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KnoWhy #539 - Why Did Samuel Say the Wealth of Some Nephites Would Become “Slippery”?

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Abstract: A few passages in the Book of Mormon speak of "slippery treasure" escaping the grasp of wicked Nephites. Is this language and concept of "slippery treasure" a thinly-veiled reference to 19th century folk magic practices, as some have argued? This KnoWhy explains the context of these verses and provides ancient parallels to what is described in the Book of Mormon.



“Samuel the Lamanite” via thisweekinmormons.com

WHY DID SAMUEL SAY THE WEALTH OF SOME NEPHITES WOULD BECOME “SLIPPERY”?

“And behold, the time cometh that he curseth your riches, that they become slippery, that ye cannot hold them; and in the days of your poverty ye cannot retain them.”

Helaman 13:31

THE KNOW

Samuel the Lamanite’s famous prophetic warnings are found in Helaman 13–15. His pronouncement began with a massive rebuke of the pride, greed, iniquities, priestcrafts, ingratitude, and foolishness of wicked Nephites who were willing to embrace false prophets while utterly rejecting the righteous prophets (Helaman 13:25–29). Samuel pulled no punches. In this context, he used the word “slippery” three times, and the word “slipped” once (vv. 30–36).¹ Looking closely, one sees the following interesting details and significant complexities in Samuel’s thinking and message:

- Because of wickedness and abominations, Samuel said that their *land* itself would now be a cursed land (13:15–17, 23, 30). It had once been a land of promise, but that was threatening to change.
- Because of this curse upon the land, the land *itself* would act as a receptacle of this mirrored punishment: “Whoso shall hide up treasures in the earth shall find them

again no more, because of the great curse of the land” (13:18).

- This curse would justly operate to keep riches *away from people* who had hidden them up in an effort to keep them *away from Lord*: “Whoso hideth up treasures in the earth shall find them again no more, . . . save he be a righteous man and shall hide it up unto the Lord” (13:18).
- If people did not thank the Lord for *giving* them their riches, He Himself would rightfully *take* their riches back (13:21–22).
- Because of iniquity, this curse would come upon *the people* and also upon *their riches* (13:21, 31).
- The curse would take the form of unexplained losses. People would say, “Behold, we lay a tool here and on the morrow it is gone; and behold, our swords are taken from us in the day we have sought them for battle” (13:34).
- The reciprocal punishment of those who “have set [their] hearts upon [their] riches”

would be that they should cry in vain unto the Lord in their *poverty* (13:21, 32).

- The disobedient would cry out in vain for help from the Lord, and they would regret that they had not repented (13:32–34).
- Ironically, if people hide up their treasures to protect them *from their enemies*, the Lord Himself would retributively “hide up their treasures, when they *flee before [those] enemies*” (13:20).
- Those who try to *secure* their riches will find that they could not *hold* or *retain* them (13:31, 36).
- Indeed, in order to make it perfectly clear that people would not be able to overcome the consequences of this curse simply by holding on more tightly to their treasures, Samuel then warned that God would curse their riches so that they would become “slippery” (13:31). People would then lament, “*O that we had remembered the Lord our God in the day that he gave us our riches, and then they would not have become slippery that we should lose them; for behold, our riches are gone from us*” (13:33). These people would finally admit, “*Yea, we have hid up our treasures and they have slipped away from us, because of the curse of the land*” (13:35). Because they did not repent when the word of the Lord came unto them, they would say, “*the land is cursed, and all things are become slippery, and we cannot hold them.*” (13:36).
- Having once accused Samuel of being “*of the devil*” (13:26), they would now blame their problem on the angels *of the devil*: “Behold, we are surrounded by demons, yea, we are encircled about by the angels of him who hath sought to destroy our souls.” (13:37).
- And too late, they would wail, “Behold, *our iniquities are great. O Lord, canst thou not turn away thine anger from us?*” (13:37).

Samuel issued here what biblical scholars have called a complex “prophetic lawsuit.”² Samuel’s judgment oracle interweaves God, humans, the Devil, demons, destroying angels, land, riches or treasures, true and false prophets, military enemies, natural causes, and

spiritual consequences. As a part of this picture, items become “slippery” due to God cursing the land, the earth then obeying God, and the people disobediently hiding their treasures instead of hiding them up unto God.

Years later, in his redaction of Nephite records, Mormon deemed it helpful to provide a prologue to Samuel’s prophecy. To explain to his readers the worldview standing behind Samuel’s prophecy, Mormon inserted into his abridgment of the book of Helaman an exquisite exposition. It explains the longsuffering of the Lord, the foolish insolence of man, the obedience of even the very dust of the earth, and the inability of man to hide anything from God (Helaman 12:4–22). Mormon inserted this exposition, knowing what Samuel’s prophecy contained. Thus, Mormon said, “If a man hide up a treasure in the earth, and the Lord shall say—Let it be accursed, because of the iniquity of him who hath hid it up—behold, it shall be accursed” by the Lord for as long as the Lord shall deem (vv. 18–19). This is because the earth, the waters of the deep, the mountains, and the dust all obey God, moving here or there, “to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God” (v. 8). This cosmic worldview was common in biblical times and throughout much of antiquity.³

Mormon also recorded a final fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy in Mormon’s own day. After inscribing 3 Nephi and 4 Nephi onto his plates, Mormon turned to composing his own autobiographical record. As a young man, he had personally witnessed what he saw as the fulfillment of several of Samuel’s words. This catastrophe must have left a powerful impression on him. Mormon wrote:

And these Gadianton robbers, who were among the Lamanites, did infest the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof *began to hide up their treasures in the earth; and they became slippery, because the Lord had cursed the land, that they could not hold them, nor retain them again.* And it came to pass that there were sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics; and the power of *the evil one* was wrought upon all the face of the land, even unto the fulfilling of all the words of Abinadi, and also Samuel the Lamanite. (Mormon 1:18–19, emphasis added)

While Mormon held firmly to the spirit of Samuel's prophecy, four subtle differences are worth noting here.

First, in Mormon's day, the Nephites hid up their treasures because they were trying to protect them from the Gadiantons without fleeing from them. While Samuel had spoken of people burying their treasures as they fled before their enemies (Helaman 12:20), Mormon's people were hiding their riches and were *not* using their God-given resources to defend against their opponents.

Second, speaking of his day, Mormon mentions "sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics . . . upon all the face of the land" (Mormon 1:19). While Samuel had predicted that wicked people in his day would complain that they were "surrounded by demons" (Helaman 13:37), Samuel did not indicate that any of those unrepentant Nephites were using occult or magical practices. In Mormon's day, however, people were using these standard indigenous practices,⁴ presumably, to curse people or property, to avert disaster or disease, or in trying to counteract the curse that God had placed upon the land.

Third, in Samuel's day, the iniquitous people would say, "Yea, we are encircled about by the angels of him who hath sought to destroy our souls" (Helaman 13:37). By Mormon's time, these misfortunes were explicitly seen as the direct work of the Devil, "the evil one" himself (Mormon 1:19).⁵

Fourth, in Mormon 1:18, the treasures became "slippery" only because "the Lord had cursed the land." Samuel, hoping that people would yet repent, mentioned many human factors that had led God to curse the land, as well as the people and their riches. In any event, that curse on the land was durable and powerful.

This worldview was not uncommon in early civilizations. Many ancient people shared all or parts of the worldview of Samuel and Mormon. For example, under the Roman Twelve Tables VIII-8a (from around 450 B.C), it was a capital offense for a person to place a curse or magical enchantment upon the land or crops of a neighbor.⁶ This was because people believed in the existence of gods, spirits, or forces that people could effectively mobilize either for good or for evil purposes.

Biblical backgrounds also help explain Samuel's warning about treasures becoming slippery. As Blake Ostler has noted,

[The Book of Mormon] is best interpreted from an understanding of the Deuteronomic covenant which required obedience and pronounced resulting curses and blessing upon the land for breach or obedience to the covenant respectively (Deut. 11:26-29). . . . The ethic prominent throughout the Book of Mormon [is] that seeking wealth while ignoring the poor is abhorrent to God. The ability to obtain riches and keep them was dependent upon obedience to the Deuteronomic covenant: "And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day. And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the Lord thy God, . . . ye shall surely perish" (Deut. 8:17-19).⁷

In addition to Deuteronomy, Micah 5:11–13, quoted by Jesus in 3 Nephi 21:16–17, condemns the use of witchcrafts,⁸ soothsayers, and graven images. The biblical account of the rebellion of Korah graphically describes how a rebel Levitical priest, along with his sons and all their goods and households, were swallowed up by the earth. "The earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up," and they "went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them" (Numbers 16:31–35). Reflecting on this story, which is retold in the Quran (28:76–82), the Ottoman Turkish poet İsa Necati (who died in the early sixteenth century) described the swallowed possession of Korah's rebellious allies as literally "'the moving Treasure'... so called because it is said to be still sinking deeper into the earth's heart."⁹ A later Jewish legend describes the terrible fate of Korah and his allies as being swallowed down to hell, tortured, and cast up back near the surface of the earth only to perpetually repeat the process until their final Resurrection. (The audible groans of Korah and his confederates are said to be faintly perceptible to anyone who puts their ear close to the ground.¹⁰)

Furthermore, an Egyptian text known as the Instruction of Amenemope, which pre-dates Lehi's departure from Jerusalem by many centuries, warns:

Do not set your heart upon seeking riches,

For there is no one who can ignore Destiny and Fortune; . . .

If riches come to you by thievery

They will not spend the night with you;

As soon as day breaks they will not be in your household;

Although their places can be seen, they are not there.

When the earth opens up its mouth, it levels him and swallows him up,

They will plunge in the deep;

They will make for themselves a great hole which suits them.

And they will sink themselves in the underworld;

Or they will make themselves wings like geese,

And fly up to the sky.¹¹

It has been widely recognized that the Instruction of Amenemope parallels some of the concepts and language found in the biblical book of Proverbs, and indeed may have been the source or inspiration for some of its axioms.¹² As Nili Shupak has argued,

Most of the Egyptian wisdom works—including Amenemope—served as study material in scribal school and other educational frameworks. One may assume, even if there is no direct evidence, that during the First Temple period such institutions dedicated to educating high-ranking officials existed in the royal court [of Judah]. These simultaneously served as the basis for the development of biblical wisdom literature and the assimilation of Egyptian and other foreign cultural elements. At least part of the biblical wisdom books and selections from famous Egyptian wisdom works—in the original or translation—were likely to have been studied herein. In this context, the fact that Proverbs

evinces literal parallels to Amenemope as well as concepts, motifs, and expressions known from other Egyptian works composed centuries earlier should come as little surprise.¹³

This is equally significant for the Book of Mormon. Kevin Barney has observed that “it seems more than coincidental—yet not surprising—that the concept of slippery, disappearing treasures is found both in an Egyptian text known to the ancient Israelites and in the Book of Mormon, a record with cultural, linguistic, and literary roots in the ancient Near East.”¹⁴

Hugh Nibley and Blake Ostler have also drawn attention to the condemnation of the self-indulgence of the rich in 1 Enoch as another potential ancient parallel for the curses of Samuel in Helaman 13:31–36.¹⁵ 1 Enoch 94:8 reads: “Woe to you, ye rich, *for ye have trusted in your riches. And from your riches shall ye depart, because ye have not remembered the Most High in the days of your riches*” (emphasis added).¹⁶ “Woe unto you who acquire silver and gold in unrighteousness, . . . for *your riches shall not abide but speedily ascend from you; . . . and ye shall be given over to a great curse*” (1 Enoch 97:8–10, emphasis added).¹⁷ As with the Book of Mormon, this concept of riches becoming a curse against the wicked in the text of 1 Enoch is probably derived, ultimately, from a biblical background.

THE WHY

It now becomes understandable why Samuel foretold that the riches of iniquitous people would become “slippery.” He said this for several reasons.

For one thing, he truly wanted people to repent. While their riches would pass out of their grasp, their riches would not be destroyed. They could still be reclaimed. It was not yet too late. Oil renders substances slippery, but oil can be washed away. A “slippery promise” cannot be relied on, but the covenant of the Lord is firm and steadfast. Slippery conditions are unstable and uncertain, as is a “slippery trick,”¹⁸ but faith and obedience to the commandments of God restores confidence, certainty, and stability. His message carried an urgent tone of dire consequences.

Also, Samuel wanted to speak to his audience in terms they understood. Their worldview unquestionably accepted the presence of spirits, beings, and forces of nature that influenced the world around them. By

saying that their wickedness would bring God’s curse upon them, upon their land, and upon their coveted treasures, Samuel hoped that his warning would pierce the hearts of his audience. He wanted his words to ring true, so that the people would take them to heart. The specter of things “slipping away” (Helaman 13:35) would ring physically and naturally true to them.

Moreover, Samuel declared God’s divine judgment upon these people. His words were consistent with God’s law of reciprocal justice: “an eye for an eye,” “that which ye do send out shall return unto you again, and be restored” (Alma 41:15).¹⁹ At several points, his warnings were couched in terms of this reciprocal or talionic understanding of righteous judgment. Thus, the suitable punishment for unrighteously *holding* onto one’s treasures is precisely that they will become slippery and no one will be able to *hold* or retain them (Helaman 13:31, 36), and their *land* of promise would reciprocally become cursed *land*. In their ancient legal world, all this was ultimately just and fair.

Using the word “slippery,” Samuel also spoke in cultural and scriptural terms that his audience would have known something about. The biblical fate of Korah and his family, as well as the wisdom of Proverbs and of ancient traditional sources may well have been brought to his listeners’ minds by Samuel’s new and arresting use of the unusual word “slippery.” When mentioned together with “demons” (Helaman 13:37) and later with “sorceries, witchcrafts, and magics” (Mormon 1:18), this word brought with it the sanction, warning and opprobrium of both the law (in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and of the prophets (in Micah and Nahum).

Finally, within religious traditions probably known to Samuel, the loss of riches or treasure was not because of mischievous spirits playing tricks on treasure diggers, but because of wickedness and pride. From the beginning of Nephite preaching in the Land of Nephi, the loss of prosperity was a result of divine displeasure and a sign of what would be their ultimate fate if they did not repent. “Their hearts are set upon their treasures,” the prophet Jacob warned, “wherefore, their treasure is their god. And behold, their treasure shall perish with them also” (2 Nephi 9:30). In contrast to earthly treasure, which, despite mortals’ best efforts, can easily slip through their fingers, Helaman taught his sons Lehi and Nephi—who may well have been the

two missionaries who converted Samuel—that they should seek intangible eternal treasure which doesn’t fade away: “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” (Helaman 5:8).

Although it has been argued that the language and imagery of “slippery treasure” in the Book of Mormon must be a nod to nineteenth-century treasure digging,²⁰ which included a belief in “guardian demons [that] moved buried treasures to different locations when people dug for them,”²¹ there are, in fact, more compelling ancient parallels for this language and imagery. “While the vocabulary and concept [of slippery treasure] clearly parallel early American treasure-seeking concepts, such ideas were not exclusive to that time period,” and they do not account for the overarching thrust of Samuel’s prophecy in Helaman 13 or the overall message of the rest of the Book of Mormon.²²

In the minds of Samuel and Mormon, the “slipperiness” of treasure in the Book of Mormon is not because a would-be treasure seeker was foiled by a guardian spirit, but because “the earth [and its inhabitants are] so far removed from Yahweh’s protection that the laws of nature are violated; items will not stay put. This reversal of expectations presaged the people’s destruction. Book of Mormon slipperiness doesn’t lose wealth; it loses a nation.”²³ Despite the surface-level similarities, “it is clear that the world view associated with money-digging had little influence on the Book of Mormon.”²⁴

In successfully reading any sacred scripture, one must delve deep below the surface-level, have patience, use caution, read in full context, and seek to apply personally its divine messages. Knowing all of these underlying points helps modern readers to grasp securely the riches and depths of the Book of Mormon.

FURTHER READING

David A. Grandy, “Why Things Move: A New Look at Helaman 12:15,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51 no. 2 (2012), 99-128.

Kevin L. Barney, “‘Slippery Treasures’ in the Book of Mormon: A Concept from the Ancient World,” *Insights*, June 2000, 2.

Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:185–189.

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NOTES

1. These four, plus one more in Mormon 1:18, are the only times in the Book of Mormon that the word “slippery” appears.
2. See Kirsten Nielsen, *Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1978).
3. David A. Grandy, “Why Things Move: A New Look at Helaman 12:15,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51 no. 2 (2012), 99–128.
4. See also Mormon 2:10 (“the magic art and the witchcraft which was in the land”). “The presence of these phenomena in Mesoamerican cultures at many periods is so obvious that no documentation needs to be cited.” John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 494.
5. Perhaps echoing the euphemism known to have been used by Jesus in 3 Nephi 13:12 to refer to the Devil: “deliver us from [the] evil [one],” *apo tou ponorou* in Matthew 6:13.
6. See Clyde Pharr, “The Interdiction of Magic in Roman Law,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 63 (1932): 269–295; Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 137–140; Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2001), 11; Derek Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 142–145.
7. Blake T. Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 71–72.
8. See also Nahum 3:4.
9. E. J. W. Gibb, *A History of Ottoman Poetry* (London: Luzac & Co., 1902), 2:117.
10. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Paul Radin (Philadelphia, Penn.: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1911), 3:298–300.
11. William Kelly Simpson, trans., “The Instruction of Amenemope,” in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, ed. William Kelly Simpson (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 230 (emphasis added).
12. Adolf Erman, “Eine ägyptische Quelle der »Sprüche Salomos,“ *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 15 (1924): 86–93; D. C. Simpson, “The Hebrew Book of Proverbs and the Teachings of Amenophis,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 12, no. 3/4 (Oct. 1926): 232–239; Glendon E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 1979); Bernd U. Schipper, “Die Lehre des Amenemope und Prov 22, 17–24, 22,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117 (2005): 53–72; Michael V. Fox, “From Amenemope to Proverbs: Editorial Art in Proverbs 22, 17–22, 11,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 126 (2014): 76–91; Nili Shupak, “The Contribution of Egyptian Wisdom Literature,” in *Was There a Wisdom Tradition? New Prospects in Israelite Wisdom Studies*, ed. Mark R. Sneed (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 265–304, esp. 291–297; cf. more generally Bernd U. Schipper, “Egypt and Israel: The Ways of Cultural Contacts in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age (20th–26th Dynasty),” *Journal of Egyptian Interconnections* 4, no. 3 (2012): 30–47.
13. Shupak, “The Contribution of Egyptian Wisdom to the Study of Biblical Wisdom Literature,” 296–297.
14. Kevin L. Barney, “‘Slippery Treasures’ in the Book of Mormon: A Concept from the Ancient World,” *Insights*, June 2000, 2.
15. Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986), 8; Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” 72.
16. Translation in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913), 2:266.
17. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2:268.
18. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Converse, 1828), s.v. “slippery.”
19. On talionic justice especially in the Book of Mormon, see John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 338–348.
20. Robert N. Hullinger, *Mormon Answer to Skepticism: Why Joseph Smith Wrote the Book of Mormon* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton Publishing House, 1980), 105; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1998), 61, 196–197.
21. Barney, “‘Slippery Treasures’ in the Book of Mormon,” 2.
22. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:186. Even Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 197 ultimately thinks that the language of “slippery treasure” in the Book of Mormon is an “echo of the translator’s social world, not as a key to understand a very complex historical and religious narrative.”
23. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 6:56.
24. “For instance, the Book of Mormon says nothing about the enchantment of spirits, divining rods, magic circles, guardian spirits, sacrifices to appease spirits, or other rituals necessary to obtain hidden treasures — all a necessary part of the magic world view associated with money digging.” Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” 71.