

Scriptural Chastity Lessons: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife; Corianton and the Harlot Isabel

B. W. Jorgensen

I'M GOING TO RISK starting with an impression I will not try to document but suspect many Mormons would share: that in the church, when we attempt to teach chastity to youth (say in Sunday School, Aaronic Priesthood, Young Women, Seminary, BYU and Institute religion classes), the two prime scriptural examples we use are the story of Joseph in Egypt, resisting and fleeing the lustful wife of Potiphar (Gen. 39: esp. 7-12), and the story of Alma's wayward missionary son Corianton, or rather his father's exhortation to Corianton (Al. 39-42, esp. 39:3-14).¹

1. For the Potiphar episode, I will use the text of the King James or Authorized Version (AV), since that is the standard version in LDS discussion, with occasional glances at the Revised English Bible (REB). Use of this episode of the Joseph story as an example of chastity has very ancient roots; James Kugel's *In Potiphar's House* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), which I consulted late in my fourth draft, briefly traces how "the adulterous proposal of Potiphar's wife, and Joseph's virtuous refusal to cooperate, came to loom larger and larger in the imagination" of "ancient readers" (22) through several apocryphal texts (21-26) before taking up "narrative expansions" of the story in rabbinic midrash.

I deliberately wrote the first two drafts of this essay without referring to any secondary sources to see what I could say; I wanted as innocent or unsponsored or uncontaminated a reading as I could manage. I knew that Reynolds Price's translation in *A Palpable God* (New York: Atheneum, 1978; San Francisco: North Point, 1985) had aroused my suspicion that this was a more complicated story than our didactic uses of it acknowledged; but I also found when I reviewed Robert Alter's discussion in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) that I had assimilated several of his specific readings; I'd consciously emulated his method and practice of close reading, especially his attention to the relation of dialogue and narration. For this draft of my essay, besides Price, Alter, and Kugel, I have consulted com-

I mean to question whether either of these instances is simply about chastity; this should not necessarily defeat their usefulness as examples in discussions of chastity, but it will complicate that usefulness and may enlarge it in surprising ways.

For the first thing to say is that neither Joseph's nor Corianton's story is unambiguously or simply a story about keeping or breaking what we call "the law of chastity," though clearly enough, each story does have something to do with what we call chastity.

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In the case of Joseph, notice first the terms in which he initially refuses Potiphar's wife's plea (or does she hope he will take it as a command?), "Lie with me" (39:7). He says:

Behold, my master wotteth not what is with me in the house, and he hath committed all that he hath to my hand;
there is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God? (8-9)

mentaries or translations in the following sources: David Rosenberg, trans., *The Book of J*, interpreted by Harold Bloom (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990); E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964); Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985).

My understanding of St. Augustine's sense of "lust of the eyes" in Book 10 of his *Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960), partly prompted my re-reading of the exhortation to Corianton; but, aside from confirming my sense of the doctrinal prooftext use of Alma 39:5 with glances into the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), Joseph F. Smith's *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1939, 1986), Joseph Fielding Smith's *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), and Spencer W. Kimball's *Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), I have not consulted any secondary sources on Alma 39-42. I suspect that a review of, say, all LDS General Authority references to the passage might prove hugely redundant. Yet by the time of the third draft of my essay, thanks to a suggestion from my colleague Richard Cracroft, I'd seen that B. H. Roberts, in his operatic short novel *Corianton* (1888-89, 1902), portrays Corianton as thinking to convert Isabel at one point in the plot; Roberts's fictionalization of the story, though it has most of the faults and few of the virtues of nineteenth-century fiction (and after all, it is a "first novel"), works out a rather ingenious and plausible interpretive intertwining of the Korihor story, the Zoramite mission, and Corianton's sin. It might be both interesting and useful for someone to trace the history of interpretations of Corianton's sin in Mormon discourse. Roberts himself may be responsible for popularizing the view that Corianton did fornicate (not very successfully) with Isabel, who, in Roberts's story, quickly grows bored with the virginal young man and then reveals more sinister motives for her involvement. For a helpful summary and (in my view, too encomiastic) discussion of Roberts's *Corianton*, see Richard H. Cracroft, "The Didactic Heresy as Orthodox Tool: B. H. Roberts as Writer of Home Literature," in *Tending the Garden: Essays on Mormon Literature*, ed. Eugene England and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1996): 125-30.

Undeniably, Joseph regards what she invites him to do as “great wickedness” that would lead him to “sin against God.”² Joseph doesn’t make any explicit appeal to a code of chastity³ (at least not to chastity as a form of personal purity), though of course he may well understand that such a code applies to the act she has proposed and he is refusing; the wife may not think or admit that it does apply, and his answer to her may show he knows this by appealing to a code he hopes will matter to her. Notice, then, the grounds he does make explicit: he is a servant or slave (“bought” as we’ve already learned in 39:1), though he has risen to a personal attendant (39:4: “he served him”) and then “overseer” (39:4) or top slave; his master has “committed all that he hath to [Joseph’s] hand” and has not “kept back any thing from [Joseph] but [her], because [she is] his wife.” Whether or not he tacitly judges the situation in terms of a chastity code, vocally he judges it in terms of a master-slave relationship, and in terms of what “things” among the master’s property have been committed to the slave’s hand; perhaps quite literally, what things he may and may not touch.⁴ For a slave to touch property which the master has not “committed to” the slave’s hand may well be, to Joseph, “great wicked-

2. I take “sin” as a verb here since that creates a dual predicate of balanced parallel phrases, rather than a dual direct object with unbalanced and non-parallel phrases; but perhaps the preference does not matter much. Speiser translates the last phrase here as “stand condemned before God” (301); Rosenberg, as “show contempt for the gods” (125); in both cases the concluding predicate seems a result or culmination, not a restatement, of the preceding statements: to violate these conditions of slave status and property would offend deity; von Rad (365) emphasizes that Joseph’s ethical appeal is ultimately God-centered. “God” represents the Hebrew plural *elohim*, hence Rosenberg’s quite literal English plural. Speiser (303) notes that here, instead of the name Yahweh (or its substitute Adonai), the term “God” is used apparently because Joseph is addressing an Egyptian; again, Rosenberg’s plural seems validated, though Speiser does not explain his preference for the capitalized English singular.

3. Kugel discusses the “rabbinic commonplace” (100-101) that the patriarchs, including Joseph, anachronistically studied the Torah before the law was given on Sinai, so that Joseph here may be understood as referring to the commandment against adultery, which he had learned from his father.

4. Bloom calls Joseph’s “grounds” here “essentially pragmatic” (230). Even von Rad, who finds “God” the final and central term of Joseph’s appeal, also emphasizes his appeal to “universal human decency which is unwilling to break a trust” (365). Alter notes the repetitions of “master” by both Joseph and the narrator (109), again stressing the issues of slave status, property, and trust. None of these commentators will reduce the situation to the application of a single moral rule (unless that rule is trust). Which is not to suggest that any single moral rule (any, that is, which did apply) would not have saved at least some part of the situation. Still, it’s worth noting, too, that Joseph’s verbal appeal to ethical standards fails utterly to change the wife’s behavior for the better. It’s possible that she does not really arouse sexual temptation in Joseph—she may be much older, unappealing to him in various ways, so although she clearly invites sex, he need not be so inclined. Our notion that he consciously meets and resists sexual temptation is very much our own option, not strongly obliged by the text.

ness" and thus a way to "sin against God." I believe (though I'm not prepared now to document) that in the ancient world, such would be the case; the little I know about the ancient gods (the Hellenic ones; I don't know the Egyptians) suggests that one class of things that would offend them would be a servant's disobedience or transgression of the limits of his stewardship under his master. I'm not aware of any texts pre-dating Joseph that would clarify the Hebrew God's attitude in these matters.

The least the text obliges us to say, I think, is that, though he is young and apparently inexperienced with women (sexually, I assume, but more importantly, morally and psychologically), and though as the outcome will show, he is seriously unprepared to deal with this particular woman, Joseph does grasp the situation as something more complex than simply the choice to "lie with" or not to "lie with" a woman who does not belong to him; he sees the situation as something more than that, or even as something other than that, a risk of transgressing his status as a servant and the limits that places on what he can do with his master's property. He may be wrong, of course; but that would oblige us to show how we know, from this text, that he is wrong. I think he's at least partly right, though again, he doesn't know enough, isn't shrewd enough, to gauge what this woman's response will be (nor do we, until we put it together, too late). The least this text, so far, obliges us to say about it as an example of chastity preserved is that the protagonist grasps his situation in other terms and in a more complicated way than we do when we use his story as an example in support of keeping the law of chastity. That might give us pause. It might provoke us to think harder about how the scriptures invite us to think about, and to act in, human situations.

What else might give us pause must be that, for Joseph, the issue of sexual right and wrong in his situation seems to be an issue of property, of what "things" are committed to the servant's hand and what "things" are not. It must at least slightly trouble us that Joseph's speech seems almost to locate the woman among the other "things," "all that [Potiphar] hath." Is chastity finally and fundamentally an issue of property? and specifically of which man a woman is the property?⁵ Joseph's speech does distinguish the woman from the rest of Potiphar's property, singled out as not left in his hand "because thou art his wife." But that will not make either of these questions go away: the woman may be, at most, a special (and in Potiphar's case, since he seems not to keep a harem, singular) *kind* or *item* of property. These are questions I do not hope to answer but cannot help raising, since Joseph himself provokes them in his explicit, if inadequate, grasp of his situation. Again I emphasize: the

5. von Rad comments rather extensively on ancient Israelite and pagan views of adultery, which permitted masculine sexual relations with concubines, slaves, or captives but required absolute fidelity of women to their husbands. He stresses the "proprietary" view of pagan cultures, but acknowledges a similar element in the Israelite view as well (365).

scriptural story, looked at even slightly more closely, is more complicated than our use of it to illustrate the application of a single moral criterion.

Uses of Joseph's story as a chastity lesson generally, I believe, stop at verse 12, when the young hero has "fled, and got him out" ("go ye and do likewise," we tell the youth), though the lessons often go on to suggest that his chastity must be a factor in his later success, a loyalty to divine law that keeps "the Lord . . . with Joseph" (39:21).⁶ I didn't think of this in my youth, but lately it has come to seem somewhat ironic that chastity lessons using Joseph don't go on to note the immediate consequence which might have troubled the young man: his adherence to divine law lands him in jail (actually a light punishment⁷); or to put it in terms closer to those of his own story, which it might be hard for him to ignore, once again he's stripped and in the pit.⁸ The first time it was his brothers' envy and resentful anger; this time it is his master's wife's lust and resentful anger, but the ends are much the same. Of course, though it takes a while and costs one man's life, Joseph's prison term does lead to his great chance to interpret Pharaoh's dreams successfully and thus rise once again, this time to become "ruler over all the land of Egypt" (41:42-43). And Joseph might well regard any hole in the ground that gets him out of the Potiphar household as a step up. But I'm getting ahead of the story.

What Robert Alter calls "Joseph's longwinded statement of morally aghast refusal" (72) has failed, and Potiphar's wife goes on "day by day" to speak to Joseph,⁹ but "he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her, or to be with her" (39:10). Here, "hearkened not" may recognize an aspect of command as well as a plea in her bluntly reiterated "lie with me."¹⁰ (That way of putting it, by the way, might be a Jacobean translator's euphemism, as the Revised English Bible's "come, make love to me" seems a modern euphemism for the Jacobean one. A contemporary seductress

6. Alter contrasts this episode with the tale of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 as "a tale of seeming defeat and ultimate triumph through sexual continence" (10), though his later discussion of the episode (107-11) does not stress simply that view of it.

7. Speiser, 304; von Rad, 366-7.

8. Alter (111) notes this ironic parallel.

9. Speiser reads "cajoled" (301) but notes the literal "spoke to" (303); von Rad reads "spoke to" (363); Alter, "coaxed" (108); Rosenberg, "appeal to" (125). It seems best to be scrupulously literal here, as the AV, von Rad, and Price (128) are; the neutral tone of "spoke to" may be a touch of characterization, the wife either not pressing Joseph with intemperate lust, or strategically maintaining a temperate manner until she finds the right moment, or varying the terms of her appeal, or sometimes not appealing (sexually) at all. The neutrality of the J writer here and elsewhere allows a complex range of possibilities and invites our active, constructive, and self-revealing guesses.

10. Alter notes that "the brevity of [her] sexual proposition" may suggest "the peremptory tone she feels she can assume toward her Hebrew slave" (73)—momentarily ignoring that he is not *her* slave, and that this fact, together with her imperative tone, suggests the triangular struggle of which Joseph is only partly aware.

might try to put the point across minimalistically with just two words of one syllable.¹¹) The shift from her “lie with” to the narrator’s “lie by” may suggest the kinds of occasions he avoided, once warned by her first frank request: reclining near her for meals or conversation, when she might have asked for the pleasure of his company (for “be with her” the REB reads “be in her company”).¹² At any rate, given a favorable opportunity, when Joseph, instead of avoiding her, “went into the house to do his business; and there was none of the men of the house there within” (11), she tries one last time. The empty house seems to fulfill Joseph’s earlier words, “my master wotteth not what is with me in the house” (8), and she seizes the moment by laying a hand on the master’s property. Or almost: “. . . she caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me” (12). The gestures that accompany her “lie with me” here and earlier contrast sharply: the first time, she “cast her eyes on Joseph”; here there is no look, no attempt to meet eyes, only grabbing, and we may accordingly hear “lie with me” in quite different tones.¹³ Is “garment” here a general term for a Hebrew word the translators cannot render more specifically? or does it mean he is wearing only one garment, stripped to a “loincloth” (as the REB renders it) to oversee fieldwork?¹⁴ Whatever, his “business” in the house has overridden Joseph’s erstwhile caution, and he’s caught.

11. Alter twice stresses the wife’s “two-word sexual bluntness,” (in the Hebrew) (72-3, 108-9).

12. Speiser reads “beside” (291); Rosenberg, “attend her” (125). Perhaps we are to bear in mind that Joseph is Potiphar’s personal attendant or body-servant. And again, taste could be among Joseph’s motives here, as well as moral scruples of whatever sort.

13. The contrast may be even sharper if we take Price’s literal translation “lifted her eyes to” (128), which Speiser had noted but rejected because in other Biblical uses the phrase implies trust (303). But of course: “trusting” might be exactly the tone the wife would give her first invitation; and if we don’t insist on seeing her as a practiced seductress (a view for which even her later violent accusation does not give sufficient evidence), it might be genuinely the tone she feels, an impassioned woman taking a sizeable risk. And yet again, prudery or disgust as well as prudence might play a part in Joseph’s repulsion; readers who suppose he feels any desire for her may be simply projecting their own attitudes onto the protagonist. That seems entirely consistent with J’s narrative rhetoric, which so often leaves motive and feeling open to our guess and imputation, so the story reveals as much about us as it does about its characters.

14. According to von Rad, the garment “was actually the undergarment, a long shirt tied about the hips,” so that “Joseph fled completely undressed, at once disgracefully and honorably” (366). Kugel discusses Joseph’s “business” or “work” and his “garment” more extensively in terms of rabbinic midrash (94-8), exploring the ancient case for “Joseph the Guilty”: “For to hold that Joseph was not tempted for a minute by Mrs. Potiphar is, as it were, to put him outside the range of normal human emotion. But to say . . . that Joseph was indeed tempted, and that events indeed brought him to the very point of complying—this is to present a Joseph of flesh and blood with whom others can identify, and whose example of sudden repentance others might seek to emulate” (98). I’ve presumed a mainly naive and innocent Joseph, yet that does raise questions, and the text does not strictly necessitate such a reading.

Faced with the violation of chastity or his servant status or his master's property (both himself and the woman), Joseph does the only thing he can do: "he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out" (12).¹⁵ Apparently she won't let go (if she can't "lie with" him, she'll look at him), and he's not going to stay for a tug-of-war; he'll cut and run. Maybe he recognizes even that won't save him entirely.

He seems not to suspect just how much hell will break loose. Left holding his empty garment, she swiftly calls "the men of her house" and accuses Joseph, in a scene which Joseph cannot have witnessed, though he might have pieced it together later from servants' gossip, and which the writer therefore has clearly constructed for our benefit. Mainly the wife just bears false witness of what we've been told actually happened:

... he came in unto me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice: and it came to pass, when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, that he left his garment with me, and fled, and got him out. (14-15)

She falsifies Joseph's reason for coming into the house, imputes her sexual intention to him, and claims to have responded, before Joseph fled, as a dutiful wife and chaste woman should, by "cr[ying] with a loud voice" (possibly a legal requirement to avoid the imputation of consent).¹⁶ They did hear her, did they not? So what took them so long to answer? There is some risk here that one or more of these servants might have seen Joseph going into the house clothed and fleeing it naked before they heard her outcry. Still, I doubt these "men of her house" would have questioned her claim, since the phrase that refers to them suggests they are slaves committed to her. "Her house," though, raises other small questions which Egyptologists and scholars of Biblical Hebrew would be qualified to address: is she here thinking of "the house" as "her house" (after all, she's the wife), or does she have a separate dwelling on the estate? If so, did her climactic lunge at Joseph occur there? If so, what was his "business"

15. Alter notes how "left in her hand" here echoes Joseph's uses of the same phrase in his earlier refusal speech (109). Again I suspect an undercurrent of stress on property: she reached for Joseph as for something to possess, but is left with a lesser thing than she reached for.

16. Alter (109-10) and Sternberg (424) both discuss her swift and skilful rearrangement of crucial evidence, including her claim that Joseph left his garment "by" or "near" her rather than "in her hand," so he will seem to have stripped himself. Sternberg (423-27), in the closest reading I have seen of the episode, subtly and persuasively analyzes the wife's "art of poisonous repetition" (423) both in this scene, starting with her reiterated claim that she cried out, "designed to insinuate into the audience's mind a sequence of screaming that extends from the moment of attempted rape to their own arrival on the scene" (425), and in the next, with Potiphar.

there? Or, as I think more likely, was she lying in wait for Joseph in “the house,” the main house or master’s dwelling, and does that explain why “the men of her house” were not immediately at hand and had to be “called unto” (14)? Obviously they were within hearing and did hear the outcry she raised, so it’s clear she’s willing to risk the circumstantial lie with them: perhaps she’s sure they would not dare speak against her; she does, after all, have some power in “her house,” whatever Joseph may think about “none greater in this house than I” (9). And power, specifically the sexual power politics of the Potiphar household, now begins to look like the main issue for the wife, though Joseph seems not to have had a clue.

For just as this entire small scene must seem in excess of a simple chastity lesson (which is, I suspect, why church instruction generally ignores it), so the first part of the wife’s accusation to the men of her house looks oddly in excess of her situation: “See,” she says, “he hath brought in an Hebrew unto us to mock us” (14).¹⁷ What’s going on here, in this part of the story that Joseph, who “got him out,” can’t know unless it’s reported to him later? Whatever we may want to make of Joseph’s heroic youthful chastity—and there’s no question that he has preserved his chastity in this episode, whatever his conscious motives were—the teller of the tale has other fish to fry as well. Here, it’s at least the situation and psychology of the villainess of the piece, one of our culture’s favorite badwomen, arch-seductress or proto-seductress; and beyond that, as I’ve suggested, the sexual politics of Potiphar’s house. The wife, though Joseph may never know it, turns out to be much more than the simple, generic, sexual temptation she is in our instructive uses of the episode;

17. The Hebrew verb which the AV translates as “mock” here seems to have a tricky range of possible senses, making its use in this speech and the speech to Potiphar quite problematic and obliging translators to make interpretive choices that can vary widely: Alter reads “to dally with us [or, to mock us]” (108, 109); von Rad translates as “insult” in both speeches (363) and notes the senses of “play” and “erotic play” or “fondling” as in Gen. 26:8 (366); Speiser renders it “make love to” (302) in both speeches, notes the erotic “nuance” of its use in 26:8, and says “the possible alternative ‘to toy with us’ is not favored by the context” (303); Rosenberg uses “handle” in the first speech, “fondle” in the second (125); Sternberg uses “to play games with” in both speeches (423); Price, whose translation I think piqued my entire curiosity about this scene, uses “trifle” in both speeches (128-29). It occurs to me that English has offered, since well before the time of the AV, a four-letter word that, at least in some of its modern idiomatic uses, could provide a similar range of senses, including one to cover “lie with,” though translators’ and commentators’ reluctance to use it is perfectly understandable, and not only on grounds of the potentially distracting shock and offense of obscenity. All this does suggest, though, that in these problematic contexts it may be not the wife and the J writer but the scholars who are euphemizing. The currently “definitive” source on the unused obscenity is Jesse Sheidlower, ed., *The F Word* (New York: Random, 1995), which cites its “earliest known appearance in English” ca. 1475 (xxv, 101) and exhaustively represents its variants, idioms, euphemisms, etc.

more than either Joseph or we could guess from her repeated imperative “lie with me.” What she reveals of her mind after the fact, we are invited now to read back into the earlier scenes of the episode, tangled with what had seemed a simple if stubborn case of predatory female lust.

“See, he hath brought in an Hebrew unto us to mock us” (14). She first accuses Potiphar of intending to “mock us” by bringing Joseph into the house—unless the translators’ “to” imprecisely renders a construction that means “with the result of.” Does her “us” mean herself and the men of her house as Egyptians (hence her stress on “an Hebrew”), or as possessions of Potiphar, his slaves and his wife, over whom this Hebrew has been lifted, as Joseph all innocently reminded her in his first refusal: “. . . he hath committed all that he hath to my hand; there is none greater in this house than I” (8-9)? Why not both? And in reaction to this, as much as to Joseph’s sexual refusal, she shows herself as what hell hath no fury like.¹⁸

Yet not quite so frankly to Potiphar. When Joseph’s and her “lord came home” (16), she revises the first part of her accusation to fit this face-to-face confrontation with the master of the house: “The Hebrew servant, which thou hast brought unto us, came in unto me to mock me” (17).¹⁹ The rest, somewhat condensed and slanted, is the same deposition she made to her servants. As to them, she stresses to Potiphar Joseph’s alien origin, Hebrew, but now adds a stress on his status, servant. She’s speaking now to the master, not to other slaves; and she may wish to hint that no servant should be “greater in this house than” the master’s wife.²⁰ She seems to weigh in Joseph’s “Hebrew servant” status to increase the offense to her own status as an Egyptian wife. And her words for the offense, “to mock me,” displace and shift the meaning of the word “mock”: to the servants she claimed Joseph “came in unto me to lie with me” (the REB renders this “to rape me”), but to the master she presents herself as a dutiful wife too chaste to mention sexual mat-

18. Speiser (303), Alter (109), and Sternberg (424-5) all note her arousal of ethnic and social prejudice against Joseph as an upstart Hebrew slave; von Rad explains that the term “Hebrew . . . originally said nothing about what national group a person belonged to, but rather told something about his social and legal status” as a member of a “lower, de-classed level of the population” (368). Alter and Sternberg particularly stress how her “us” designedly opposes herself and her servants to Potiphar and Joseph.

19. Alter (110) and Sternberg (426) note the sexual innuendo of the idiom “came in unto me”; Sternberg’s rendering of the syntax of this speech suggests how carefully the wife plays that innuendo: “There came in unto me the Hebrew slave that thou hast brought us . . .” (426)—first the hint of intercourse, then the prejudicially charged identification of the accused slave, then the subordinate clause that tilts the blame toward the master.

20. Again, Alter (110) and Sternberg (425) note how in this speech she tries to build solidarity between herself and the master as against the Hebrew interloper. It’s a delicate business, since she has to deflect any suspicion from herself and arouse her husband’s anger against his favorite servant, yet seems unable to keep from accusing Potiphar as well.

ters;²¹ to the servants her word “mock” referred mainly to the offense of “an Hebrew” being placed above all others in this Egyptian household, but to her husband the word must do duty for the sexual offense a good wife cannot bring herself to name directly, though that offense is also against her dual status as Egyptian and wife, suggesting an aristocratic attitude that a slave’s sexual approach to the master’s wife gravely insults her status. Last, in this speech, “mock” cannot directly accuse Potiphar of intending to scorn her and the rest of the household, so her sentence makes “came in unto me to mock me” a sequel or result of “thou hast brought unto us”: the accusation of Potiphar still hovers here, implicit in the hinted causality, but it will have to be his interpretation, not her declaration.²² She knows how far she can’t afford to go, and she shrewdly curbs her resentment toward her lord and master. In the one more line we hear of her voice, the last we shall ever hear of her (a direct-discourse echo which also displays Potiphar’s grasp of her accusation²³), perhaps she pushes that limit a bit more insistently: “when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spake unto him, saying, After this manner did thy servant to me” (19). Her furious but crafty little script works: “his wrath was kindled” (19) against his servant for precisely the breaches of high trust and exclusive property that Joseph had futilely warned of when the wife first approached him.²⁴ “And Joseph’s master took him, and put him into the prison” (20). The wife’s one possible accuser is out of the way, and presumably she has saved her own status in the household.

We will learn no more about the marriage or the later careers of the Potiphars. But if we’ve paid attention to some earlier clues, we can venture to guess a little further as to just how and why the wife felt mocked by Potiphar and Joseph. At the first mention of Potiphar in the Joseph story, we are told that “the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh’s, and captain of the guard” (37:36). Thus the Jacobean translation reads (and the REB essentially repeats this reading); but the current LDS edition glosses this verse: “officer” translates as “HEB eunuch (which often designates a royal official).” And the Bible Dictionary

21. Plainly or euphemistically, depending on the translator, as I’ve noted earlier.

22. Alter (110) and Sternberg (426-7) both make this point, Sternberg analyzing the wife’s “ambiguous subordination” of “the purpose-phrase ‘to play games with’” (426) and painstakingly laying out her subtle management of innuendo and implication.

23. Here Sternberg’s analysis of this “extremely odd” repetition is most helpful, showing how the quoted dialogue reflects the master’s point of view, and noting its crucial stress on the phrase “thy slave” (427). Potiphar has swallowed his wife’s accusation whole, including the implied reproach to himself for bringing Joseph into the household in the first place, and all his anger seems kindled against his favored slave.

24. Again, Sternberg has made this point (427), also noting the forceful return of the term “master,” which Joseph had stressed in his speech to the wife.

in current LDS editions defines "eunuch" as "a class of emasculated men attached to the courts of eastern rulers. They were employed to watch over the harems, and also were often given positions as trusted officials." Commentators note the literal sense of the Hebrew word here yet seem reluctant to take it literally;²⁵ but why not take it so? The sequence of titles identifying Potiphar then may actually condense his history: a eunuch, castrated so he would pose no threat to the royal wives or the royal bloodline, he has been elevated to a guards' captaincy, which the current LDS edition glosses with "HEB chief of the butchers, or the cooks; probably the chief steward." That seems a preferable reading,²⁶ especially in view of the later statement that "he left all that he had in Joseph's hand; and he knew not ought he had, save the bread which he did eat" (6). This might refer merely to ritual cleanliness,²⁷ yet it could as well suggest a character trait. An apt man for the job of chief butcher or cook (or maybe the job has reduced or magnified him to fit it), Potiphar appears to be mainly a glutton with little interest beyond his appetite for food. As a eunuch, he may be uninterested in or incapable of sex or at least of begetting children. He has a wife, but perhaps only for reasons of ceremony or protocol; a court official needs a wife for state functions; she might be a sort of ornament, like a badge or some item of full-dress uniform, little more. And as glutton or gourmand, Potiphar might have even less sex appeal than he might as a lean and healthy eunuch. No wonder the wife is a furious woman: like it or not, she's little more than an object in the house, possibly surrounded by eunuchs of her own. And then the master brings in this young Hebrew slave, who sheds prosperity on everything he touches, so that Potiphar takes a fancy to him and makes him his personal attendant and then overseer of all the other slaves. Above all, having inherited his mother's beauty, young Joseph is "a goodly person, and well favored" (39:6; cf. 29:17).²⁸ Small wonder that "his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and . . . said, Lie with me" (39:7). She's sexually neglected and resentful; already mocked (structurally if not emotionally) by her marriage and now by the presence of this healthy and virile servant who is not hers to command and has, in fact, risen to a status that rivals or exceeds her own, and who, as a male and an overseer, would seem to have more sexual opportunity than she has. (Would it even occur to her that Joseph

25. Speiser 289, 291; von Rad 355. Alter translates the term as "courtier" (107). Price renders it literally, "eunuch" (127), and it was his translation that set me thinking about this aspect of the situation. Kugel also takes the term seriously and discusses its implications (75-6).

26. Speiser (291-2) explains the term and cautions against its confusion with a similar term which roughly means "captain of the guards."

27. See Speiser (303) and von Rad (364).

28. Speiser (303) and von Rad (364) both note the echo of the earlier description of Rachel. Price translates the description with the word "beautiful" (128). Speiser stresses that Potiphar "took a fancy to Joseph, and made him his personal attendant" (301; cf. 303).

might have any commitment to a code of chastity?) She is in a position to envy Joseph both in himself and as her master's personal attendant. The situation is a layered and highly charged triangle.

No wonder at all, then, that Joseph's first refusal, couched in terms of servant status and property and showing a clear grasp of those components of his situation but complete naiveté about the wife's quite different relation to those same factors, would begin to heat her ire more than cool her lust.²⁹ And small wonder that his protracted "day by day" avoidance and climactic flight would boil that resentment into fury. On the face of the narrative, Joseph seems hardly to have a clue as to just how complex, especially how bound up with resentment and violence, the wife's so directly-expressed and seemingly simple lust is. The clues he does have, he first tries to use to deflect her, but they don't help because they refer to the very structure of status and property that arouses her violent lust; and his last desperate recourse, to leave "his garment in her hand, and fle[e], and g[et] him out," at once sexually rejecting her and insulting and jeopardizing her status, burns out her lust and leaves her anger blazing. His flight does preserve his chastity, though it preserves nothing else he might have wanted to preserve. The abandoned garment and Joseph's nakedness may, if we wish, symbolize the status he has lost, top slave, and the identity he has saved: simple Joseph, clean and bare, falling again yet bound to rise.

It is a story in which chastity—right or wrong sexual choice—plays a part; yet when we read it more closely, the issues the story foregrounds in its language will make it hard to read so simply in terms of that single issue. We may take it up, as we like or need, into the simplifying mode of moral exhortation; but both the protagonist and the teller of the tale rather clearly grasp the story in more complicated, less easily reduced ways than that. If we try to take it up in their ways, then, what does it tell us about chastity and how to keep it? Maybe less than we would like to know and more than we suppose the youth need to know. This at least: that no human moral situation or act is ever quite so simple as its description in terms of any single moral rule, although to act in such a situation from fidelity to any single moral rule, whatever rule we think applies, may well save something worth saving. And that we can never determine all the consequences of our acts, wrong or right. But that is in God's hands anyway.

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After so much narrative density, puzzlement, and plexity, some of us may find ourselves spelling R-E-L-I-E-F as we turn to Corianton. Here at

29. Von Rad notes how quickly she goes "from desire to hate" (366).

last, we suppose, will be plainness, a flat-out declaration that sexual sin is next to murder. Alas, although that idea has the status of Church doctrine, Alma 39:5 does not simply and unambiguously yield a proof-text for it. I regret to bear bad news, if this is bad news, but I did not write the news, and I only know what I think I read on the pages. I do accept the doctrine, promulgated in a 1942 First Presidency statement and often reaffirmed since,³⁰ but Alma's words to Corianton are not that specific, and in fact leave us enough room to wonder and guess that we may well need prophetic specification of Alma's meaning. The father first rebukes his son for some quite specific acts:

Thou didst do that which was grievous unto me; for thou didst forsake the ministry, and did go over into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel.

Yea, she did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son. Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted. (39:3-4)

Then, to reinforce the gravity of "that which was grievous unto me," he generalizes:

Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost? (39:5)

It's a troublesome proof-text, and the first trouble is the plural "these things": in this immediate context Alma is not speaking only of chasing a harlot, so what else is next to murder? Still, the generalized plural doesn't exclude sexual sin, and in fact allows plenty of room for that specification. But now the next trouble arises: on what sexual sin has Alma accused Corianton? Thereon should have hung a tale; but it's a tale we have not been told and will not be told in the Book of Mormon as we have it, so we have to infer it as cautiously and justly as we can from the words Alma said to his son. We hear only one side of a conversation, or we read a closet drama for two actors, with all the speeches of the second actor excised.

We are on the verge, then, of more narrative-interpretive difficulty, doubled by our having to try to trace what we can of the story through its refraction in the sentences of a quite different kind of discourse, a sustained moral exhortation and doctrinal exposition that comprise four chapters of the text (I will restrict my reading largely to ch. 39). This prompts a digression. Some LDS scriptural commentators sometimes ac-

30. See, for instance, Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed., 309-10; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 2.92; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed., 124, 709; Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, ch. 5, "The Sin Next to Murder," esp. 61-2; and Bryce J. Christensen, "Chastity, Law of" in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.

claim the doctrinal-expositional “plainness” of Latter-day scripture as preferable to the frequent difficulty and sometimes downright narrative or poetic obscurity of the Old and even the New Testament. They imply that we are to be congratulated for having outgrown a need or taste for complex narratives about complex human actions, for having grown into a capacity to take our doctrine (as if that were all we needed) in doses of straight exposition without the admixture of sweet or sour story or the thin candy-coating of superb prose or poetic style. But I’m not so sure the expositional mode of the Doctrine and Covenants, or the prominence of exposition even within the narrative structure and continuity of the Book of Mormon, is a compliment to our intellectual maturity so much as a concession to our loss of narrative intelligence or our suspicion of complex stories. The Book of Mormon, though an ancient record, was finally, when the people to whom it belonged as a cultural tradition had set about destroying themselves, written for our day, and the redactor whose severe abridgement we have been given may have seen that we would no longer be capable of receiving human or divine wisdom told in stories. We don’t have the whole contents of the Nephite plates, perhaps especially the “more history part” (2 Ne. 4:14) or “the more particular part of the history” (2 Ne. 5:33), because we’re not ready to read them, in more ways than one.

To use Corianton as a bad example, a violator of the law of chastity, it would be nice to have his more particular history, so we might see more clearly how he sinned, how he came to sin, and how he repented and went on to serve after his father’s exhortation. (After Alma 39-42, Corianton is mentioned only twice more, in Alma 63: once obliquely, in “and also did his brother” [2], i.e., Corianton, like Shiblon, “was a just man, and . . . did walk uprightly before God; and . . . did observe to do good continually, to keep the commandments of the Lord his God”; once directly, in “Corianton had gone forth to the land northward in a ship, to carry forth provisions unto the people who had gone forth into that land” [10].) We can only guess at the story’s general outline and at some of its inner dimensions of motive and self-deception and self-justification. Yet even such faint tracings may yield us a Corianton who, like his long-ago kinsman Joseph, turns out to be a more complicated example than we had thought. In the Joseph episode, the complexity was mostly in the situation, including the psyche of the temptress; in this, most of it is in the psyche of the tempted and sinning young man.

How did Corianton sin? More ways than one, if we trust his father’s plural words “things” and “crimes” (39:7). And maybe not in the specific sexual way we have supposed, again if we trust the words Alma does say, and don’t presume too far on his silences. Alma charges Corianton particularly with “go[ing] on unto boasting in thy strength and thy wisdom” (39:2); with having “forsake[n] the ministry” to go “after the harlot

Isabel" (39:3); with having gone "after the lusts of your eyes" (39:9); with having suffered himself "to be led away by [a] vain or foolish thing" and having suffered "the devil to lead away [his] heart . . . after those wicked harlots"; and last, with having brought "great iniquity . . . upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words" (39:11). Except for a later charge of "offense . . . upon . . . points of doctrine," which I believe Corianton incurs by questioning a point in Alma's counsel (41:9-10), as far as I can tell, that's the complete list, and its half-dozen particulars do justify Alma's use of the plurals "these things" and "your crimes."

Yet nowhere, in what looks like an attempt to be quite particular about those crimes, does Alma specifically charge Corianton with the sin of which our chastity lessons usually accuse and convict him without a hearing: fornication. Why not? Perhaps Alma has a compunction (something like that of the pretended-chaste wife of Potiphar) about using specifically sexual terms, but it's hard to believe this of Alma, who otherwise seems to mince no words in his forthright denunciation of his wayward son. Perhaps, even so, he wants to spare his son's feelings at least a little bit—after all, he does say, "I would not dwell upon your crimes, to harrow up your soul, if it were not for your good" (39:7). Maybe plainly naming a sexual sin would dwell too heavily, harrow too fine and deep, though we might think otherwise.

Or maybe Alma does not know whether Corianton fornicated or not, and thus stays scrupulously within the limits of what he does know: Corianton "did go after the harlot Isabel" or "after those wicked harlots" (granted, "go after" might mean to adopt the ways of, yet it might mean hanging around taverns and red-light districts); this much the Zoramites saw and took as an occasion to ignore Alma's preaching, and the rest must be conjecture and a decent silence which waits for Corianton's full confession. That would be another more particular part of his history that our abridgement does not tell us. Maybe it's all right for us to suppose what we will, as long as we don't mind being in the morally awkward position of accusing Corianton of more than his father does, accusing possibly innocent blood. I do mind. I think the most severe reading I can let myself give this passage is that Alma does make exactly the accusations he has grounds for making, "justice exercis[ing] all his demands" (42:24); and declines to make any others. As to whether Corianton did or did not fornicate, or did or did not confess having done so, Alma and the text are strictly silent, and our judgment or our suspicion reflects more on us than on his sinning son. That may even be one of the reasons the text is constructed just as it is: to oblige us to confront our own suspicions and decisions in the absence of complete evidence, and to judge ourselves in the light of the judgment we mete; also to oblige us to identify with a father and priesthood leader in this specific situation of judging and counseling an errant son. We do well to judge mercifully, as we would be

judged, and as I believe Alma, for all his severity, does judge his son, whom he loves and will not disown. Over and over he repeats "my son," ten times in chapter 39 alone, half of those in verses 3-9 as he lays out his charges: confirming their inextricable bond, claiming the young man as he later tells him "mercy claimeth all which is her own" (42:24). That must matter as much as anything else he has to say to him. That might be another thing worth learning from this episode; worth more, perhaps, than learning which sin, or sins, may be "abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost."

Thus far I've deferred the possibly sexual phrase "lusts of your eyes" (39:9), partly because, if it does signify sexual sin, it signifies something less than fornication, and partly because it's a problematic term that need not have a specifically sexual connotation. It would help to know precisely what it denoted in Joseph Smith's time, and even in his personal vocabulary, since we must trust that it adequately renders the sense he understood from the plates. The 1828 edition of Webster's *Dictionary* explains that "the primary sense [of *lust*] is to extend, reach, expand, to stretch forward. It is the same as *list*," and the same dictionary cites three current senses and a fourth "not used": "longing desire; eagerness to possess or enjoy"; "concupiscence; carnal appetite; unlawful desire of carnal pleasure"; "evil propensity; depraved affections and desires"; "vigor; active power." Current LDS Bibles do not gloss "lust of the eyes" where it occurs in 1 John 2:16 as one term of a triad summing up "all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life," and condemning these as "not of the Father, but . . . of the world." "Lust of the flesh" does sound like sexual lust; but then does "lust of the eyes" simply collapse into that as one more manifestation of the same desire, or is it a distinct mode of desire or pleasure (the older Germanic senses of the word denote mainly pleasure, which of course is something often desired)? I think the terms in John's triad name distinct though related modes of secularity that turn or "list" from God. That would make "lust of the eyes" sinful enough, though not sexual in our sense. (In the ancient Greek and modern Freudian senses of the word, yes, *erotic*; but desire or attachment in that sense hasn't, as far as I know, been treated as categorically sinful in Mormon discourse.)

For St. Augustine, who adopted the triad from John's Epistle as the partial basis of a rigorous self-examination in *Confessions* 10.30-36, "concupiscence of the eyes," which he saw as "rooted in the appetite for knowledge" (10.35 [54]), meant an attachment to corporeal or natural beauties and to the very "corporeal light" by which they shine, and a sort of visual "curiosity" which could swell into a reckless desire for novelty or experience for its own sake. In either sense, that would be sinful enough for Augustine, since it would distract the soul from fixing its desire purely on God. But lust of the eyes is not a sexual lust for Augustine; for him, both are, at the root, forms of misdirected human desire-as-such,

which does not know that its ultimate and only true object is God. His examples of this lust include having his eye caught by a hare running across a field or by a spider spinning a web. (Is Alma, four centuries before the Bishop of Hippo, an Augustinian? In some respects, I think so, but that would be another essay and not one I'm tempted now to work out.)

Well before the nineteenth century, as a survey of the senses and citations of the term in the OED quickly reveals, "lust" in English had acquired its specific and strongly pejorative sense of "sexual appetite or desire. Chiefly and now [1878-1928, when the OED was compiled and published] exclusively implying intense moral reprobation"; yet it still retained its equally well-established "Biblical and theological use," signifying "sensuous appetite or desire, considered as sinful or leading to sin," and in this sense was often used in the plural, especially in "lusts of the flesh" or "fleshly lusts." This restates the ambiguity, a potent sense of the term beginning to stain all its other uses by Joseph Smith's time: lust of the eyes might be mainly sensuous, but it might also be sexual. And to translate Alma's language with the plural, "lusts of your eyes," might be unusual but not unprecedented in the English religious vocabulary available to Joseph Smith; it could suggest multiple and different kinds or objects of visual desire or pleasure. In more than forty years of regular activity in the church, I can't recall hearing the phrase "lust of the eyes" used in any warning against sin, unless it was quoted (and not discussed) from Alma or John I, until fairly recent condemnations of film and television,³¹ which Augustine would have seized upon, along with tourism, as evidence that our generation was wholly swallowed up in this sin (he'd have loved to pun on Latin *video*, "I see"). Yet Alma includes it in a list of things "most abominable" in which he sternly warns Corianton to "cross yourself": "for except ye do this ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (39:9).

The trouble is thicker than ever: not only do we *not* find Alma specifically and unambiguously chastising Corianton for any obvious sexual sin

31. President Ezra Taft Benson, in the Priesthood Session of General Conference on 5 April 1986 did take up Alma's term: "'The lusts of your eyes.' In our day, what does that mean? Movies, television programs, and video recordings that are both suggestive and lewd. Magazines and books that are obscene and pornographic. We counsel you, young men, not to pollute your minds with such degrading matter, for the mind through which filth passes is never the same afterwards. Don't see R-rated movies or vulgar videos or participate in any entertainment that is immoral, suggestive, or pornographic" (*Ensign*, May 1986: 45). It seems clear that "lust" here is used in its most narrow sexual sense, and that "eyes" watching suggestive, lewd, pornographic, or obscene movies or video are functioning as organs of specifically sexual lust, not of any more general visual pleasure or curiosity. It's also interesting that "the lust of your eyes" applies also to "books," as if reading words were identical to seeing pictures or actual bodies. President Benson's counsel has been echoed, sometimes without citing the phrase "lusts of your eyes," by a number of General Authorities, including Gordon B. Hinckley (*Ensign*, Nov. 1992: 51-52), Joseph B. Wirthlin (*Ensign*, Mar. 1993: 71), and H. Burke Peterson, (*Ensign*, Nov. 1993: 43).

like fornication, but we find him excoriating a visual sin that we have hardly bothered to think about (until the recent proliferation of visual media), and which even he may regard as a “vain and foolish thing,” empty and trivial. And even if we take lust of the eyes as a sexual sin, Corianton as sinning by looking at Isabel with “lust” or pleasure, and apply Jesus’ declaration that “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Mt. 5:28), all that does is widen the already plural category and catalogue of “next to murder” sins to a rather burdensome breadth. “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out” (Matt. 5:29). These are hard sayings, but they’ve been said, and this is the news I read on the pages; this is the little I understand of Alma’s exhortation so far, and the little less I understand of Corianton and how he sinned so grievously as to call down so severe a warning from his father and spiritual leader in the mission to the Zoramites.

Again, as with the Potiphar episode, the least the text obliges us to acknowledge if we read it a little more closely is that, as an example for our chastity lessons, so far it is distressingly non-specific, or puzzlingly over-precise, about sexual sin; and worse, it stubbornly resists any attempt to reduce it so as to illustrate the application of a single, simple moral rule. Like Joseph and the teller of Joseph’s tale, Alma is less simple than our lessons would have him be; he insists on complexly grasping a complex human reality, which he knows intimately but does not claim to know totally. And unlike the teller of Joseph’s tale, Alma (or Mormon editing and abridging his account) does not tell us a story; he exhorts and expounds. But in his exhortation and exposition he implicitly analyzes, and what he analyzes, not totally, not exhaustively, is the soul of Corianton. He performs a kind of psychology, or even reconstructive psychosurgery. We can trace his analysis briefly and generally.

First, Alma says Corianton did “not give so much heed unto my words as did thy brother, among the people of the Zoramites” (39:2). Corianton might have taken his older brother Shiblon as an example of attentive obedience to his father’s words, and that would have been a good example to the Zoramites; but, perhaps caught up in the novelty of being among a foreign people in a foreign place, he did not. And more crucially, “thou didst go on unto boasting in thy strength and thy wisdom” (2): Corianton had too much self-esteem, was too self-reliant. Next he forsook the ministry and followed the harlot Isabel “over into the land of Siron, among the borders of the Lamanites” (3): he pursued novelty or strangeness into farther reaches, geographically, culturally, socially, and perhaps sexually. (I take it that Alma here claims, “I know where you were seen, and with whom”; we could take the geographic/cultural specifics as supporting a claim that Corianton kept company with the harlot, yet “after” need not specify even that.) Since Alma cites this adventure after citing Corianton’s excessive self-reliance, we may suppose excessive self-reliance allowed him to believe he could take these risks without seri-

ously endangering his soul or anyone else's. And besides, we can imagine him saying in the silence after his father names Isabel, he wasn't the only one who found her attractive. Yes, I know, his father might be answering, "she did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son" (4): either he cannot justify his bad example by appealing to anyone else's (so much for self-reliance!), or Alma strongly doubts he bothered to make that excuse for himself when he forsook the ministry. The phrase "steal away the hearts" sounds like a cliché of junk romantic fiction, and that may have been its provenance in the vocabulary of Joseph Smith; but it translates a fatherly concern of the highest order. The heart is at stake here, the seat of thought, desire, and volition in Biblical usage; and to Alma, Corianton's rash act seems to have suggested his heart had grievously strayed from the ministry it was called to, and for a "vain and foolish thing" at that: "suffer not the devil to lead away your heart again" (11): his salvation hangs in the balance, not yet for any specific and acted sexual sin, unless lust of the eyes, but (as it would in Augustine's moral theology) for a sinful misdirection of the heart away from God, from God's work, and from God's words as given through his father and mission leader. "The harlot Isabel" may well have been a highly paid and notorious courtesan, quite beyond Corianton's means,³² who might not even have given this young foreigner a second glance; she may

32. This might account for Alma's otherwise incongruous later warning, "Seek not after riches" (39:14), though unequal distribution of wealth is part of the Zoramite complex of sins. "The harlot Isabel" does sound, as a phrase, rather like a well-known popular appellation. The name Isabel itself looks like an embarrassing anachronism or mistranslation, since English dictionaries identify it as being of French or Spanish origin and probably derived from Elizabeth, which is originally a Hebrew name (but that would oblige us to suppose identical and improbable-looking paths of sound shift in two different cultural traditions). My hunch is that Isabel among the Nephites derives from Jezebel, which in Hebrew looks phonetically similar to begin with, and could have shifted toward a set of phonemes that Joseph Smith might transliterate as Isabel. If the name had passed down among Nephites and Zoramites orally or by way of the brass plates (on which I suppose Ahab's reign was recorded), it would make sense for a community to apply that name to a cult prostitute or a professional harlot, or for such a woman boldly to adopt the name of Ahab's famously wicked queen, the daughter of the king of Sidon (1 Kgs. 16:31), a place name also used in the Book of Mormon, though Siron sounds oddly like that as well.

John Gray, in *I and II Kings: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), says "The name Jezebel ('izebel) as pointed in the MT [Masoretic Text] is an obvious parody" based on "zebel ('dung)" and that the "first perversion of the name may have been 'i-ze-bul ('No nobility)" (332-33). He also conjectures a link to words meaning "'Where is the Prince (i.e. Baal)?' . . . actually a cultic cry of those who mourned the eclipse of Baal as a vegetation deity" (333). Elsewhere he notes that Jezebel's "harlotries" were of course "ritual prostitution" (493). Jezebel's father Ethbaal was a priest of Astarte, the Canaanite fertility goddess and consort of Baal, so this all seems probable. Some Bible dictionaries etymologize her name as meaning "un-cohabited" or "un-husbanded," which might be taken to mean "chaste," but might also signify a dedication to the goddess and to her worship in acts of ritual intercourse. My hunch about Isabel/Jezebel thus might suggest that Corianton's pursuit of the harlot put him in danger of idolatry, the "abomination" of pagan fertility cult-worship.

not even have guessed what was happening, may not have flung any specific seductive looks or charms wittingly at this boy's eyes; she need have been little more than the occasion for his error, a hare running across his path.

We might let our guesses reach a little farther here. Though Alma need not know or suspect this, Corianton might have been telling himself, boasting in his own strength and wisdom rather than trusting his father and God and staying where he was called "among the Zoramites," that he could convert the harlot and her entourage, not to mention some Sironites and Lamanites. But that was not his business and his father tells him so: "Thou shouldst have tended to the ministry wherewith thou wast entrusted" (4). This is conjecture (as in B. H. Roberts's novel), plausible but not conclusively arguable. Less conjectural might be the hunch that the plural "lusts of [his] eyes," including but not limited to sexual curiosity, were what led Corianton across the borders, no matter what higher motives he may have boasted to himself. Why else would Alma make so much of that "vain and foolish thing," warning Corianton, in words that do echo his earlier "go . . . after the harlot": "go no more after the lusts of your eyes, but cross yourself in all these things" (9)? Again, the plurals invite or allow us to suppose that more than sexual temptation was involved, though we can also, if we wish, take "all these things" as referring to any and all forms of sexual temptation. That works all right in this one verse; but in the fuller context of the chapter it will not do, since it ignores every other item in Alma's list.

This about sums up what I see Alma saying about the etiology of Corianton's sin. He has not, so far, described the young man as a fornicator, but only as a brash and rash youth who overreached himself, transgressed some borders, for "vain and foolish" reasons he probably hid from himself under a varnish of highminded self-esteem. So doing, Corianton surely did put himself in the way of serious sexual temptation and transgression; that is a harlot's stock in trade, though harlots have been known to repent, and Jesus once declared they would "go into the kingdom of God before" the chief priests and elders (Matt. 21:31). I think Corianton's "lust" (it would be naive to suppose he didn't have any) amounted more to curiosity than sexual passion, as many of us could testify is largely true of adolescent lust (but which doesn't make it any less dangerous). And I think that Alma sees him this way, and swiftly, justly, and mercifully seeks a means to prevent worse damage than Corianton has already done himself and others. For me, this makes Corianton almost useless as a clear example of unchastity and what to do about it, but a much more interesting and complexly understood case of a sinful action, partly driven by incipient unchastity, that involves the full dimensions of a complicated human psyche, including the intellectual or doctrinal points that "worried" Corianton's "mind" (40:1; 41:1; 42:1, 29-30).

But Alma's implicit analysis doesn't limit itself to etiology, nor even to symptomatology; his diagnosis of Corianton's sin goes well beyond the direction of the youth's heart and his wanderings into strange territory, into the effects that straying had on others whom Corianton seems not to have given a thought: the Zoramites.

Behold, O my son, how great iniquity ye brought upon the Zoramites; for when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words.

And now the Spirit of the Lord doth say unto me: Command thy children to do good, lest they lead away the hearts of many people to destruction; therefore I command you, my son, in the fear of God, that ye refrain from your iniquities;

That ye turn to the Lord with all your might, mind, and strength; that ye lead away the hearts of no more to do wickedly; but rather return unto them, and acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done (39:11-13).

Here, I suggest, we do approach a form of sin, a burden that will be upon Corianton's soul because he was called to the ministry, that we can take seriously as next to murder, near to the shedding of innocent blood: Corianton's bad conduct, forsaking the ministry and running off to the borders, has made him like the harlot and like the devil, one who "lead[s] away the hearts of many people to destruction" (12). Spiritually this is near to murder, for murder takes away the life of the body and cuts short the "space for repentance" (Alma 42:5) that God grants to every soul in the world, and this leading by bad conduct does delay and may prevent the repentance of those whose hearts are led away: "they would not believe in my words." The Spirit's dramatic intrusion into Alma's discourse at this point seems to confirm that this is indeed the heart of the matter: "Command thy children to do good, lest they lead away the hearts of many."

This leading away is a sin Alma has good cause to comprehend and abhor as "grievous," for he committed it in his own young manhood, as we know having read that story twice before we reach this point in Alma's record, once in the third person (Mos. 27:8-10) and once in the first person when Alma tells it to Helaman (Al. 36), not long before his exhortation to Corianton. The language of both those accounts of Alma's youthful sins strikingly anticipates the language he uses with Corianton. To cite only the three most salient instances: the account in Mosiah 27 says that Alma, an unbeliever and flashy young rhetorician, "became a great hinderment to the prosperity of the church; stealing away the hearts of the people" (9); and the confessional account to Helaman admits, "Yea, and I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away into destruction" (Al. 36:14), and says that during his three days' and nights' paralyzed insensibility his "soul was harrowed up to the greatest degree" (36:12; cf. 36:17). Can we doubt, then, that to Alma a sin next to murder is

anything—self-esteem, unchastity, anger, riches, or any vain or foolish thing—by which I let my heart be led, or by which I lead the heart of another, away from God? All sins, for Alma, seem to be ultimately forms of idolatry, whoring after strange gods rather than loving and being faithful to the God who knows us. During his torment for his sin, Alma knew “the pains of a damned soul” (36:16), “eternal torment” and “the pains of hell” (36:12-13), or of living “without God in the world” (Mosiah 27:31; Alma 41:11), so acutely that he longed to “become extinct both soul and body” (36:15). That, he seems to feel, is the ultimate description of those whose hearts are distracted or led away from God; and that, I think, is his understanding of sin not simply as rule-breaking but as a fundamental action and condition.

We can, if we wish or need, use Alma’s exhortation to Corianton to support a chastity lesson, for chastity, or at least the risk of risking chastity, is an issue in it; but even its first chapter presents us with an insistently larger and more complicated case than that. Like the teller of Joseph’s tale, Alma (and Mormon abridging him) has other and bigger fish to fry. Alma’s grip on the root nature of sin is every bit as profound and severe as Augustine’s, and his analysis of Corianton’s sin, searching its dark and tangled ways in the psyche of his son, declines to reduce its human moral and spiritual complexity to the simple keeping or breaking of any one moral rule. Unless that rule is keeping trust.

*

Once again, no relief from complexity, this time not even where we thought we’d found it in the apparent “plainness” of moral exhortation and doctrinal exposition. As a source of examples for the lessons we wish to teach, the scriptures will yield up just about anything we want—if we want it badly enough to “wrest” it, to reduce it to the simplifications we think we need. But in their hard and dense resistance to our reductions, the scriptures testify, perhaps, that they and their divine and human authors think we need something more. And they stand more than ready to yield that, too, to our patient, dogged, fierce, and generous attention.³³

One of my friends who read the first draft of this essay said, So what’s your conclusion? I hadn’t worked out any at the time, and in a sense I still haven’t. A conclusion closes, and I had wanted to open some

33. Against the presumption that the Hebrew Bible is “didactic,” as also against the presumption that it is “literary” or “historical” (in our usual senses), see Sternberg’s dense and rigorous argument in the first chapter of his *Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1-57, esp. 37-38). For Sternberg, it appears “beyond doubt that the whole idea of didacticism is alien, if not antipathetic, to the spirit of Israelite storytelling and has been imported from later philosophical and religious traditions that it would reject” (38).

scriptural texts that I felt had already been closed too long. Still, I can and should try to explain some of the implications—outflatten the infoldings—of the openings I think I’ve made into the texts.

Another friend, a counselor in my ward bishopric, to whom I gave a copy of the second draft, said, with what I took as a mock-rueful smile, You’ve taken our tool away. I said maybe I’d shown what a precision tool it was. He’s a doctor who reads a lot, and if I’d had any wit ready I might have said I’d shown that a scalpel could be used for more delicate work than testing patellar reflexes. Something like that.

That might be the first thing to take up: what has all my unravelling of complications done to the moral-instructive uses of these stories? Joseph’s temptation in Potiphar’s house might help us to show young people just how complicated is the world of sexuality, and how dangerously violent, how structured and fractured by possession, gender politics, and resentment it is. Almost seventy years ago, Freud remarked

That the education of young people at the present day conceals from them the part which sexuality will play in their lives is not the only reproach which we are obliged to make against it. Its other sin is that it does not prepare them for the aggressiveness of which they are destined to become the objects. In sending the young out into life with such a false psychological orientation, education is behaving as though one were to equip people starting on a Polar expedition with summer clothing and maps of the Italian Lakes.³⁴

Joseph’s encounter with Potiphar’s wife surely does show that sex is more than an invitation to a campout, or a picnic in Disneyworld; it shows sex as thickly entangled with aggressiveness, a danger anyone risks who enters into a sexual relationship, illicit or licit. It might also suggest that resisting or fleeing a temptation to sex won’t necessarily insulate one from violence. It might suggest above all that anyone’s possible sexual partner has a complicated situation and psyche that are quite simply beyond one’s knowledge, let alone one’s power to predict or control—and this is true for both Potiphar’s wife and Joseph: neither knows the other or can predict what the other will do. I’m suggesting, then, that read more closely, this story might become an even stronger, if less simply emphatic, caution. It might also become a less immediately comforting illustration of the notion that if you just keep your “virtue,” everything will turn out all right for you; after all, Joseph keeps his and goes to jail, while the wife compromises hers and stays home (for all the good that may do her).

34. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, The Standard Edition (Vienna and London, 1930, 1931; New York: Norton, 1962, 1989), 97-98, n.1. (I own two different paperback printings, both by Norton, of this “Standard Edition,” but differently paginated, so it may help to indicate that the footnote quoted is note 1 in chapter VIII.)

My reading of Alma's exhortation to Corianton, as I've already suggested, will make Corianton less useful as an example of sexual misconduct, since it's not at all clear that anything more sexual than lust of the eyes was involved in his sin. Yet here, too, Corianton might become a stronger example of something we seriously need to teach and learn: that any sinful act arises out of a complex chain of circumstances, causes, motives, self-deceptive rationalizations, etc., and ramifies into consequences, exterior and interior, far more broad and grave than the agent in the act can know. What we can discern of Corianton's story can lead us into a deeper doctrine of sin than we usually discuss: sin not simply as rule-breaking but as an act in which we run counter to God's will to love us and to be known and loved in return.

And as I've also suggested, the largest example in this story may be not Corianton, whose voice after all we do not hear, but his father Alma, whose voice speaks out of the depth of his own experiences of sin and anguish and forgiveness and dedication. It's ironic that we to whom this example pertains—parents and teachers and leaders—have so largely ignored this visible and audible example and wrested from it an invisible and inaudible one, Corianton the fornicator, to wield as a tool of persuasion on youth. Perhaps there's a lesson in that, too: we who lead and correct others stand ourselves in need of correction.

Paying more heed to Alma, we might learn not to accuse—or intimidate or interrogate—beyond the limits of our evidence, while being forthright about what we do "have against" an errant soul. We might learn to speak steadily the love that binds us—a bond that may be all the stronger and deeper in Alma as he recognizes his own sin, leading hearts away, passed down to the next generation. We might learn to stop insisting on punishment, penalty, pain, beyond the obligation which Alma urges on Corianton: "return unto them [the Zoramites] and acknowledge your faults and that wrong which ye have done" (39:13). That seems to suffice Alma; at the very end of his long exhortation, he simply calls his son back to full engagement in the ministry: "go thy way, declare the word with truth and soberness, that thou mayst bring souls unto repentance, that the great plan of mercy may have claim upon them" (42:31). At least in this instance, I see no sign in Alma, despite the severity of his doctrine of sin, of any notion that "sinners must suffer," or more specifically that leaders must impose suffering on them in the form of penalties beyond the ethical obligations of the situation, or humiliation beyond what comes of hearing a counselor speak frankly of their wrongs. Alma himself suffered three days and nights of hell, but (or because of that) he will not put his son through it. Alma knows by experience that sinners—in his deep and strong sense of the word—do suffer, and that above all they need to hear, or need to recall having heard, a word that can call them out

of the suffering of being in the world without God.

These scriptural examples, I think, are not very helpful in defining or refining a concept of chastity; for that we simply have to consult other sources. In the Joseph story, chastity seems very much, even too much, a matter of property, specifically of which woman belongs to which man; yet there may also be an idea of "moral cleanliness" or "purity" implied in Joseph's sense that, to violate the codes of property and slave status he appeals to, would make him "sin against God." In the Book of Mormon, too, some texts (Jac. 2:28; Moro. 9:9) seem to suggest that chastity belongs as a sort of property or value to women; so Corianton has seemed perhaps the one strong illustration of unchastity as a reproach to a male (but see also the reproach in Jac. 2:22-35). We can still take him as that, but now in a sense at once more subtle and more severe: Corianton's unchastity is incipient, in the lusts of his eyes, yet it is not less serious to Alma, and calls for severe, delicate, and loving counsel, for even in this form it is a "leading away" from God.

Another serious question arises: have I challenged or undermined any fundamental doctrine in reading these scriptural examples as I have? I don't think so. Yet it's true that, on my reading of Alma 39, sexual sin is not *the* but only *a* or *one* "sin next to murder." Perhaps that is damaging, since it spreads "next to murder" over so many possible sins—every one you can think of, and all the ones you can't—that it spreads it too thin, where we'd wanted it laid thick on just one category of sins. If that is bad news—and it may be, to some—then again all I can say is that I didn't write the news, I just read it. Maybe I should have kept it to myself. But as I've said elsewhere, I speak as a scribe and not as one having authority. What has had authority here is the scriptural text; and "Exegesis," as Joachim Jeremias put it, "is obedience."³⁵

We've recently seen in the church at least one change in doctrinal *language*—the replacement of "free agency" by "moral agency" or just "agency"—that might shed light on the doctrinal-language implications of my reading of Alma 39. The term "free agency" does not appear in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, but it does appear, though only with cross-references to "Accountability; Agency; Fall of Man," in recent LDS topical guides to the scriptures. In 1990, Elder Boyd K. Packer said, "The agency the Lord has given us is not a 'free' agency. The term 'free' agency is not found in the revelations. It is a *moral agency*. The Lord has given us freedom of choice . . ." Similarly in 1992 he said, "The phrase '*free agency*' does not appear in scripture. The only agency spoken of there is *moral agency*." In both cases he cites D&C 101:78, where the phrase "moral

35. I don't know where this may occur in Jeremias's work; I've seen it only as an epigraph in Jonathan Bishop's little-known and hard-to-find *Who is Who?* (Ithaca: Glad Day Press, 1975), 185.

agency" does occur.³⁶ The textual remarks are precisely right: the term or phrase "free agency" does not occur in the canonically accepted revelations, the standard works. Yet in both cases the collateral claims—"not a 'free' agency"; "the only agency spoken of there"—do not seem fully warranted by some scriptural contexts and by the concepts that occur in them:

Wherefore the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. (2 Ne. 2:16)

And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, . . . or to choose captivity and death. . . . (2 Ne. 2:26-27)

Therefore cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves—to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life. (2 Ne. 10:23)

. . . being placed in a state to act according to their wills and pleasures, whether to do evil or to do good—. . . . (Alma 10:31)

. . . for behold ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free. (Hel. 14:30)

Other citations might be made, but these sufficiently show that a *concept* that *sounds like* "free agency" is indeed "spoken of there"; and the close connection in such passages between the terms "free" and "act," especially in "free to act," suggests that the agency the Lord has given us may be *termed* a "free" agency. We are "free to choose" and "free to act" for ourselves, and thus we are accountable, moral agents. I really have no quarrel with the substantive point of Elder Packer's declarations, and only a small puzzlement at the rhetoric in which they are embedded. I have long preferred (and used, especially in my literature and writing classes as well as in religious contexts) the term *agency*, finding it sufficient for my needs.

What does pertain more closely to my reading of Alma 39 here is the protocol of interpretation implied in Elder Packer's remarks: if a "term" or "phrase" does not appear in scripture, does that mean that a doctrine usually expressed in that term or phrase, in those words, has no scriptural foundation? If so, then "sexual sin is the sin next to murder" rests on a narrow and uncertain foundation, since Alma 39:5 does not use those words, and in context appears to say, more broadly, that sexual sin, along with several other sins, is a sin next to murder. The *concept* remains, but the *words* in which we have discussed it seem to have far less scrip-

36. See "Mormon-Correct Language," *Sunstone* vol. 16, no. 2 (August 1992): 68; and Boyd K. Packer, "Our Moral Environment," *Ensign*, May 1992: 67.

tural warrant than does the phrase “free agency.” I can live with that. I see my reading of Alma 39 not as suggesting any change in doctrine, but only as offering a scribe’s clarification of the scriptural context usually cited as the source of that doctrine.

For me, the largest point my essay makes—and I’ve said this already, too—is that we read the scriptures poorly when we flatten their stories into flannelboard cutouts to illustrate some one moral rule or other. I’m flattering them right now as I try to summarize these implications, and I herewith repent of using the language of “example” in doing so. I do think the scriptures have far more to teach us than our own instructive or didactic biases may let us grasp. Increasingly, over the past couple of decades, I’ve pondered Moroni’s conditional clause, which I memorized in my teens, “And when ye shall receive these things” (Moro. 10:4). I memorized the whole thing back then. But now, as befits a middle-aged reader who often stalls mid-sentence, whether reading silently to himself or aloud to a class, I can’t get past that first clause. I know I’ve received a lot, and asked about it, and gotten what has seemed like generous manifestation of the truth; yet I can’t help asking if I’ve fully received what’s offered. I think this essay is suggesting that in our simplistic reduction of scriptural stories to examples of rules, we are declining to “receive these things” fully, and thus deferring the manifestation of truth. I hope the kind of reading I’ve done here does that a little less.

Our sacred texts prompt us to “liken all scriptures unto us” (1 Ne. 19:23); yet the closer we attend to the stories they tell, to the weft of their words, the more difference we discover, the more stubborn singularity we strike. Joseph is not me, Corianton not you; they are themselves, acting their own ways in their own sets of circumstances, unrepeatable in the details that make them singularly who and what they are. As the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould once remarked, sounding like a heretic to science (if we think that science only seeks out simple and ultimate general descriptions and universal laws), “our empirical world” is such that “everything interesting happens only once in its meaningful details.”³⁷ That could appall us, drive us to despair of ever connecting. And if to connect we turn to generality, reduction, and simplification, we connect too sparsely, too loosely—we only connect the dots, when we need a much more detailed and shaded picture. Yet we do connect, and connect much more than dots; we connect all the more intricately, thickly—it’s like getting stuck with burdock, as any attentive reader will tell you—the farther we reach into the more particular story of this one person who, in density of detail, is finally like no other. I might even risk likening the re-

37. In a review of Freeman Dyson’s *Infinite in All Directions*, in the *New York Review of Books* vol. 35, no. 16 (27 October 1988): 32.

mark of the architect Mies van der Rohe to our situation as readers of scriptural stories and of our own lives: "God hides in the details."³⁸ And he means to be found.

38. Widely familiar in the form, "God is in the details" (and as of March 1998 used by Elder Neal A. Maxwell in slightly modified form, "God is in the details of our lives," and often echoed by local leaders in my BYU Stake), this remark attributed to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe occurs in *Chambers Dictionary of Modern Quotations*, ed. Nigel Rees (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1993), with a citation to the New York *Herald Tribune*, 1969, and the caution, "but said earlier, possibly by Flaubert" (277). I first read it, in the form I quote, on the last page of a novel, Robb Forman Dew's *Dale Loves Sophie to Death* (New York: Farrar, 1981), 217.