

Korihor: The Arguments of Apostasy

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Korihor appears out of nowhere, as it were, in the Nephite record. His entire story is contained in Alma 30, where he suddenly appears in the land of Zarahemla, preaching “unto the people against the prophecies which had been spoken by the prophets, concerning the coming of Christ.” (Alma 30:6.) What we know of his background is mostly from inference, but his arguments show that he was an educated man, in sophistry if not in the scriptures. But we know from his own final admission that Korihor once had a testimony: “I also knew that there was a God. But behold, the devil hath deceived me. ... And I have taught his words; and I taught them because they were pleasing unto the carnal mind, ... insomuch that I verily believed that they were true.” (Alma 30:52–53.) Thus Korihor’s life teaches us that having the truths of the gospel and being a covenant servant of Christ are in nowise guarantees of salvation. We are also reminded that the most powerful opposition to the work of the Savior on this earth comes from those who know the truth and then deliberately turn from it and seek to destroy others.

Korihor took what might be called a philosophical approach to destroying faith in our Savior, an approach remarkably similar to that taken by many persons today in semi-philosophical attempts to “relieve” believers of what they are pleased to call their “naiveté.” His arguments could not hurt those whose belief was born of genuine spiritual experience, but they were powerfully effective among those weak in the faith whose belief had not yet gone beyond words. An analysis of those arguments helps us to see how we can be strong in the faith in Christ. Let us select three of his arguments as examples.

We begin with Korihor’s argument for naturalistic empiricism (the belief that it is possible to *know* all truth through the senses—by experience and observation):

“Behold, these things which ye call prophecies, which ye say are handed down by holy prophets, behold, they are foolish traditions of your fathers.

“How do ye know of their surety? Behold, ye cannot know of things which ye do not see; therefore ye cannot know that there shall be a Christ.” (Alma 30:14–15.)

Now it is plain that empiricism has value. It is good for us to observe our surroundings carefully and to appreciate our sensations. How else would we walk or drive an automobile? Without sensation, how could we know beauty or communicate with friends and loved ones or appreciate the marvelous handiwork of the creations of our God? Sense experience is indeed a valuable part of this life; the error comes in supposing that it is the *only* way of knowing what we know.

What can our senses tell us about justice or mercy or the future? Nothing. Indeed, it works the other way. Only when we have acquired by some non-empirical means the concepts of justice and mercy, or an idea about some future event—only then can we recognize the significance of our sensory experiences relating to justice and mercy or the fulfillment of prophecy.

None of the more important questions we ask can be solved or answered by depending solely on sensation. Is there a God? Is man immortal? Is it good to be honest? What should I do next in my life? The answers to each and all of these more important questions must come by faith. Every man answers these questions and makes the great decisions of his life on the basis of his belief in and acceptance of someone or something he cannot see. No man knows by his senses that each man has a spirit separate from his physical body, but some have a testimony of that fact gained by faith.

The answer to Korihor is plain and simple: Our initial acceptance of Christ is not empirical, for we do not see him. But we have received into our lives a Holy Spirit that teaches us to understand the scriptures about Christ and to believe that he lives. We do not pretend that this is yet knowledge. It is faith. We believe in Christ without having seen him because we trust this Holy Spirit that has taught us so many good things.

Korihor might by his argument be able to confuse someone who had never had revelation, but his contention is only a pathetic childishness to those who enjoy the companionship of the Holy Ghost.

A second argument used by Korihor might be called his humanism. In concert with the other humanists of the world, he insists that achievement and success come by human means, such as physical strength, skill, and reason:

“And many more such things did he say unto them, telling them that there could be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength.” (Alma 30:17.)

Korihor would have us believe, like some authors of modern “success” books, that the solutions to our problems lie in sharp thinking and realistic approaches to life. But such persons define success in terms of wealth, social status, political power, and the glutting of the senses; and, as the servants of Christ know, if selfish attainments are one’s goal, the world is so constructed that one can indeed ignore the Savior and attain. But Korihor and his fellow humanists think that they are masterfully doing it on their own, not realizing that those who succeed at the expense of faith and love are on a down escalator and are being carefully guided, encouraged, aided, and comforted by their unseen mentor Satan. Their glorying in their own strength and accomplishments is a tribute to the cleverness of Satan, that devil who greases the sluiceway of sin.

Conversely, those who have accepted the gospel see that real success in this world is overcoming selfishness and turning one’s strength to righteousness, to blessing others. They know full well that this kind of success is an uphill, strained effort into the very teeth of the forces that make sin so easy. They know that it is not by any human means that one can overcome the world. After all we can do by human power, we are still nothing. It is only when the grace of God touches our lives that we can overcome evil and enact the precious mercies of righteousness. There can be no boasting, no pretension that anything human prospers us. The glory is all given unto God by those who are more than armchair servants of the Master.

The humanist argument is very persuasive to many because it is flattering. We do not naturally like to believe that without Him we can do nothing. Thus part of Satan’s entourage includes those who know the gospel is true but who insist they really don’t need much help except for a pointer or two and a little assistance in being resurrected. The servant of Christ is not persuaded, however. Long pleading with the Lord has stripped him of all humanistic pride.

A third argument used by Korihor is that of relativism: “... and whatsoever a man did was no crime.” (Alma 30:17.) A fuller statement of this attack by Korihor is as follows: Since (he claims) there is no god and men do not live after death, and since (he claims) all so-called “laws” and “commandments” are but social conveniences to give power to priests, the only important thing in life is to do what you want to do—if you can get away with it. How modern Korihor sounds! But the argument is timeless, as old as sin itself.

There are, of course, many versions of relativism (one would hardly expect relativism to be absolute). One version encourages enjoyment of the Church social organization without getting uptight about theology or religious commandments.

Another kind of relativism says that the commandments are great but open to broad private interpretation. A third acknowledges that there are commandments, but allows indulgence in sin since “nobody’s perfect.” A fourth version says that the commandments were okay when they were given, but they have become superfluous in our enlightened age. A fifth kind of relativism, that used by Korihor, says that the commandments were bad from the first; they are inhibitions on the soul of man that actually prevent him from ever achieving happiness. A sixth type, also used by Korihor, says that since one act is indifferent from another, it doesn’t matter what we do.

The great power of all relativistic approaches is that they allow the individual to judge his own actions. This is why almost any of the approaches strikes a responsive, sympathetic chord in all other relativists. Korihor found many who were pleased with his relativism, even though they may have rejected much else of what he said. “And thus he did preach unto them, leading away the hearts of many, causing them to lift up their heads in their wickedness.” (Alma 30:18.)

In stark contrast to the virtually infinite number of personal choices available in the broad way of relativism is the way of the Savior. That strait and narrow way is to do as he did: not to seek our own will, but to do the will of Him who sent us. It is to obey him in all things, obeying his word, which is his law, as it is freshly written in our hearts from revelation to revelation. It is to rely solely upon his merits, counting him as the only fountain of righteousness. It is being willing to die for his sake, crucifying the old person with worldly wants and desires in order to be born again “as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.” (Mosiah 3:19.)

Thus the gospel teaches a way that is absolute—absolute in that the formula for righteousness is always the same for every person and for every time and circumstance: take the name of Christ, always remember him, keep all of the commandments that he gives unto us. There is no other way to righteousness, for whatsoever is not of faith in Christ is sin.

Now it is little wonder that Korihor found much success in commending relativism to the members of the church in his time. For while the Church is true, the members of the Church here on earth have not yet overcome the world, although most are still trying. For many, the effort is hard, the price too great. Whether they leave the Church or not, they abandon the narrow way and settle for some variety of relativism.

But there is one thing relativism can never do, even within the Church. One who subscribes to any of the versions of relativism just listed will never (unless he repents) be brought to those sacrifices that will prepare his soul to spend an eternity in blessing others. Relativism can never purify heart and mind, or transform body and countenance into the image of the Savior.

Thanks be to our God that there is a way, strait and narrow though it be, to learn to love with a pure love! But the price is great. We must place all of our heart, might, mind, and strength at his disposal—always. We must count as dross and expendable everything of this world, including our own lives. This does not mean to deny life, but to live fully, enjoying the companionship of the Holy Ghost, working in a crescendo of works of love that will take us without faltering through the veil to results only understood in eternity.

Korihor was not unique to Book of Mormon times. His counterparts have always been with the Church, and they will now but increase in flattery and fury until the end of the world. What will prevent us from succumbing to their sophistries? The following are offered as a time-tested prescription against apostasy.

1. *Hunger and thirst after righteousness.* Blessed are they who do so, “for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost.” (3 Ne. 12:6.) Righteousness is to bless others, to minister to their needs, both temporal and spiritual. The great enemy of righteousness is not only evil; plain old-fashioned evil fools few. A more subtle and therefore more dangerous enemy is self-righteousness, supposing that what pleases us will be good for others.

Perhaps the great divider between the seekers of righteousness and the self-righteous is that those who hunger and thirst after true righteousness cannot rest until satisfaction and happiness come to those whom they strive to help. They hurt when others hurt. The self-righteous are often deed-conscious rather than people-conscious. They seem to glory in forms and traditions, formulas and standards. They cast alms to the poor without loving them or stopping to discern what the real problem might be.

Those who seek true righteousness quickly learn one thing—their own impotence. They find they are not knowledgeable enough, nor wise enough, nor powerful enough to bless others as their hearts desire.

Their hunger for righteousness has prepared them for the gospel, and when they hear its good news they leap at the opportunity to make the covenant to love the Savior and to receive his Spirit to be with them.

2. *Learn to live by the Holy Spirit.* The Spirit teaches us the truth of the gospel. But it is another thing to learn to live by the Holy Spirit. The difference is like hearing a violin concert expertly performed and acknowledging its merit, then personally mastering the violin to be able to play as expertly ourselves.

This mastery is a matter of constant, faithful application of our will power. There are no quantum leaps to righteousness, only the slow adding of line to line, precept to precept, grace upon grace. In this remaking of our lives, every improper thought, every bad habit, every evil desire must sooner or later be evaluated against the glory of our Savior. We, not he, must make each painful choice to prove all things, then to hold fast to that which is good.

How many experiments and experiences are necessary? Only enough to enable us to give our selves, to yield our hearts unto the Savior; enough experiments to know the voice of the Savior beyond any shadow of doubt; enough experiences of obedience to learn to love with pure love and to continue therein.

3. *Support priesthood authority.* Those who have learned to walk in the Spirit also rejoice in the opportunity to sustain their priesthood-appointed leaders with faith and prayers. They know by the repeated testimony of the Spirit that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the kingdom of God on the earth and that those who serve over them in the callings of the priesthood are appointed and sustained by the Savior. As servants of the Savior, they, too, sustain.

Because they sustain they become the united power and strength that the Church organization brings to the work of righteousness in the world. They sustain in love even as they hope to be sustained. They always sustain in faith and righteousness, receiving instruction from the Savior and obeying him in all things.

4. *Build the kingdom.* Living in righteousness makes possible the establishment of Zion on earth again. What careful priesthood labor there must be to bring the gathered remnants to see eye to eye, having one mind and one heart, dwelling in righteousness with no poor among them! Then the kingdoms of this world will be constrained to admit that this is indeed the kingdom of God and his Christ, for the inhabitants will love one another, even as Christ loves them. Those who support have the joy of seeing the prophecies fulfilled before their very eyes.

He or she who has a shoulder to the wheel, who honors and trusts the driver of the wagon, who knows he is doing the right thing in the right cause is not taken in by the glitter of apostasy. But what of those not so mature in the work of the Lord? Is there any guaranteed way to prevent apostasy of the newborn or the weak and infirm? The honest answer is no. The love and patience of those who are mature will shelter some of them for a time. But ultimately there is no outside shelter—the only, effective shelter is a personal faith, a personal testimony. In every generation Korihor takes his toll of those who will not get themselves founded on the Rock.