

HELANAN 1–6

John W. Welch Notes



Once again, and as it always seems to be the case with the Book of Mormon, many interesting and inspiring things can be said about everything found in this next block of six chapters. The following sections raise only a few of the possible points, but they produced many useful classroom comments and discussion questions, as I hope they will likewise do for you in your family scripture study and personal reflection.

Helaman 1

Helaman 1:1–2 — Serious Difficulty among the Nephites

At the beginning of the fortieth year of the reign of the judges “there began to be a serious difficulty among the people of the Nephites” (Helaman 1:1). Mormon here has clearly understated a very dire situation. Helaman (Alma 62:52), Moroni (Alma 63:3), and Shiblon (Alma 63:10) had all recently died. Within five years, the Nephites had lost several of their finest and most admirable leaders—men who had been pivotal in holding their nation together during the long defensive military campaign against the Lamanites.

As might be expected, the death of Chief Judge Pahoran had created a disturbance among the people as to who should be his successor (Helaman 63:2). When Pahoran died, perhaps suddenly, his three sons—Pahoran², Paanchi, and Pacumeni—all “did contend for the judgment-seat; therefore, they did cause three divisions among the people” (Helaman 1:4).

Brant A. Gardner points out the fragility of the situation:

Not only was the chief judge’s death a time of transition, but it was the first time that the surviving chief judge had not declared his ruler. ... Complicating things even more, the crisis of succession came at a time of increasing internal divisions

among the Nephites. Pahoran's death became a spark that ignited already-smoldering divisions.

Further Reading

Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:42.

Book of Mormon Central, "[How Was a Void in Leadership Dangerous for the Nephites? \(Helaman 1:2\),](#)" *KnoWhy* 172 (August 24, 2016).

Helaman 1:5–13 — Dissent Leads to Tragedies

Pahoran, the peaceful chief judge of the Nephites who responded so patiently to the angry captain Moroni, died without having selected a successor. Three of his sons claimed right to the judgeship. Following are their names and their successive fates:

- Pahoran the younger (Pahoran₂) was "appointed by the voice of the people to be chief judge and a governor over the people of Nephi" (v. 5). He was murdered by Kishkumen.
- Paanchi and his followers were angry that he had not been selected as chief judge. Paanchi was tried and executed because he "raised up in rebellion and sought to destroy the liberty of the people" (v. 8). A group of his followers sent forth an assassin named Kishkumen to kill Pahoran the younger. Kishkumen's band of conspirators took oaths to protect Kishkumen. They were the core of the gang that became the Gadianton Robbers.
- Pacumeni had graciously stepped down when his brother, Pahoran the younger, had been selected. He was subsequently appointed "according to the voice of the people" to be chief judge after Paanchi was executed (v. 13). Pacumeni was then killed by Coriantumr during his invasion of Zarahemla (v. 21).

Thus, between the beginning of the fortieth year and the end of the forty-first year, in addition to Pahoran the elder, the Nephites had lost three chief judges in rapid succession. What would this have meant for the Nephite world in general?

Helaman 1:7–8 — Paanchi Takes Steps to Incite Rebellion

In the trial and execution of Paanchi, we encounter another legal question about that point at which speech becomes illegal action. The earlier trial of Korihor had tested the limits of free speech under the laws of Mosiah guaranteeing the freedom of belief and presumably the expressions thereof. The issue now became whether Nephite law allowed or required Paanchi to be punished for expressing intent to rebel against the government. This case is only briefly reported, but from this case came the Nephite precedent that legally defined the point at which conspiratorial planning becomes legally actionable as treason.

In all societies, crimes involving conspiracy and incitement are always difficult to define and even harder to enforce. Given the difficulties that the Nephites experienced with the secret combinations of the Gadianton robbers during the time covered by the book of Helaman in the second half of the final century before the coming of Christ, it can be surmised that this legal concept became a key point in Nephite law at this time. Perhaps for this very reason, the case of Paanchi was positioned by the writers and abridgers of the book of Helaman at the very outset of this book as a leading legal issue during this period of Nephite history. Mormon will interject his own comments on a few occasions as he goes along in his abridgement of the book of Helaman, most notably in Helaman 3:12–14, where he states that the problems of conspiracy and secret combinations would eventually prove to be “the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi.”

Interestingly, Paanchi’s crime was merely that of being *about to* incite a rebellion. The text says twice that he was “about to” set his plan into action: “therefore, he was *about* to flatter away those people to rise up in rebellion; . . . as he was *about* to do this . . .” (Helaman 1:7–8). Apparently, he was apprehended and stopped just after he went beyond some critical point of preparation to set his plan into action. He had laid specific plans to call the people to rebellion. He may have been in a public place, just about to call the people to revolt. Thus, it seems evident that Nephite law recognized the immanent incitement of rebellion as a completed crime; that point of law clearly stood behind by the arrest, conviction and execution of Paanchi. From several cases in the book of Alma, the Nephites had learned that a stronger stand needed to be taken more quickly to quell incipient rebellions before they generated a head of steam.

Other legal documents from antiquity can be cited in which it was already considered a capital offense at the point when plans were made and preparations had actually begun to incite a rebellion or to be on the brink of setting a plan of rebellion into action. According to these early sources, preparing a rebellion was itself a capital offense. Whether or not the plot ever got off the ground was legally irrelevant. One such case comes from an Egyptian account of a trial in 1164 BC concerning a conspiracy and rebellion. The Judicial Papyrus of Turin records the trial and execution of one Pai-bak-kamen. Like Paanchi, he was the leader of a group whom he incited, calling them to “gather people and stir up enemies to make rebellion against their lord”; many others who had colluded with him, and some, who were only remotely implicated, were also executed, mutilated, or left to commit suicide. Recent paleo-forensic examinations of the mummies indicate that the rebellion was indeed successful and later was put down, but the public legal records would have wanted to deter any further rebellions by imposing the death penalty upon the uprisers as early in the process as possible.

Reflecting similar precautions, some very early ancient Near Eastern treaties required vassals to prevent conspiracies against the overlord. A third-century BC treaty between Ebla and Abarsal placed heavy legal burdens on the rulers of Abarsal “to denounce any conspiracy against the ruler of Ebla.” Disloyalty or conspiring against a king could always land the perpetrators in serious trouble.

During the early Israelite monarchy, conspiracy was severely punished. The case of the priest Ahimelech, who had unwittingly given bread and a sword to David, shows that king Saul could treat even such incidental conduct as treasonous. King Saul executed Ahimelech and all of the members of his family, together with eighty-five priests (1 Samuel 22:13–18), on the ground that they had “conspired against [the king]” (1 Samuel 22:8), even though (as one must presume) most of the people who were executed had taken no actual specific action against Saul.

Another pre-exilic Israelite case of conspiracy is found in 2 Chronicles 33:24–25, when servants of King Amon, the son of Manasseh, “conspired against, and slew him in his own house.” All people who were in any way part of the conspiracy were killed, even though some of those victims probably had done no more than give their encouragement or acquiescence to the perpetrators. This assassination of Amon, which occurred in Jerusalem in 640 BC, would have been well known to the prophet Lehi, who was an Israelite youth at that time. While we do not know exactly how far Paanchi had gone, it was held “by the voice of the people” that, for legal purposes, he “*had raised up* in rebellion and sought to destroy the liberty of the people” (Helaman 1:8).

In spite of the involvement of the public in this proceeding, the execution of Paanchi evoked a powerful objection among Paanchi’s followers. They enlisted Kishkumen to kill the chief judge Pahoran (see Helaman 1:9). From this one may assume that Pahoran had been instrumental in seeking for justice in the case against Paanchi before the people. And indeed, Kishkumen approached the judgment seat in disguise and murdered Pahoran.

With Paanchi and Pahoran both dead, their brother Pacumeni was appointed chief judge and governor by the voice of the people “to reign in the stead of” Pahoran, “according to his right” (Helaman 1:13), whatever that might mean. Kishkumen and his confederates then “entered into a covenant, yea swearing by their everlasting Maker, that they would tell no man that Kishkumen had murdered Pahoran” (Helaman 1:11). Because Kishkumen and his band then intermingled with the population, they could not easily be identified and prosecuted—although “as many as were found” were “condemned unto death” (Helaman 1:12). Apparently, these oath-swearing conspirators—like robbers or outlaws who had placed themselves outside of the law and therefore were not entitled to legal

protections (as in the summary execution of the robber Zemnarihah in 3 Nephi 4:28)—were held incontestably guilty upon arrest.

As the Nephite government struggled in its campaign against these terrorists at home, matters grew worse due to external pressures. Within a single year, sensing a moment of weakness in the shaky leadership of the Nephite government, a Lamanite army invaded Zarahemla, and Pacumeni was killed by Coriantumr (see Helaman 1:21). Coriantumr was “a descendant of Zarahemla” (Helaman 1:15). As a descendant of the Mulekite king of the land of Zarahemla, Coriantumr could plausibly stake a legal claim to kingship, and he had little trouble being appointed leader of a Lamanite army to invade the land of Zarahemla (Helaman 1:16–17).

Meanwhile, with Pacumeni now dead, another “contention” arose among the Nephites “concerning who should fill the judgment-seat” because there was “no one to fill the judgment-seat” from Pahoran’s family (Helaman 2:1). The populace turned back to the family of Alma for leadership, and Helaman, the son of Helaman and the grandson of Alma the Younger, was legally appointed “by the voice of the people” to serve as the new chief judge (Helaman 2:2).

Further Reading

John W. Welch, “[The Case of Paanchi](#),” in *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 311–322.

Helaman 2

At this point in the Book of Mormon, we are introduced to the continuing lineage of a marvelous family who comprise the backbone of so much of the latter part of the Book of Mormon. This is a good place to look again at the family of Alma in a multi-generational context.

- **Alma the elder** was converted by Abinadi, who probably died before he knew the extent of his success with this convert.
- **Alma the younger (Alma₂)**, son of Alma, gave up his position as chief judge to focus all of his energy as chief high priest. He served a long and honorable mission.
- **Helaman₁**, Alma the younger’s son, was the chief high priest who led the army of young Ammonite warriors.
- **Helaman₂**, son of Helaman₁, became chief high priest after the death of his father and also became the chief judge after the disaster of Pahoran’s sons.

- **Nephi₂**, Helaman₂'s son, was named after Nephi₁, the son of Lehi who came from Jerusalem.
- **Nephi₃**, son of Nephi₂, was one of the twelve Nephite disciples chosen by the resurrected Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon (3 Ne. 1:2–3; 19:4). This prophet prayed mightily to the Lord in behalf of his people

The righteous traditions of this remarkable family continued throughout many generations. It is unusual in the scriptures to have so many generations of one family through which the records were passed, and in which the memory of their ancestors meant so much.

What was the relationship of Nephi₂ to Alma the younger? How many generations were there between them? Nephi₂ was Alma₂'s great-grandson. There was Alma the younger, then his son Helaman₁, Helaman₂ the grandson, and thus Nephi₂ was the great-grandson. Nephi₂, the son of Helaman₂, the great-grandson of Alma the Younger, and he never knew Alma or even his grandfather Helaman₁. He did not even know his father for very long, as Helaman₂ died when Nephi was quite young. You might wonder how that affected Nephi and his younger brother Lehi as they were growing up.

Fortunately, Nephi₂ was able to know quite a lot about his great-grandfather, although not by personal experience, but through the records his family had kept. Alma the Elder and Alma the Younger, Nephi₂'s ancestors, not only had great experiences and wonderful thoughts, they wrote them down. They made sure that their descendants had these records and preserved them. Nephi₂ had knowledge of the story of Alma, Zeezrom and Amulek because he had been taught from the records. He probably knew many of his ancestors' speeches by heart.

Not only did this family make records, they read and used the records—they learned and were taught what was on the records. It is possible that they begot a righteous posterity because they left their words and made sure that they were taught. The righteous posterity also took responsibility to learn and use those very records. The scriptures were a living thing for them—we can see that as they quote them and use them.

Helaman 2:1–2 — Helaman₂ Becomes the Chief Judge

Again, we have the judgment seat empty, and again it was filled by “the voice of the people” (Helaman 2:2). Helaman₂, son of the previous high priest, and grandson of Alma the younger was selected for this role. His father, Helaman₁ had not been the chief judge, but rather had been the high priest. Helaman₂ would have become the High Priest when his father left, because it is more likely that that office was inherited, as prescribed by the Law of Moses. Now, he also became the chief judge. In the forty-second year of the judges, Helaman₂ courageously took responsibility. Being both the chief judge and the high priest

only heightened the risks of the situation. His brave decision was one of the great moments in Helaman₂'s life. At about age twenty-four, he was the only one to whom the people could turn for leadership. Throughout the next few chapters, we will see the wise character of this new chief judge.

Helaman 2:4–9 — Kishkumen Attempts to Assassinate Helaman₂

Persuaded by the flattery of “one Gadianton, who was exceedingly expert in many words, and also in his craft, to carry on the secret work of murder and of robbery” (Helaman 2:4), Kishkumen, who had previously assassinated Pahoran, “went forth towards the judgment-seat to destroy Helaman” (v. 6). Gadianton, who was now the leader of the band of conspirators, had promised that if they assassinated Helaman₂, he would take over the judgeship and place members of his band in “power and authority among the people” (v. 5). Just when Kishkumen was about to assassinate Helaman₂, one of the chief judge’s servants who had discovered the plot, stabbed “Kishkumen even to the heart, that he fell dead without a groan” (v. 9). This may have been deliberately conducted in this manner, waiting until Kishkumen had gone far enough that he had played his hand and could be legitimately killed. Kishkumen was clearly a member of an organized conspiracy group and, when dealing with a secret society, one rarely knows who is truly part of the conspiracy and who is not.

Though Kishkumen had died, with him out of the way, the crafty Gadianton expanded his influence out in the wilderness, and this group, in legal terms, became a band of robbers with him as the power broker. Mormon, who already knew what the Gadianton robbers would become, interjected: “And behold, in the end of this book ye shall see that this Gadianton did prove the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi” (v. 13). We will see more of the progression of this group’s influence in Helaman 6.

Apparently, these oath-swearing conspirators—called robbers, bandits, or outlaws—had placed themselves, as a band, literally outside the law and therefore were not entitled to protections under the law. They were held incontestably guilty upon arrest. Once again, the Nephite law that required more than mere intent before a person could be punished must have been satisfied by the element of the conspirator’s oath. Taking that binding step went legally beyond the protected line of mere belief.

Socially and politically, the trial of Paanchi apparently left in its wake conditions very similar to these that have given rise elsewhere in the world to the phenomenon identified as “social banditry.” Typically included among those preconditions are the disruptions caused by prolonged wars, famines, economic inequality, administrative inefficiencies, sharp social divisions, and political marginalization of minorities. But the main factor listed by social scientists regarding the conditions that have consistently produced social

banditry in many pre-technical societies is a sense of indignity and injustice. Things required by the local rulers are felt to be intolerably unjust. Thus, the outcomes and repercussions of the trial of Paanchi surely incubated the rise of the militant Gadianton robbers and the other bands of social brigands that became such a serious threat among the Nephites for the next seventy-five years. (See further discussion of thieves and robbers at the end of the discussion of Helaman 6, below).

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[What is the Difference Between 'Robbers' and 'Thieves' in the Book of Mormon? \(Helaman 6:18\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 432 (May 10, 2018).

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why was Helaman's Servant Justified in Killing Kishkumen? \(Helaman 2:9\)](#)," *KnoWhy* 173, (August 25, 2016).

John W. Welch, "[Theft and Robbery in the Book of Mormon and Ancient Near Eastern Law](#)," *FARMS Preliminary Report* (1985), 1–41.

John W. Welch "[The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon](#) (Provo, UT: BYU Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 311, 319, 351–56.

Helaman 3

Helaman 3:3–5 — Some People Migrate to the Land Northward

Four years later, in the forty-sixth year of the judges, there were many groups of people migrating into the land northward—especially from among the Ammonites. These were the sons and possibly the grandsons of the pacifists who had sworn the oath to resist taking up arms. They had prospered, partly because fewer of them in their population group had died. They may have felt that they did not really belong in the Land of Nephi. In some ways, they were still Lamanites—they had their own history and traditions. They may have realized that they had been a cause of much of the continuing conflict between the Lamanites and the Nephites. The Lamanites were still trying to reclaim parts of the Nephite land to get the Ammonites back. As pacifists committed by righteous conversion and covenant, the Ammonites decided to move through the narrow neck of land and to relocate in the land northward.

Helaman² probably approved and politically allowed this extraordinary migration, in the same spirit that his father had taken the extraordinary step of marching at the head of the young Ammonite soldiers. There must have been a good relationship between Helaman² and the Ammonite people personally. This was probably the case because of the debt

owed by the Ammonites to Helaman₁, even though Helaman₂ may not have spent very much time with his father, who was out in the battlefield for much of his son’s youth.

Helaman 3:7 — The People in the Land Northward Use Cement

In Helaman chapter 3, we learn that the migrants did a lot of building. The Ammonites were innovative, and the record says that they moved to where there was not much timber. What were they to build with? They solved the problem innovatively by building structurally with cement. The cement they learned how to use was very high-quality cement—it was not just mortar holding blocks together. These migrants discovered and used a new technique.

There are several places in the western hemisphere where there are pits of natural dry lime plaster. It can be put in sacks and transported more easily than blocks of stone. When mixed with water, this natural lime makes a very high-quality cement. Several locations in Mesoamerica you can walk on today have slabs of cement poured 2,000 years ago that are in better condition than an average driveway today—mine included!

After the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, some people doubted that people in the ancient western world had become “exceeding expert in the working of cement.” Where were the remains of their cement structures? Subsequently, the discovery of such structures came to light. Teotihuacan, an enormous ancient archeological site in the Valley of Mexico, is one location where structures were constructed of cement. Archeologists can date the origin of those buildings. A master’s thesis written at Johns Hopkins University in the 1940s dated the introduction of concrete or cement structural building techniques to about the middle of the first century B.C. Indeed, the forty-second year of the judges was 50 B.C., precisely the middle of the first century B.C. I have liked to call this “concrete evidence for the Book of Mormon.” As a fact stated in the Book of Mormon itself, any proposed real-world location for the Ammonites’ relocation into a land northward needs to reckon with this remarkable detail included in Helaman 3:7. This use of cement must have been a very stunning invention. No wonder the Nephite records mentioned it, and Mormon—who came grew up in the land northward (Mormon 1:6)—preserved this detail in his abridgement.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[When Did Cement Become Common in Ancient America? \(Helaman 3:7\),](#)” *KnoWhy* 174 (August 26, 2016).

Matthew G. Wells and John W. Welch, “[Concrete Evidence for the Book of Mormon,](#)” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 212–214.

John L. Sorenson, *“How Could Joseph Smith Write So Accurately about Ancient American Civilization?”* *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

Helaman 3:23–25, 32 — The Nephites Celebrate a Jubilee

Helaman₂, the son of the Helaman₁ who led the stripling Ammonite warriors, served as chief judge for twelve years, from the forty-second to the fifty-third years of the reign of the judges (50–39 B.C.). After an assassination attempt against him in his inaugural year, his reign was the most peaceful of any Nephite chief judge. He saw no wars, and nine of his years were notably marked as times of peace. He was especially remembered for his “justice and equity” (Helaman 3:20), which says a lot.

Most significantly, the forty-ninth and fiftieth years of the reign of the judges appear to have been something of years of jubilee. The forty-ninth year would have been the seventh sabbatical year (a reasonable time for great celebration and rejoicing) and the fiftieth year was the jubilee itself (a time of continual peace and great joy). The jubilee laws under the Law of Moses are found in Leviticus 25–26. The forty-ninth and fiftieth years are mentioned in particular in Leviticus 25:8–10.

The jubilee celebrated by Helaman₂ and his people was not, however, like other fifty-year jubilees dictated by the Law of Moses. This seems to have been a quasi-jubilee, rightly celebrating the fiftieth year of the reign of the judges. Apparently, the Nephites were still celebrating the festivals under the Law of Moses. But now they had two calendars going: (1) the ancient Mosaic calendar, marking festivals such as Passover and the Day of Atonement that were required to be celebrated according to law on the Plates of Brass, and (2) the Nephite calendar that counted the years since instituting the reign of judges, marking dates for the occasions of celebrating their own unique anniversaries. Whatever the actual nature of the Nephite jubilee, Mormon apparently could not pass by the forty-ninth and fiftieth year of the reign of the judges without commenting that “thousands did join themselves unto the church and were baptized unto repentance” (3:24) and that they had “peace and exceeding great joy” and then “continual peace and great joy” in those two years (v. 32). Mormon significantly emphasized the public religious celebration that took place at this time.

At the same time, it is important to note that during this brief season of peace, growth, and prosperity, the Gadianton robbers were already secretly infiltrating Nephite society. The secret actions of the Gadiantons were not known to Helaman₂ and other officials of government (v. 23), but Mormon could insert that information because he knew the story with hindsight gained from other records he was abridging. A chronological overview of the reign of Helaman as chief judge is helpful:

Helaman as Chief Judge

Years 42–53 of the Reign of the Judges

| References | Year | |
|----------------|------|--|
| Helaman 2:1–12 | 42 | Peace achieved with the Lamanites Kishkumen killed attempting to assassinate Helaman Gadianton flees and becomes robber leader |
| 3:1 | 43 | No contention among the Nephites, but a little pride |
| 3:2 | 44 | No contention |
| 3:2 | 45 | No contention |
| 3:3 | 46 | Much contention and many dissensions Many migrate into the land northward |
| 3:19 | 47 | Great contention continues |
| 3:19, 22 | 48 | Contentions eventually diminish |
| 3:23–25 | 49 | Peace, prosperity, very dramatic church growth Continual rejoicing all year long Gadianton robbers secretly infiltrate settled lands |
| 3:32 | 50 | Continual peace and great joy |
| 3:33–35 | 51 | Peace and sanctification Rising pride among church members |
| 3:36 | 52 | Peace prevails despite increasing pride |
| 3:37 | 53 | Helaman ₃ dies in office |

Figure 1 John W. Welch and Greg Welch, "Helaman as Chief Judge," in *Charting the Book of Mormon*, chart 38.

Helaman 3:33–35 — How Do We Grow Firmer and Firmer in Faith?

The righteous people here were managing to stay faithful in the midst of great difficulty—tribulations caused by people who were actually sitting next to them in church. Some of the congregation were creating problems for the rest of the congregation. “[T]hey were lifted up in pride, even to the persecution of many of their brethren” (v. 34). The distinction is made that pride did not enter into the church of God, “but into the hearts of the people, who professed to belong to the church of God.”

It must have taken great effort for the faithful to remain strong in that day when they had little organizational support and not much access to information. They undoubtedly had to be spiritually self-sustaining. Those who were persecuted were trying to be good members of the church, gathering to teach and learn the gospel with others in order to make sure their testimonies were firm in the face of everything that was happening in the outside world around them. They were humble. In the midst of all that was going on among members of the church, these humble people became firmer and firmer in their faith. That is remarkable! How can we become firmer and firmer in our faith in the midst of trials? Their example is worth noting:

Nevertheless they did fast and pray oft, and did wax stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying and the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God (v. 35).

One of the things that is so interesting in these Helaman chapters is information about what was truly in the hearts of the people—something that is not necessarily apparent on the outside. For the good and the bad, many of these people were not necessarily what they appeared to be on the outside, and that is an important recognition. Part of what Mormon was trying to teach us today is the need to be very discerning, by the spirit, as we see what is happening within the lives of others, particularly as we try to preserve our own testimony, our own faith and strength.

Helaman 3:37 — Helaman, Son of Helaman, Dies Young

Helaman₂ died while in office in the fifty-third year of the reign of the judges. We do not know much about this man. Why? Well, may we all be blessed to live a boring life! When all was peaceful, what do the historians have to say? What do newsrooms have to report? Helaman₂ died when he was about thirty-five years old. If his son, Nephi, was born when Helaman was twenty, that Nephi would have been about fifteen years old when his father died. There was not a lot of father-to-son continuity in this situation. This young Nephi barely knew his father and Helaman’s second son, Lehi, had known him fewer years.

The commentary on Helaman's time in office, however, pointed out that he followed in the footsteps of his father: "Helaman did fill the judgment-seat with justice and equity; yea, he did observe to keep the statutes, and the judgments, and the commandments of God; and he did do that which was right in the sight of God continually; and he did walk after the ways of his father, insomuch that he did prosper in the land" (v. 20). A similar commentary on the nature of the reign of Nephi² likewise stated, "He did fill the judgment-seat with justice and equity; yea, he did keep the commandments of God, and did walk in the ways of his father" (v. 37).

Helaman 4

Helaman 4:1–4 — Pride Creeps in among the People

In chapter 3, pride had crept in and out among members of the church quite rapidly. In Helaman 3:1, we read that there was no contention, "save it were a little pride ... which did cause some little dissensions." This appears to have been resolved by the forty-fourth year. But then, in Helaman 3:3 (just two verses later), dissension rises again, in the forty-sixth year—enough contention that many people emigrated. There was a brief respite during the two jubilee years, but by the fifty-fifth year, pride crept in again, "even to the persecution of many of their brethren" (Helaman 3:34).

Here in chapter 4, even in the first verse, we see that matters had become even more serious: "[I]n the fifty and fourth year there were many dissensions in the church, and there was also a contention among the people, insomuch that there was much bloodshed." The pride and dissension were bad enough, but the old story popped up again. The dissenters left and joined the Lamanites and succeeded in "stirring them up to anger against the Nephites; and they were all that year preparing for war" (v. 4). The wars began in the fifty-seventh year, at which time the Lamanites, aided by these dissenters, captured the Nephite lands—even Zarahemla.

Helaman 4:12–13 — Root Causes of Failure to Prosper

The commentary in these two verses provides a list of core failings that led to disaster. They are the very things King Benjamin warned against. The Nephite people failed because of:

- The pride of their hearts;
- Their exceeding riches;
- Their oppression of the poor, withholding their food from the hungry, withholding their clothing from the naked;
- Their smiting their humble brethren upon the cheek;

- Their making a mock of that which was sacred;
- Their denying the spirit of prophecy and of revelation;
- Their murdering, plundering, lying, stealing, committing adultery;
- Their rising up in great contentions; and
- Their deserting away into the land of Nephi, among the Lamanites.

Perhaps this sad condition spread so rapidly because these material successes arose dramatically in an unregulated decade of post-war boom. Perhaps people felt insecure due to lingering worries about Gadianton terrorism. Perhaps disgruntled political partisans saw opportunities to expand their positions at a time when the central government was young and inexperienced. Whatever the economic or political causes, their spiritual failures to act righteously and to keep the commandments of God exposed the church and the people to impending disasters.

Because they boasted in their own strength and did not rely upon the Lord, these people did not prosper. In fact, they lost possession of almost all their lands.

Helaman 4:14–16 — Three Great Leaders

There were three strong leaders trying to help these rapidly failing people who had lost sight of their God.

Nephi² and Lehi², the sons of Helaman², were dealing with the government and the spiritual affairs. Meanwhile, Moronihah, the son of the great spiritually focused military leader, chief captain Moroni, was doing what he could with the military situation. This noble son of a noble father “did preach many things unto the people because of their iniquity” (v. 14). Because of the preaching and prophesying of these great leaders and their dire situation (having been overtaken by the Lamanites), the Nephite people actually began to repent, “and inasmuch as they did repent they did begin to prosper” (v. 15).

In a somewhat startling moment of self-awareness, the Nephites came to their senses and acknowledged their sins, problems, and weaknesses. The Nephites became greatly afraid when “they began to remember the prophecies of Alma, and also the words of Mosiah,” as well as when “they saw that they had been a stiffnecked people, and that they had set at naught the commandments of God” (Helaman 4:21). Only when they repented could Moronihah “venture to lead them forth from place to place, and from city to city, even until they had regained the one-half” of what they had lost (Helaman 4:15–16).

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, [“How Did the Nephites Become Weak in Such a Short Time? \(Helaman 4:25\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 175 (August 29, 2016).

Helaman 5

Helaman 5:1–4 — Nephi Delivers Up the Judgment Seat So He Can Preach

At this point, Nephi² had served exactly ten years as chief judge, and then he gave the judgment seat to Cezoram in the sixty-second year of the reign of the judges. The laws had become corrupted, so he stepped down—just as his great-grandfather Alma had done to try to address the root problems underlying political and social troubles. Alma had served for nine years as the chief judge and, realizing that the word of God was mightier than the sword, desired to see if preaching the word would have a better effect. Nephi² had been in the position of chief judge for ten years and was merely twenty-five years old when he gave up the position, and he chose to go on a mission, again just like his great-grandfather had done. He and his brother, Lehi, dedicated themselves to preaching the word of God for the remainder of their days, traveling around the Land of Nephi.

Would it have been hard for Nephi² to relinquish that kind of political control and walk away from being the leader of his nation? Would he have felt as though he was abandoning ship? He handpicked his successor, a man named Cezoram. The new appointment did not go out for a vote of any kind—at least it is not mentioned in the record. We have no idea who Cezoram was, but with a name with a root word “zoram,” chances are he was a Zoramite with a prefix, “Ce-Zoram.”

In the sixty-sixth year of the reign of the judges, Cezoram was murdered. This makes one wonder if Nephi would have been murdered if he had stayed in office. However, he had strong family credentials and maybe he would have been a more difficult target. These various scenarios can be pondered several ways, leaving us to wonder if Nephi² himself fretted over what he should do when he decided to focus his attention on the land of Nephi. This could not have been an easy decision for him.

In Helaman 5:4, the record bluntly states that Nephi² was weary of iniquity. I do not know of any other prophet who was described as being “weary.” Yet, it is understandable that he reached a point of frustration and weariness with the situation he was up against. So, Nephi² and his brother, Lehi, answered the call, which perhaps their father had inspired them to think about, to preach the word of God.

And, what a great brother Lehi was—he chose to go with his brother. Being the second son of Helaman², Lehi could likely have chosen to take over the judgment seat. Undoubtedly, he was always in his older brother’s shadow. Lehi could have stepped out of that shadow and taken hold of power that could have been his. Instead, he chose to go with his brother and preach the gospel.

We encounter Nephi² at the beginning of chapter 5. He will be the colossus of prophecy and the central figure all the way through to the end of chapter 11—seven entire chapters. Fully half of the Book of Helaman is about this man Nephi² and what an amazing man he was! Yet, I venture to say, like Moronihah, we do not talk about Nephi² very much. Why are these men in the Book of Helaman so obscure? Why do we not know their stories very well? We know the stories of Moroni and the stripling warriors, and we know the story of Alma and Amulek. Why aren't we as familiar with these Helaman narratives? Are we just too tired when we get to the Book of Helaman? Are the stories not as easy to condense into short form?

Perhaps one reason these stories are less familiar to us is that the narrative of the entire Book of Mormon is suddenly transposed during this period of time. The supposed good guys (in Zarahemla) are now the bad guys, and the bad guys (the Lamanites) become the good guys. We may not be comfortable with the reversal. The Lamanites who convert are deeply converted, and Samuel the Lamanite, who is introduced at the end of the Book of Helaman, was one of those amazing converts. He may have been one of hundreds, for all we know. We will talk about that later, when we get to the Samuel narrative. The point is, there was a lot of very effective preaching now being done by Lamanites to the Nephites right in the center of the land of Zarahemla.

Bear in mind that as Nephi² was serving as a missionary, he was not an ordinary 19-year-old missionary. He was the high priest. No doubt, he had been working in the temple every day—sacrificing and seeing that the ordinances were properly performed. Think of the strength that would have given him. In a modern-day analogy, it is similar to the prophet serving a lifetime mission, calling upon the powers of heaven to assist his efforts. The Lord will bless every missionary, but some leaders have a special calling, with special authority and with special powers. Fortunately, we have those general authorities among us today. We have people who have accepted the call to spend the rest of their days in service to the Lord, teaching and preaching the gospel—the prophet, the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the First Quorum of Seventy. These men serve lifetime appointments.

Helaman 5:5–13 — When Was Helaman's Advice to His Sons Recorded?

Helaman² may have already died before his advice to his sons was recorded. We do not know when the words in Helaman 5:5–13 were first spoken. Helaman² had died ten years earlier, when his sons Nephi and Lehi were about 15 and 13 years old. However, we are told specifically that they “remembered” the words of patriarchal advice from their father.

We often read Helaman 5 as though Helaman² was offering missionary advice immediately before sending his boys out on a mission. But he would not have given this

counsel to his sons in that context. They were still very young children. So, Helaman₂ was probably doing this fairly close to the time he died. These may have been his deathbed words to them—his final desires. It was like bestowing a patriarchal blessing—similar to what his grandfather, Alma, had done, speaking to Helaman, Shiblon and Corianton, shortly before he left. They too remembered those words, as they were counseled to do.

Helaman₂ likewise used the word “remember” in this section of verses, fourteen times to be precise. Fourteen is two times seven and thus is a significant number in Hebrew. Helaman₂ counselled his sons to remember the significance of their names. These two sons were named after Lehi and Nephi who came out of Jerusalem. Remembering the significance of their names may have helped them recollect the works of their forebearers. When they recalled the words of these ancient prophets, they would remember their father’s advice—“remember, remember.” Look at Helaman 5:9, where Helaman₂ uses the word “remember” four times alone. Perhaps Helaman thought, “I am going to double this doubled imperative so that my two sons will remember not only my words but also remember the words of King Benjamin.” These seem to be the anguished words of a man who is dying too early—a father who was trying hard to leave a legacy for his two sons. Helaman₂ deeply desired them to remember what he was saying. He took this opportunity to give direction to his boys, so that they could carry on the family legacy of righteousness.

Notice that Helaman₂ explained the end-result he desired for his sons after they lived a life of good works. In verse 8, Helaman stated that he wanted his sons to do good “not ... that ye may boast” (which, of course, is a King Benjamin phrase), but “that ye may ... lay up for yourselves a treasure in heaven, yea which is eternal, and which fadeth not away; yea, that ye may have that precious gift of eternal life.” This advice sounds like it is coming from someone who is thinking a lot already about his immanent passing into the next life.

Helaman 5:6 — Why Did Helaman Name His Sons Nephi and Lehi?

Why did Helaman₂ name his sons Nephi and Lehi? The repeated appearance of these two names applying to several people throughout the historical record sometimes makes it difficult for us to recognize who is who in the Book of Mormon. We sometimes have to stop and ask, “Who was the father of this Nephi? Was this the same Helaman that led the stripling warriors? Etc.” This Nephi and Lehi are the grandsons of the stripling warrior leader. But, while it is hard to keep them all straight, these names were important in asserting and maintaining direct connections with the legacy of Lehi and entitlements to the land of promise. The kings following the original Nephi called themselves “second Nephi, third Nephi, and so forth” (Jacob 1:11). By calling his first son Nephi and his second son Lehi, Helaman may have been reinforcing the claim of the Nephites to certain traditional rights in the land of Nephi.

The names may certainly have inspired these two sons to want to serve, at some point in their lives, in the land of Nephi, which they magnificently accomplished. It helped them to remember their origins and their genealogy. Remembering the goodness and righteousness of these ancestors strengthened the characters of Helaman's sons and gave them a sense of their heritage. Bearing these names was a constant reminder to them to try to be like these great progenitors. The names had deep meaning in terms of identity construction—of whom Helaman wanted his sons to become.

This Nephi's son will also be named Nephi, the Nephite leader at the time of the birth of Christ and also at the time of Christ's appearance after his resurrection. So, the name held special value among the leading Nephite families.

Helaman wisely gave his second son the name of Lehi. Notice that the younger son received the name of the patriarch of the Nephite and Lamanite nations—reversing the order of the names of the Nephite predecessors. There was also some political significance in the name Lehi. Helaman's son Lehi was born in the thirty-seventh or thirty-eighth year of the reign of the judges, after peace had been achieved between the Nephites and the Lamanites. The name "Lehi" was all-inclusive, subtly strengthening the political statement that all the posterity of Lehi could be joined in peace.

Further Reading

Matthew L. Bowen, "‘He Is a Good Man’: The Fulfillment of Helaman 5:6–7 in Helaman 8:7 and 11:18–19," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 17 (2016): 167–168.

Helaman 5:9–11 — Salvation Only Comes through Christ

The words in Helaman 5:9 compare well with Mosiah 3:17–18. Quotation marks could easily be put around the phrase, "There is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Christ." Quotation marks were not used in ancient languages, but there is no doubt that Helaman had taught his sons Nephi and Lehi the words of King Benjamin. They were using the recorded words of King Benjamin and other prophets as one of their core scriptures at this point. Mosiah 3:17 and 18 are the central chiasm of the entire speech of King Benjamin. By quoting these particular words, Helaman focused on the apex of King Benjamin's speech. Helaman's ability to quote King Benjamin so effectively and directly indicates that he and his people learned and probably knew the entire speech by heart.

Helaman 5:12 — We Must Build on the Foundation of Christ

Helaman gave his sons—and all of us indirectly—crucial advice at the beginning of Helaman 5:12: "[R]emember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation." Throughout history, laying

the foundation of a building with a precisely fitted and positioned stone was the key to creating a structure that would last. Without properly laying the foundation, the structure would sink, crumble and collapse. Today we do not use stone as the foundation for building structures—we pour reinforced concrete. Anciently, however, stone was used as the foundation. A builder would begin by carefully measuring and laying a chief cornerstone for the structure. The chief cornerstone for the temple of Herod was enormous and remains in place today. It was very solid—as big as a good-sized semi-trailer. We have no idea how the ancient builders moved this particularly cornerstone into position, but it created a monumentally sure foundation—a solid base upon which the temple could be built. This was crucial. Herod's temple was destroyed, but the foundation, the platform, and the retaining walls are still there two thousand years later. This is what tourists see when visiting the site of Herod's temple. The foundation for Herod's temple will be there for a very long time. What a powerful image!

Similarly, in Mesoamerica the Maya, and in Peru the Incas, knew how to build with rocks. They knew how to build rock foundations for structures that have lasted hundreds of years. People living in ancient times would have easily identified with this strong image of building on a rock foundation. In Helaman's analogy, it is the Messiah, Christ, Jehovah, the Son of God who is our sure foundation. Whatever else is built upon the wrong foundation will pass away.

Interestingly, ancient buildings had several stones that were carefully measured and laid in the foundation—usually four cornerstones. However, there was only one “chief” cornerstone that was often placed ceremonially in important government, royal or sacred structures. To place a chief cornerstone, a corner of the foundation was opened. A stone box with a lid was made to fill the opening and important inscriptions were put inside the box. This “rock” became part of the stone foundation of the building. Metal plates or clay tables in stone boxes were often found to be the chief cornerstones of ancient temples or palaces.

This is similar to what we do today when new temples are built. A symbolic cornerstone for each temple has meaningful documents and items placed inside a box. The “rock” is then put in place and done by ceremony, with the prophet or an apostle sealing the cornerstone with mortar. This modern-day celebration follows a very ancient tradition. That is what made this particular cornerstone a special “chief” cornerstone.

The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 2:20, referred to the church and its members being built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone. Anciently, the chief cornerstone of significant building structures contained the record of why the building was being built, under what authority it was being built, and other relevant information. The chief cornerstone contained “the word” or

authorizing decree of the king or the builder. That is what made it the “chief” cornerstone. This is an interesting symbol of Christ, who is not only there as the foundation, but also as the explanation of authority and reason for the structure. Symbolically, Christ and the chief cornerstone both contain and constitute the “word” of God.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, [“Why Did Helaman Compare Christ to a Rock? \(Helaman 5:12\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 176 (August 30, 2016).

Book of Mormon Central, [“Why Did Helaman Want His Sons to Remember to Build upon the Rock? \(Helaman 5:12\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 332 (June 28, 2017).

Helaman 5:12 — The Gulf of Misery and Woe

In the ancient world, another interesting symbol associated the temple itself as “the rock,” “the hill,” or “the mountain.” Psalm 24 states, “Who shall ascend into the hill [mountain] of the Lord?” This Psalm is speaking of the temple. In Jerusalem today, the location where the temple of Herod once stood is known as the Temple Mount—and it is a big rock. The scriptures talk about this rock as being—to put it in modern vernacular—the plug that sits on top of the underworld that prevents the floods from coming up and destroying the world. If the rock were not there, there would be no plug to prevent destructive floods from coming up out of the underworld.

These ancient people believed that they lived within an ecosphere with water above that was held off by the firmament and water below that was held off by the plug. If the windows of heaven were opened, the rains would come down—as occurred with the floods of Noah. In their view, there had to be the right balance between the heavenly waters and the subterranean waters. The temple was what maintained that order, according to the ancient mind. The rock, which represented the Lord, prevented them from being overwhelmed by the storm and by the hail, and from being dragged down into the gulf of misery—those underworld waters that would consume them.

In Christ’s parable given in the Sermon on the Mount, the man who built on the rock was safe. When the storm came down and the floods happened, his house stood firm. Alternatively, the opposite would happen if he built on a sandy foundation—he would be destroyed.

Several Book of Mormon writers spoke of the “gulf of misery.” Besides Helaman’s use of this phrase in chapter 5 verse 12, there are other places in this book of scripture where the “gulf of misery” is discussed:

- Nephi reported that the angel who reviewed his father’s vision mentioned that “a great and a terrible gulf divideth [those in the great and spacious building from the word of God]” (1 Nephi 12:18);
- Nephi gave an interpretation of his father’s dream to his brothers and stated “that it was an awful gulf, which separate the wicked from the tree of life” (1 Nephi 15:28).
- Lehi must have used this phrase when describing his vision because of two scriptural narratives which appear to support this fact: (1) the angel referred to the “gulf” when reiterating the vision to Nephi; and (2) Lehi stated the following when speaking to his sons near the time of his death: “O that ye would awake; awake from a deep sleep, yea, even from the sleep of hell, and shake off the awful chains by which ye are bound, which are the chains which bind the children of men, that they are carried away captive down to the eternal gulf of misery and woe” (2 Nephi 1:13).
- Ammon mentioned the gulf in his famous joyous speech in Alma 26:20: “Behold, [the Lord] did not exercise his justice upon us, but in his great mercy hath brought us over that everlasting gulf of death and misery, even to the salvation of our souls.”
- Mormon used the gulf imagery very effectively in one of his “thus we see” interludes: “Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God” which will “lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked” (Helaman 3:29).

Helaman 5:12 — Christ Is the Rock that Saves Us from the Gulf of Misery

Helaman concluded his remarks to his sons by giving a beautiful description of Christ and his mission. This description gives us hope that if we build our foundation on the rock, which is Christ, we will not be pulled down into the gulf of misery—we “cannot fail.” Helaman explained that the Lord has power to save and that this was the plan that was laid from the foundation of the world—Christ would be the Redeemer and Savior of the entire world.

Helaman’s missionary preparation course ended with verse 12. Helaman 5:5–12 was all that was included in the record to equip these boys for their missions. They were not given a copy of *Preach My Gospel* (a 300-page manual), but they had been instructed in these few lines about the most important things. They were asked not only to remember Christ—they were also to remember to repent. Verse 11 explains that the conditions of repentance bring forth the power of the Redeemer unto salvation. We must remember that the entire process of repentance is necessary as we call upon the power of the Savior to open up the way of salvation, which can only come through Him and in that way.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, [“Why Did Helaman Want His Sons to Remember to Build upon the Rock? \(Helaman 5:12\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 332 (June 28, 2017).

Book of Mormon Central, [“Why Did Helaman Compare Christ to a Rock? \(Helaman 5:12\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 176 (August 30, 2016).

Helaman 5:14–17 — Nephi and Lehi Begin Their Mission

After reviewing the advice from their father, Nephi and Lehi left on their mission. First, they went to the city of Bountiful—a strategic location. Likely, they were hoping to keep people from migrating into the land northward as others had done. Then they went to the land of Mulek where they had little success. Ultimately, they traveled through all the cities of the Nephites. If Nephi was weary before, he must have been exhausted now. They continued southward, trying to teach the Nephites until they came to the city of Zarahemla, which was now held by Lamanites.

Despite the trials, these faithful missionaries had some success among the people of Zarahemla who had dissented from the Nephites and joined the Lamanites. Many of the Nephite dissenters repented, were baptized, and rejoined the Nephites. These converted dissenters went among the Nephites “to endeavor to repair unto them [the Nephites] the wrongs which they had done.” When you think of the trouble that these dissenters had caused, could they repair those wrongs? I do not think so. At least not completely and certainly not by themselves. They could not go back and undo all of the disaster that had been caused—the wars, the sickness, the death, pain, and the property loss. Notice it does not say that they actually repaired the wrongs they had done. The damage was probably irreparable. But they did “endeavor” to make repair. That is all we can do, and all that is ultimately required.

The converted dissenters undoubtedly knew how hard it was going to be to teach the Nephites, but they tried. This was part of their repentance process. Alma had taught a great lesson to his sons Helaman and Corianton that contained clear instructions on the principle of restitution as a part of repentance (Alma 36, 39–42). That Helaman was the great-grandfather of these two boys, so they had reason to regard this teaching highly.

Helaman 5:18–19 — Nephi and Lehi Receive Power, Authority, and Revelation from God

Nephi and Lehi received personal revelation as to what to say and were also given the power to say it. They were given both authority and the content. We must be spiritually prepared to receive gifts of the Spirit. The Holy Ghost often needs something to work with. We talk about being “moved” by the Spirit—the Spirit “moves” us to do something. However, we have to put something inside our hearts, minds, or souls for the Holy Ghost

to move around. If you load your mind with good things, they can be brought to your remembrance in the moment you need it.

Thus, Nephi and Lehi had great success, “insomuch that there were eight thousand of the Lamanites who were in the land of Zarahemla and round about baptized unto repentance, and were convinced of the wickedness of the traditions of their fathers” (v. 19).

Helaman 5:20–22 — Nephi and Lehi Are Imprisoned in the Land of Nephi

Following great success in Zarahemla, Nephi and Lehi decided to go south into Lamanite territory—the land of Nephi. Generations before, Ammon and the four sons of Mosiah had gone to the land of Nephi at a time when there had not been much, if any, previous contact between Nephites and Lamanites. At that time, there was resentment between the two nations and the Lamanites were very defensive. Any Nephite coming into Lamanite territory was thrown in jail until it could be determined who they were and the purpose of their presence in Lamanite lands.

Now, generations later, Nephi and Lehi were going into an even worse possible enemy situation. However, there was possibly one bright spot among the hostilities and takeovers between the two nations over the previous years—there were instances of mercy and good faith shown by a few Nephites to the Lamanites. Twenty-two years previous, in the forty-first year of the judges, Moronihah defeated some Lamanites who had come in to invade the center of the land of Zarahemla. Very much in character with his father, captain Moroni, Moronihah showed mercy and “caused that the Lamanites who had been taken prisoners should depart out of the land in peace” (Helaman 1:33). Perhaps Nephi and Lehi were helped by some of those former prisoners who could vouch for them and report that Nephites were not all bad.

The two missionaries could travel wherever they wanted in the land of Zarahemla, but now they were in enemy territory and were quickly arrested. We do not know if they had any opportunity to preach before they were arrested.

Interestingly, just a year following these events, the Nephites and Lamanites changed their travel policies, allowing open borders. Both Nephites and Lamanites were given freedom to travel as well as openly trade in both the land north and the land south. This very dramatic change, which was caused by Nephi and Lehi’s success, is discussed below in the section on Helaman chapter 6.

Helaman 5:23–24 — Nephi and Lehi Are Surrounded by Fire

Joseph Smith’s First Vision marks the beginning of the Restoration of the Gospel in this last dispensation. It is the foundation of our testimonies that the Father and the Son appeared in a pillar of fire to Joseph Smith. The Prophet Joseph described this vision in

one of his accounts as being so bright that he thought all the trees in the forest would be consumed. A similar experience occurs at the beginning of the conversion of a whole Lamanite nation. This was their “First-Vision experience,” and it bears quoting and telling just as much as we relate the First Vision story in every missionary discussion today.

Two missionaries, Nephi and Lehi, were arrested after arriving in Lamanite territory and held in a Lamanite prison for many days. When the Lamanites came to kill them, they had a Shadrach-Meshach-and-Abendnego-type of experience. In Helaman 5:23, the two were “encircled about as if by fire” and the Lamanites were afraid to touch them. Verse 24 describes the scene in more detail—the two missionaries were encircled by a “pillar of fire.” There is mention of a pillar of fire in other scriptural accounts. For example, as the Lord led Israel out of Egypt through the wilderness, there was a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. The Old Testament makes it clear that the pillar of fire manifested the presence of the Lord. In the modern-day account of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, he relates, “I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16). Two personages, God the Father and Jesus Christ, appeared in this pillar of light.

Nephi, and Lehi, were about to be killed. The pillar of light encircling the Lord’s high priest and brother was a manifestation of the divine presence surrounding them and providing protection. The Lamanites instinctively seemed to know not to touch the fire. They stood as if they were struck with amazement; they could not speak.

Helaman 5:26–28 — The Prison Begins to Shake

Nephi and Lehi told the Lamanites to not be afraid for “it is God that has shown unto you this marvelous thing.” Then the earth started to shake. The effects on the earth may have also been part of the divine presence. There was a lot of energy in this event—perhaps some kind of force field. This prison and surrounding area had been built with stones—cement had not been used in that part of the land. Stones were stacked on top of each other and they shook suddenly. It is interesting that the prison walls did not fall down. Even though the walls were shaking, they did not fall. Today, as in ancient times, there are earthquakes and volcanoes especially in the central parts of the Western Hemisphere. The hand of the Lord could both tear down and raise up.

There were many people in the prison—not just Nephi and Lehi. The record reports that both Lamanite dissenters as well as Nephites were imprisoned—though we have no idea how big the room was where Nephi and Lehi were interred.

Following the shaking of the prison walls, the very bright light that surrounded them receded and everything was dark—at least until their eyes adjusted. A dark cloud now enveloped these people. Again, this was a divine manifestation—similar to the Israelite experience with God manifesting Himself with the cloud by day to go with the pillar by night.

Helaman 5:29–33 — The Voice of the Lord Commands the Lamanites to Repent

I love the description of the voice these people heard: “[I]t was not a voice of thunder, neither was it a voice of a great tumultuous noise, but behold, it was a still voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper, and it did pierce even to the very soul” (Helaman 5:30).

This is a wonderful effort by someone trying to describe a unique spiritual experience. This person heard the voice and tried everything he could to reproduce the experience—recounting the nature of the voice that was heard and felt. Ancient people, of course, did not have iPhones where they could record the voice by simply pushing a button. They tried to record the experience in words. Even though the voice was heard and understood by a large number of people, it affected them personally, for “it did pierce even to the very soul.”

Perhaps the experience was memorable because of the contrast between the rumbling and the shaking of the earth and the voice. The Lamanites were terrified and they knew that they had been wicked. At this point, they realized that the sky was falling in on them, and instead of the judgments of God coming down upon them, what were they given? They received a very soft, sweet, invitation. It was intimate. Even though there were 300 people there, the text says that it pierced each one of them. It got through to their hearts. What an experience!

The voice of God is not always a great booming voice. The voice heard by the people in this narrative in Helaman is similar to the description of the voice of the Father introducing his Son to the crowd gathered around the temple in Bountiful in 3 Nephi 11.

The apostle John spoke of the quietness of the Spirit: “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

The ancient Old Testament prophet Elijah also gave a similar description of the voice of the Lord:

And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. (1 Kings 19:11–12)

Let us think about whispering. If you want your children or grandchildren to pay attention to you, does it work better to yell at them or to whisper? Sometimes the Lord yells at us, sometimes he whispers in a still, small voice. Why, on this occasion do you think it was a whisper? Whomever you are speaking to, it is important to be sure that they

hear your message in the way that they should. The Lord knew how and what he needed to say to these people to get their attention.

Helaman 5:33 — What Was So Sacred That It Could Not Be Spoken?

The voice spoke three times, and on the third time we are told that “the voice came, and did speak unto them marvelous words which cannot be uttered by man.” Once again, we must remember that Nephi was the high priest over the church. What was one important thing that the high priest could say that no one else could? It was the sacred name of Jehovah. In the temple, the high priest actually wore a little gold plate on his forehead that had the name of Jehovah on it to indicate that he had taken upon him the name of God. It could be read, but it could not be spoken except on the Day of Atonement. Even then, only the high priest could speak that name. Under Jewish tradition, the name of God had to be spoken ten times—a perfect number of times.

Perhaps the voice the people heard in this prison experience said, “I am.” That was the name that was sacred and could not be spoken. Perhaps the Lord explained, “I am Jehovah, I have done this, I have brought people out of bondage, I have brought you here.” If the Lord used his name, maybe even ten times, that would be something that could not be spoken.

Helaman 5:36–39 — Aminadab Sees Nephi and Lehi in the Fire

The observers could tell that something significant was happening, but it took Aminadab who was “a Nephite by birth, who had once belonged to the church of God but had dissented from them,” to explain to the people what was going on. The description of what Aminadab saw Nephi and Lehi doing used a subjunctive “as if” statement. He saw the two missionaries looking to heaven “as if talking or lifting their voices to some being whom they beheld” (v. 36). That is a powerful way of bringing the reader into an affirmative evaluation as to what, exactly, was happening. It invites an affirmative response by understatement—Yes, Nephi and Lehi had indeed beheld a heavenly being and were communicating with that being.

Aminadab was a dissenter and yet he was instrumental in guiding the Lamanites through this spiritual experience. What does that tell you about some people who are not physically active at Church as much as we think they should be? We ought not to be so surprised when someone like Aminadab steps up to assist in God’s work. Aminadab was a key player in this prison narrative. He had “belonged to the Church of God” at one time and so he knew enough that he could recognize and explain what was really happening when the others were bewildered.

Interestingly, Mormon found this man important enough that he told us his name—Aminadab. In Hebrew, “Ami” means “my people” and “nadab” means “are generous.”

Aminadab’s parents had given him a name through which he was to remember that “his people are generous people.” In this situation, Aminadab responded generously.

Helaman 5:43–49 — Every Soul Is Encircled by Fire

This event was a powerful, powerful experience that involved pillars of fire. How would an artist depict this scene? There were 300 people, each with a pillar of fire around them, and Lehi and Nephi standing in the midst of them. What an experience that must have been. What a light show! Talk about rock stars. That very, very powerful experience ended with the quiet statement, “Peace, peace be unto you” (v. 47). This was a peaceful spiritual experience in spite of all that was present—pillars of fire, a voice from heaven, and ministering angels.

At a time of confusion, pressure, trial or doubt, you may have received a wonderful feeling of peace letting you know that things would be fine. This peace can be very reassuring and can be a beautiful blessing. We can recognize these moments of peace as gifts of the Spirit when they come.

The foundational doctrine, as was taught earlier in the chapter, is repeated again—“Peace, peace be unto you, because of your faith in my Well Beloved, who was from the foundation of the world.” We must put our faith in Christ, who is the rock provided from the foundation of the world who will save us.

After angels came down and ministered to them, the three hundred converts were asked to minister to the rest of the Lamanite people and share their experience. They were able to convince the majority of the Lamanites of the reality of what had happened to them.

Helaman 5:51–52 — The Lamanites Return Nephite Lands to the Nephites

These Lamanites then gave up their weapons of war to show their repentance; they are like the Ammonites. They returned all the Nephite lands they still occupied. These lands encompassed half of the Nephite territory—the cities and land that Moronihah could not win back by military force—remember those places? “Therefore they did abandon their design to obtain the remainder of their lands” (Helaman 4:19). Now the Nephite lands were returned by the Lamanites—not by the sword, but by the Lamanites’ own volition. This is a major change of affairs.

Helaman 6

Helaman 6:1 — A Major Turning Point

There is a short phrase that is easily overlooked in the Book of Mormon that reports the state of affairs at the end of the sixty-second year of the judges. This phrase signifies a

huge swing of the pendulum in Book of Mormon history. Speaking of the large number of converted Lamanites, we read that “their righteousness did exceed that of the Nephites, because of their firmness and their steadiness in the faith.”

Helaman 6:3 — Lamanites Teaching and Converting Nephites

The Nephite people of the church had great joy in hearing of the conversion of many Lamanites and the establishment of the church among the Lamanites.

The Lamanites had repented and restored the lands to the Nephites. What did the Lamanites do next? They went out ministering to and teaching the Nephites—likely sharing their conversion stories. Can you imagine being a Nephite at that time? Just a short time before, the Nephites were fighting the Lamanites. Now the Lamanites were among them, wanting to share their testimonies and spiritual experiences. Wow!

Helaman 6:7–13 — Freedom of Travel between the Nephites and Lamanites Proclaimed

The next section of scripture is an annual report that was likely recorded on the large plates of Nephi by a very diligent record-keeper. At the end of every year, a scribe would record a summary of what happened that year on the large plates of Nephi. Mormon usually abridged or summarized the details from these records. Therefore, we do not have many verbatim copies of these annual reports.

The report in verses 7–13, however, is such a beautiful and important annual report that we most likely have it in its entirety and, I think, in its perfect original form. What reason would Mormon have had to modify this annual record? It’s not too long. It states the essence of the year’s main events. It was a gem of a record. This annual report is also written in a pure chiasmic form. This chiasm is not only brilliant—it is also a beautifully written annual report. Some scribe, over two thousand years ago, decided he was going to write into the records of eternity this amazing development of freedom of travel that took place in the sixty-fourth year of the reign of judges. He did a wonderful job of writing the summary by using the ancient chiasmic literary form. The natural balance inherent in a chiasmic structure perfectly represents, in a literary way, the newly instituted balance between these two lands. It is one of the best examples of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. On top of its equally matched details in the first and second halves, the central turning point of this chiasm works even better in Hebrew than in English—where “the Lord” and the name “Zedekiah,” with its theophoric suffix *-iah*, meaning “Jehovah” or “the Lord,” dominate the central focal point of the chiasm.

The chiasmic structure is as follows:

Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7-13

And behold, there was *peace* in all the land,
 [Freedom of travel and trade in *both lands* is discussed]
 And it came to pass that they became exceedingly *rich*, both
 the Lamanites and the Nephites;
 and they did have an exceeding *plenty of gold, and of silver*, and of
 all manner of *precious metals*, both in the *land south* and in the
land north
 Now the land *south*
 was called *Lehi*, and
 the land *north*
 was called *Mulek*;
 which was after the son of *Zedekiah*; *
 for the *Lord*
 did bring *Mulek*
 into the land *north*
 and *Lehi* into
 the land *south*.
 And behold, there was *all manner of gold* in *both* these *lands*, and
 of *silver*; and of *precious ore of every kind*;
 and there were also curious workmen, who did work all kinds
 of ore and did refine it; and thus they did become *rich*
 [Economic prosperity in *both lands* is discussed]
 And thus the sixty and forth year did pass away in *peace*.

*The Hebrew word for *Lord* constitutes the theophoric
 suffix *-yah*, which is at the end of the name Zedekiah.

Figure 2 John W. Welch and Greg Welch, "Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7-13," in *Charting the Book of Mormon*, chart 13.

Notice that, in verse 7, the annual report and the chiasm begin with *peace* in the land. The report and chiasm ends in verse 13 with *peace*.

After the peace, there is mention in verse 8 that the people now for the first time have *freedom of travel and trade in both lands*. This correlates nicely with *economic prosperity in both lands* in verse 12.

As a result of their prosperity, both the Lamanites and Nephites became *rich*—a statement made in parallel at the beginning (in verse 9) and end of the report (in verse 11).

The extent of their riches is also described in parallel phrases. The statement that there was *plenty of gold and silver and precious metal* in *both* the *land north* and the *land south* (at

the end of verse 9) is coupled with the report that there was *all manner of gold, silver, and precious ore* in *both these lands* (at the beginning of verse 11).

Verse 10 marks the absolute middle of the chiasm. Notice all ten of the chiasmic parallelisms in this one verse: It states, “Now the (a) *land south* was called (b) *Lehi*, and the (c) *land north* (d) *Mulek*, which was after the son of (e) *Zedekiah*, for the (e) *Lord* did bring (d) *Mulek* into the (c) *land north* and (b) *Lehi* into the (a) *land south*.”

Remember, up to this point if anybody wanted to travel from one land to another land, he would be forced back home as soon as he started to move out. If a Nephite or Lamanite stepped on foreign soil, he could be killed on the spot or imprisoned or taken before the king of that land. Now, both Nephites and Lamanites had freedom to travel between Nephite and Lamanite territory.

The logic for the change in policy is expressed in verse 10 (the center of the chiasm). Since the Lord brought people into both lands, the Lord intended both lands to be filled with people. There was a reciprocity in the dealings of the Lord with the people in both lands. Therefore, the people should legitimately be allowed to travel between lands. A theological justification was offered for this revolutionary freedom of travel policy.

If the parallelism is to be complete, how can “Zedekiah” stand as the parallel to “Lord” in this chiasm? For one thing, both Zedekiah and the Lord are kings. More compelling is the fact that the name “Zedekiah” is linguistically based on two Hebrew words: “Zedek” means “righteous” and “iah” (yah) is the theophoric suffix that means “Jehovah” or “the Lord.” So, Zedekiah’s name means “righteous is the Lord.” This results in the word “Lord” being mentioned in immediate succession at the center of this chiasm.

I noticed this chiasm for the first time in March, 1987, and it was published in May, 1987 as a FARMS Update, and soon was made widely available in the 1992 compilation *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*. I mention this timing because I remember well the late Wednesday night when this chiasmus came to my awareness. I was the bishop of the BYU 36th ward, and students needed interviews with the bishop for many reasons as the end of the winter semester approached. All the other students had come punctually on time. One in the middle of my scheduled list was still missing. It was getting late. I was tired, and I needed to teach my Honors Book of Mormon class the next morning. I decided to wait, as long as it took. I opened my copy of the Book of Mormon and sat on the couch in the apartment lobby and began to read the next day’s assignment, which spilled over from Helaman 5 into Helaman 6. This annual report separated itself from the surrounding text as a treasure left by an unnamed but very diligent ancient scribe. When the young man sheepishly stuck his head into the lobby, I invited him in. I told him that the Lord had just blessed us both by him being a little late. I shared with him what I had just found. We had

a great interview, in spite of his worries. I hope this text has meant as much to him as it has to me all these thirty-three years later.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, [“Why Was Chiasmus Used in Nephite Record Keeping? \(Helaman 6:10\),”](#) *KnoWhy* 177 (August 31, 2016).

John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, [“Helaman as Chief Judge,”](#) in *Charting the Book of Mormon*, (FARMS, 1999), chart 133

John W. Welch, [“Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7–13,”](#) in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 230–232.

Helaman 6:17–18, 22–25 — The Gadianton Robbers Return

Thieves were treated differently than robbers under ancient law. Significantly, the same distinction was made under the law in the Book of Mormon. Throughout the Nephite record, robbers were typically organized bands who separated themselves from society, opposed the government, and largely subsisted by plundering their enemies. Thieves, on the other hand, were generally members in the community who were guilty of stealing from fellow citizens. In simple terms, robbers were organized groups of “outsiders” (acting outside the law and the community), whereas thieves were community “insiders” who acted alone. From the viewpoint of the dominant government, robbers were vile menaces to the community and the order of government. Thieves, on the other hand, usually acted alone and did not disrupt the normal operations of government.

From the viewpoint of the marginal, disenfranchized elements of society—the robbers were seen as heroic Robin Hoods. Social banditry emerged from circumstances in society that were perceived by the masses to be unjust and intolerable, including administrative inefficiency, sharp social divisions, economic crises, famines, or prolonged wars. These movements were often rural, giving the poor effective methods of social agitation. They were often led by marginalized military or political figures, usually enjoying the support and protection of their village, and drawing strength from people who had been dislocated, displaced, or otherwise alienated from mainstream society. Social brigands were frequently heroes among the poor, acting as defenders and champions of the common people and sharing the basic values and religion of the peasant society.

There are sixteen characteristics that historians and anthropologists have identified as behavioral characteristics of bandits or robbers—the perennial plague of ancient civilizations. Below is a comparison between profiles of “robbers” and “thieves” in the ancient world. Because the accounts in the book of Helaman mention so many of these

factors, let me take this opportunity to run through this profile of robbers and bandits, as contrasted from mere thieves who stole things rather harmlessly from their local villagers:

1. Robbery was committed blatantly in the open; theft, in secret, a minor offense.
2. Robbers were outsiders and were therefore outside the protection of the law; theft usually occurred within the society.
3. Robbers usually acted with greater force and violence than did thieves.
4. Robbers acted in a group or band (hence, they are called “bandits,” highwaymen, brigands); thieves mostly acted alone.
5. Robbers were organized in professional groups. Usually bands of 15 to 40 men, but one had 10,000 men. They often had their own leader, code, priests, and so on, sometimes drawing together dissidents, foreigners, and social outcasts.
6. Robbers bound themselves together with oaths and sacrifices, making them heretics as well as criminals.
7. Robbers kept their hideouts secret, accentuating their sinister reputation.
8. Robbers operated with raids, assassinations, and terrorism.
9. Robbers would harass the highways or disrupt commerce, primarily to weaken local governments.
10. Robbers posed a great military threat to the society.
11. Robbers often demanded ransom or used extortion.
12. Robbers were considered outlaws and could be dealt with under martial law or no law at all.
13. The government bore the duty to clear the highways and keep the bands of robbers in check. These bands were usually short-lived.
14. Robbers could be executed; thieves could not.
15. Captured robber leaders were treated especially harshly.
16. Robbers were considered instruments of God’s wrath afflicting a wicked nation

Robbers in the Old World

In the Code of Hammurabi, a compilation of ancient Babylonian laws which date back to about 1754 BC, one of the most stringent rules was that the governor of a city had responsibility for ensuring that there were no robbers on the highways in his region. This rule was strictly enforced. If anyone lost property due to an attack by robbers, the governor was required by the Code to pay for the losses. Responsibility resided with the local government.

Bands of robbers and of pirates (the nautical equivalent) were identified as the worst enemies of the Roman Empire—especially in the area around Jerusalem and throughout the Mesopotamian region, a frontier of the Roman Empire with a very unstable border. The robbers were a constant plague. The Romans finally rid themselves of pirates a few

years before the birth of Christ by conquering the entire coast of the Mediterranean. This allowed the Romans to close off harbors from the use of pirates.

Robbers in the Book of Helaman

Whenever a central government becomes weak, groups of robbers take advantage of the situation. That is exactly what we see happening here in the Book of Helaman. In Helaman chapter 2, there was constant upheaval in government leadership in Zarahemla. The people were really struggling. They could not even protect their own chief judges. Leaders were assassinated and the robbers were able to wield power and cause contention and commotion throughout the community. We encounter the robbers again in Helaman 6:15–41, where they are even stronger and come back with a vengeance to dominate the politics in the City of Zarahemla.

Every one of the sixteen characteristics of robbers listed above is specifically mentioned in these Helaman chapters. For example, the robbers kept their hideout secret (see characteristic number 7). Every time they assassinated someone, they would run off and hide. People would chase after the robbers, but to no avail. No one could find them because the robbers found cover in their secret hideout. The robbers swore oaths that no one in their band would ever reveal where their hiding place was located.

Often, Book of Mormon robbers joined together in large groups. Many times, they had their own leader and their own law code (characteristic number 5). In Helaman 6:24, we see reference to the fact that if any robber in the band divulged the whereabouts of their hiding place or the nature of their oaths, he would be “tried.” The “trial” would not be done according to the laws of the country, but “according to the laws of their wickedness.” Thus, we know that the robbers in the Book of Mormon had their own rules within their secret society.

Behind the scenes, the Gadianton bandits increased their influence and numbers by quietly infiltrating the village and finding Nephites who were willing to protect and join them (characteristic four). In Helaman 6:38, when there was commotion in the land of Zarahemla, “the more wicked Nephites” did “build [the robbers] up and support them.” The record states that the Nephites were “seduced.” The tactic of seduction was, “You help us and you can share in the spoils.” This is, again, a very typical *modus operandi* for such people.

These few chapters in Helaman contain a complete textbook description of the classic behavior of robbers that was so prevalent throughout the ancient world. It is easy, in reading about the Gadianton robbers, to consider the stories to be fantastic or phenomenal. It is difficult to believe that people would actually organize themselves in

these ways and do these kinds of things. This, however, was exactly how such things unfortunately happened in the ancient world.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "What is the Difference Between 'Robbers' and 'Thieves' in the Book of Mormon? (Helaman 6:18)," *KnoWhy* 432 (May 10, 2018).

John W. Welch and John F. Hall, "Two Profiles of Robbers in the Ancient World," in *Charting the New Testament* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), chart 3–12.

John W. Welch, "Legal and Social Perspectives on Robbers in First-Century Judea," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 3 (1996–1997): 141–153.