"Dumb" Puns in Alma 30

A Mesoamerican Twist on Korihor's Talionic Punishment

Mark Alan Wright and Neal Rappleye

Evidence for the use of both puns[1] and talionic (or reciprocal) punishment[2] by peoples of the Book of Mormon is well attested. To complement previous research in these areas, which focused primarily on data from the ancient Near East, we argue that Mesoamerican wordplay and legal systems may also be evident in the account of Korihor recorded in Alma 30. Recognizing these connections to the text's plausible cultural and linguistic context illuminates *why* Korihor receives the punishment he is given: it was no arbitrary consequence, but one tailored to his accusations in an irony-laden narrative that would have been easily recognized by an ancient Mesoamerican audience.[3]

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1. See Matthew L. Bowen, *Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay and the Temple in Mormon Scripture* (Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2018). Additional examples include Jeff Lindsay, "Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job: A Review of Scott B. Noegel's Work," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship* 27 (2017): 213–20; Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 257–58; David E. Bokovoy and Pedro Olavarria, "Zarahemla: Revisiting the 'Seed of Compassion,'" *Insights* 30, no. 5 (2010): 2–3.

2. See John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008); John W. Welch, "The Execution of Zemnarihah," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon,* ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 250–52.

3. On Mesoamerica as the likely setting for the Book of Mormon, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985); John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book;

Puns and Wordplay in Mesoamerica

Punning is very common and highly valued in both verbal and visual arts in Mesoamerica.[4] Regarding the literature of the Quiché Maya, Allen Christenson notes that "particularly with regard to names and archaic words used in ceremonial contexts, Quichés derive a host of meanings from them, including puns and other word plays."[5] As Federico Navarrete observed, "Punning had deep roots in Mesoamerican cosmology, which considered that no similitude was accidental and that beings in different cosmic levels (including signs and images) were magically related to, and influenced by, their counterparts."[6] Among the modern Maya, a person's ability to incorporate wordplay into verbal sparring matches is considered a gauge of "social maturity, linguistic competence, intelligence, and political potential."[7] Even images of violence and human sacrifice "had their sardonic and ironic twists within the Mesoamerican worldview,"[8] not entirely unlike the gallows humor or dark comedy favored by many late-night talk show hosts of our own day.

Ralph Roys—one of the great Mesoamerican ethnographer-linguists of the twentieth century—notes that Maya ritual language incorporates "frequent play on words of the same, or somewhat similar, sound, but with different meanings. They abound in puns, near-puns, and sometimes very bad puns. . . . The Maya language lends itself to such a device, for it contains many homonyms and other similar-sounding words."[9] In

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Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013); Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015).

4. John S. Justeson, "The Origin of Writing Systems: Preclassic Mesoamerica," *World Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (1986): 440; Rusty Barrett, "Poetics," in *The Mayan Languages,* ed. Judith Aissen, Nora C. England, and Roberto Zavala Maldonado (New York: Routledge, 2017), 452–53.

5. Allen J. Christenson, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya, The Great Classic of Central American Spirituality, Translated from the Original Maya Text* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 63 n. 27.

6. Federico Navarrete, "The Path from Aztlan to Mexico: On Visual Narration in Mesoamerican Codices," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 37 (Spring 2000): 40.

7. Gary H. Gossen, *Chamulas in the World of the Sun: Time and Space in a Maya Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 106. See also Janet Catherine Berlo, "Beyond Bricolage: Women and Aesthetic Strategies in Latin American Textiles," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 22 (Autumn 1992): 116–22.

8. Shirley Boteler Mock, "A Macabre Sense of Humor: Dramas of Conflict and War in Mesoamerica," in *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare,* ed. M. Kathryn Brown and Travis W. Stanton (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2003), 246.

9. Ralph L. Roys, trans. and ed., *Ritual of the Bacabs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), xix.

short, punning and related wordplay permeate Mesoamerican art and discourse.

Talionic Punishments in Mesoamerican Legal Systems

John W. Welch noted that talionic retributions are "often related symbolically to the offense" in biblical law.[10] Like those of the ancient Near East, Mesoamerican legal systems also often affixed talionic punishments to certain crimes. For example, Aztec women who lied were punished by having their lips slit, because it was from their lips that the lying words flowed.[11] Among the Maya of Yucatan, the phrase *u nabinah u taa*' means "llovió o cayó sobre él el daño o mal que intentaba o procuraba para otro, o pagó la pena del talión" (roughly, "the damage or evil that he tried to bring about for someone else came raining down on him, that is, he paid the talionic penalty").[12] Legal historian John M. Seus found that in the ancient capital city of Texcoco, "talion law was applied to the false witness, probably much in the manner found in the Old Testament [Deuteronomy 19:19]. He was punished as the accused would have been had he been guilty of the offense charged."[13] While criminal law was generally harsh across the ancient world, Seus found that "uniquely, the [Aztec] state would accept ecclesiastical confession and penance in lieu of its own punishment."[14] Space does not permit a more complete discussion here, but the concepts underlying talionic punishments were widespread in ancient Mesoamerica.

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10. Welch, "Execution of Zemnarihah," 251.

11. John M. Seus, "Aztec Law," *American Bar Association Journal* 55, no. 8 (1969): 738. Seus also notes that Aztec men who were caught lying "were dragged around until they were dead," and historians "who should record fictitious events" were prescribed death by the ruler Nezahualcoyotl.

12. Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, ed., *Diccionario Maya Cordemex: Maya-Español, Español-Maya* (Mérida, Yucatán, Mex.: Ediciones Cordemex, 1980), s.v. "Nabinah." The Yucatec word *Nokop* carries similar talionic connotations. The entry gives as an example phrase *nokopní u tak ho'l Juan yok'ol: llovió sobre Juan lo que acusó a otro, pagó la pena del talión* ("What John accused another of came raining down on him; he paid the talionic penalty"). The phrase *(u) tokil tak ho'l* is simply defined as "*talión, la pena del tanto*" ("talion, the penalty for both"), but a more literal translation would be "he makes things to burn atop another's head." That precise definition is also given as a subentry to the word *numya* (which on its own variously means "tribulation," "work," "misery," and "adversity," among other things) for the phrase *u numyail tak ho'l, u tokil tak hol'*. The word *pak* is likewise defined as "*la pena del talión o del tanto por ciento*" and "*castigar con la pena del talión*" ("to punish with a talionic penalty").

13. Seus, "Aztec Law," 738.

14. Seus, "Aztec Law," 736.

Struck Dumb within a Mesoamerican Worldview

To understand the penalty assigned to Korihor for his crimes, we also need to delve briefly into a Mesoamerican etiology of disease and deformity. Across the region, the people attributed any illness, disease, deformity, and even death to supernatural forces and interpreted them as signs of divine disfavor.[15] As Aztec scholar Frances Berdan states, "Beyond this world of mortal, physical punishments lay a vast world of supernatural sanctions. These punishments (such as disease and deformity) most commonly applied to religious infractions and were carried out during a person's lifetime."[16]

Ritual specialists were both feared and revered in Mesoamerica because their powers could be summoned to either inflict illness, injury, or death on an enemy or to cure those who had been so afflicted. A Colonial-era Yucatecan manuscript known as the *Ritual of the Bacabs* contains forty-two incantations used by Maya shamans, many of which are devoted to the healing of various maladies, both spiritual and physical. Roys found that "nearly one-third of the Bacabs manuscript is devoted to incantations for various so-called seizures. The term is *tancas,* a contraction of *tamacas,* which is the name of a number of complaints. Among these are madness, frenzy, numbness, spasm, and falling sickness. [Falling sickness] is defined as 'a frenetic malady which strikes dumb, crazes, and deafens the person who has it.'"[17] Significantly, being struck dumb is explicitly associated with other "symptoms" such as deafness, madness, and frenzy throughout the *Ritual of the Bacabs.* The phrase *ten ch'ub a chi* (or slight variants)—which Roys conceptually translates as "I curse you"—occurs some nineteen times throughout the manuscript. However, the phrase literally translates to "I cause your mouth to grunt" (or "mutter inaudibly," "grumble to yourself," "babble indistinctly"), or "I make your mouth small," or "I deform your mouth."[18] In short, to "curse" someone is to strike them dumb.

15. Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas, *Chan Kom: A Maya Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 160.

16. Frances Berdan, "Living on the Edge in an Ancient Imperial World: Aztec Crime and Deviance," *Global Crime* 9, nos. 1–2 (February–May 2008): 32.

17. Roys, *Ritual of the Bacabs,* xviii.

18. Translation by Mark Alan Wright; compare entries s.v. "ch'ub," "ch'ub chii'," and "ch'ub chi'" in Vásquez, *Diccionario Maya Cordemex.*

Semantic Overlap of Key Terms in Mayan Languages

The association of "madness" and "frenzy" with muteness or deafness is widely attested to in Mayan languages due to the use of identical or closely homophonous terms for them. In Mopan, the root *b'es* means "mute, dumb" but also "silly, fool[ish]," and *ajb'es* means either "mute person" or "fool."[19] In Poqomchi' and Kaqchikel, the root is *mem* or *meem,* and the associations are identical.[20] In Quiché, the verb *man -ta taj* means "to be deaf," and *man -ta' taj* means "to be an idiot" (the only difference being the glottal stop in the latter).[21] The exact same connotations hold true for other Mayan languages such as Chol and Tzotsil. In Yucatec Mayan, *ah ch'uch'* means "*enmudecer*" ("to strike dumb") as well as "*tonto, loco, lunático*" and "*demente*" ("silly, crazy, lunatic," and "demented [or deranged]").[22]

In Classic Mayan, Stela 24 from Naranjo (ca. 702 AD) describes Lady Six Sky with the epithet *ah nun,* most likely meant to identify her as a "foreign-speaking woman," but more literally meaning a "person who speaks poorly." According to Martha J. Macri, the Mayan root *nun* was a loanword related to *nontli* ("mute") in Nahuatl and was used to refer to a person who did not know the local language or spoke poorly. It could also refer to a coarse, unlearned person, or even someone who is "ignorant, stupid, lazy, retarded." Its use to identify foreigners may go back to as early as the fourth century AD, when a foreign ruler named Yax Nuun Ayiin was installed at Tikal. Ironically, it was evidently used as a mark of prestige or status by foreign ruling elites.[23]

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19. Charles Andrew Hofling, *Mopan Maya-Spanish-English Dictionary* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011), 79, 131.

20. See Terrance Kaufman, *A Preliminary Mayan Etymological Dictionary* (n.p.: FAMSI, 2003), 728, http://www.famsi.org/reports/01051/pmed.pdf. For a similar association in related languages, see Lawrence H. Feldman, *Pokom Maya and Their Colonial Dictionaries* (n.p.: FAMSI, 2000), s.v. "mem," http://www.famsi.org/reports/97022/97022Feldman01.pdf; Guillermo Sedat S., *Nuevo Diccionario de las Lenguas: K'ekchi' y Española* (Guatemala: Chamelco, Alta Verapaz, 1955; digital version, DEENSP, 2016), s.v. "mem."

21. Allen J. Christenson, *K'iche'–English Dictionary and Guide to Pronunciation of the K'iche'-Maya Alphabet* (n.p.: FAMSI, 1978–85), s.v. "man -ta taj," http://www.famsi.org/mayawriting/dictionary/christenson/index.html.

22. Vásquez, *Diccionario Maya Cordemex,* 142, s.v. "(ah) ch'uch'." See also Miguel Güémez Pineda, "Locos, Tontos, Lunáticos y Dementes," Sipse, November 22, 2016, https://sipse.com/opinion/locos-tontos-lunaticos-dementes-columna-miguel-guemez-pineda-231555.html.

23. Martha J. Macri, "Differentiation among Mayan Speakers: Evidence from Comparative Linguistics and Hieroglyphic Texts," in *"The Only True People": Linking Maya*

There is evidence that non-Maya groups also used terms for muteness in derogatory ways. For instance, the Xinka, non-Mayan speaking neighbors of the Kaqchikel, use the K'iche'en loanword *meem,* "mute, dumb," to also mean "crazy."[24] The traditions of the Kaqchikel also tell of an unidentified foreign group that they called the Nonoalca-Xulpiti, a name based on Nahuatl loanwords meaning "mute" (*nontli*) and "stupid, idiot, crazy" (*xolopiti*).[25]

A final lexical item from Yucatec Mayan worth highlighting here is *wayak',* which means all of the following: "symbol" or "sign," "prophecy," "prediction," "dream," "visionary dream," "fantasy" or "illusion," or "dreamed-up image."[26] The root of the word, *way,* likewise has a wide variety of meanings, including "ver visiones como entre sueños" ("to see visions as though in dreams") but also "hechizar" ("to bewitch"). Furthermore, when the agentive *ah-* (meaning "he of") is added to *way,* it means "brujo, nigromántico, encantador" ("witch, necromancer, enchanter"), and there is a subentry in the Cordemex dictionary for *ah way xibalbá,* "hombre que hablaría con el demonio" ("man who speaks with the devil").[27]

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This brings us to Alma 30. Korihor, the Anti-Christ, has a number of words or phrases that are unique to him, all of them derogatory: "frenzied mind," "derangement of your minds," "silly," "foolish ordinances," and "ancient priest." Korihor declares that the Nephite belief in Christ was "the effect of a *frenzied* mind; and this *derangement* of your minds comes because of the traditions of your fathers, which lead you away

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Identities Past and Present, ed. Bethany J. Beyyette and Lisa J. LeCount (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2017), 147–51.

24. Frauke Sachse, "Reconstructive Description of Eighteenth-Century Xinka Grammar" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2010), 55, 221.

25. Frauke Sachse, "Over Distant Waters: Places of Origin and Creation in Colonial K'iche'an Sources," in *Pre-Columbian Landscapes of Creation and Origin,* ed. John Edward Staller (New York: Springer, 2008), 129; Frauke Sachse and Allen J. Christenson, "Tulan and the Other Side of the Sea: Unraveling a Metaphorical Concept from Colonial Guatemalan Highland Sources," *Mesoweb Publications* (2005): 6, https://www.mesoweb.com/articles/tulan/Tulan.pdf; Sachse, "Reconstructive Description," 39 n. 12. See also Ruud van Akkeren, *Place of the Lord's Daughter: Rab'inal, Its History, Its Dance-Drama* (Leiden, Neth.: Research School CNWS, School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, 2000), 191.

26. Vásquez, *Diccionario Maya Cordemex,* 916–17, s.v. "wayak."

27. Vásquez, *Diccionario Maya Cordemex,* 915–16, s.v. "way," "(ah) way."

into a belief of things which are not so" (Alma 30:16, emphasis ours). He mockingly—and repeatedly—refers to Nephite beliefs as "foolish" (Alma 30:13, 14, 23, 27), as well as "vain" (Alma 30:13) and "silly" (Alma 30:31) all of which fall under the various meanings ascribed to *ah ch'uch'*. Korihor also contends that the priests keep the people down by "their *dreams* and their *whims* and their *visions* and their pretended *mysteries,*" and Korihor repeatedly demands that Alma show unto him a *sign* (Alma 30:28, 43, 45, 48, emphasis ours); all of these concepts, as noted above, are covered by the word *wayak'*. It is perhaps important that the words *silly, frenzied, derangement,* and *whims* are unique to Korihor; they appear nowhere else in the Book of Mormon. Likewise, being struck dumb as a sign (and a punishment) is also unique to Korihor.[28] Even Korihor's confession plays off the root of *wayak',* as he states that "the devil hath deceived me" (Alma 30:53), essentially identifying himself as an *ah way xibalbá.* Furthermore, after his confession, "he besought that Alma should pray unto God, that the curse might be taken from him" (Alma 30:54), suggesting that he expected his ecclesiastical confession to replace his talionic punishment, as would have been the case in Aztec law.

The confluence of these factors within a single narrative unit suggests to us the presence of both intentional and meaningful Mesoamerican wordplay and parallelism. Maya poetics make use of a variety of parallelism: grammatical, lexical, morphological, syntactic, semantic, paradigmatic, and syntagmatic.[29] *Lexical parallelism* "refers to the vocabulary and sets of words used in the organization of [a] parallelism," whereas in *paradigmatic* or *syntagmatic parallelism,* "'one thought can substitute for the other' by means of repetition, paraphrasis, synonymy, and antithesis."[30] While we lack the original text of the Book of Mormon, one could almost argue for the possibility of lexical parallelism in Alma 30 since so many Mayan languages use the exact same word to mean both "dumb" and "foolish," "frenzied," and so forth, but even lacking a copy of the plates, we can confidently consider these examples of *paradigmatic parallelism.*

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28. While there are others in the Book of Mormon who are temporarily made dumb through astonishment or fear (including $Alma_2$ himself in Mosiah 27:19; the only other example involves a group of Lamanite prison guards in Hel. 5:25), Korihor is the only one who is explicitly struck dumb by God and told that the cursing would be permanent.

29. Luis Enrique Sam Colop, "Poetics in the *Popol Wuj,*" in *Parallel Worlds: Genre, Discourse, and Poetics in Contemporary, Colonial, and Classic Period Maya Literature,* ed. Kerry M. Hull and Michael D. Carrasco (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012), 283–310; Barrett, "Poetics," in Aissen, England, and Maldonado, *Mayan Languages,* 433–57.

30. Colop, "Poetics in the *Popol Wuj,*" 288, 296–97.

In sum, Korihor mocks the Nephites for relying on *wayak'* (in its sense of "dreams" and "visions") but demands a *wayak'* (in its sense of "sign") before he will believe. He ridicules the Nephites for being *ah ch'uch'* (in its sense of "silly," "foolish," "frenzied," and "deranged") and is then cursed to become *ah ch'uch'* himself (in its sense of being "struck dumb"). When viewed through a Mesoamerican lens, the interplay between puns and talionic justice in Alma 30 becomes deeply ironic, perhaps even a bit sardonic. Korihor's punishment fits his crime like a glove: he is cursed to become the very things he falsely and derisively accused the Nephites of being.

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