorable state that prevails in its absence. The conventional reading requires verse 30 to be the exception, with “otherwise” naming the better state rather than the worse one.
7. The verb “hearken” as used in verse 30 has parallels in many places, such as 2 Nephi 28, where hearkening unto the precepts of men is explicitly associated with the same covenantal curse invoked in verse 29, confirming that the clause “otherwise they shall hearken unto these things” names a consequence.
8. The antecedent of “these things” appears to be supplied by the sermon’s own consistent usage, in which the phrase is shorthand for the condemned practices Jacob has been cataloguing which are referred to in the surrounding narrative as “thing,” “things,” and “these things.”

Overall, the conventional reading requires inserting a conditional exception for men to have many wives and concubines into verse 30, which is not supported by the sermon’s grammar, lexical context, and literary environment. The proposed reading aligns with the verse’s internal logic and its relationships to the surrounding text. There are many implications to dismissing the conventional reading. It has functioned for many years as an “exception clause,” in Jacob’s fiery sermon, as the Book of Mormon’s sole justification for the claim that God may command men to have many wives and concubines. Whether such an exception or justification exists elsewhere is a separate question, but it does not appear to exist in Jacob 2:30.

Conclusion

This paper has surfaced arguments demonstrating that Jacob 2, verse 30, has a consistent meaning independent of the conventional reading, which reads into the verse an assumption that the surrounding text does not support. The more compelling reading, when the verse is viewed within its grammatical, textual and covenantal context, is not that the Lord occasionally permits what he has condemned—a conditional license to have many wives and concubines—but instead, it reveals a declaration of divine authority over a covenant people. Verse 30 appears to be reinforcing what has just come before in the sermon: that the Lord desires to raise up a righteous branch, or seed; that this is accomplished by keeping His commandments to only have one wife and no concubines; and that he will command his people in order to accomplish his purposes and protect His people whom he cares about. When viewed in light of the proposed reading that has been supplied in this paper, the conventional reading begins to look less fixed. Treating verse 30 as an exception clause undermines the moral force of the entire sermon that surrounds it, a sermon containing some of the most intense and grief-stricken words in scripture to the Nephite people. When Jacob 2:30 is considered within its lexical context, the structure of the sermon, and the patterns established elsewhere in scripture, the proposed reading provides a coherent account of the verse on its own terms.