



Type: Book Chapter

The Terrifying Book of Helaman

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Source: *The Book of Mormon: Helaman Through 3 Nephi 8, According to Thy Word*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University,
2004

Page(s): 163-176

Abstract: Mormon uses the history of the Nephites to warn us to avoid wickedness that could lead to our destruction. He shows in the book of Helaman that the Nephites condemned themselves to destruction through choosing wickedness and refusing to allow God to prepare them to meet Christ. He shows that when God sent signs, miracles, and prophets, the Nephites rejected them. As they sought the “things of this world and . . . the honors of men” (D&C 121:35), they began to persecute the righteous and reward the wicked, creating in the process a society of crime, intolerance, injustice, immorality, and hypocrisy. As Mormon unfolds this history, he shows how the destruction of the wicked Nephites that occurs in 3 Nephi is just.



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Gerald Hansen, Jr.

The book of Helaman is a warning—a frightful warning. It should not be read primarily as a history as it sometimes is. Even though we learn about the ministries of Helaman, Nephi₂, and Samuel the Lamanite, and of the Gadianton robbers, as well as the reaction of the Nephites to all of those in the book of Helaman, to read it primarily as a history is to miss the point (Nephi₂ is the second man named Nephi in the Book of Mormon).

Mormon uses the history of the Nephites to warn us to avoid wickedness that could lead to our destruction. He shows in the book of Helaman that the Nephites condemned themselves to destruction through choosing wickedness and refusing to allow God to prepare them to meet Christ. He shows that when God sent signs, miracles, and prophets, the Nephites rejected them. As they sought the “things of this world and . . . the honors of men” (D&C 121:35), they began to persecute the righteous and reward the wicked, creating in the process a society of crime, intolerance, injustice, immorality, and hypocrisy. As Mormon unfolds this history, he shows how the destruction of the wicked Nephites that occurs in 3 Nephi is just.

We are not supposed to miss this justification. It is part of Mormon’s warning, part of his attempt to prepare us to meet the Lord. To this end, he spends an entire chapter editorializing on the foolishness of humankind’s faith in itself and notes the goodness of God (see Hel 12). He says that God blesses his

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children in every possible way at the least suggestion of righteousness on their part; but in return, they harden their hearts, forget their great benefactor, and “trample under their feet the Holy One,” all because they “set their hearts upon the vain things of the world” (v 2, 4). Mormon’s language, stern and reproachful, even sarcastic, indicates how serious he feels the situation is when men and women forget their God: if death, terror, famine, and pestilence are the only things that cause people to repent so they can be saved, then that is what they will get (v 3). His strong language is meant to awaken and save.

Mormon’s language, however, is not the only thing that gives his editorial power. Its very location in the book of Helaman dramatically increases the power of its message. The editorial both follows and precedes extraordinary examples of Nephite spiritual blindness. It follows an eleven-chapter description of the Nephites’ self-determined fall to wickedness in spite of the continual preaching of prophets, and precedes four chapters of the same thing—specific warnings and prophecies by Samuel the Lamanite and an account of how the Nephites attempt to rationalize his warnings. If we do not consider Mormon’s editorial within the context of its surrounding chapters, we miss much of his message. Not only does he say that people are “foolish . . . vain . . . evil . . . devilish . . . and quick to do iniquity” (Hel 12:4), he also teaches us that we often bring our own problems upon ourselves, including, on occasion, large scale destructions, by rejecting the countless warnings of God and turning to gross wickedness.

The Nephites had been forewarned for over 500 years. As early as the great vision that Nephi₁ received in the valley of Lemuel in the old world, the Nephites had been warned that there would be great destructions among them some time just before the Savior’s visit to them (see 1 Nephi 12). They also knew from a later prophecy by Nephi that the reason for the destructions would be that they would kill the prophets and the saints (2 Nephi 26:3). They ignored or forgot that warning and many others, and by the time of Nephi₃, the son of Nephi₂ who

was the son of Helaman, the Lord had to destroy the wicked to protect the righteous. He tells the “more righteous” who survived that the cities were destroyed so that, “the blood of the prophets and the saints shall not come any more unto me against them” (3 Nephi 9:5, 7–9, 11).

We do not need to draw the parallels to the second coming of Christ. We know and have known for centuries that there will be great destructions among us when the Savior comes. We also know that the destructions will occur for the same reason: the rejection and killing of the prophets and saints. Moroni warns the wicked of our days that “the time soon cometh that [God] avengeth the blood of the saints upon you, for he will not suffer their cries any longer” (Mormon 8:41); the Doctrine and Covenants prophesies that God will consume the nations “that the cry of the saints, and of the blood of the saints, shall cease to come up into the ears of the Lord” (D&C 87:6–7); and Nephi says that “[God] will preserve the righteous . . . even unto the destruction of their enemies by fire” (1 Nephi 22:17). Obviously, in our case, as in the case of the Nephites, we have had opportunity to know for many years not only that great destructions will occur, but also why. Knowing what we know, is it possible that some in our day who have the truth will dwindle in unbelief, like the Nephites, and become so wicked that they will be destroyed?

A stupid question, yes, but an alarming one just the same, if we study the book of Helaman. As we have seen, Mormon’s point in the book is to show the goodness of God and the foolishness of humankind. As he depicts this foolishness and unmask the fundamental problems of Nephite society in the book of Helaman, it becomes increasingly easy to see how we are repeating the same mistakes today.

The most frightening aspect of Mormon’s account is the seductive and subtle nature of the temptations that put the Nephites on the path to destruction. The sins that the prophets condemn the most in the book of Helaman, pride and the seeking for wealth, are not the ones that we would first suspect

to be the most dangerous. Satan plays the conman's shell game as well as anyone. He seduces us to neglect critical issues in our lives and soothes our consciences with the careful observance of good but less important things. He tempts us to define righteousness in our own terms rather than God's. As the Savior told the Pharisees, "Ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith" (Matt 23:23). Like the Pharisees, the Nephites never saw the real issues and were, therefore, easily seduced.

The prophets of the book of Helaman, on the other hand, were not deceived. They understood that the most dangerous sins are pride and the lust for riches. Mormon, for instance, puts these two sins first and sets them apart in his list of sins that he says were responsible for the Nephites' losses in war (Hel 4:12). Nephi chastises the people for the same two sins in his great garden tower speech (7:21). And, of all the sins Samuel the Lamanite could have chosen to chastise the Nephites for as he cried from the walls of Zarahemla, pride and the lust for wealth, are the ones he bears down on (13:17–39). These prophets of the book of Helaman recognize the generative nature of these sins. They recognize that seeking wealth causes or leads to most other sins, while pride allows people to feel justified in their wickedness (see vv 22, 26–28).

The prophets recognize that the sins of the great and spacious building—pride and seeking wealth—are more perilous than the sins implied by the mists of darkness—immorality and drunkenness—because they are not as obvious. Everyone knows that drunkenness and immorality are wrong; having wealth and the manifestations of pride that go with it are, on the other hand, seen as virtuous in most societies. After all, people who work long hours, look nice, and have big homes are generally privileged and well-respected. Seeing the respect they command, we naturally assume that it is good to seek wealth, and it becomes quite easy for us to ignore the scripture's counsel to keep our eyes single to the glory of God (D&C

88:67), preferring instead the philosophies of TV talk shows because they justify us in the lifestyles we are seeking.

In this frame of mind, we reject as “old fashioned” Brigham Young’s counsel:

Our artificial wants, and not our real wants, and the following of senseless customs subject our sisters to an excess of labor. . . . Work less, wear less, eat less, and we shall be a great deal wiser, healthier, and wealthier people than by taking the course we now do. (JD 12:122)

And we would skip over Spencer Kimball’s counsel:

Our success, individually and as a church, will largely be determined by how faithfully we focus on living the gospel in the home. . . . We will move faster if we hurry less. We will make more real progress if we focus on the fundamentals. (83)

We certainly would also be willing to ignore President Ezra Taft Benson’s counsel that mothers, with working husbands, should not leave their families to go make money: “[Mothers], be there at the crossroads whether your children are six or sixteen” (Mothers in Zion 8). And again because of the pressures of society, we would also tend to ignore his counsel that fathers invest heavily in their families with their time and energies:

Mothers play an important role as the heart of the home, but this in no way lessens the equally important role fathers should play, as head of the home, in nurturing, training, and loving their children. (“Fathers in Israel” 50; emphasis added)

Turning to the subtleties of society makes it very easy to forget the Savior’s counsel: “Wherefore seek not the things of this world but seek ye first to build up the kingdom of God, and to establish his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (JST Matt 6:38; see also Matt 6:33).

A careful reading of the book of Helaman helps us see through the subtle deceits of society. It forces us to think through the issue of pursuing wealth and causes us to reconsider where we are as individuals and as a society. It shows how the temptation to seek the pride and wealth of the world can lead to

the wickedness that brings destruction (1 Nephi 11:36). It does so by repetitively stating that the problem is the search for wealth and pride and then by exploring the problems engendered in a society inflicted with such mania. There are three problems, in particular that stand out in Mormon's account and therefore deserve closer examination—crime, pseudo-patriotism, and injustice.

Crime

Mormon seems especially concerned with crime. As he describes in the book of Helaman, crime among the people was epidemic and mostly the product of a secret combination, the Gadianton robbers. This band of criminals was responsible for everything from political assassinations to theft. But if we are to appreciate Mormon's warning in the book of Helaman, we must remember that the Gadianton robbers could flourish only in a society that wanted what they offered. In contrast, he tells us that the Lamanites eradicated the Gadianton robbers from their society by the preaching of the gospel to them (Hel 6:37). Apparently the Lamanites became so righteous that they eliminated any market for the services of the Gadianton robbers. In other words, there would be no drug dealers if no one used drugs, no prostitutes if people were chaste. But the Nephites built up the robbers, being seduced "until they had come to believe in their works and partake of their spoils, and to join with them in their secret murders and combinations" (v 38). The more part of the Nephites began to accept the type of false philosophies, like the respectability of seeking great wealth, which allowed crime to expand. As Professor Hugh Nibley has said concerning this verse,

We must remember that we are dealing here not with a small and peculiar band of professional or congenital criminals, but with the general public gone mad after money—people not really criminal at heart, but unable to resist the appeal of wealth and the things it could buy. (*Approach* 321)

A major danger in assuming that the accumulation of wealth is necessarily virtuous is that soon the end of achieving riches justifies the means of obtaining them. Often, people who are normally good begin to see gaining riches as a justifiable end and become tempted to do uncharitable or shady things, while rationalizing their actions with comments like, “I want to be rich so I can give more money to my church or to charity.” Attitudes like this allow us to ignore the people we have hurt and the seeping corruption we have let into our lives because we convince ourselves that we are doing so much good. No wonder the Savior said to “seek not the things of this world” (JST Matt 6:38). In essence he seems to be saying that we should work hard, keep our eyes single to God’s glory, and let God give us wealth when and if he feels we can handle it. Abraham is the great example of this principle. He refused to accept even the smallest amount of money from a wicked source, the king of Sodom, but received and used wisely the wealth promised to him by God in a blessing given by Melchizedek (Gen 14:22–24; see also JST Gen 14:39–40). There is wisdom in this approach. Time and again the Nephites show that those who “set their hearts upon their riches . . . [who seek] to get gain that they might be lifted up one above another . . . [begin] to dwindle in unbelief, and grow in wickedness and abominations” (Hel 6:17, 34).

The Nephites’ dwindling in unbelief permitted the establishment and growth of the most insidious type of Gadianton robber, the white collar criminal. By 23 BC the entire Nephite government had come under the control of the Gadiantons (Hel 6:39). Again, the reason the white collar criminal is the worst type is that they seduce ordinarily good people into participating in wicked things. For instance, most good people do not have any aspirations to join organizations that are universally considered to be evil. But they can dwindle into believing seemingly proper, yet false, philosophies taught to them by respectable people and naively participate in hurtful practices and attitudes without fully realizing what they are doing. It is

far too easy to charge high rents, to mark up merchandise that is selling, to pay low salaries, to make fraudulent claims in advertising, or to exploit personal relationships or church positions in business dealings. Too often these practices are accompanied by dangerous attitudes such as the belief that poor people live in poverty out of choice and deserve what they get. Such attitudes and practices make us part of the problem just as the Nephites in the book of Helaman were part of theirs. The Nephite's problem with the Gadianton robbers began with a mafia-type criminal—with their secret oaths and covenants—but it ended up with most of their society believing in false principles, which allowed the trampling and smiting and rending and turning of backs upon the poor and the meek and the humble followers of God (Hel 6:39). How else could the Gadianton robbers “obtain the sole management of the government” and fill the judgment seats with their people (6:39; 7:4) if it weren't for the fact that the people at large were blind to what they, themselves, were doing? And how else could the people be blind to criminal and wicked activity by government leaders if it weren't for the fact that what the leaders were doing seemed normal? Few free societies knowingly elect criminals to high office and allow them to govern in wickedness. But the Nephites, blinded by prevalent and popular philosophies, allowed the entire government to be managed by the Gadianton robbers. I believe the greatest evidence of their ignorance and apathy is that they mourned and fasted, apparently deeply saddened, at the death of their chief judge—who was, after all, a Gadianton robber (8:28; 9:10).

Pseudo-Patriotism

The blindness and ignorance of the Nephites caused by the seduction of wealth produced another problem in their society, a pseudo-patriotism that threatened personal liberties. When Nephi began to criticize the status quo, those with status sought to silence him. They did it in the name of what we see some

today call patriotism, which amounts to hype and cheerleading for those that follow and condemnation for anyone that opposes. The normal tactic is to portray ourselves as stalwart, loyal, good guys (even if we are not) and to cast doubt and aspersion on the morals and motives of those with different ideas. The corrupt government officials employed this very tactic when Nephi spoke out against their practices. The dishonest judges made it appear that he was the one who was disloyal, charging him with reviling against the people, the law, and the judges (Hel 8:2, 5). In reality, the whole thing was merely the corrupt judges' way of trying to get rid of, or at least to discredit, a man who was calling them on their wickedness. Mormon says the "judges were angry with [Nephi] because he spoke plainly unto them concerning their secret works of darkness" (v 4).

What they were doing is perhaps best summed up by Professor Hugh Nibley, "You can get away with anything if you just wave the flag" (Zion 54). Shouting down opponents with labels and innuendo, and playing up your own loyalty and patriotism, may be effective in silencing the opposition, but it could be disastrous to republics and democracies, since the genius of free societies is the wisdom that comes from compromise and discussion. We often forget that our own constitution—a document we consider inspired—was hammered out in just this way. Free societies need differing viewpoints. For all the boasting we do about the freedoms that exist in our society, we tend to forget that history shows that we are capable, during a crisis, of intolerance and frenzy as described by historian William E. Leuchtenburg:

In the year 1919, Senator McKellar of Tennessee advocated sending native-born American citizens with radical beliefs to a penal colony in Guam. South Carolina's James F. Byrnes asked for the intervention of the federal government to balk an uprising of Negroes that he declared Reds were planning in the South. Some New York school teachers were dismissed after a campaign to determine "Who's Red and Who's True Blue." General Leonard Wood, the army chief of Staff, noted his approval of a minister's call for the deportation of Bolsheviks "in ships of stone with sails of lead, with the wrath of

God for a breeze and with hell for their first port.” “If I had my way with these ornery wild-eyed Socialists and I.W.W.’s,” shouted the evangelist Billy Sunday, “I would stand them up before a firing squad and save space on our ships.” In Indiana a jury deliberated two minutes before acquitting Frank Petroni, who had shot and killed a man for yelling, “To hell with the United States!” The great Red Scare of 1919 was underway. (66)

When we consider these kinds of fanatic acts done in the name of patriotism, we are shocked into realizing that when we shout down our opponents, whether we do it with labels like liberal or conservative or unpatriotic or atheist or communist, or with imprisonment, as we did with the Sedition Act of 1798, or simply by physical or social intimidation—when we silence divergent voices, we eliminate discussion and inhibit our ability to correct our problems.

Injustice

What should be apparent from discussing the problems of crime and intolerance is a third problem, actually the real problem, in any society that has gone mad over money—injustice. Crime is wrong, particularly white collar crime, as is intolerance, precisely because they create injustice. God hates injustice. The scriptures condemn this evil perhaps more harshly than any other sin. In Isaiah 1:10–17, for example, God tells the Israelites, who are practicing their religious devotions, that he will not hear their prayers because their hands are full of blood: they did not do justly to the downtrodden. In Micah 6:6–9 he again says that thousands of rams used in religious ceremonies will count for nothing unless the offerer is just and merciful. The Nephites in the book of Helaman were guilty of such religious hypocrisy. They had religion but chose to ignore obvious examples of injustice in their society. For instance, rampant crime, of the type Nephi accused the Nephites of doing—murder, plunder, theft, and bearing false witness (Hel 7:21)—is a clear indication that things are dreadfully wrong in a society. Yet the Nephites scarcely paid attention to what their

prophet was saying. They did not seem to care. It did not seem to matter to them that the righteous and presumably the poor could not obtain justice under the law while the guilty who were wealthy went free because of their power and influence (Hel 7:5). It did not seem to bother them that the poor were oppressed through the withholding of food and clothing or that the humble were smitten (4:12). More shameful than these injustices are the persecutions that occurred within the church of God. One would hope that God's church would be free of such atrocities. But it was not. Those who said they were members but did not act as though they were, were lifted up in pride because of their wealth and persecuted the more humble followers of the Lord (3:33).

This persecution of poorer members by those who professed to belong to the church may be one of the best indicators of the spiritual sickness of the Nephites. It may be hard for some to understand how it came about that Church members could persecute other members. A statement by Vance Packard, a modern sociologist, gives us some insight as to how it could occur:

In the study of Elmtown's youth, it was found that religion was remote from the lives of the great majority of them. . . . To most students, Hollingshead concluded, "the church is a community facility like the school, the drug store, the city government, and the bowling alley." And this is in the heart of the Bible Belt. Many of the youngsters attend church functions regularly, but carry their status feelings with them, often in a most un-Christian manner. He said that a socially select gang of girls attending the Sunday night "Fellowship" meetings at the most elite church "deliberately make any girl of whom they do not approve feel so uncomfortable" that she will not attend again. . . .

For the majority of American Christians . . . going to church is the nice thing that proper people do on Sundays. It advertises their respectability, gives them a warm feeling that they are behaving in a way their God-fearing ancestors would approve, and adds (they hope) a few cubits to their social stature by throwing them with a social group with which they wish to be identified. (174)

In other words, when people go to church for status or out of habit, then the teachings of Christ to treat everyone with respect, to have mercy and to do justly, have little or no effect

in the lives of those who profess righteousness. In reality, church-going can be part of the spiritual problem. The intolerant and unjust who have religion have often convinced themselves that God loves them because they do religious things. They are spiritually oblivious, or as God says to the wealthy, lukewarm members of the church in Laodicea, “[thou] knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev 3:17). The Nephites in the book of Helaman are a great example of this phenomenon. When Nephi severely chastised them, they marveled. In spite of their gross wickedness, they were shocked that he thought they were wicked (Hel 7:14–15).

This attitude of the people is perhaps the most frightening aspect of this terrifying book of Helaman. We read of a people who were so caught up in the vain things of the world that they were blind and mostly unaffected by Nephi’s great call to repentance. It was not that the people did not have religion; it was that their religion was one of the facades of their respectable lifestyle. The deceit did not fool the prophets; they warned them of their ways. Nephi called down a great famine, while Samuel prophesied great signs and could not be killed. Both preached plainly with the power of God and with courage. Both were mostly rejected because the people hardened their hearts, preferring to believe instead the philosophies and excuses of men (see Hel 16:15–23). The outcome of this blindness is well known to readers of the Book of Mormon. The Nephites continued in the same pattern of wickedness in spite of receiving great signs and having momentary periods of righteousness until all but the more righteous were destroyed at the Savior’s coming (3 Nephi 9:12–13).

All this Mormon gives us in an attempt to warn us that seeking wealth is a seductive mistress. She does not mind if we spend some time in religious devotion. As far as she is concerned we can choose to worship “our golden calves” in the name of Jehovah (see Ex 32:5–6), if by so doing we convince ourselves we are right with God.

Just before recounting the terrible destructions in 3 Nephi, Mormon describes the Nephites as being “lifted up unto pride and boastings because of their exceedingly great riches, . . . even unto persecutions” . . . (3 Nephi 6:10), as being “distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning” (v 12). Satan tempted them “to seek for power, and authority, and riches, and the vain things of the world” (v 15), and “they did not sin ignorantly, for they knew the will of God concerning them, for it had been taught unto them” (v 18). Perhaps there is no greater commentary on the foolishness of the Nephites than what is detailed in these verses. The same sins decried by the prophets in the book of Helaman were later on widespread among the Nephites in spite of the many opportunities God gave them to repent. God was, therefore, justified in destroying the wicked. And fortunately for us, the pattern of seduction, wickedness, and destruction is recorded for all to read.

The poignancy with which Mormon writes his grim account reveals his compassion for us. He means to move us to action. The book of Helaman, containing Mormon’s centralizing editorial on the foolishness of humankind’s vanity, is his warning to us of the last days to repent, to come to Christ, to seek God’s kingdom so that we can avoid the destruction that came upon the Nephites. The message of the book of Helaman is both terrifying and reassuring at the same time—terrifying because we see patterns of wickedness that are being repeated in our day, and reassuring because it testifies and manifests that for “whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, . . . [it] shall divide asunder all the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the [men and women] of Christ in a strait and narrow course . . . and land their souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven” (Hel 3:29–30).

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