

Nephi Prophecies the Destruction of His People

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Nephi's Vision. Following Nephi's vision of darkness and chaos in the land of promise (1 Nephi 12:4-5),¹ he "saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself" to the survivors of the destruction (1 Nephi 12:6). Nephi saw the Redeemer ordain "twelve ministers" to lead and judge the survivors in "their faith in the Lamb of God" (1 Nephi 12:7-10). Then another vision opened, which prophesied the destruction of Nephi's descendants (1 Nephi 12:11-23). Verses 11-12 describe the chronological part of this vision and may be structured conceptually (with italics added for the key words) as follows:

A₁ And *the angel saith* unto me,
B *look!*
C₁ And I looked and beheld *three generations*
D did pass away in *righteousness*;
E₁ and their garments were *white*,
F₁ even like unto *the Lamb of God*.
A₁ And *the angel said* unto me,
E₂ These are made *white*
F₂ in the blood of *the Lamb*,
G₁ because of their *faith in him*.
C₂ And I, Nephi, also saw many of the *fourth generation*,
D which did pass away in *righteousness*.²

The "A" lines describe the angel leading Nephi through the vision he wanted to see after hearing about his father's vision (1 Nephi 10:17; 11:1-3). The "B" line is the angel's firm command for Nephi, probably a young teenager,³ to pay close attention to what the angel was about to unfold. The "C" lines identify people ("three generations" in line C₁ and "many of the fourth generation" in line C₂) who pass away in righteousness ("D" lines) and whose garments become "white" like "the Lamb of God" ("E" and "F" lines), "because of their faith in him" (line G₁).

Earlier in this vision, Nephi had been shown that through faith in the Redeemer, "multitudes" would survive the time of chaos and darkness (1 Nephi 12:5). Those people and their descendants would continue "in righteousness" until sometime during the fourth generation, when

¹ See part three of this chapter, "The Prophecy of Three Days of Darkness," 1-2.

² Capitalization, punctuation and spelling of quotes from 1 Nephi 12:11-23 are as set forth in Joseph Smith, Jr., author and proprietor, *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, New York: E.B. Grandin, 1830; Independence, Missouri: Herald Heritage Reprint, 1970), 27-28; or Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work: Book of Mormon 1830 First Edition Reproduced from Uncut Sheets* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Publisher's Press, 1958), 27-28. The earliest extant text of these verses is found in a portion of the original manuscript that has survived. About three-fourths of the original manuscript was destroyed by water and mold, between 1841 and 1882, while the manuscript was held in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House, a hotel in Nauvoo, Illinois. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies ["FARMS"], 2001), 6-7, 110-12. There are two material interpretive issues related to the textual transmission of verse 18, but those issues do not affect the chronology analyzed in this part. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 252-63. These two interpretive issues are noted in part one of this chapter, "Lehi's 600-year Prophecy," 10 n.24.

³ See part three, "The Ages of Nephi and Sariah," of my chapter on "Lehi's Escape."

some (or perhaps many) would depart from faith in the Redeemer. The vision then returned to the “multitudes” living in the land of promise during or following the fourth generation. The next three verses (1 Nephi 12:13-15, italics added) may be structured conceptually as follows:

And it came to pass that
C_{3A} I saw the *multitudes of the earth*
H₁ *gathered together.*
A₁ And *the angel* said unto me,
C_{4A} Behold *thy seed,*
C_{5A} and also *the seed of thy brethren!*

And it came to pass that
C_{4B} I looked, and beheld *the people of my seed*
H₂ *gathered together* in multitudes
C_{5B} against *the seed of my brethren;*
H₃ and they were *gathered together* to battle.

Nephi had recently experienced violent conflicts with his brothers (1 Nephi 3:28-29; 7:6-19). In addition, during an earlier revelation, Nephi had been told that when his seed would “rebel” against the Lord, his brothers’ seed would become “a scourge ... to stir [Nephi’s seed] up in the ways of remembrance” (1 Nephi 2:24). However, in this new vision, Nephi saw that those conflicts not only would be related to “wars” and “great slaughters with the sword” before the coming of the Messiah (1 Nephi 12:1-3), but would be related to subsequent battles as well (the “H” lines). Nephi was shown, partially through an understanding of images from his father’s vision (1 Nephi 12:16-18), that his seed not only would be scourged, but would be overcome. Verses 19 and 20 may be structured conceptually (with italics added) as follows:

A₂ And while *the angel* spoke these words,
C_{5B} I beheld and saw that *the seed of my brethren*
C_{4C} did contend against *my seed,*
A₃ according to *the word of the angel;*
G₂ and because of *the pride* of my seed,
G₃ and *the temptations* of the devil,
C_{5B} I beheld that *the seed of my brethren*
C_{4B} did overpower *the people of my seed.*

And it came to pass that
C_{5B} I beheld and saw the people of *the seed of my brethren,*
C_{4C} that they had overcome *my seed;*
C_{3B} and they went forth in *multitudes upon the face of the land.*

Thus, beginning with the unrighteousness of some part of Nephi’s seed in the fourth generation, the time would come when they would be gathered for battle and would contend with his brothers’ seed. Arrogantly pursuing the temptations of the devil (the “G” lines in this section providing contrast to the faith expressed in line G₁ in the first section), Nephi’s seed would be overpowered and overcome, after which his brothers’ seed would go forth “in multitudes upon the face of the land.”

Nephi’s Grief. In Nephi’s collection of prophecies near the end of his writing in the small plates (2 Nephi 25-30), Nephi emphasized his anguish at what he had been shown by the angel. After describing the great destruction that would occur as a sign of Christ’s death and resurrection (2 Nephi 26:3-6), Nephi first referred to the grief he felt for those who perished at the time of that chaos and darkness. Then he prophesied the appearance of Christ to the righteous, the

faithfulness of a few generations and, with “the pains of [his] soul,” the subsequent rejection of Christ’s light that would lead to “a speedy destruction.” This passage (2 Nephi 26:7-11, italics added) may be structured conceptually as follows:

A₁ *O the pain, and the anguish of my soul*
B₁ for the loss of *the slain of my people!*
C_{1A} For *I, Nephi, hath seen it,*
A₂ *and it well nigh consumeth me*
C_{2A} before *the presence of the Lord;*
A₃ *but I must cry unto my God,*
D₁ thy ways are *just.*

B₂ But *behold, the righteous, that hearken*
C_{3A} unto *the words of the prophets,*
D_{2A} and *destroy them not,*
B₃ but *look forward*
C_{2B} unto *Christ* with steadfastness
C_{3B} for *the signs* which are given,
D₃ notwithstanding all *persecutions;*
B₄ behold they are *they which shall not perish.*
C_{2C} But the *Son of righteousness* shall appear unto them;
D_{4A} and he shall *heal them,*
D_{4B} and they shall *have peace* with him,
B_{5A} until *three generations shall have passed away,*
B_{5B} and many of the *fourth generation shall have passed away in righteousness.—*
C₄ And when *these things* shall have passed away,
D_{2B} a *speedy destruction* cometh unto my people;

A₄ for, notwithstanding *the pains of my soul,*
C_{1B} *I have seen it,*
C_{1C} wherefore, *I know that it shall come to pass;*
B_{6A} and they sell themselves *for nought;*
B_{6B} for, for the reward of *their pride, and their foolishness,*
D_{2C} they shall reap *destruction;*
B_{6C} for because they *yieldeth unto the Devil,*
B_{6D} and *choose works of darkness* rather than light;
D_{4C} therefore they must *go down to hell,*
C_{2D} for the *spirit of the Lord* will not always strive with man.
C_{2E} And when *the spirit* ceaseth to strive with man,
D_{2B} then cometh *speedy destruction;*
A₅ and this *grieveth my soul.*⁴

⁴ Capitalization, punctuation and spelling are as set forth in Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 107. The earliest extant text of this verse is found in the printer’s manuscript, a copy of the original manuscript prepared for use by the typesetter of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts, Part One* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 3-4, 216-17. Except for the phrase *Son of righteousness* (line C_{2C}), no material interpretive issues are related to the transmission of this text. Skousen suggested that Joseph Smith’s scribe, Oliver Cowdery, may have misinterpreted the homophonous *Son* for *Sun*. The Messiah’s title *Sun of righteousness* appears in Malachi 4:2, but in the Savior’s quotation of that passage in 3 Nephi 25:2, Cowdery also transcribed it as *Son of righteousness* (see also Ether 9:22). Similar titles appear to be contemplated in Jeremiah 33:15 (“Branch of righteousness”) and 1 Nephi 2:9; Ether 8:26; 12:28 (“the

The “A” lines in these verses refer to the anguish of Nephi’s soul as he viewed the awful fate of the unrighteous. The “B” lines compare and contrast the righteous and unrighteous. The “C” lines are about the Lord, his revelations to the righteous and his withdrawal from the wicked. Finally, the “D” lines are about God’s exercise of justice; he heals and brings peace to those who follow the prophets, but permits the speedy destruction of those who reject his prophets. The Son of righteousness will appear to the righteous (line C_{2C}), those who will survive the three days of darkness and chaos. They will have peace with him (line D_{4B}) “until three generations shall have passed away” (line B_{5A}), “and many of the fourth generation shall have passed away in righteousness” (line B_{5B}).

Other Records. Hundreds of years after the time of Nephi, Alma briefly referred to Nephi’s fourth generation prophecy as part of Alma’s 400-year prophecy of Nephite extinction (Alma 45:10-14). Alma’s prophecy will be examined in the fifth part of this chapter; however, the relevant section of the prophecy (part of vs. 12) states “that from that day [when the Lord appears to the righteous], even the fourth generation shall not all pass away, before this great iniquity [sinning against great light and knowledge] shall come.”⁵

Nearly 70 years later, the prophet Samuel referred to a Lamanite fourth generation prophecy. In this prophecy, Samuel used the words of the angel who spoke for the Lord (Helaman 13:10, proposed conceptual structure and italics added):

A₁ yea, *I will visit them in my fierce anger,*
 B₁ and there shall be *those of the fourth generation,*
 C₁ which shall live, of your enemies, to behold *your utter destruction;*
 A₂ and *this shall surely come, except ye repent, saith the Lord;*
 B₂ and *those of the fourth generation*
 C₂ shall visit *your destruction.*⁶

The “A” lines identify this passage as statements made by the Lord. The “B” lines refer to people of the fourth generation, but this is clarified in the “C” lines. This fourth generation is that of the Nephites’ enemies, who both behold and “visit” the Nephite destruction. The verb *visit* appears to mean not just that the Nephites’ enemies would “come to see” the destruction, but that they would “punish,” “afflict” and “bring judgments on” the Nephites.⁷

fountain of all righteousness”). Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Two* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2005), 829-33.

⁵ Capitalization, punctuation and spelling are as set forth in Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 348. The earliest extant text of Alma 45:10-14 is found in a portion of the original manuscript that has survived. Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 375. There are no material interpretive issues related to the textual transmission of these verses. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Four* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2007), 2518-22.

⁶ Capitalization, punctuation and spelling are as set forth in Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 442. For this part of the 1830 edition, the typesetter may have worked directly from the original manuscript rather than the printer’s manuscript. Skousen, *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Part One*, 3-4; idem, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 6. There are no material interpretive issues related to the textual transmission of this verse. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Five* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2008), 3079-82. The wording of the printer’s manuscript is the same as the 1830 edition, indicating that the wording of the original manuscript was identical to these two copies. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts, Part Two* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 762-63.

⁷ Noah Webster, LL.D., *American Dictionary of the English Language*, two vols. (New York: S. Converse, 1828), II: [889] (“visit”), accessed at www.archive.org/details/americanfictiona02websrich. See also Noah

Finally, the risen Lord expressed his feelings about the impending destruction of the Nephites (3 Nephi 27:32): “But behold, it sorroweth me because of the fourth generation from this generation, for they are led away captive by him,⁸ even as was the son of perdition; for they will sell me for silver, and for gold, and for that which moth doth corrupt, and which thieves can break through and steal. And in that day will I visit them, even in turning their works upon their own heads.”⁹

Chronological Issues. The confusion that may arise from five separate references to a fourth generation is that they do not all appear to refer to the same people. Nephi envisioned “many of the fourth generation” who would pass away “in righteousness” (1 Nephi 12:12). Evidently, this fourth generation included both righteous and unrighteous members. Nephi kept this view of the fourth generation when he composed his collection of prophecies: “many of the fourth generation shall have passed away in righteousness” (2 Nephi 26:9).

Alma’s brief reference to a fourth generation stated that “even the fourth generation shall not all pass away before this great iniquity shall come” (Alma 45:12). The *great iniquity* was specified earlier by Alma: “the people of Nephi” would “sin against so great light and knowledge,” in that they would “dwindle in unbelief and fall into the works of darkness, and lasciviousness, and all manner of iniquities” (Alma 45:11-12). During the fourth generation, some (perhaps just a few) would dwindle in unbelief. That is, “the fourth generation shall not *all* pass away [in righteousness] before this [sin against great light and knowledge] shall come” (italics added). This interpretation seems to extend Alma’s prophecy out to a fifth (or perhaps even a later) generation that would fully adopt the “works” of darkness, lust and iniquity, while some of the righteous members of the fourth generation still lived. Apparently, the iniquity would be great, not necessarily in the sense that a great many of the fourth generation would participate in such sin, but in the sense that the iniquity constituted a sin against the great wisdom preserved by the preceding generations.

With Samuel’s fourth generation prophecy (Helaman 13:10), the subject was not even a Nephite generation, but the fourth generation of the Nephites’ enemies who “visit ... destruction” on the Nephites because of their failure to repent. The phrase *utter destruction* seems to indicate a complete, total, final destruction,¹⁰ but would that mean annihilation, assimilation or both? Would the Nephites’ enemies live longer than the Nephites, so that a fourth enemy generation could inflict utter destruction on a fifth Nephite generation? Did the counting of the first enemy generation begin at the same time as the first counted Nephite generation? Would Nephi’s prophesied “speedy destruction” (2 Nephi 26:10-11) occur during the fifth Nephite generation? The risen

Webster, LL.D., *Dictionary of the English Language: Abridged from the American Dictionary* (New York: White, Gallaher, & White, 1831), 495 (“visit”); Samuel Johnson, LL.D, and John Walker, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed. (London: William Pickering, 1828), 774 (“visit”); *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, two vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), II: 3642-43 (“visit”). (Both 19th century abridged dictionaries were accessed through Google Books.)

⁸ The pronoun *him* means *the devil*, a reference back to 3 Nephi 27:11.

⁹ Capitalization, punctuation and spelling are as set forth in Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 509. This text also appears to have been typeset directly from the original manuscript rather than the printer’s manuscript. The wording of the printer’s manuscript is the same as the 1830 edition, indicating that the original manuscript was identical to these two copies. There are no material interpretive issues related to the textual transmission of these verses. Skousen, *The Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Part Two*, 863; idem, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 6; Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Six* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2009), 3530-31.

¹⁰ Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, II: [866] (“utter”). See also Webster, *Dictionary of the English Language: Abridged*, 487 (“utter”); Johnson and Walker, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 807 (“utter”); *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, II: 3578 (“utter”).

Redeemer's words provide some clarity (3 Nephi 27:32). The fourth generation is described as being "from this generation," that is, from the generation he visited and taught. That fourth generation would be "led away captive" by the devil because of their devotion to material wealth. Would such devotion lead immediately to destruction? Finally, how long were these generations? Was a generation defined by its oldest living member, by some sort of assumed number of years or by the earliest of its members to reproduce the next generation? These are all issues to be considered in the chapter that examines the fulfillment of these fourth generation prophecies.