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Generations and Centuries

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Chapter 32

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I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me. (Exodus 20:5)

In his last recorded prophecy, Alma₂ declared,

“Behold, I perceive that this very people, the Nephites, according to the spirit of revelation which is in me, in *four hundred years* from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them, shall dwindle in unbelief. Yea, and then shall they see wars and pestilences, yea, famines and bloodshed, even until the people of Nephi shall become extinct—Yea, and this because they shall dwindle in unbelief and fall into the works of darkness, and lasciviousness, and all manner of iniquities; yea, I say unto you, that because they shall sin against so great light and knowledge, yea, I say unto you, that from that day, even the *fourth generation* shall not all pass away before this great iniquity shall come. (Alma 45:10–12)

It may seem curious that Alma should equate “the fourth generation” of verse 12 with “four hundred years” in verse 10, but this phenomenon is found elsewhere in

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the Book of Mormon. Thus, 4 Nephi 1:14, 18, 22 equates a hundred years with an entire generation.

In his prophecy about the coming of Christ and the subsequent destruction of his people, Nephi₁ wrote,

But the Son of righteousness shall appear unto them; and he shall heal them, and they shall have peace with him, until three generations shall have passed away, and many of the *fourth generation* shall have passed away in righteousness. And when these things have passed away a speedy destruction cometh unto my people. (2 Nephi 26:9–10; see also 1 Nephi 12:11–12)

During his visit to the land of Bountiful, Christ affirmed Nephi's vision, saying, "But behold, it sorroweth me because of the *fourth generation* from this generation, for they are led away captive by him even as was the son of perdition" (3 Nephi 27:32).

Just five years before Christ's birth, the Lamanite prophet Samuel declared the word of the Lord to the Nephites,

And *four hundred years* shall not pass away before I will cause that they shall be smitten; yea, I will visit them with the sword and with famine and with pestilence. Yea, I will visit them in my fierce anger, and there shall be those of the *fourth generation* who shall live, of your enemies, to behold your utter destruction; and this shall surely come except ye repent, saith the Lord; and those of the *fourth generation* shall visit your destruction. (Helaman 13:9–10 see also v. 5)

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After his father Mormon had described the downfall of the Nephite nation some 384 years after Christ's coming (Mormon 6:5), Moroni₂ wrote that "Behold, *four hundred years* have passed away since the coming of our Lord and Savior" (Mormon 8:6). Several years, after wandering to escape the Lamanites, he wrote that "more than four hundred and twenty years have passed away since the sign was given of the coming of Christ" (Moroni 10:1).

The question that one must ask is whether there really were four generations between the time of Christ's coming and the time of the Cumorah battle that destroyed the Nephite nation. Some might suggest that the four generations are represented in 4 Nephi, which lists four men (Nephi₄, Amos₁, Amos₂, and Ammoron) who kept the records from which Mormon compiled his abridgment. However, Ammoron was the brother of Amos₂ and should not count as another generation (4 Nephi 1:47). We could count Mormon, who received the records from Ammoron, as the fourth generation (Mormon 1:2-5), but we should not exclude Nephi₃, the disciple of Christ, who recorded the visit of Christ. This means that we have six men who kept the records during the time between the appearance of Christ to the Nephites and the destruction of the Nephite nation.

A similar phenomenon is found in the Bible.¹ From Exodus 12:40, we learn that "the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years." After he had returned from Egypt, Abraham received a warning from the Lord, "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not

¹ For other Bible passages that stress the third and fourth generation, see Genesis 50:23; Exodus 20:5 (cited in Mosiah 13:13); 34:7; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 5:9; 23:7-8 (contrast vv. 2-3); 2 Kings 10:30; 15:12; Job 42:16; Joel 1:3.

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theirs [Egypt], and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them *four hundred years* . . . But in the *fourth generation* they shall come hither again” (Genesis 15:13, 16; see also Acts 7:6). Again we have four hundred years being equated to four generations. An examination of Moses’ genealogy shows that his paternal ancestors who lived in Egypt were four in number, Jacob, Levi, Kohath, and Amram (Numbers 3:17, 19; 6:18, 20). However, it was not until after “Joseph died, and all his brethren [including Levi], and all that generation” that “there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” and brought the Israelites into slavery (Exodus 1:6–11; compare the wording of Judges 2:10). This means that only three generations of Levi’s line (Kohath, his son Amram, and his sons Moses and Aaron) lived in Egypt during the time of oppression.