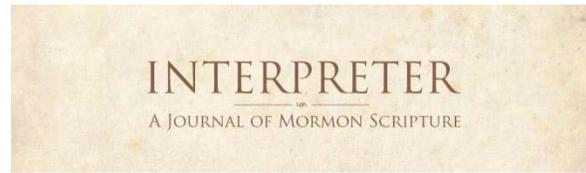




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## The Time of Sin

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## The Time of Sin

Joseph Spencer

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# THE TIME OF SIN

*Joseph Spencer*

*Abstract: This essay provides a close theological reading of Helaman 13, the first part of the sermon of Samuel the Lamanite. Beginning from the insight that chapter focuses intensely on time, it develops a theological case for how sin has its own temporality. Sin opens up a disastrous future, deliberately misremembers the past, and complicates the constitution of the present as the past of the future.*

**I**n a well-known passage in the Book of Mormon, the visiting Christ reprimands his New World disciples for having omitted an important detail from their historical record: the fulfillment of a prophecy uttered by Samuel the Lamanite (see 3 Nephi 23:7–13). It might be worth asking exactly why the Nephite record-keepers were less than fully diligent on this score, less than fully attentive to Samuel’s prophetic pronouncements. Whatever their (unjustified) reasons—and one suspects, frankly, that it unfortunately had something to do simply with the fact that he was a Lamanite—there is a sense in which we, today’s readers of the Book of Mormon, replicate the ancient Nephites’ relative lack of interest in Samuel’s prophecies. Of the many sermons in the Book of Mormon, Samuel’s is perhaps still the least studied. This may be because Samuel has relatively little to say in a direct fashion about “doctrine,” and it is generally doctrine that draws Latter-day Saints to the Book of Mormon’s major sermons. Or it

may be because Samuel's sermon is at the end of a somewhat undeveloped and remarkably depressing book made up mostly of rough sketches of war, apostasy, and wickedness. Whatever our (unjustified) reasons, we would do well to rectify this situation, revising our own accounts, written and unwritten, of what the Book of Mormon teaches by ensuring that Samuel has a place in them.

This essay is an attempt at a close reading of part of Samuel's prophetic sermon and thus an attempt in part to rectify our collective lack of theological interest when it comes to Samuel. My reading is guided at every moment by what seems to me to be Samuel's interest in *time*. This interest is in evidence throughout the sermon (as well, in interesting ways, as in the chapter that precedes the sermon), but the focus on time is most intense—and most instructive—in Helaman 13, where Samuel's theme is repentance. My own focus here, consequently, is limited to what Samuel has to say in that chapter. What I mean to develop from Samuel's discussion is a basic theological exposition of what might be called *the time of sin*. What that means will have to become clearer as my reading progresses. What follows comes in four parts: (1) an analysis of Samuel's opening words concerning the disastrous future and how it follows from the sinful present (see Helaman 13:5–23); (2) a study of Samuel's subsequent brief analysis of how the sinful present misremembers the past (see Helaman 13:24–28); (3) a look at how Samuel then returns to focus on the disastrous future, richly complicating his original account (see Helaman 13:29–37); and (4) a few concluding words concerning Samuel's final call to repentance (see Helaman 13:37–39).

The method I employ in what follows is that of scriptural theology. I aim neither to provide an exegesis of the text (which would require that Samuel's sermon be contextualized with respect to traditions on display in the Book of Mormon regarding remembrance and keeping covenant) nor to raise questions

concerning authorship or authenticity of the text (I assume the historicity of the text here and focus just on theological traces in Samuel’s words). My sole aim is to use the scriptural text as a resource for theological reflection. (In order to keep close just to the text of Helaman 13, I even omit outside resources, avoiding footnotes and other scholar apparatus necessary in exegetical work.) Those words, “theological reflection,” should not be understood in an overly narrow sense, as if the point were to do something like the sort of systematic theology exemplified in the writings of scholastic theologians. Like biblical theologians in the larger Judeo-Christian tradition today and following a tradition that has been productively active for at least a century, I mean to do something quite different from such “systematic” work. Beginning from the philosophical insight that human beings are fundamentally *temporal* beings—beings enmeshed in time, woven of memories and anticipations, riveted to the fleeting present—I mean to see how Samuel’s constant use of temporal terminology in his diagnosis of Nephite sin might help us to understand the human condition, the experience of our passage through this fallen world as a “time of sin.”

### **The Future (Helaman 13:5–23)**

Samuel opens his sermon in Helaman 13 with an articulation of the causal relationship between sin and disaster, presented in terms of the way the (sinful) present leads directly to the (disastrous) future. This link between present and future is summed up in Samuel’s word “awaiteth,” already in the second verse of his address: “heavy destruction awaiteth this people” (13:6). The verb suggests that “heavy destruction” is already in place and the Nephites at least halfway down the road to that place where their fate awaits them. This is, of course, a familiar scriptural theme. There is nothing very surprising about it. But there *is* something surprising about the way Samuel explains this familiar link between present and future in the preceding

verse (in fact the opening words of Samuel’s sermon): “Behold, I, Samuel, a Lamanite, do speak the words of the Lord which he doth put into my heart; and behold he hath put it into my heart to say unto this people that the sword of justice hangeth over this people; and four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people” (13:5). Here, too, the connection between present and future is starkly clear: “the sword of justice” hangs over the Nephites in the present, and it will fall on them in the future. But what is surprising is *the amount of time* Samuel says it will take for the present to lead to the future: *four centuries!*

This is not the only time Samuel places destruction so distantly in the future. A few verses later he says, “and there shall be those of the fourth generation who shall live, of your enemies, to behold your utter destruction” (13:10). Samuel is consistent, then, but one wonders whether it might be a bit excessive for Samuel to be criticizing *his* generation for their sinfulness if he goes on to predict not *their* inevitable destruction or the inevitable destruction even *of their children* but the inevitable destruction of a generation to come *in the relatively distant future*—in fact at the end of Nephite history. This is especially odd given all that will take place over the four centuries in question. Not only will the resurrected Christ come to visit Lehi’s children, but that visit will result in the longest and most glorious period of righteousness and peace in world history! That such a remarkable turn toward righteousness intervenes between the present of sin and the future of disaster would seem to call Samuel’s essentially causal link between present and future in question: What has the wickedness of the Nephites of Samuel’s day to do with that of the Nephites who would live only after a period of such unmistakable goodness has passed?

The link Samuel makes between the sinfulness of his own generation and the disastrous end of the Nephites is all the

stranger in light of the fact that serious destruction would also precede the visit of Christ to the New World. In fact, many of Samuel's hearers in Zarahemla would themselves experience those events, and Samuel actually goes on to mention those more imminent destructions later in his sermon (see Helaman 14:20–27). Why should Samuel focus here on the destruction that would come only much later and without an obvious connection to the sinfulness of his actual addressees? This is curious, but perhaps there is something of an answer in another connection Samuel mentions:

Nothing can save this people save it be repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ, who surely shall come into the world, and shall suffer many things and shall be slain for his people. And behold, an angel of the Lord hath declared it unto me, and he did bring glad tidings to my soul. And behold, I was sent unto you to declare it unto you also, that ye might have glad tidings; but behold ye would not receive me. Therefore, thus saith the Lord: Because of the hardness of the hearts of the people of the Nephites, except they repent I will take away my word from them, and I will withdraw my Spirit from them, and I will suffer them no longer, and I will turn the hearts of their brethren against them (13:6–8).

Here Samuel notes that he had (as the first verses of Helaman 13 recount) originally attempted to preach in Zarahemla concerning the good news of Christ's imminent advent, but he was rejected. Because of that rejection, his original message concerning the future of the Messiah's coming was replaced with a message concerning the future of the Nephites' destruction. Glad tidings had been replaced with dire warnings. Here, then, a rather different tie between present and future is articulated. The present of prophetic anticipation is tied through faith

to the future of messianic redemption. Apparently because the Nephites rejected *this* present-future connection, the *other* present-future connection—that of disaster—had to be presented to them.

The time it takes for a sinful present to arrive at a disastrous future is thus opposed to the time it takes for a faithful present to arrive at a promised future, and the former apparently only occurs when the latter is rejected. How does this speak to the strangeness of the link Samuel makes between the wickedness of his own generation and the destruction of the rebellious Nephites of four centuries later? At the very least, it seems that link is guaranteed by the Nephites' lack of interest in the good things the prophet said would come before destruction. Because the Nephites of Samuel's day refused to believe in the good things that would come before rebellion and punishment would bring an end to Nephite history, Samuel presented them with a future from which those good things were subtracted. Although goodness *was* coming—and coming soon (see Helaman 14:2–19)!—those who rejected that goodness in advance were more closely tied to the sad events several centuries in the future than they were to the happy (as well as the sad) events that would happen in their own generation.

Despite that close tie, however, the fact remains that the destruction of which Samuel speaks oddly lies far in the future. A more direct explanation comes in verses 12–14. The predicted disaster is actually *postponed*, Samuel explains, and it is apparently “because of those who are righteous” who remain in Zarahemla (13:12). Thus “it is for the righteous' sake that [the city] is spared” (13:14), despite the fact that “there are many, yea, even the more part of this great city, that will harden their hearts” (13:12). Most startlingly put: “if it were not for the righteous who are in this great city, behold, [the Lord] would cause that fire should come down out of heaven and destroy it” (13:13). All these statements concern the present and serve

to explain why the present does not entail a disaster in the immediate future. But Samuel goes on to say something about why that disastrous future would eventually come: “the time cometh, saith the Lord, that when ye shall cast out the righteous from among you, then shall ye be ripe for destruction” (13:14). Here the unfortunate future, postponed but inevitable, will come precisely when the righteous are ejected from among the people.

This theme—that of destruction being postponed because of the presence (or, sometimes, the prayers) of the righteous—deserves reflection, even if it is relatively familiar. Samuel has already made clear that the future of disaster replaces the future of promise for the Nephites because they give the present to rejecting God’s messengers rather than to trusting in the coming glory. But the realization of the future of disaster, it now becomes clear, depends on more than just the Nephites’ lack of trust in the promise. If the future to which their faithless present leads is to come about, they must reject not only the message concerning Christ but also every person who *would* receive that message happily. The sinfulness of the present lies in *unbelief*, but the disaster of the future lies in *anti-belief*. The road that leads from the sinful present to the disastrous future is the road along which develops a real suspicion concerning believers, the road of growing intolerance for those who profess to open themselves to a future of promise. The future of the faithless is an always-more-intense distrust of those who hope—a distrust that leads them to seal their own disavowed fate. The fixed fate of the faithless—if they do not repent—is deeply opposed to the open possibilities that lie in the messianic future of the faithful.

In the verses following his discussion of postponement, Samuel once more sketches the connection between the present of sin and the future of disaster already outlined. This further sketch is, however, transitional in nature, since it introduces

the theme of the next part of Samuel's sermon: the link between the present and the past. It deserves at least brief comment.

First, it should be noted that the disastrous future is at this point in the text never given an exact date: there is no talk of four centuries or four generations. For that reason, it is difficult to know whether the disastrous future talked about here (in verses 17–23) is the same disastrous future talked about earlier in the chapter (in verses 5–10). If it is *not* the same disastrous future, there is the possibility that it describes a disastrous future actually to be experienced by Samuel's hearers (the destruction, for instance, that would occur at the time of Christ's death in the Old World). The text, however, suggests that the same disaster is intended. The disaster in question—which Samuel consistently calls a “curse”—concerns the irredeemability of treasure that will be hidden up, but not to the Lord. Why would the Nephites hide their treasures? Samuel explains: they “will hide up their treasures when they shall flee before their enemies” (13:20). Here the likely identity of two predictions is suggested. The curse that marks the irredeemability of treasures hidden up, but not to the Lord, is associated with a destruction of the Nephites by their enemies. Even more suggestive is the fact that Samuel alludes to the possibility of treasure being redeemed if it is buried by “a righteous man” who “shall hide it up unto the Lord” (13:18). It is not difficult to hear in these words a foreshadowing allusion to the one person who would, during the destructions of four centuries later, bury up his treasure to the Lord: the wandering Moroni who would bury the record of the Nephites (along with other Nephite treasures).

Curiously, though, when Samuel returns to this theme of a curse later in verses 30–37, it seems clear that the curse in question is associated not with the far-distant future in which the Nephites are collectively destroyed but with the disaster accompanying Jesus Christ's death in the Old World. Mormon, at any rate, as editor and narrator seems intent on drawing a

connection between the curse here predicted (especially the Nephites' predicted response to that curse in verses 33 and 37) and the narrative of destruction in 3 Nephi 8–10 (especially as reported in 3 Nephi 8:24–25; 9:2). This reading may be all the more appropriate given the fact that Samuel will go on in Helaman 14 to predict the destructions associated with Christ's death (see especially Helaman 14:20–27). But even if this interpretation is the better one, it should be noted that Samuel's words are at this point in the sermon—and perhaps intentionally—ambiguous. His hearers, it seems, would have been likely as not to interpret his words as referring to the far-distant disaster he has already fixed chronologically (in verses 5–10).

Turning to a second point regarding verses 17–23, it might be noted that Samuel's elaboration of the disastrous future (in terms of a curse concerning treasure) provides an important clarification of the sinfulness of the present. The sinfulness of the present is not only a question of a rejection of the future preached by the prophets, it is also a question of a problematic relationship to the past. This becomes clear toward the end of Samuel's discussion of the curse that will come on the land: "ye are cursed because of your riches, and also are your riches cursed because ye have set your hearts upon them... . Ye do not remember the Lord your God in the things with which he hath blessed you, but ye do always remember your riches, not to thank the Lord your God for them" (13:21–22). With these words, Samuel introduces the next part of the chapter, in which the focus turns emphatically from the way the present entails the future to the way the present is constituted by a problematic relationship to the past. Here already, in addition to making clear that the love of wealth is what lies behind the Nephites' rejection of the messianic message, Samuel points to that problematic relationship to the past by distinguishing between remembering the Lord in all blessings and remembering one's

riches, pure and simple. If the sinful present is what organizes the disastrous future, it is helpful to determine what exactly the sinful present consists of—and Samuel finally begins to clarify that point by explaining that the sinful present is first and foremost a wrong relationship to the past.

It is not, however, until the passage that follows that the details of this entanglement of present and past are worked out fully. Samuel’s brief talk of remembrance is only an indication of where he is going next. In order really to see how the time of sin functions, it is necessary to leave behind the link between the present and the future, articulated at length in verses 5–23, and to turn to the link between the present and the past, articulated more compactly in verses 24–28. As will be seen, it is as he begins to dwell on *this* link that Samuel’s talk of time becomes particularly instructive, and theologically compelling.

### **The Past (Helaman 13:24–28)**

To this point in Helaman 13, Samuel’s focus has been more on the (disastrous) future to which the (sinful) present leads than on the nature of the (sinful) present itself. In other words, to this point Samuel has not said much about what exactly constitute the present of sin. He has only said (1) that the sinful present is in part a question of a rejection of a certain future—the future of prophetic promise—and (2) that it is a matter of one sort of remembrance (of one’s riches) rather than another (of the Lord). Beginning with a sudden emphasis in verse 24 on “this time which has arrived,” however, Samuel now gives his attention first and foremost to the constitution of the sinful present, and that constitution is surprising in certain ways. Given the already-discussed transition in verse 22 from anticipation to remembrance, it should not be surprising that Samuel portrays the present as bearing a certain relationship to the past. But what *is* surprising is the way that relationship works. One might expect that, just as the sinful present leads

to a disastrous future, the problematic past led to the sinful present. In other words, one might expect Samuel to continue emphasizing the way that choices at one time determine what happens thereafter. This, however, is not what Samuel does. His focus in verses 24–28 is not on how the past led to or determined the present; rather his focus is on how the present retroactively shapes or organizes the past.

Before coming to the question of *how* the Nephites (mis)remember the past, Samuel says something about *what* they (mis)remember. When he summarizes the sinful present in verse 24, he calls it “this time which has arrived, that ye do cast out the prophets, and do mock them, and cast stones at them, and do slay them, and do all manner of iniquity unto them, even as they did of old time.” Here, on Samuel’s account, the present is effectively a repetition of the past. The present is basically the same as the past. Remembering, it would thus seem, should not be too hard because the Nephites have right before them a kind of mirror image of the past, its recurrence. If then the Nephites have a problematic relationship to the past, it will obviously be because they remember the past as different from their own time—or perhaps they remember the past correctly but completely misunderstand the present. Either way, when Samuel asserts that the past and the present are the same, the unrepentant Nephites assert that a fundamental difference distinguishes the two periods.

Having asserted the continuity of the present with the past, Samuel goes on: “And now when ye talk, ye say: If our days had been in the days of our fathers of old, we would not have slain the prophets; we would not have stoned them, and cast them out” (13:25). It is fascinating that Samuel phrases this next point in terms of “talk.” His accusation is not simply that the Nephites repeat the past without recognizing that they do so. His claim is rather that their sinful present is characterized by a certain sort of discourse, a certain way of talking. The Nephites

*explicitly deny* the identity of past and present, and the fact that they do so loudly and frequently makes clear that their denials are actually a sort of confession (“the lady doth protest too much, methinks”). At any rate, it is important to note that it is not *Samuel* but *the Nephites* who first introduce the comparison between present and past, even if they introduce the comparison only in order to deny it. In delivering his message, Samuel points out only that the Nephites’ obsessive talk is symptomatic and suggestive: If they are so different from their “fathers,” why do they have to keep bring it up, insisting on it every time they “talk”?

Strikingly, Samuel seems to indicate that the only real difference between the Nephites and their predecessors, when it comes to killing the prophets, is precisely this business of ideological “talk.” If, in other words, there *is* a difference between Samuel’s hearers and those in the past they constantly condemn, it is just that those in the past went about their abominable murders more authentically! This seems to be the meaning of Samuel’s next statement, anyway: “Behold ye are worse than they” (13:26). The sinful relationship to the past that constitutes the Nephites’ present (the denial or disavowal of the real identity or repetition that links present with past) makes the present actually worse than the past. Ironically then, the failure to recognize that the present is identical with the past makes the present in an important respect *non*-identical with the past—different just in that the present turns out to be *worse* than the past. The Nephite present repeats the past *except* that it fails to recognize that it repeats the past. Apparently in this way the Nephites of Samuel’s day trumped their predecessors in wickedness.

But how serious is “talk”? Is it really *so* much worse to murder *and* misremember than it is just to murder? Samuel says more about how the Nephites are “worse than” their

predecessors by explaining that their ideological talk has real effects that go well beyond “mere talk”:

If a prophet come among you and declareth unto you the word of the Lord, which testifieth of your sins and iniquities, ye are angry with him, and cast him out and seek all manner of ways to destroy him; yea, you will say that he is a false prophet, and that he is a sinner, and of the devil, because he testifieth that your deeds are evil. But behold, if a man shall come among you and shall say: Do this, and there is no iniquity; do that and ye shall not suffer; yea, he will say: Walk after the pride of your own hearts; yea, walk after the pride of your eyes, and do whatsoever your heart desireth—and if a man shall come among you and say this, ye will receive him, and say that he is a prophet. (13:26–27.)

It should be noted that Samuel continues to focus on “talk” all the way through this passage: “you will say,” “ye will . . . say.” Here then, he provides a bit of clarification of how sinful talk translates into real (wicked) action. Whereas the Nephites’ forebears presumably rejected in a forthright manner the message of repentance that came to them, the Nephites of Samuel’s day accuse those bearing such a message of being specifically *false* prophets, and they call *true* prophets anyone who calls them to live lives of selfishness and pride.

Importantly, Samuel provides a clue as to what focuses the Nephites in such a problematic way on the present. It seems to be the love of money—something that has already come up in Samuel’s sermon. At any rate, it is wealth that the Nephites lavish on those they falsely regard as true prophets: “Yea, ye will lift him up, and ye will give unto him of your substance; ye will give unto him of your gold, and of your silver, and ye will clothe him with costly apparel” (13:28). Here then, Samuel comes back to his transitional words of verse 22, that is, to his

discussion of what the Nephites remember. They remember only their “riches,” though “not to thank the Lord [their] God for them.” As before, it is obsession with wealth that drives the sinful misrepresentation of the past, therefore spoils the present, and organizes a disastrous future. But where in verse 22 wealth is simply the wrong focus of remembering, in verse 28 it seals the present against the (true) past. By giving ostentatious gifts to false prophets—to those who obscure the links between the present and the future and the present and the past by saying that “all is well” (13:28)—the Nephites use their idolatrous wealth to attempt to isolate the present both from what precedes and from what follows it. Putting their money where their mouths are, the Nephites feel the need to support with their wealth whatever confirms their idolatrous refusal to see either the past or the future for what it is. They pay off the prophets who tell them the present is all that matters and that the present should be a time of enjoying what wealth they have.

At this point it is possible to provide a preliminary outline of what Samuel might be said to regard as “the time of sin.” Sin, it seems, is peculiarly focused on inhabiting the present but in a way that closes the present off from both the (real) future and the (real) past. It refuses a future of real possibility—the messianic future, specifically—and ignores the consequent future of real disaster. And it disavows the past with which it is strikingly continuous. It is as if the time of sin is the time of a walled-off present, a present that wrongly pretends to be different from what has gone before it and a present that wrongly pretends that the future does not matter. It is, it seems, the imaginary time one gives oneself when one pretends the past is without consequences and the future without implications. Moreover, the time of sin is the time in which one remembers only wealth, but ironically, it is also the time in which one spends all one’s wealth on securing the present against anything that might

compromise it. It is thus the time in which one both *gains* one's wealth without compromising influences from the past and the future and *loses* one's wealth by spending it all to keep those compromising influences from imposing themselves. The time of sin is thus, in short, the time in which wealth exists only as a means employed to the end of pretending that one is unendingly wealthy.

Sin inhabits—perhaps better: occupies—the present by organizing both an imaginary future and an imaginary past. Setting up borders so as to sustain the fantasy of a prolonged enjoyment of wealth, sin closes its eyes to the devastating consequences of its self-imposed blindness. Ironically, precisely to the extent that sin refuses to regard the past it repeats and insists that its future remains indeterminate, it traps itself within a fully deterministic history, positioning itself on a timeline that leads from sin to bondage to utter destruction. The fantasy of consequenceless freedom is precisely what compromises the freedom that *should* characterize the present, what compromises the freedom the present *would* support were sin to be rejected through repentance.

Such is Samuel's account of the time of sin—its prescient past, its horrifying future, and its desperate present. With that account clear, at least in outline, Samuel turns next to a kind of exhortation to repentance, although a largely indirect one. It too turns on the question of time—if anything more intensely than what precedes it. What has been sorted out here in determining the nature of the time of sin can only help to make sense of Samuel's generally frustrated message of repentance in the last part of Helaman 13.

### **The Future Again (Helaman 13:29–37)**

Samuel opens the last part of Helaman 13 with three questions, all poignantly constructed through the use of the phrase “How long?”: “O ye wicked and ye perverse generation;

ye hardened and ye stiffnecked people, how long will ye suppose that the Lord will suffer you? Yea, how long will ye suffer yourselves to be led by foolish and blind guides? Yea, how long will ye choose darkness rather than light?” (13:29). With each of these questions, Samuel asks how much time has to pass before the time of sin will give way to the time of repentance—if, that is, it ever will. If the present time of sin is, as outlined above, the time in which one fantasizes about an indeterminately prolonged period of the pure enjoyment of wealth, Samuel’s questions are most appropriate. How long can the fantasy last? How much can one prolong the unsustainable vision of uninhibited enjoyment—particularly when the only thing that sustains that unsustainable vision in the meanwhile is the indiscriminate spending of what is supposed to be enjoyed? How long can one stave off waking up from the sweet but deceptive dream of sin?

The triple repetition of Samuel’s question—“How long?”—forces a certain recognition of the link between the way the present dissimulates the past and the way the present leads inexorably to future disaster. How long can a present built on the sandy foundation of denial hold against the storm and flood of destruction? The answer, unfortunately, is that it can hold out long enough to ensure complete destruction; the time of sin, its present, can be prolonged just enough to seal the fate of future disaster. But if the present of sin is *not* prolonged, if it is cut short by repentance, there remains the possibility of escape. From what Samuel says in the wake of his triple question, however, it appears that the Nephites of his day were only moments away from sealing their fate. His desperately repeated “How long?” was offered in the faint hope that his hearers might turn from their wickedness in the final moments before they gave themselves completely to darkness.

How close Samuel’s Nephite audience was to losing the possibility of repentance is clear from the tension between the

several “How long?” questions in verse 29 and the use of the word “already” in verse 30: “Yea, behold, the anger of the Lord is already kindled against you; behold, he hath cursed the land because of your iniquity.” There are two essentially opposed ways this “already” can be understood. On the one hand, it seems to lend a sense of *urgency* to the triple “How long?” of the preceding verse. Repentance cannot be delayed much longer if God’s anger is already kindled (“How long?” means “How long will you wait to repent?”). On the other hand, though, the “already” marks the triple “How long?” with a kind of *futility*. If God’s anger is already kindled, there seems to be little hope that repentance will do any good (“How long?” means “How long will God wait to destroy you?”). Is the “already” meant to cut short the Nephites’ attempt to prolong the time of sin, or is it meant to suggest that they have already prolonged that time beyond the possibility of cutting it short? Samuel himself seems to hover between these two interpretations of his own words. The next few verses hold little hope for a reversal of the situation, but verse 39 will conclude the chapter with a call to “repent and be saved.” However, Samuel’s “already” is meant to inflect his “How long?” and it is clear that change has become expedient. The time is short.

Importantly, Samuel next addresses anew the relationship between the present and the future, something he has already done. This time, however, he addresses that relationship in a different way. In the first part of Helaman 13 discussed above, Samuel speaks of how the *future* looks (or ought to be seen) from the perspective of the *present*; in this last part of the chapter, though, he speaks of how the *present* will look retrospectively from the perspective of the *future*. It is not difficult to see why Samuel makes this move. In light of verse 30’s “already,” it is plain that the sinful present is on the verge of giving way to the kind of disastrous future Samuel has already predicted. Understanding how the present will soon be remembered

might help those trapped in that present to escape it before it is too late. There is, moreover, an apparent rhetorical purpose in Samuel's shift in perspective as well. Samuel's Nephite audience is skeptical that what they are doing in the present will lead directly to disaster, but by addressing how the present will look from the perspective of the future, Samuel rhetorically eliminates the openness of the future. The future of disaster is the *only* future the Nephites have at this point, and it is a future in which they will realize how their present actions led inexorably to destruction. Samuel is effectively saying that in the future they will recognize the truth of his present message.

Interestingly, returning to the theme of wealth, Samuel now gives titles to both the present and the future. The future he calls "the days of [the Nephites'] poverty" (13:32), and the present (still as viewed from the perspective of the future) he calls "the day that [God] gave [the Nephites' their] riches" (13:33). Here reference is obviously to the curse already outlined in verses 17–23. When that curse becomes a reality that cannot be ignored, the Nephites will themselves distinguish between the days of their poverty and the day that God gave them their riches. Hence their future reaction of *mourning*, which Samuel describes:

And in the days of your poverty ye shall cry unto the Lord; and in vain shall ye cry, for your desolation is already come upon you, and your destruction is made sure; and then shall ye weep and howl in that day, saith the Lord of Hosts. And then shall ye lament and say: O that I had repented, and had not killed the prophets, and stoned them, and cast them out. Yea, in that day ye shall say: 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.  
(13:32–33.)

The wealth of time-related terms here should be noted: “the days of your poverty,” “already,” “that day,” “the day that he gave us our riches,” etc. These terms crucially govern the tenses of the verbs throughout Samuel’s projection of the Nephites’ devastation: those that refer to the future lamentation on the part of the Nephites (“shall cry,” “shall...weep and howl,” “shall...lament and say,” “shall say”); those that refer to the irreversible fulfillment of prophetic predictions concerning the future, which is what causes their lamentation (“is...come,” “is made sure,” “are gone”); those that refer to what should have happened in the present, from the perspective of the future (“had repented,” “had not killed,” “had remembered”); those that refer to what the future could have been, had it followed from a repentant present (“would not have become,” “should [not] lose”); and, perhaps most significantly, the one—and only one—that refers to the simple present the Nephites refuse to see: God’s ignored grace to the Nephites (“gave”).

There is much to think about in this complex weave of times and tenses, but there is reason to focus on one word in particular here because it draws into this recasting of the relation between the present and the future the matter of the relationship between the present and the past: “remembered.” When Samuel describes the Nephites in the future as wishing things had gone otherwise, pining after the possibility that their riches might “not have become slippery,” he has them wish they “had remembered the Lord [their] God in the day that he gave [them their] riches.” If in the first part of Helaman 13 Samuel means to make clear how the present’s organization of a future of disaster is predicated on the present’s organization of an imaginary relation to the past; in the second part of Helaman 13 he means to make clear how the future’s lamentation about

what should have been done in the present entails a recognition of that problematic imaginary relation between present and past. The key to repentance, and so to giving oneself to a future of real promise and possibility, is remembrance. And as Samuel's sermon makes painfully clear, this is something generally learned too late, only after "desolation is already come" and "destruction is made sure."

Samuel's prediction of the Nephites' lamentation continues beyond what was quoted above, and what Samuel says in that continuation is particularly striking: "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). At first, this passage appears to be little more than a brief elaboration of what it means when the Nephites say that their "riches are gone from [them]." But the element of time in this elaboration is remarkable: "we lay a tool here and on the morrow it is gone"; "our swords are taken from us in the day we have sought them for battle." At this point, the calamity of the future is described as a kind of malfunctioning of time itself: the future because it is the dawn of real and irreversible destruction does not *itself* have a future. Disaster is a kind of cessation of time's flow, the beginning of a kind of discontinuity between present and future. Time misfires in the disastrous future, at least to the extent that time is usually understood to be an experience of the continuity of objects in space. In disaster nothing remains, and time no longer holds the world together in coherence.

The Nephites of Samuel's predicted future appear to realize this because of the way they *attempt* to orient themselves to a future: "Yea, we have hid up our treasures and they have slipped away from us, because of the curse of the land" (13:35). The act of hiding up treasure is a way of trusting that there is a future—indeed, a future of possibility. Fleeing from destruction but hiding up their treasure before doing so, the Nephites of the

disastrous future seem to believe their destruction is only temporary, a passing matter beyond which lies a future. But when they find that everything they store up for the future—for the supposed future of the future—is irredeemable, they are forced to recognize that time has come to an end for them. They are futureless, and this they cannot help but see whenever they attempt to live in light of a future.

Crucially, it seems this recognition leads the Nephites Samuel projects into the disastrous future to revise their lament about their failure to repent. Before, Samuel described them as wishing that they had repented “in the day that [God] gave us our riches.” Now, however, he has them wish that they “had repented in the day that the word of the Lord came unto us” (13:36). Upon recognizing the collapse of time, the Nephites rethink the past of grace, no longer interested solely in the gift of wealth and the promised possibility of (temporary) enjoyment but interested as well—and hopefully more intensely—in the gift of the prophetic word, the gift of an announced future of real possibility. When time itself ceases to function, the unrepentant not only recognize that they should have remembered God but also that what God had offered to them was the possibility of eternal happiness, of life without end, of timeless joy. Instead of receiving that offer in remembrance and repentance, the Nephites gave themselves to a future dominated by “demons” and “the angels of him who hath sought to destroy [their] souls” (13:37).

### **Conclusion (Helaman 13:37–39)**

At the end of verse 37, Samuel subtly shifts from speaking about “that day” in the disastrous future to “those days” in the disastrous future, pluralizing his reference: “And this shall be your language in those days.” Various interpretations might be given of this shift, but among them would be the idea that Samuel means to indicate a kind of prolongation—not of the

imaginary present of sinful enjoyment (the Nephites' fantasy), but sadly of the real future of disaster and suffering. Apparently "that day" of "weep[ing] and howl[ing]" (13:32) will stretch into "those days" of sorrowful "language," a futureless end of all time that ironically seems never to end. This curious ambiguity between "day" and "days" at the end of time is captured beautifully in a phrase in verse 38: "everlastingly too late." All days, it would seem, have disappeared into the past, since it is at that point "too late," and yet that final day itself becomes days (and weeks, and months, and years) because it is too late "everlastingly."

More of verse 38 deserves quotation and analysis, though, because the phrase "everlastingly too late" appears within another weaving of the singular "day" and the plural "days," specifically directed to the Nephites of the disastrous future: "But behold, your days of probation are past; ye have procrastinated the day of your salvation until it is everlastingly too late, and your destruction is made sure." Here the singular "day" is "the day of your salvation," a day that could have dawned but never did, as those addressed "procrastinated" it "until it is everlastingly too late." That most singular day that never arrived would have interrupted the plural "days of probation," the prolonged time of possible repentance, hence a kind of formula: because the plural days of probation were never interrupted by the singular day of salvation, the singular day of disaster and destruction stretches into the plural days of nostalgic self-torment. It is most interesting here that the day of *salvation*—not, say, the day of *repentance*—is something that could be "procrastinated." For that day to have dawned, for it to have interrupted the days of probation, it was necessary only for the Nephites to have remembered the past correctly, to have listened to the prophet's word concerning the future earnestly. *They* could have initiated the day of salvation, even if salvation itself came as a gift from God. Their procrastination, of course,

is equivalent to their prolongation of the imaginary present of pure enjoyment, walled off from any real past and any real future.

As Samuel goes on, he refers to the imaginary status of that present of pure enjoyment: “ye have sought all the days of your lives for that which ye could not obtain” (13:38). It should be noted that Samuel speaks rather suddenly of “all the days of [the Nephites’] lives” as a kind of totality, a history that has been brought to an end. Importantly, in doing so Samuel assigns to that totality the nature of an impossible quest: the Nephites filled their days with the pursuit of what “is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head” (13:38). The time of sin is the time of attempting to transform the untransformable nature of things, the time of being contrary by insisting that wickedness itself is happiness. Of course, it has already been made clear how one attempts this: by insisting that the wicked present is distinct from the wicked past, by refusing to remember. The time of sin, a present self-deceptively closed off from the reality of its continuity with the past and from the promise of a glorious future, can be interrupted only by an *untimely* remembrance—a willingness to hear the *untimely* words of a prophet who calls for repentance, ruining everyone’s “good time.”

The final words of Helaman 13, then, remain poignant even if they are echoed a thousand times elsewhere in scripture: “O ye people of the land, that ye would hear my words! And I pray that the anger of the Lord be turned away from you, and that ye would repent and be saved” (13:39). Samuel’s final plea and its accompanying prayer are as crucial today as in the day he risked preaching to the Nephites. We today, readers of the Book of Mormon, would do well to hear his words, whether or not the ancient Nephites ever did.

It is, in a word, always a good time to repent.

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