

The 400-year Prophecies of Nephite Destruction and Extinction

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Alma's Prophecy. Hundreds of years after the time of Nephi, a high priest and former chief judge of the Nephites, named Alma (Mosiah 29:42-44), expanded on Nephi's prophecy about the destruction of the Nephite people.¹ At that time, Alma delivered the accumulated records of the Nephites to his son, Helaman (Alma 37:1-18; 44:24), and said, "behold, I have somewhat to prophesy unto thee [Helaman]; but what I prophesy unto thee, ye shall not make known; yea, what I prophesy unto thee shall not be made known, even until the prophecy is fulfilled; therefore write the words which I shall say" (Alma 45:9). Helaman then recorded his father's 400-year prophecy (Alma 45:10-12, proposed conceptual structure and italics added):

A₁ Behold, *I perceive*
B₁ that *this very people, the Nephites,*
A₂ according to *the spirit of revelation which is in me,*
C₁ in *four hundred years from the time*
D₁ that *Jesus Christ shall manifest himself* unto them,
E₁ shall *dwindle in unbelief,*
B₂ yea, and then shall *they*
F_{1A} see *wars and pestilences,*
F_{1B} yea, *famines and bloodshed,*
B₃ even until *the people of Nephi*
E_{2A} shall *become extinct,*
B₂ yea, and this because *they*
E₁ shall *dwindle in unbelief,*
E_{3A} and fall into *the works of darkness*
E_{3B} and *lasciviousness,*
E_{3C} and *all manner of iniquities;*²

Alma's prophecy began with his brief explanation of the development of the prophecy; he perceived something new based on the spirit of revelation that he experienced ("A" lines). His people, the Nephites ("B" lines), in four hundred years from the Redeemer's manifestation to them ("C" and "D" lines), would suffer pestilence and famine, bloodshed and war, until they became "extinct" (the E₂ and F₁ lines). Their decline and disappearance would result from their unbelief, accompanied by works of darkness, lust and other iniquities (the E₁ and E₃ lines).

¹ See part four of this chapter, "Nephi Prophecies the Destruction of His People."

² Capitalization, punctuation and spelling of quotes from Alma 45:9-14 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), 348-49; 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), 348-49. 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, 374-75. 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.

Alma's prophecy created a lengthy, but perhaps precise chronological expectation, clearly related to Nephi's previously expressed fourth generation prophecy (1 Nephi 12:11-23; 2 Nephi 26:7-11). Nephi had written and presumably spoken of the time when the Nephite decline would commence, eventually leading to his people being overcome and speedily destroyed. Alma's prophecy associated the time for their extinction with 400 years "from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them."

In the middle section of Alma's prophecy, he reiterated Nephi's fourth generation prophecy (Alma 45:12, proposed conceptual structure and italics added):

A₃ yea, *I say unto you,*
 B₂ that because *they*
 E_{4A} shall *sin against so great light and knowledge;*
 A₃ yea, *I say unto you,*
 C₂ that from *that day,*
 B₄ even *the fourth generation* shall not all pass away,
 E_{4B} before *this great iniquity* shall come;

In this section, the "A" lines refer to Alma's prophetic actions rather than perceptions. Unlike the 400-year prophecy, which was not to be made known until it was fulfilled, Alma's version of the fourth generation prophecy added his witness, his voice, to Nephi's. The fourth generation prophecy apparently could be uttered and taught. The "B" lines continue to refer to the Nephites. The phrase "that day" in line C₂ means "the time" referenced in line C₁: the risen Redeemer's appearance to the Nephites. The E₄ lines complete this section and expand the prophecy of iniquities to include a "great iniquity," defined as sinning "against so great light and knowledge."

In the third and final section of Alma's prophecy, he shifted the time frame far into the future. Alma 45:13-14 (with italics added) may be structured conceptually as follows:

C_{3A} and when *that great day* cometh,
 C_{3B} behold, *the time* very soon cometh
 B_{5A} that *those which are now,*
 B_{5B} or *the seed of those which are now*
 F_{2A} numbered among the people of Nephi,
 F_{2B} shall no more be numbered among the people of Nephi;
 B₆ but *whosoever*
 F₃ remaineth, and is not destroyed
 C_{3C} in *that great and dreadful day,*
 F_{2C} shall be numbered among the Lamanites,
 F₄ and shall become like unto them
 B₇ all, save it be a few,
 D₂ which shall be called the disciples of *the Lord;*
 B₈ and *them* shall the Lamanites pursue,
 E_{2B} even until they shall become extinct.
 E_{3D} And now, *because of iniquity,*
 A₄ *this prophecy* shall be fulfilled.

In this concluding section, the "C" lines refer to a very different "great day;" a "great and dreadful day" of sin and iniquity. The "B" lines continue to be references to the Nephites. Line D₂ refers back to the first section's mention of the Lord's appearance to them (line D₁). Even near the end of the 400-year period, there would still be some Nephites who followed the Lord. The "E" and "F" lines make it clear what Nephite extinction (also mentioned in the first section) would entail. As

a result of the iniquity spelled out in the first and second sections of the prophecy, Nephites would become like Lamanites and “be numbered among the Lamanites.” The surviving “disciples of the Lord” would be pursued until they were extinct. Line A₄ ends Alma’s prophecy of Nephite extinction as it began, with a reference to his witness of truth delivered through the “spirit of revelation” (lines A₁ and A₂).

Samuel’s Prophecy. A second 400-year prophecy is recorded in the Book of Mormon, but it does not appear to have been derived from Alma’s earlier prophecy (which was kept secret; Alma 45:9). The later prophecy was delivered by Samuel, the Lamanite prophet who, at the command of the Lord, came into the land of Zarahemla (the land associated with the Nephite capitol) and delivered the message given to him by an angel (Helaman 13:2-9). While Samuel’s prophecy is similar to Alma’s, the two are not identical. As Alma’s 400-year prophecy was recorded nearly seven decades earlier than Samuel’s and it extended the expectation of Nephite history as many as 38 years longer than Samuel’s prophecy.

After Samuel had preached to the Nephites for “many days,” he was cast out and “about to return to his own land.” Then “the voice of the Lord” came to him, commanding that he should return to Zarahemla “and prophesy unto the people whatsoever things should come in his heart.” When he was not permitted to enter the city, “he went and got upon the wall thereof, and stretched forth his hand and cried with a loud voice” (Helaman 13:2-4). The first prophecy Samuel delivered was his 400-year prophecy (Helaman 13:5-9, italics added), which may be structured conceptually as follows:

A₁ Behold, *I, Samuel*, a Lamanite,
 B_{1A} *do speak* the words of the Lord,
 C_{1A} which he doth put into *my heart*,
 C_{1B} and behold he hath put it into *my heart*
 B₂ *to say* unto this people,
 D_{1A} that *the sword of justice* hangeth over this people;
 E₁ and *four hundred years* passeth not away
 D_{1B} save *the sword of justice* falleth upon this people;
 F_{1A} yea, heavy destruction awaiteth *this people*,
 F_{1B} and it surely cometh unto *this people*,
 F_{1C} and nothing can save *this people*,
 G_{1A} save it be *repentance*
 G₂ and *faith on the Lord Jesus Christ*,
 H_{1A} which surely *shall come into the world*,
 H_{1B} and *shall suffer* many things,
 H_{1C} and *shall be slain* for his people.

A₂ And behold, *an angel of the Lord*
 B_{3A} hath *declared* it unto me,
 C_{2A} and he did bring *glad tidings to my soul*.
 A_{3A} And behold, *I* was sent unto you
 B_{3B} to *declare* it unto you also,
 C_{2B} that ye might have *glad tidings*;

A_{3B} but behold ye would not receive me,
 B_{1B} therefore *thus saith the Lord*,
 C_{3A} Because of the hardness of *the hearts*
 F₂ of *the people of the Nephites*,
 G_{1B} except they *repent*
 H_{2A} I will *take away my word* from them,

H _{2B}	and I will <i>withdraw my spirit</i> from them,
H _{2C}	and I will <i>suffer them no longer</i> ,
C _{3B}	and I will turn <i>the hearts</i>
F ₃	<i>of their brethren</i> against them;
E ₂	and <i>four hundred years</i> shall not pass away,
H _{2D}	before I will <i>cause that they shall be smitten</i> ;
H _{2E}	yea, I will <i>visit them</i>
D _{2A}	with <i>the sword</i> ,
D _{2B}	and with <i>famine</i> ,
D _{2C}	and with <i>pestilence</i> ; ³

Eight different conceptual lines appear to have been used in this prophecy by the Nephite scribe who recorded the mission of Samuel to the Nephites (see Helaman 14:1). The “A” lines identify the chief actors: Samuel, the angel who sent him on his mission for the Lord and the Nephites who rejected Samuel’s, and thus the Lord’s, message. The “B” lines refer to actions related to declaring the prophetic message. The “C” lines are about the feelings of the heart or soul, which may be glad or hard and influenced by the Lord. The Lord’s “sword of justice” (the D₁ lines) hangs over the unrighteous and, when it falls, they will be visited with the sword, famine and pestilence (the D₂ lines). The “E” lines establish the 400-year expectation. The “F” lines distinguish “this people,” the Nephites, from “their brethren,” the Lamanites. One might imagine the Nephites who threw rocks and shot arrows at Samuel (Helaman 16:2), mocking the prophet for his insistence that it surely would be the Nephites, rather than the Lamanites, who would suffer “heavy destruction.” The “G” lines hold out the Lord’s long suffering willingness to withdraw his sword of justice if the Nephites would exercise “faith on the Lord” (line G₂) and repent of their sins (lines G₁ and G₃). Lastly, the “H” lines focus on the Redeemer coming to save his faithful, repentant people (lines H_{1A} through H_{1C}) and finally withdrawing to punish the wicked (lines H_{2A} through H_{2D}).

Chronological Issues. The first temporal issue to be raised is similar to one associated with Lehi’s 600-year prophecy. What is the meaning of the preposition *in* in Alma’s phrase “in four hundred years”? Does it mean “within the limits of a period or space of time” or “at the expiration” of a “limit of time.”⁴ Samuel’s prophecy, which held that 400 years would not all pass away before the Lord would unleash his destruction (Helaman 13:5, 9), clearly described events that would occur “within the limits of a period” of 400 years.

Samuel’s prophecy concerning things that would happen before the end of a 400-year period does not require Alma’s prophecy to measure an incomplete 400-year period. One must examine what was to occur within, or at the end, of the two different 400-year periods. For Samuel’s 400-year period, the Nephites were to be smitten with the sword, famine and pestilence

³ Capitalization, punctuation and spelling of quotations from Helaman 13:2-9 are as set forth in Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (1830), 441-42. For this part of the 1830 edition, the typesetter may have worked directly from the original manuscript rather than from the printer’s manuscript. 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; idem, *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 6. 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 Five* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2008), 3076-78. 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.

⁴ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, two vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I: 1395 (“In”).

before the end of that period (Helaman 13:9). For Alma's 400-year period, the unrighteous Nephites were to become "like unto" the Lamanites and "numbered among the Lamanites," while the "disciples of the Lord" would become "extinct" (Alma 45:13-14). The two different prophetic end points permit, but do not require, Alma's 400-year prophecy to be interpreted as including a full or precise period.

The prophecies also differ in another important way. Samuel's prophecy was delivered about five years before the signs of the Messiah's birth were to be seen (Helaman 14:2-6); so, 400 years from Samuel's work at Zarahemla would have extended only about 395 years beyond the signs of the Messiah's birth. Alma's prophecy, however, measured 400 years "from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself" to the righteous survivors of the three days of darkness and chaos. Referring to Nephi's fourth generation prophecy, Alma connected "that day" (line C₂) with the time of the Redeemer's manifestation (lines C₁ and D₁). Hence, Alma 45:10 and 12 indicate that Alma's 400-year limit extended 400 years beyond the Messiah's death, resurrection and appearance to the surviving multitudes—and, thus, as many as 38 years longer than Samuel's prophecy.⁵

The calendric questions continue with these 400-year prophecies. Alma was a Nephite and Samuel a Lamanite; so, were their calendars the same? How long were their calendars (if the prophecies used different calendars) or how long was the calendar (if the prophecies used the same calendar)?

Summary. In this chapter, I have proposed six prophecies that, as they were first given and later fulfilled, provide the narrative of the Book of Mormon with its basic chronological structure. Mormon's four year-end marking phrases for weaving the history associated with the six principal prophecies were noted, together with their probable pattern, which appears to flow across some internal book boundaries within the Book of Mormon. Chart I (at the end of this chapter) sets forth this pattern as: A-B-A—C-A-C-D—C-A-C-A-C-D—C-B-C. The "D" year-end marking phrases appear only twice, to identify two important times of prophetic fulfillment: first, the end of 600 years from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem, when the signs of the Messiah's birth were imminent (3 Nephi 1:1); and second, the end of 194 years from the signs of the Messiah's birth, when Amos, the third generation of Nephite record keepers from the time of the signs, died and it was noted that "a small part of the people ... had revolted ... and taken upon them the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land" (4 Nephi 1:18-21). The commencement of Nephite destruction was at hand.

I also noted Mormon's internal book structure, a seven-book pattern, to which he apparently intended to append two separate writings: the small plates of Nephi and a translation of Ether's 24 plates. Mormon died at the hands of his enemies before he could see his intentions entirely fulfilled and his son, Moroni, eventually completed the Book of Mormon. Finally, the six principal prophecies were examined closely for chronological meaning and temporal issues. Those issues will be examined again in subsequent chapters of this source book, as the prophecies are matched with their recorded fulfillment.

⁵ See the earlier parts of this chapter dealing with the prophecies about the lifespan of the Messiah, the three days of darkness and the fourth generation commencement of religious backsliding.