

HELAMAN 7–12

John W. Welch Notes



Overview Questions

In these chapters, we will see that Nephi was a very great prophet who used many ways to try to get people to listen to his prophetic voice. Pondering upon the following questions may help prepare you to receive personal insights about these chapters, as you listen to the voice of the Spirit:

- What will it take to get people to listen to a prophet’s voice today?
- What do you imagine Nephi looked like and acted like as he mourned, lamented, cursed, and testified on the top of his tower in chapter 7?
- Why do you imagine that the judges themselves did not arrest Nephi in 8:1?
- Why did “democracy” not work among these people?
- What will it take to keep democracy working in our world today?
- Why do the people refuse to arrest Nephi? (8:7–9)
- Which prophets does Nephi call to his defense in chapter 8? Why did he mention Jeremiah in particular?
- What does Nephi prophesy in 8:27, and what do his enemies conclude when that prophecy is fulfilled? (9:16, 20)
- In response to this predicament, what does Nephi prophesy? (9:26–36)
- How could Seantum be put to death legally when there were no witnesses who had observed him murder his brother? Doesn’t the law of Moses require two witnesses in order to convict someone of a capital offense?
- How did the people react to the fulfillment of Nephi’s prophecy? (9:40–41, 10:1).
- How did Nephi react to this great success? These must have been very stressful days.

- What power does God give to Nephi? (10:6–10), and why does God so bless Nephi with this power? (10:4–5, 11)
- Since the people of Nephi really repented in the face of the famine caused by Nephi (11:7–23), why did they return so soon to evil and wickedness? (11:24–38).
- What can a person do to prevent falling back into old habits each time one successfully repents?
- Why does Mormon conclude that human beings are less than the dust of the earth? (12:7).

Helaman 7:1–6 — Nephi Arrived Home to Find Great Iniquity

Nephi’s teachings had been thoroughly rejected in “the land northward” such that he could no longer stay among them (v. 3), so he returned to the land of Zarahemla somewhat discouraged. The wickedness among the people of Zarahemla, who had been entirely taken over by the Gadianton robbers, caused immense sorrow. This sinking into “great iniquity” had happened very rapidly, and as verse 6 says, “When Nephi saw it, his heart was swollen with sorrow within his breast.”

Helaman 7:6–9 — Nephi Lamented Over the Nephites’ Wickedness

Nephi had several great moments in his life. This moment, in which he went up to his tower to mourn the evils of the people and call them to repentance, was certainly one of them. When he got home and saw how troubled everything was, he went up on his tower to pray and mourn. This was a very public expression of sorrow, much like they did when someone had died.

In a way, you might say that Nephi had strategically staged a fake funeral! Instead of walking around trying to call people to repentance one by one, he mourned and lamented loudly and in public. He was weeping, and “multitudes of people” gathered around his tower. They must have been asking each other such things as, “What is going on? Who has died?” It was a brilliant way to attract their attention, and Nephi began immediately to call them to repentance, explaining that he was mourning “because of the exceeding sorrow of my heart, which is because of your iniquities!”

Nephi didn’t have a modern Conference Center with a raised podium and a microphone. He didn’t have the internet, television, or radio to transmit his message to his people. Instead, he had a tower next to a highway leading to a market. And while Nephi’s message was initially intended for an ancient audience, there can be no doubt that his cry of warning was included for our day.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Nephi Prophesy Near ‘the Highway Which Led to the Chief Market?’](#) (Helaman 7:10),” *KnoWhy* 178 (September 1, 2016).

John W. Welch, “[Was Helaman 7–8 an Allegorical Funeral Sermon?](#)” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 239–41. See especially Helaman 7:11, 15. In a typical funeral, family members would wail and cry, tear part of their clothing, veil their faces, cut their beards, put on sackcloth, and sit in ashes.

John W. Welch and Robert D. Hunt, “[Culturegram: Jerusalem 600 B.C.](#),” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), especially in this case see pp. 36–37 and sources cited in note 41.

Helaman 7:10 — What Was Significant about Nephi’s Tower?

Ancient American cities had minor market areas in the outlying neighborhoods. The houses were spread out fairly far apart, in order to accommodate gardens and animals. There likely would have been main roads that converged to the big market in the center of town. Nephi’s tower may have looked like a pyramid of some kind and was probably made of stone. It was near the main market, which was prime real estate. This was probably the most valuable land in the City of Zarahemla, which was the capital city.

How did Nephi get that land? It was most likely inherited land from his father (Helaman₂) and his grandfather (Helaman₁). It was even possibly the location of Alma the younger’s (his great-grandfather), home as the chief judge of the court system. The temple was probably not far away. It was the same city and even the same neighborhood in which the Nephites gathered to hear King Benjamin’s famous speech. It is possible that this tower also served out as a look-out tower to watch for an approaching enemy.

As Nephi stood on the top of this pyramid, he apparently made enough of a spectacle of himself that a crowd gathered. There is something unusual going on here.

Further Reading

John L. Sorenson, “[Nephi’s Garden and Chief Market](#),” 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) 236–238. “Furthermore, in some Mesoamerican cities ‘garden areas were cultivated immediately adjacent to single habitation complexes,’ and low-rising pyramidal towers were enclosed within private family compounds.”

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Nephi Prophesy Near ‘the Highway Which Led to the Chief Market?’](#) (Helaman 7:10),” *KnoWhy* 178 (September 1, 2016).

Helaman 7:17–19 — Nephi Asked “Why Will Ye Die?”

When Nephi was on the top of the tower, he probably was not wearing his priestly robes, but rather sackcloth and ashes. As Nephi put on this visual performance, many of the people may have thought that this was a funeral, and that someone had died. Nephi wittingly responds, “Why will ye die?” I think Nephi was not just saying, “Why are you going to die?” (of course, all mortals will die), but more he is asking, “Why are you willfully acting in such a way that you are in effect *willingly* dying?” The question was a time-honored prophetic lament and warning (see Jeremiah 27:13; Ezekiel 18:31; 33:11; and Jacob 6:6). Nephi’s question about death also seems to foreshadow his revelation about the death of the chief judge.

Helaman 7:25–27

Nephi, as the prophet, decided that he was going to plead with the people and to speak in unequivocal terms to let them know how bad things were going to be for them. He pronounces woes in some rather harsh language:

Yea, wo be unto you because of that great abomination which has come among you; and ye have united yourselves unto it, yea, to that secret band which was established by Gadianton!

Yea, wo shall come unto you because of that pride which ye have suffered to enter your hearts, which has lifted you up beyond that which is good because of your exceedingly great riches!

Yea, wo be unto you because of your wickedness and abominations!
(Helaman 7:25–27).

When the prophet pleads with us, that is a really good time to listen. It seems that in recent years the pleadings from General Authorities has become rather pronounced and discernable. Just think of President Eyring coming to tears pleading in General Conference. I think also of the passion of Elder Holland’s talks, and the pleading of Elder Scott. They often speak straight at you with some very, very deep-seated pleadings. Nephi is in that prophetic mode here on his tower.

Helaman 8

Helaman 8:1–4 — The Judges Attempted to Have the People Arrest Nephi

The Gadianton judges did not like Nephi stirring up the people to repentance. They started accusing him and inciting people to anger against Nephi. The Judges were trying to get the President of the Church arrested, the Prophet. This was not an ordinary, daily event.

The judges believed that Nephi had broken the law. Exodus 22:28 says, “Thou shalt not curse the ruler of thy country,” and Nephi was doing just that. They thought that he had illegally reviled against the government. If these kinds of woes got Abinadi in trouble, why did the judges not arrest Nephi?

The lawsuits in this world had to be initiated by an offended party, and so they tried to get the people to bring the lawsuit. We are dealing with some corrupt judges, so it is interesting that even though they had changed the law, even though they were very corrupt themselves, this is a line that they could not cross. If they had dragged Nephi into court, these leaders, as corrupt as they may have been, still needed to retain the support of the general population.

Helaman 8:7–9 — Democracy among the Nephites

Let us ask an important question. Why did democracy fail in the Nephite world at this time? King Mosiah instituted a form of democracy in Mosiah 29, where judges operated according to the voice of the people, even if it did not look like democracy of the 21st century. However, as things progressed in the book of Helaman, the government became worse and more corrupt. We can see the failure of an effort to create a democracy.

Once at Brigham Young University, a guest speaker from the University of Texas asked each of the faculty members in the College of Humanities to read *First Democracy* by Paul Woodruff. It was about democracy and its beginnings in Athens. Although some Greek city-states were very democratic, like Athens, others were not, like Sparta.

The reason the book was really interesting to me, especially as I read it right at the same time I was reading these chapters, is that the same problems that threatened democracy in the Greek world and threaten it in the United States of America today, are specifically mentioned in these chapters in Helaman. For example, here are some of the characteristics that have to be in place in order for a democracy to work properly.

The Rule of Law

First, you have to have rule of law. Law has to be respected and in place. If you begin to corrupt or change the law, the foundations of democracy are threatened. The people who

can control and change the law can exert a disproportionate power over the society. Democracy is diminished if not eliminated. That was what happened in the Book of Helaman. The people who got into power, the Gadianton robbers, immediately begin to corrupt the laws.

Rulers Must Be Accountable to the People

Second, Woodruff says that in order to have a strong democracy, rulers must be accountable to the people. Leaders must be held responsible for mistakes, and if necessary, removed from office. If you do not have a way of holding government officers accountable, then they begin to manifest again a disproportionate amount of power, and power tends to corrupt.

Interestingly, in Greece and Rome, you could not sue a person for personal damages while they were in office, but as soon as they left office they had no more governmental immunity and you could sue them for any kind of personal injury that you suffered because of anything that they had done. Just the threat—the fear of being sued when you left office kept a lot of the Roman administrators well within the bounds of reason. That is not the way we do things today.

Insulation from Bribes and Wealth

The leaders in Helaman were not held accountable. Instead, they set up fences of immunity and were protected by their wealth. Democracy is threatened whenever people are able to use their wealth to increase their political power. Ideally, democracy means one person, one vote. However, if your vote does not count and somebody else's vote does, democracy is diminished, so anything that we can do to be sure that everybody's vote really does count is important in preserving democracy.

People are interested in voting when their vote really matters, but there is yet another thing. In order for democracy to work, if you have any representative aspects of your government, the representation needs to be proportional. If it gets too widely out of proportion, then the minorities in the community feel that their voices are not heard. They are disenfranchised, and that is not what democracy is supposed to be. We have to be on the lookout for places where minorities are not being heard or given a chance to be heard. In Zarahemla, the church is actually in the minority. The church's voice in this chapter is not being heard. In fact, the church is being drummed out of town.

Public Events in which Everyone Can Participate

It is very important in a democracy to have public events where everyone can participate as King Benjamin had. He had everybody come to the temple, and had a sense of unity

and celebration— especially celebrating common origins. The national heritage that we share in common needs to be preserved as a story that unites all of our people.

Education

Education is very important. For a democracy, you have to have an educated populace, and you do not get the impression here that much education is going on in the city of Zarahemla.

There are many things that we can do to strengthen our democracy. There is more involved here than we might have thought, but in all of these cases, in ancient Greece, in America, and in Zarahemla, democracy was being threatened. It was a difficult time in Zarahemla.

It is easy to become a little bit cynical about democracy, and there is no question that democracy is messy. It is not a neat, tidy way to run a government. However, the alternative is tyranny, as the ancient Greek world has proved. That may be clean, but it is not what we want. Especially because it often does not allow people to make religious choices to worship according to the dictates of their conscience, to do the kinds of things that we know we are here on this earth to do.

Helaman 8:13–22 — Nephi Invoked the Testimonies of Former Prophets

Let us look at the end of Helaman 8. After the corrupt judges tried to get Nephi arrested, they pushed a little more. One of the criticisms that these people had raised against Nephi was that he was only one person witnessing against the people. Nephi took the occasion to speak about prophets and prophecy. Starting in Helaman 8:16, he began invoking many prophets who had spoken the truth, and had spoken as single voices. Nephi offered the examples of Moses, Abraham, Zenock, Zenos, Esaias, Isaiah, and Jeremiah—who stood as witnesses of God, even when they were alone.

Just as Jeremiah had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem, Nephi was now prophesying of the Nephites' destruction. We know that Jeremiah was a true prophet because of Lehi's words. After Lehi departed into the wilderness, he received a vision validating the destruction of Jerusalem. In addition to Lehi's dream, the Mulekites also attested to Jerusalem's destruction. The founding story of Zarahemla is the story of Mulek coming from the destruction of Jerusalem. Here, Nephi uses that as evidence for the truthfulness of prophecy.

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, "[Why Should Readers Pay Close Attention to the Mulekites?](#) (Omni 1:19)," *KnoWhy* 434 (May 17, 2018).

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Nephi Rely on Earlier Testimonies of Christ? \(Helaman 8:22\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 179 (September 2, 2016).

Helaman 8:27–28 — Nephi Prophesied That the Chief Judge Had Been Murdered

Nephi concluded this speech by prophesying that the chief judge Seezoram had just been murdered by his brother Seantum. Nephi told the people what Seantum would say, what they would find, and that Seantum would confess. Lo and behold, they all ran out there and found exactly that it was so. Unfortunately, some of the people assumed that Nephi must have been complicit in the conspiracy. Perhaps they assumed that Nephi wanted his power back by being involved in the killing the chief judge. When they pushed him a little bit more, he firmly challenged them to go and see for themselves the murder of their chief judge.

Helaman 9

Helaman 9:1–4 — Five Nephites Investigate Nephi’s Claims

The people of Zarahemla sent five people to investigate and of course, they were shocked at the scene that welcomed them. Upon beholding the murder, they all collapsed. When more people arrived, they assumed that the envoys must have been the murderers. The people arrested the five and took them into custody. Despite insisting on their innocence, the accusers assert that Nephi and these five must have planned the entire thing together.

Helaman 9:12 — A Dramatic Twist of Irony

Helaman 9:12 has a touch of dramatic irony. A group of the judges who had been at Nephi’s tower were at the burial of the chief judge, and were curious as to why the five investigators had never returned. The judges asked around concerning the five they had sent to check on the murder. They asked “Where are the five who were sent to inquire concerning the chief judge whether he was dead?” They were given this as an answer, “Concerning this five whom ye say ye have sent, we know not; but there are five who are the murderers, whom we have cast into prison.”

Helaman 9:25–38 — Seantum Was Questioned and Convicted

In this predicament, where Nephi was brought in as a potential conspirator, he gave the final prophecy of exactly what would happen if the people were to go talk with Seantum. Indeed, they found the blood on Seantum’s cloak, Seantum turned pale, he answered exactly the way Nephi prophesied, and then he confessed exactly as Nephi had predicted. “And behold, the words which he [Nephi] had said were true; for according to the words he [Seantum] did deny; and also according to the words he [Seantum] did confess” (Helaman 9:37).

To those who found the five investigators lying on the floor, it looked like the five were the murderers who had been struck by divine judgement. There was a lot of circumstantial evidence that pointed in their direction. Nevertheless, the five suspects could not be convicted on circumstantial evidence under a legal system in which the often-invoked two-witness rule was inviolate.

In contrast, Seantum had blood on his garment. He went pale. While this is circumstantial evidence, he eventually did confess. However, under biblical law, in order to convict someone, there had to be two witnesses, and this is likely why the five investigators were not immediately put to death.

In fact, there are four cases in the Old Testament that illuminate this principle of witnesses. One of them is the case of Achan. Achan was one of the soldiers in Joshua's army. When the army came back from battle, Joshua told everybody to turn in their loot into a central repository. Since, much of the booty would have been metal idols, they had to be very careful about what they did under Mosaic law. They especially did not want people keeping those gold and silver idols.

Achan did not turn in his loot. He buried it under the carpet of his tent, and then the battle went badly for the Israelites. Joshua consulted the Lord and was told that somebody had not turned in all they should have. First, they asked which tribe the problem was in, and then they narrowed it to one tribe—most likely casting lots, a common way for them to determine the will of the Lord. Then they asked which family group within the tribe, and finally they asked which man had done it. When they cast again, the lot fell on Achan, who confessed his sin. They checked the floor of the tent, and there was all the gold and silver that he had gathered. They stoned him, then burnt him along with his family, his animals, his tent, and all his property. They burn it all. They obliterated him from the camp because he had defiled the whole camp.

In addition to (1) the case of Achan in Joshua 7, the other cases that allowed physical evidence to serve effectively as witnesses were: (2) the man put to death for admitting that he had killed Saul (see 2 Samuel 1:10–16); (3) the two assassins of Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, who were similarly executed (see 2 Samuel 4:8–12); and (4) Micah, the son who voluntarily confessed stealing from his mother (see Judges 17:1–4). How the ancients reconciled these four cases with the rigid rule that required two witnesses has long been a subject of jurisprudential attention. Aaron Kirchenbaum finds the evidence inconclusive: "Whether this pentateuchal requirement of two witnesses, adopted as standard Israelite criminal procedure (1 Kings 21:10, 13), was construed loosely, as an alternative or supplement to confession—as would appear from David's juridical decisions—or whether it was interpreted strictly, as excluding confession—as taught by the Oral Tradition . . . —must

remain an open question to the critical scholar." See Aaron Kirschenbaum, *Self-Incrimination in Jewish Law* (New York, NY: Burning Bush Press, 1970), 33.

Rabbis interested in Jewish jurisprudence asked how this and the three other known cases could be reconciled with the law requiring two or three "witnesses." When divinely revealed evidence was located, and when the culprit confessed voluntarily, was that enough? And so they developed a rule to harmonize the four Old Testament cases with the law requiring two witnesses by saying that (a) if you have what we call the *corpus delicti*, physical evidence of the crime, and (b) if God is involved somehow in detecting the nature of the wrong-doing and the wrong-doer, then the divine confirmation becomes one witness, and the *corpus delicti* becomes the second witness. But the rabbis also decided that this rule should apply only (c) when the confession is given voluntarily by the culprit outside of a judicial proceeding. This summation of the rule in Deuteronomy 19:15 in combination with these four Old Testament cases was articulated and explained in the Talmud, but this precise legal synthesis is operating here in the case of Seantum.

Just as Achan confessed his guilt in Joshua 7 as soon as he was detected by the oracle of God as the soldier in the camp of Israel who had hidden the contraband booty under the carpet of his tent, so Seantum immediately confessed his guilt, having been exposed by the glance of God's all-searching eye.

Sometimes we may wonder why we are told so many of the details of a given story in scripture. This is certainly an interesting story on its own, but every fact and detail in the trial of Seantum, it turns out, has legal significance. It all shows that Seantum, in fact, was executed legally according to the law.

Moreover, Nephi could not be held guilty under ancient Israelite law as a co-conspirator. At the most—and of course, Nephi was not involved in a conspiracy—all he could have done was plan and talk about it. Israelite law could only put someone to death if you *did* something. A conspirator is not necessarily a doer. He may have prodded people to action, but he did not actually do anything, so when Nephi was accused, they say confess your *fault*. They do not say confess your *guilt*, which is a very subtle but correct point.

Given the complicated and important ancient legal issues presented by the case of Seantum, it is little wonder that the text makes special note of the fact that Seantum "was brought to prove that he himself was the very murderer" (Helaman 9:38). No further testimonies from witnesses (of which there were none) was legally needed to convict him, and one may thus assume that he was summarily executed.

Although the case of Seantum was quite unusual and therefore probably would have had little precedential usefulness in other Nephite cases, it was significant in several other

ways. At a time when the influence of the church was in steep decline in the city of Zarahemla, God’s entrance into this proceeding demonstrated that he was aware of the corruption of political officials, to the point of openly sustaining and validating the words of his prophets. At least for a few years, many people were convinced by this episode that Nephi was indeed “a prophet” (Helaman 9:40), and some even thought he was “a god” (Helaman 9:41). Although these people soon reverted to their wicked ways, the case had been made that God knew well the wickedness of the robbers and assassins who continued to plague the Nephites. Thus, the case of Seantum sustained and encouraged the righteous few in their adamant determination to resist civil corruption and to believe in further revelation, as the righteous people did in the case of the five-year prophesy of Samuel the Lamanite, even to the point of risking their lives. No doubt for these reasons, the righteous historians at the end of this era singled out and emphasized the trial of Seantum as an important victory of God’s prophets over the factions of the wicked dissenters.

Further Reading

Welch, John W. “The Trial of Seantum,” in *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2008), 323–334.

Book of Mormon Central, “Why Could Seantum be Convicted Without Any Witnesses? (Helaman 9:35–36),” *KnoWhy* 180 (September 5, 2016).

Helaman 9:39–41 — Some Believed That Nephi Was a Prophet

Joseph Smith was a prophet just as Nephi was a prophet, and we can listen to a prophet’s voice with confidence. Some in Zarahemla thought Nephi was a prophet. Because of his significant powers of discernment, some even thought he was a god. Interestingly, the five who had been charged with the murder were converted while in prison, so their testimonies also helped to convert other people. And the fact that those five were converted by what transpired in this case only reinforces their credibility as spokesmen after their conversion. They were more surprised than anyone that everything transpired exactly as Nephi had said. It is a remarkable story, and an important one. So it is unfortunate that most of the world has never heard of the incredible trial of Seantum.

Helaman 10

Helaman 10:1–3 — Nephi Ponders Over the Events of the Day

The people were amazed at what happened. Some believed, and some did not, but they wandered off and left Nephi standing alone. Nephi, left alone, reacted to this amazing

experience by pondering. Notice that he never gloated about how the judges were wrong. He was a humble man who was not seeking his own glory. As he was heading home, he heard the voice of God.

Helaman 10:4–11 — Nephi Received Sealing Power

The next great moment in Nephi's life was not only when the Lord spoke to him, but was also when the Lord came to bless him forever for his service by granting him the sealing power. He had labored unwearingly until the seventy-first year of the judges. In Helaman 10:7, Nephi was given the power, "that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

This blessing of the sealing power has to be the most sublime, personal blessing in all of scripture. "Behold, thou art Nephi and I am God," said the Lord. This was apparently a formal situation, in which angels were present to bear witness (Helaman 10:6). This power granted Nephi the ability to command virtually anything. Nephi withheld that power for a while, but finally decided that he was going to need to use it to institute a famine, which has some good effects. What a wonderful blessing he is given. He eventually calls the famine off, but not until three years later, which was another great moment in his life.

In verse 4, we learn why Nephi received this blessing. He received this gift:

1. Because of his unweariness. In other words, he do not become weary or tired of doing good works.
2. Because he had not sought his own life. He had been willing to sacrifice even his life, if necessary.
3. Because he had sought the will of God.
4. Because he had kept the commandments.

Well, that is quite a formula, and the take-home message that you might get out of this is at the end of verse 5 when the Lord says, "Because of this I will bless you." Why? "Because I know that you will not ask that which is contrary to my will." Nephi's will had become so aligned with the Lord's that the Lord knew that he could trust him completely and implicitly. He never asked for or used his power in a way that would not have been consistent with the will of the Lord. While that is an incredible state of spiritual achievement to have reached, it did not happen overnight. As you study the work of Nephi in the preceding chapters, you will understand the wonderful things that he did which brought him to a point where he would not ask anything contrary to the will of the Lord.

Helaman 11

Helaman 11:1–4 – God Sends a Famine Instead of Wars

Nephi was blessed to be able to “smite the earth with famine” (Helaman 10:6). In the very next verse, he was given the power to “seal” and “loose” on earth and in heaven. Because “seal” and “loose” can also mean “close” and “open,” it is possible that Nephi assumed that his power to cause famine, when necessary, was related to this ability to “close” things up in heaven.

Compare Helaman 10:7 with Matthew 16:19 and Isaiah 22:22, and it becomes clear that “sealing” and “loosing” in this verse refer to opening and closing. Nephi was literally able to close the heavens to keep it from raining. When one looks at Alma 18:30–32 and Genesis 1:1, for example, it becomes clear that in the Ancient Near East and the Book of Mormon, the heavens were viewed not only as the place where God dwells, but also the area above the earth: the sky. Thus, when Nephi is told he will be able to open and close things “in heaven” he may have taken this very literally to mean he could literally open and close the sky.

Nephi was not the first prophet to use the priesthood to cause drought. The first recorded words from Elijah in the Old Testament are his testament to the wicked king Ahab, were that “there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word” (1 Kings 17:1). Elijah, just like Nephi, used the priesthood to “seal” the heavens to keep it from raining. Thus, it is likely that Nephi received power to “seal” in Helaman 10, and then used it to “seal” the heavens in Helaman 11. This connection between Nephi and Elijah sealing the heavens is strengthened by the many allusions to the Elijah story in the story of Nephi son of Helaman.

Elijah	Nephi
Elijah causes a famine by “sealing” the heavens.	Nephi causes a famine by “sealing” the heavens.
Elijah experiences a fire and an earthquake in connection with hearing a soft voice from God (1 Kings 19:12).	Nephi experiences a fire and an earthquake in connection with hearing a soft voice from God (Helaman 5:23, 30–31).
Elijah warns that the unrepentant will be eaten by dogs (2 Kings 9:36).	Nephi warns that the unrepentant will be eaten by dogs (Helaman 7:19).

Elijah has an experience in which he stands before the Lord (1 Kings 17:1; 18:15).	Nephi has an experience in which he stands before the Lord (Helaman 10:5).
Elijah says that “rain” will cease “according to my word” (1 Kings 17:1).	Nephi says that “rain” will cease “according to my words” (Helaman 11:13).
Elijah is taken by the spirit from place to place (1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16).	Nephi is taken by the spirit from place to place (Helaman 10:16–17).
Elijah does not have a recorded death or burial (2 Kings 2:11).	Nephi does not have a recorded death or burial (3 Nephi 1:3).

Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “[How Did Nephi Use the Power to Seal on Earth and in Heaven?](#) (Helaman 11:4),” *KnoWhy* 182 (September 7, 2016).

Helaman 11:18–19 — Nephi’s Brother, Lehi

Throughout this section, there has been no information about what Lehi, Nephi’s brother, was doing. One may wonder where he was during all the amazing experiences that Nephi had. After the famine had resolved and people had repented, there is a section noting the great righteousness of Nephi, something easily observable. The people now accepted him. Helaman 11:18 records, “And they did no more seek to destroy Nephi, but they did esteem him as a great prophet, and a man of God, having great power and authority given unto him from God.” Then quite unexpectedly, with no more explanation or clarification, we are told, “And behold, Lehi, his brother, was not a whit behind him as to things pertaining to righteousness.” We would certainly like to know more about what Lehi was doing during this dramatic episode in Nephite history. What a wonderful pair of children, grandchildren, and—for Alma the younger—great-grandchildren.

Helaman 11:24–33 — Warfare Tactics of the Gadianton Dissenters

In spite of the great blessings, prosperity and peace that was then enjoyed in Zarahemla, the lingering political factions opposed to Nephi and Lehi arose again, this time with an even greater vengeance. Those dissenters again commenced war, but this time they used tactics of raiding, retreating into secret places in the wilderness and the mountains, forming a very “great band of robbers,” causing havoc, and following the ancient plans and practices. They thrived on taunting, defying, causing fear, abducting and kidnapping women and children. In these verses, Mormon gives us a clear description of their tactics.

In basic principles as well as nuanced subtleties, the Book of Mormon’s depiction of what we now call guerrilla warfare is stunningly authentic. Warfare in Joseph Smith’s day was rather different from what we read here in the Book of Helaman. During the 19th century, it was commonly expected that opposing troops would formally array themselves for battle and engage in an all-out contest on a set-piece battlefield. Guerrilla warfare, on the other hand, operates on the principles of stealth, surprise, hidden base camps, small-scale skirmishes, strategic retreats, advantageous terrain, and, importantly, propaganda. These types of tactics, although foreign and even shameful to 19th-century thinking, were used repeatedly and deliberately by the Gadianton robbers of the Book of Mormon. Daniel C. Peterson has described it as “a totally believable and coherent complex of military behaviors and responses.”

Further Reading

Daniel C. Peterson, “[The Gadianton Robbers as Guerrilla Warriors](#),” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 146–173.

Book of Mormon Central, “[Is the Book of Mormon’s Depiction of Guerrilla Warfare Realistic? \(Helaman 11:25\)](#),” *KnoWhy* 423 (April 10, 2018).

Helaman 11:34–37 — They Did Not Mend Their Ways

Mormon did not go into detail about the next few years. After the famine was over, the prosperity of the people and its associated pride caused them to forget God and allowed them to sink into the grasp of the Gadianton robbers. We learn that the Gadianton robbers were “making great havoc” (v. 27). In the “space of not many years,” the band of robbers had become great and powerful. But at the end of the eighty-first year, the misery caused people to return to their God. The brief journal entries for those years are as follows, which probably suggests that nothing of value happened:

- And in the eighty and second year they began again to forget the Lord their God.
- And in the eighty and third year they began to wax strong in iniquity.
- And in the eighty and fourth year they did not mend their ways.
- And it came to pass in the eighty and fifth year they did wax stronger and stronger in their pride, and in their wickedness; and thus they were ripening again for destruction.
- And thus ended the eighty and fifth year.

Helaman 12

In chapter 12, Mormon can no longer hold back his personal point of view. As an abridger up to this point, Mormon has been very restrained. But in abridging the book of Helaman, he repeatedly and emphatically had encountered sobering evidence of the dark side of human nature. As you read Mormon's words here (which are particularly poignant when you remember what he himself had lived through personally), what characteristics of human nature do you see that should give us all great pause?

After the famine ended, what emotions and problems beset the Nephites (11:26–33)?

How can people, individually and collectively, overcome “unsteadiness” (12:1)?

In what ways today do people “trample under their feet the Holy One” (12:2)?

How can a person increase their speed in becoming less slow to do good, to remember the Lord, and to walk in wisdom's paths? (12:4–6)

How does it help you to know that you are “less than the dust of the earth”? (12:7; recall also Mosiah 2:25).

Helaman 12:1 — Mormon's Commentary and Testimony

Mormon's commentary on the preceding events and behaviors in the book of Helaman comprises the whole of chapter 12. Verse 1 begins, “And thus we can behold...,” which is an indicator, along with “And thus we see...” or “we see,” of Mormon's upcoming commentary (see also verses 2–3).

Verse 1 acts as a kind of abstract by summarizing the main points of this chapter:

- How false, and also unsteady are the hearts of the children of men; and
- The Lord in his great infinite goodness doth bless and prosper those who put their trust in him.

The rest of the chapter expands on these main points, describing the depths of man's folly and the height of the Lord's kindness, patience, and desire to bless these children of men.

This whole chapter is Mormon's testimony of the love and power of God, and his desire to bless us. It highlights man's foolishness in not paying attention and forgetting his obligations to such a loving Divine creator, trampling “under their feet the Holy One—yea, and this because of their ease, and their exceedingly great prosperity” (verse 2). Just in case we did not get the message from the account, he warns us in verse 3:

And thus, we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him.

Helaman 12:7 — Less than the Dust of the Earth

In order to illustrate the magnitude of the problem that he saw, Mormon illustrated with imagery from the world around him. He was illustrating that the story we have read demonstrated that God kept his word; if we are righteous, we will “prosper in the land;” and if we let pride get in the way, and harden our hearts, we will suffer, even eternally.

To accomplish his goal, Mormon contrasted the obedience of nature with the sinful disobedience of men. Unlike human tendencies, in response to the voice of the Lord, dust moves hither and thither, hills and mountains are transformed into valleys, and the whole earth shakes (see Helaman 12:7–12).

In response to this passage, Joseph Fielding Smith stated:

The point he is making is that the dust of the earth is obedient. . . . Everything in the universe obeys the law given unto it, so far as I know, except man. Everywhere you look you find law and order, the elements obeying the law given to them, true to their calling. But man rebels, and in this thing, man is less than the dust of the earth because he rejects the counsels of the Lord.

Further Reading

Joseph Fielding Smith in *Official Report of the Ninety-Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1929), 55, quoted in K. Douglas Bassett, *Latter-day Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 1999), 386—Quoted in Grandy, “Why Things Move,” 109, note 24).

Helaman 12:13–15 — Mormon’s Cosmic View and Imagery

Helaman 12:15, in particular, has been viewed as indicating that Mormon had a heliocentric view of the cosmos. However, our modern sun-centered model of the solar system would have been inconsistent with the beliefs of ancient cultures.

The finest academic treatment of the cosmological view of world found in the Old Testament and also in this chapter in the Book of Mormon is a very well articulated study by David Grandy, published in 2012 in *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Among many interesting points, Grandy explains,

There would be no allowance for either the sun or the earth to fully orbit the other body. This is because the earth was not imagined as a round body hanging freely in space ... Instead the earth was thought to rest on subterranean waters, which God had separated at the creation from waters now situated above the firmament...

Living in the aftermath of the rise of modern science, we might wonder how premodern people could ever attribute sentience or life principle—or at least the capacity to respond to nonmechanistic influences—to things we “know” to be lifeless. Would it not be obvious to every thinking person, regardless of background or era, that rocks are inert entities?

However, the idea that nature was inert was exactly what Mormon did not assume. For him, rocks, hills, mountains, the whole solar system, and even the smallest particles of dust, obeyed the commands of God (Helaman 12:7–10, KnoWhy 183). And actually today we know that even within the rocks are electrons and subatomic particles in constant motion. Something keeps all that molecular movement going, regularly and orderly.

Of course, this is not to imply that Mormon couldn't have received more scientifically accurate information about the cosmos through revelation. We know that Moses and Abraham, for example, received sacred knowledge of cosmic truths through revelation (see Abraham 3 and Moses 1:33–38), but in neither of those cases was there information equivalent to our modern “scientific” view that the earth revolves around the Sun. David A. Grandy explains, “Mormon’s lament about the inconsistency of man is not evidence of the Nephites arriving at a scientifically correct understanding of the earth’s motion before Copernicus.”

In fact, he goes on to say that Mormon’s statements in these verses are evidence of the Nephites understanding the earth’s motion very differently from the way we understand it today, and that Mormon’s commentary was motivated by an awareness of God’s active involvement in nature and not from a need to make a scientific correction.

Before we talk further about what Mormon actually said here in Helaman 12, let us look at what he did not say. As David A. Grandy has written,

In Helaman 12, Mormon’s concern is not about whether it is the sun or the earth that moves; or whether either body moves around the other, *about which no mention is made*. Instead, Mormon’s concern is whether entities of any sort move in response to God’s will. This view emerges from the context of the passage, and it is fully consistent with other scriptural descriptions of motion.

In other words, we tend to superimpose our view of the cosmos on Mormon’s words. There is no mention of the astronomical bodies moving around each other. Mormon is

simply expressing a view from his day, that resonates with people who believe in the divine creator, that when God instructs the earth to move in whichever direction he needs it to, the earth moves, and no doubt he knew of God’s parting of the Red Sea for the children of Israel just as we think of Jesus calming the storm on Galilee. Mormon is bewailing that we as people are not as compliant as natural matter. He was not speaking from a scientific point of view, but from a doctrinal and symbolic perspective. Thus, he probably intended for his readers to focus mainly on his moral lesson, that humans are “less than the dust of the earth” (12:7) when they disobey God.

Fortunately, despite our fallen condition and natural inclinations to go astray, we do have the agency to put off disruptive temptations, so that through the atonement of Christ and “by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel, all mankind may be saved” and ultimately can become divinely exalted beings. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf has taught,

This is a paradox of man: compared to God, man is nothing; yet we are everything to God. While against the backdrop of infinite creation we may appear to be nothing, we have a spark of eternal fire burning within our breast. We have the incomprehensible promise of exaltation—worlds without end—within our grasp. And it is God’s great desire to help us reach it.

Further Reading

David A. Grandy, “[Why Things Move: A New Look at Helaman 12](#)” in *BYU Studies Quarterly*, 51, no.2 (2012): 99–128. “Mormon devoutly desires that humans should be subservient to their Creator and Benefactor, although often they are not—as Mormon knows from his own personal efforts to lead his unruly people” (109).

Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Mormon Say the Children of Men are Less than the Dust of the Earth?](#) (Helaman 12:7), *KnoWhy* 183 (September 8, 2016).

Jared W. Ludlow “Abraham’s Visions of the Heavens,” *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, *Studies in the Book of Abraham* 3 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 57–74.

Hugh Nibley, *One Eternal Round*, in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Volume 19 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book, FARMS, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, and Brigham Young University, 2010), 364–366.

Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “[You Matter to Him](#),” *Ensign*, November 2011, 20.