

The Signifier Signified:

A Deconstruction of Korihor's Demands for a Sign

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“The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in *a certain way*. Because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it...the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work...No exercise is more widespread today and one should be able to formalize its rules.”¹

LATTER-DAY KORIHOR’S

Whether you’re a renowned keynote speaker identifying one in the comments, or a former member utilizing the story to criticize the church itself by creating your own church after his name, *Korihor* has become an unusually persistent figure in these our latter-days. For the skeptic, Korihor’s story offers an individual with whom to relate. Just as they do today, Korihor was out there challenging the inherited authority and silly traditions of his fathers, refusing such things as testimony as sufficient evidence and otherwise questioning the claims concerning an unseen God—with many of our modern-day cosplayers demanding signs just as Korihor once did.

For the active believer, Korihor’s story offers a confirmation that these deconstructionists already, and still will yet, receive that which they cannot understand—because they desire it.

We oft see the narrative of Alma 30² utilized as a mechanism to deconstruct the Latter-day faith, but there is irony in the appropriation of Korihor’s experience for the unbeliever. For example, on August 15, 2026, the Hellfire Agency of the Church of Korihor, the arm in charge of the critical thinking mission of this church, held a live YouTube event regarding the Mephistophelean Prophet, Shane Baldwin. The First Herald and founder of the Church of Korihor, Joe Rawlins, rationally explained,

“Alma and the Christian’s killed him. They killed Korihor...Alma stripped his voice away and he—under duress— said, “Okay, I’ll admit that your God is real and that I was only deceived by the devil.’.... Korihor was right. That’s the disturbing part: Korihor was right...[he] dies because of the apathy of Christian’s in his community and their disregard for the homeless ... So I don’t know that this is a great example particularly because ultimately what Korihor experiences is censorship.”³

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Motilal Banarsidass, 1994., c.1 part 1, p.24

² Royal Skousen, editor. *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Alma 30., Hereafter cited as BOM.

³ “Shane Baldwin Threatened to Expose Her | Not Well in Zion.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Church of Korihor, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kgiy6SF3H68&t=3653s.

But here we see Prophet Russel M. Nelson's admonition ring true, that one should not be a lazy learner.⁴

It's easy to concede and agree that Korihor may have admitted to the power of Alma's God under some form of duress, for this would seem to follow as true, since Alma, being wise, believed that should he lift the curse of muteness, Korihor would just go about leading away the hearts of the people immediately (Alma 30.55). Therefore, Alma left the timing of that decision up to the Lord. Thus, Korihor was cast out to be dealt with by the Lord—which does include being dealt with by the people of the Lord.

Here is where we come upon all those lackadaisical study habits. Our first herald and other deconstructionists are upset that Korihor has to go around “a begging for his food” (Alma 30.56), as if the guy doesn't travel through the godforsaken wilderness fending for himself as a part of daily life as he goes from settlement to settlement harshing villagers vibes. Second, yes, it says he begs for food. It doesn't say anything about no one ever giving him something to eat or not. He didn't starve to death after all. Third, the claim that the apathy of Christian's killed a mute homeless man is inaccurate even with out attempting a de-sedimentation of the text. The people of Alma and the land of Zarahemla, being convinced of the wickedness of Korihor, were converted again unto the Lord. However, and most importantly, their conversion put an end to Korihor's iniquity; which is to say it put an end to both his wickedness, and his newly acquired unfavorable situation of muteness. (Alma 30.58). So, arguably, Korihor may not have remained mute up to the time of his death, because the Lord and his people dealt with it accordingly—in his own time, and in his own way.⁵ Neither was Korihor homeless, for Zarahemla was not his home. He entered enemy territory to dishearten the people (Alma 30.6), and is not required to be taken in, therefore, he was cast out. The text doesn't even actually say that he was cast out of Zarahemla. They let him go around a-begging until he decided to leave of his own accord. Next, when Korihor left Zarahemla, he was apparently still struck dumb to some degree because he continued to beg for support in Antionum among the Zoramites. That didn't last long, however, because this is indeed where he was trampled to death (Alma 30.59–60). Thus, we see the end of the non-mute nomad. But then, who exactly killed Korihor? Christians? It wouldn't seem to be the case; not precisely. For we discover that the Zoramites have separated themselves from the Nephites, and that their leader, Zoram, has been teaching his people to bow down to dumb idols, etc (Alma 30.59–Alma 31.2). I'd say death by trampling is a pretty “dumb idol etcetera.” Moreover, Alma was saddened to hear about their overall behavior, his heart so grieved and mixed with some existential trepidation that he put together a band of brethren to go take up the sword of the word of God unto the Zoramites, that they may hear Gods word and be once more converted unto living eternal life (Alma 30.59–Alma 31.5).

⁴ Nelson, Russell M. “Christ Is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains.” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Apr. 2021, www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2021/04/49nelson.

⁵ Oaks, Dallin H. “In His Own Time, in His Own Way.” *Ensign*, Aug. 2013, www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2013/08/in-his-own-time-in-his-own-way.

Ironically, Alma would soon teach the Zoramites that they had been falling, and that the Lord would deal with them in the same manner as they dealt with Korihor, following a sign in the form of an ancient motif wherein the wicked are punished by means of the wicked,

“I say unto you, if ye do not any of these things, behold your prayer is in vain and availeth you nothing, and ye are as hypocrites which do deny the faith. Therefore if ye do not remember to be charitable, ye are as dross which the refiners cast out—it being of no worth—and is trodden under foot of men.”⁶

It's no surprise that the conclusion of the deconstructionists is what it is, because fortune favors the brave, and the brave know the ugly, and the ugly ain't pretty. Though those such as Alma, being wise, know that,

“The whole world knows the beautiful as the beautiful, and this is only the ugly; it knows the good as the good and this is, indeed, the bad.

Something and Nothing producing each other;
The difficult and the easy complimenting each other;
The long and short off-setting each other;
The high and the low filling out each other;
Note and sound harmonizing with each other;
Before and after following each other—

These are in accordance with what is constant.

Hence the sage dwells in the deed that consists of taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words.”⁷

Alma knows that the will of the Lord is in accordance with what is constant. Therefore, he acted not upon Korihor, and also preached not unto him, but set him free.

“And now behold are ye sure that this is a good seed? I say unto you: Yea. For every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness. Therefore if a seed groweth, it is good. But if it groweth not, behold it is not good; therefore it is cast away.”⁸

⁶ BOM, Alma 34.28–29

⁷ Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by D. C. Lau, Penguin Books, 1963., c.46 p.50 [*Alternative translations of the Tao Te Ching typically order this as Chapter 2, not Chapter 46*].

⁸ BOM, Alma 32.31

A SIGN OR NOT A SIGN, THAT IS THE QUESTION

The conceptual structure of Korihor's demand to Alma begs several questions:

1. What does Korihor mean when he asks for a "sign"?
2. What relationship does a sign bear to the thing it signifies?
3. Why are the signs Alma provides insufficient?
4. Can any sign provide the kind of certainty Korihor demands from it?
5. Why does a narrative centered upon the demand for a sign culminate in the disappearance of speech and the appearance of writing?

When examined more closely, Alma 30 contains a remarkably intricate problem of signification—a concept at the heart of deconstruction. Korihor demands a sign that is capable of overcoming the apparent absence of God, to which Alma responds that Korihor already has signs enough already, expanding that all things denote that there is a God (Alma 30.43–44). Nevertheless, Korihor insists on a sign that is, by his measure, more decisive.

However, the sign he eventually receives is one that deprives him of speech. When unable to speak he must move to writing in order to articulate his interpretation. His alleged decisive sign, therefore, does not terminate at signification, it produces more signs.

This reversal exposes the instability already present within Korihor's own demand. He seeks a sign capable of producing certainty by overcoming absence, yet anything functioning as a "sign that there is a God" must remain distinct and distant from God. It is the case that the sign itself makes the absent present precisely by preserving a distinction and putting distance between itself and what it signifies; and thus the result of Korihor receiving his sign is not the end of the narrative, because the meaning must be conveyed through further signs; and the meaning of those signs, signs more.

At first, Alma asserts the existence of God in ways that Korihor neither perceives nor accepts. Korihor, therefore, requests further evidence. If Alma can produce an observable manifestation of divine power, Korihor will accept the claim. Notice that his request does not explicitly demand an encounter alongside an existing interpretation, rather, he asks for a sign powerful enough to convince only him. The question then, is whether the decisive nature he assigns to that sign would also settle its meaning, or whether conviction would still depend upon recognizing and interpreting it as divine.

According to Korihor, God is not sufficiently present, so his requested sign is supposed to remedy this absence. That is to say, there exists an absence which requires a sign producing a known present, with the sign then being that which will bridge the distance between an unseen God and Korihor's demand for knowledge. Yet this surfaces one of our more basic questions. Not to be Jordan Peterson about it, but if Korihor rejects the plentiful signs of Alma, then what exactly does Korihor mean by "sign"? What is a

sign? Well, it must first be acknowledged that asking what a sign is presupposes that the sign may possess an essence that can be made present...

A sign is something that directs an interpreter toward something beyond the sign itself: smoke can signify fire; tracks can signify an animal; written marks can signify a thought—any particular event can be interpreted as signifying the activity of an unseen cause. However, in each instance, the sign is not identical with what it signifies. Smoke is not fire; tracks are not animals; the word “God” is not God, and so a sign of “God” cannot simply be God. If the sign and what it signifies became absolutely identical, the relation of signification would disappear. There would no longer be a “sign of” any thing; there would simply be the thing itself. And note that *distinction* need not mean *separation*. Smoke can signify that a fire is present beside it. Similarly, a sign understood as revealing divine activity need not imply that God is absent.

The narrower point is that a sign mediates what it signifies. In other words, recognizing an event as a sign of God still involves interpreting what that event revealed. In essence, the signifier is the perceptible form, the signified is the meaning articulated through it, and the referent is that to which it refers. Experiencing something and recognizing it as God's action remain distinguishable aspects of the encounter. The recognition and interpretation then provide the level of intelligibility the event produced for the witnesses.

A flower or a tree offers a further analogy of this dependence on relations. A plant is empty of independent essence, requiring soil, sun, water, et al., in order to exist. Its dependence on these things does not prevent it from being a flower or a tree, it describes how it exists. It arises as it does out of the context of its conditions. This reminds me of the Heart Sutra, which expresses a comparable account of dependence,

“Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form, form too is not other than emptiness.”

Emptiness here means to be centrally empty of independent or intrinsic existence. This illuminates how a sign's meaning likewise depends on a prepotent system of relationships, an interpreter, and what it signifies. In other words, a plant exists through its conditions, while a sign acquires meaning through mediation.

And so, if God became immediately present—a presence requiring no interpretation, mediation, reference, representation, or signification—then Korihor would not have a sign of God, he would have God. The sign thus points towards presence while announcing its absence. Furthermore, this hypothetical only names an encounter without mediation, it does not establish that such an encounter could be recognized as God. The question is whether that recognition would itself depend upon a system of

relations through which God becomes intelligible. Alma had already been testifying that the traces of God are everywhere, yet these are indeed not God; and their identification as traces of God already involves interpretation. They denote that there is, witness to, and signify God. But Korihor denies these.

This produces the first instability with Korihor's demand. The sign is supposed to establish the power of an unseen God, but its success depends on how it is recognized. The sign can function as a sign only insofar as God remains in some sense absent from it. Distinction does not require God's absence, it requires relation through which the event signifies divine power. The sign presents something precisely by acting proxy for, or rather referring to something that is not identical, something beyond itself.

A TRACE IN THE ABSENCE OF PRESENCE

"The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance [l'apparaître] and signification."⁹

There is a residue of absence within that which is present, and it can be understood as a "trace." A sign is not a sensible signifier pointing toward an independently present signified, it is a differential trace whose apparent signified is already implicated in further signification. Meaning, meaning is arranged from relational play rather than terminating in an absolutely present meaning.

A trace is easily imagined as something that is left behind. Footprints in the snow indicate someone was present but has since departed. Yet this can be taken further. What is absent is not that which is merely left behind once it disappears, absence participates in determining the identity of what is presently before us—of that which is plainly manifest.

Consider the word "light." The word appears here for the reader, yet its meaning does not exist independently of its differentiation from darkness, shadow, night, lamp, sun, heavy, et al. Those alternatives do not need to appear on the page, but their absence does not render them irrelevant. The differences they establish make the present word intelligible. What is present, therefore, contains traces of what is absent. This, something we already learned earlier in the text at hand. For,

"It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not so, my firstborn in the wilderness, righteousness could not be brought to pass, neither wickedness, neither holiness nor misery, neither good nor bad. Wherefore, all things must needs be a compound in one; wherefore, if it should be one body it must needs remain as dead,

⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Motilal Banarsidass, 1994., part 1, c.2 p.65

having no life neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption, happiness nor misery, neither sense nor insensibility.”¹⁰

Like a plant in the context of its conditions, and the empty form of your formed emptiness; like knowing that this is good and this is indeed the bad, what is present contains traces of its absent opposite.

The importance of this structure for Alma 30 becomes apparent immediately. Korihor demands a sign whose referent is supposedly unambiguous, a divine meaning he will regard as decisive, because, for him, God appears to be absent, and the signs already offered are insufficient. However, his requested sign can only signify God precisely through relational reference to God, and not God himself. Therefore, recognizing God's presence or activity in the sign still requires an interpretation of that relation. The sign can disclose divine activity without becoming an encounter exempt from signification. If Korihor expects the sign's decisive force to eliminate the need for interpretation, he is asking it to overcome the very relation through which it signifies. He wants to escape signification by means of a sign. But we see that God's absence is not eliminated by the sign, for His presence is shown as the mark of the absence preserved within the signs' very capacity to signify of His existence. The sign would, in effect, simultaneously say, “Here is God,” and, “God is elsewhere.”

We see here that Korihor's approach is to locate and identify an unambiguous signifier to show the signified. In other words, he needs a miracle to show the power of God. Alma's response to this transforms the scales of their dispute dramatically,

“Thou hast had signs enough. Will ye tempt your God? Will ye say, shew unto me a sign, when ye have the testimony of all the thy brethren and also all the holy prophets? The scriptures are laid before thee. Yea, and all things denote there is a God; yea even the earth and all things that is upon the face of it, yea and its motion, yea and also all the planets, which move in their regular form, doth witness that there is a Supreme Creator.”¹¹

His response and semiotic structure is saturated in signification, providing a universe of signs. Alma is not initially pointing Korihor towards some hidden supernatural object, he points toward what is already present. This is to say that their disagreement doesn't appear to be merely between someone who possesses evidence and someone who lacks it. He and Alma inhabit the same world. They both stand upon the earth and look up at the heavens, they both encounter testimony, have both read scripture, so

¹⁰ BOM, 2 Ne 2.11

¹¹ BOM, Alma 30.44

their difference of opinion—the reason they don't see eye to eye—concerns the meaning of the provided signs. And so, Korihor still requests a more privileged sign.

For Alma, the existence of the earth equals the existence of a Creator; for Korihor the existence of the earth leads to an open-ended inquiry. This, in and of itself, reveals an important aspect to signification, that being that signs do not interpret themselves. The earth is not out of a Chinese factory, and thus does not appear bearing a non-contestable insignia declaring, "Created by God." Alma interprets the earth itself as evidence of a Creator; Korihor does not accept that interpretation. Whatever one thinks of either position, the difference between them cannot be resolved by pointing toward the object that both already perceive. This would be to mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. However, even ignoring the pointing finger because it is not itself the moon produces another kind of confusion. Korihor's demand is therefore caught between two dangers. He refuses to mistake the sign for its referent, but he risks refusing the possibility that anything can signify beyond itself at all unless the relation becomes absolutely incontestable. Alma occupies the opposite position. For him, the world is saturated with reference, for, "all things denote that there is a God." Whether those things denote what Alma believes they denote remains a matter of interpretation. But the philosophical difference between the two men is now clearer: Korihor seeks an extraordinary presence capable of ending interpretation; Alma understands the ordinary world as already overflowing with signs capable of enlarging interpretation.

Korihor already possesses that which Alma declares as signs. What he and the deconstructionists alike lack is a sign whose meaning cannot seemingly be deferred into another line of questioning; and what they contest is whether those signs warrant the conclusion we believers or Alma have drawn. Each proposed sign can lead to another question. Testimony says that God exists, but why should you believe the witness? Scripture says that God exists, but why should you trust scripture? The order of the heavens signifies a Creator, but why must it imply such a thing? Even the heavens opening before Korihor would raise many questions. His request is implicitly distinguishing between what he considers "ordinary" signs, and a more final, decisive sign. The demand takes on a further difficulty if this distinction is expected to terminate interpretation and establish God through a meaning that assures itself. Korihor demands, even desires a transcendental signified—which is just the arrested development of the movement of signifiers that would guarantee the system from the outside. As Charles Sanders Peirce explained the dilemma,

"Anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, this interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on ad infinitum. . . . If the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least."

With Jacques Derrida expanding concisely,

“From the moment there is meaning there is nothing but signs. We think only in signs.”¹²

The difficulty here is that an extraordinary event must still be recognized as an event, and interpreted as a sign. What Korihor seeks is a peculiar passing moment—

“Oh if life were made of moments
Even now and then a bad one—
But if life were made of moments
Then you'd never know you had one.”¹³

—which is a moment he therefore receives, because he demanded it.

None of this is to argue that evidence is incapable of supporting rational conclusions, nor that every interpretation is as equally as plausible as the next. It is to make the strait and narrow observation that evidence does not interpret itself. A sign may make one interpretation overwhelmingly compelling without ceasing to function through interpretation. This persistence of interpretation does not prevent conviction, it prevents conviction from being confused with an escape from the conditions and relations through which evidence becomes useful, and thus, meaningful.

In short, what Korihor seeks is a sign capable of ending the necessity of signs, which is a self-defeating paradox.

MEDIATING THE DESIRE FOR UNAMBIGUITY

This is made more clear through the concept of mediation. Something is mediated when it is encountered through something else. Smoke mediates the knowledge of the unseen fire; a photograph mediates the encounter with an absent person; writing mediates the thought of the unseen or long-dead writer. Korihor rejects such mediations as sufficient evidences. Testimony, scripture, prophecy, the heavens and the earth are not enough. What he does not realize is that the solution he demands is yet another sign whose evidential force must also be interpreted. He keeps using that word; I'm not sure it means what he thinks it means.

Korihor's requested sign treats “sign” as a special category of empirical evidence that would then compel interpretation. If lightning struck the ground before him and wrote out, “God Exists”, this still does not place God before him. Rather, Korihor is encountering marks on the ground, marks being words, words bringing about a proposition, a proposition with an inferred author, and an inferred author

¹² Peirce, C.S., Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Motilal Banarsidass, 1994., c.2 part 1, p.50

¹³ Sondheim, Stephen. *Look I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981–2011)*. Alfred A. Knopf, Publisher, New York. 2011., *Into the Woods*

inferring a God. This “proof” is mediated by signs all the way down. The claim that the signified—God—authored the event, remains nested within, and mediated by further relations of signification.

A sign is the mediator. To the extent that Korihor expects the sign to exempt him from interpretation, he is asking mediation to deliver him from mediation; which is a contradiction that remains unseen, only becoming visible when his request is granted—when things are delivered unto him which he cannot understand, because he desired them.

Alma inevitably declares, prophesying,

“This will I give unto thee for a sign, that thou shalt be struck dumb, according to my words; and I say that, in the name of God, ye shall be struck dumb, that ye shall no more have utterance.”¹⁴

Korihor's demand for truth through claims of Alma's signs being insignificant lead to the unambiguous sign of the loss of his speech, and thus a loss of the power in the spreading of his lies. At first it would appear that the apparently absent God has manifested power through an observable event, but the chief judge, using writing, asks Korihor if he is thus convinced, to which Korihor stretches forth his hand to write his confession,

“...I know that nothing save it were the power of God could bring this upon me. Yea, and I always knew that there was a God. But behold, the devil hath deceived me, for he appeared unto me in the form of an angel...”¹⁵

What is truly revelatory here is that Korihor writes of how he had already received a manifestation of what he believed to be an angel or spirit of God already, but that it would seem to him now in his dumb state that the appearance of that entity was misrecognized, or miscategorized. This demonstrates that an extraordinary manifestation does not carry its own interpretation merely by being extraordinary.

THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF OUR FATHERS

I find that there is a very distinct difference to be found in Korihor's method versus the very well-established tradition of the fathers of the Nephite's when it comes to the pursuit and verification of knowledge.

¹⁴ BOM, Alma 30.49

¹⁵ BOM, Alma 30.52

It would appear most plain that Korihor's approach to attaining knowledge is to:

1. Make a Claim
2. Make a Demand
3. Receive Unambiguous Sign
4. Receive Conviction

Whereas the traditions of their fathers approach to attaining knowledge is to:

1. Have a Desire
2. Ask in Faith
3. Believe ye shall Receive
4. Receive witness/sign¹⁶

Now Korihor, being a stiff-necked person, despised the words of plainness, and sought for things that he could not understand by way of claiming existent signs as insignificant, demanding a sign that would finally establish what he had refused to receive through other witnesses. If that demand requires for signification without signs, mediation without mediators—and thus—God without God, it defeats its own conditions. He has no faith to receive what Alma and the others read as already plainly manifest. He looked beyond the mark, having lost his orientation, and would therefore need to fall, being struck dumb.

Entering the chapter as an overwhelmingly verbose character, Korihor preaches, disputes, accuses, reasons, persuades, and otherwise travels through the organic algorithm of community in order to disseminate his arguments through speech, which is his narrative power. He later demands the presence of a sign capable of establishing what the speech of others has failed to establish previously. The sign received thus destroys the vocal power through which he disseminated the teachings of the deceiving angel. However, meaning and interpretation are not absent from the moment. Korihor must write, causing writing to perform the function speech can no longer perform.

This transition matters because speech appears naturally connected with presence. This appearance of presence, as well as Korihor's overall epistemological situation, was established earlier in the text, as Nephi taught,

"For when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost, the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men. But behold, there are many that

¹⁶ BOM, 1 Ne 11.1–8, Enos 1.15

harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it hath no place in them. Wherefore they cast away many things which are written and esteem them as things of naught.”¹⁷

Korihor is incapable of encountering the meaning of this sign as pure presence. Even after receiving his supposedly decisive sign he still must reach forth with his hand and use more signs to convey the interpretation thereof; in order that he may signify what the sign signifies to him—which is in turn then left to the interpretations of others. This is nowhere near his request of, “Sign equals God.” His conviction does not make the relation between sign and God disappear. Rather the sequence is: Alma’s testimony is rejected by Korihor; Korihor demands a sign; Alma prophesies, Prophecy is fulfilled; Korihor writes signs of interpretation; Alma and the chief judge interpret.

Korihor’s supposedly final sign generates yet more signs—signs of the variety which he previously rejected when and where others had offered them up. What we find here is that writing demonstrates that conviction must itself enter signification if it is to become testimony for others.

When a speaker is before us, the speaker, the voice, their intention, timbre, and utterances seem to occupy the same present moment. It is writing that makes the separation more obvious. A written mark can remain after the writer is gone, can travel where the writer is not, and be a mark of the absence of the writers presence in life or death. Writing is thus well equipped for making absence productive; and at precisely the moment Korihor demands a sign capable of overcoming absence and establishing divine power, the narrative forces him into a medium whose power consists partly in visibly exposing the dependence of meaning upon signs in the absence of speech. The voice is gone, the mark of its effect and the mark it generates in writing, remain. Speech, too, depends on signs, and its apparent immediacy does not preclude it from mediation, but writing makes that dependency more visible. Korihor’s message, his new testimony, can now circulate beyond the encounter in which it was produced and be encountered by others in his absence—ourselves included.

There are many instances of the prophets of the Book of Mormon advocating for the importance of writing, but to continue on with what Nephi taught regarding speech, he added,

“And the things which I have written in weakness will he make strong unto them, for it persuadeth them to do good. It maketh known unto them of their fathers. And it speaketh of Jesus and persuadeth men to believe in him and to endure to the end, which is eternal life...Wherefore no man will be angry at the words which I have written save he shall be of the spirit of the devil.”¹⁸

¹⁷ BOM, 2 Ne 33.1–2

¹⁸ BOM, 2 Ne 33.4

In the end, out of the whole chapter, it is Korihor who provides us with the most explicit testimony, sign, and acknowledgment of God.

Additionally, and ironically, Korihor believed that the right sign could and would eliminate ambiguity, yet it is explicit in the narrative that signs never interpret themselves. Alma interpreted the earth and the heavens as signifying God, Korihor did not. Korihor attributed the power causing his muteness to God, but by his very logic and rationality of refuting Alma's earlier signs, any present observer could take on their own interpretation of Korihor's condition and response thereof. Even after the miracle occurred, its meaning necessitated articulation and clarification by movement into writing.

A CONCLUDING SIGN TO GENERATE MORE SIGNS

This brings the analysis back to Korihor's contemporary afterlife. He understandably appeals to modern skeptics who like to ask uncomfortable questions, who refuse to accept testimony merely from religious tradition and pronounced authority, and they demand justifications for many things. But these demands for evidences and justifications contain assumptions about evidences and justifications just as much as Korihor's demand for signs contains assumptions about signification. Rejections of existing signs depends upon distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate mediation, and demands for presence assumes that absence contains the trace of something to be overcome. Any attempts to escape mediation require mediation, and attempts to escape signification generate more signs. Therefore, a deconstructionist attempting to destabilize the religious claims, evidences, and significations surrounding Korihor is consequently destabilized. Wherever criticism demands evidence apart from interpretation, it encounters the same difficulty exposed by the very structure of Korihor's own demands.

None of this demonstrates that Alma's interpretation of the cosmos is necessarily correct. It does not prove the existence of God, vindicate every theological claim in the narrative, or eliminate the ethical difficulties raised by Korihor's punishment. Those questions remain available to criticism. A more subtle occurrence has been generated. That being, the categories through which Korihor formulated his challenge ceased to remain stable. In other words, the distinction between an ordinary sign and a final sign exempt from interpretation has been de-sedimentized.

There is therefore an irony in the modern appropriation of Korihor as an emblem of deconstruction. Korihor, asking for presence behind a sign, or rather for a decisive sign of divine power, receives a sign producing absence of speech, which demands the mediation of writing, and a testimony—a sign—of the power which he sought to encounter.

What has been historically understood as a story of confrontation between faith and skepticism turns out to be philosophically comprehended as a struggle over the nature and possibility of a sign; yea, even the signs of God.

The good is the good and this is, indeed, the bad.