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Destruction Timeline

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Source: *Geology of the Book of Mormon*

Published: Vineyard, UT: n.p., 2014

Page(s): 73–76

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Chapter 5

Destruction Timeline

In evaluating the hazards mentioned as part of the 3rd Nephi catastrophe, some of them have dependency on time factors. Specifically, storm events need to be looked at in context of seasonality, and other hazards will have to be evaluated in terms of the time available for them to occur as identified in the text of the Book of Mormon.

Timeline Based on 3rd Nephi

3rd Nephi 8:5 states:

And it came to pass in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month, there arose a great storm, such an one as never had been known in all the land.

One might assume on first reading that this date refers to January 4, 34 AD; however, the calendar system of the Nephites was recalibrated at or shortly after the birth of Christ, so using zero AD as a base date would not be accurate. In addition, we know that the catastrophe coincided with the death of Christ, which did not occur in January. The scope of this inquiry is not to discuss the various Mesoamerican calendrical systems or to discuss the methods of establishing the date of Christ's death using the Passover and other Old World correlations, but only to establish the time relationships necessary to interpret the hazards presented in 3rd Nephi.

Those that have compared the date for the crucifixion of Christ with Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican information have asserted it to be on the 14th day of the Jewish month Nisan. There still appears to be differences of opinions as to how this would equate to the Julian dates (the currently used calendar) with the remaining possibilities being March 16 or 18, 29 AD (Spackman, 1993, 68), or April 6 or 7, 30 AD (Chadwick, 2010). Sources that do not attempt to utilize Book of Mormon or Mesoamerican information have arrived at dates for the crucifixion of April 7, 30 AD, or April 3, 33 AD (Finegan, 1964, 300). For purposes of this inquiry, the range of years from 29 AD to 33 AD is not critical, as archaeological radiocarbon dating and other geologic dating techniques are not close to that range of accuracy. When dealing with seasonality of events, late March and early April will be the assumed range as to when the 3rd Nephi disaster started.

3rd Nephi 8:19 states:

And it came to pass that when the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the storm, and the tempest, and the quakings of the earth did cease—for behold, they did last for about the space of three hours; and it was said by some that the time was greater; nevertheless, all these great and terrible things were done in about the space of three hours—and then behold, there was darkness upon the face of the land.

The verses between 3rd Nephi 8:5 and 8:19 do not state exactly when during these three hours each of these individual items started other than indicating that the thunderings and the quakings were happening at the same time. As a group, they “lasted” and “were done” in about 3 hours, perhaps a little longer depending on the location. It seems to be clear from the language in verse 19 that the quaking of the earth was not one continuous quake, as the word “quaking” is used in the plural. The

same can be said for the thunderings and the lightnings. This is an important distinction, especially with regards to the quaking and known earthquake phenomena.

It has been noted that the author in 3rd Nephi describing the disaster was no doubt relying on others for information as to what occurred at each geographical location (Kowallis, 1997, 142). Whether each of the persons providing the report from their area would have noted the specific number of earthquakes/aftershocks is not known, but would probably not be expected.

As with other ancient measurements of time, the term hour is not necessarily a standard unit of time. The word “hour” does not even appear in the Bible until the book of Daniel, and the word “hour” in the New Testament can mean anything from an instant, to 45 minutes, to an hour and a quarter, a period or three hours, or even longer (Potter, 1941). That there may be different measurements in Mesoamerica for the term hour is evidenced in Alma 18:14, where it indicates that the “king answered him not for the space of an hour *according to their time*” (emphasis added). Although the length of an hour is not necessarily critical to this hazard analysis, a longer hour may provide for a longer length of time for the hazards that are delimited to the three-hour period identified in 3rd Nephi.

After the period of three hours, darkness commenced on the land and lasted for three days:

3rd Nephi 8:23 states:

And it came to pass that it did last for the space of three days that there was no light seen; and there was great mourning and howling and weeping among all the people continually; yea, great were the groanings of the people, because of the darkness and the great destruction which had come upon them.

Sometime during the time of darkness, the voice of Jesus Christ spoke and identified the specific destruction of each of the sixteen cities that had already occurred (3rd Nephi 9:3–12). After the voice of Jesus Christ spoke there was another period of time that passed, “the space of many hours.”

3rd Nephi 10:1–2 states:

And now behold, it came to pass that all the people of the land did hear these sayings, and did witness of it. And after these sayings there was silence in the land for the space of many hours; or so great was the astonishment of the people that they did cease lamenting and howling for the loss of their kindred which had been slain; therefore there was silence in all the land for the space of many hours.

Following the “space of many hours” the voice of Jesus Christ spoke again, and then the darkness was dispersed. At the same time, certain of the natural occurrences also ceased, specifically the trembling of the earth, the rending of rocks, the dreadful groanings, and tumultuous noises. This is important to note, since the previous statements in 3rd Nephi regarding the storm, the thunderings, the lightenings, the tempest and the quakings having ended after three hours did not include all of what was still going on. Apparently earth tremblings, groanings, rendings, and tumultuous noises were occurring with some regularity during the three-day period of darkness, well beyond the initial three hours of destructive forces.

3rd Nephi 10:9 states:

And it came to pass that thus did the three days pass away. And it was in the morning, and the darkness dispersed from off the face of the land, and the earth did cease to tremble, and the rocks did cease to rend, and the dreadful groanings did cease, and all the tumultuous noises did pass away.

Additional Timeline Information from Vision, Prophecies, and Angelic Description

While not necessarily what would be considered a first-hand source of direct observation, similar to the voice and recitation of the destruction by Jesus Christ in 3rd Nephi, if one believes in the veracity of the Book of Mormon as an inspired document, then the visions, prophecies, voice of Christ, and angelic descriptions of the future events must be evaluated and accounted for. It must of course be recognized that visions, prophecies, and descriptions of future events may not be recited, seen, or recounted in chronological order (as some may be concurrent), so care must be taken not to imply anything from the order of recitation or vision unless there is indication in the text of a time frame associated with a specific event. It is possible that some of the recounting may not even be in the order originally received, just as any recounting of concurrent events may perhaps change in order based on the purpose and intent of the recounting.

1. Nephi's Vision

In Nephi's vision as indicated in 1 Nephi 12:3–5 he recited the items in this order:

- a) Mist of Darkness
- b) Lightnings
- c) Thunderings
- d) Earthquakes
- e) All manner of tumultuous noises
- f) Earth and rocks rent
- g) Mountains tumbling to pieces
- h) Plains of the earth broken up
- i) Cities that were sunk
- j) Many (cities) that were burned with fire
- k) Many (cities) tumble to the earth because of quaking

Nephi then recounts that after seeing these things, he saw the “vapor of darkness” that it passed from off the face of the earth.

2. Zenos' Prophecy

In the prophecy of Zenos as recited by Nephi in 1 Nephi 19:10–12 he recited the items in this order:

- a) Three days of darkness would occur
- b) Thunderings and lightnings
- c) Tempest
- d) Fire
- e) Smoke
- f) Vapor of darkness
- g) Opening of the earth
- h) Mountains which shall be carried up
- i) Rocks of the earth must rend
- j) Groanings of the earth

3. Samuel the Lamanite

Samuel the Lamanite's recounting of information from an angelic visit as recited to him in Helaman 14:20–29 included the following items:

- a) In "the time" that Christ dies, the sun, moon and stars shall be darkened with no light, continuing for the "space of three days" until he shall rise from the dead
- b) At "the time" Christ dies, for the "space of many hours" afterwards he recited that the following items would happen in this order:
 - i) Thunderings and lightnings
 - ii) Earth shall shake and tremble
 - iii) Rocks above and below the face of the earth broken up
 - iv) Rock(s) rent in twain and found in seams, cracks and broken fragments above and below the earth
 - v) Great tempests
 - vi) Many mountains made low like unto a valley
 - vii) Many places called valleys which shall become mountains with great height
 - viii) Many highways broken up and cities become desolate

Summary

Based on all of this information a summary of the 3rd Nephi timeline would be as follows:

- Christ dies on March 16 or 18, 29 AD; or April 6 or 7, 30 AD; or April 3, 33 AD.
- Immediately thereafter a great storm arose along with other destructive forces that lasted for roughly three "hours." Some of the destructive forces occurred intermittently throughout the three hours, others continuously.
- After the storm and other destructive forces ceased there was darkness "upon the face of the land" for three days.
- "Many hours" before the end of the three days, a summary of the destruction of the various cities was provided by the voice of Jesus Christ.
- During the three day period of darkness some continuing natural events were ongoing, namely, trembling of the earth, rending of rocks, dreadful groanings, and tumultuous noises.

The only apparent internal discrepancies in the timeline are that Nephi in his vision appears to have seen the mist of darkness prior to the destructive forces, instead of the mist of darkness occurring after the destructive forces. Since it is a vision, and considering that the destructive events would have been difficult to see when there was a mist of darkness, it would seem logical that there is no time or chronological relationship implied.

Samuel the Lamanite's recounting reference of the initiation of darkness "at the time" of Christ's death appears not to be a second-by-second recounting, but is a somewhat broader reference that can accommodate the 3rd Nephi recounting that the darkness started within 3 hours of the beginning of the destruction.