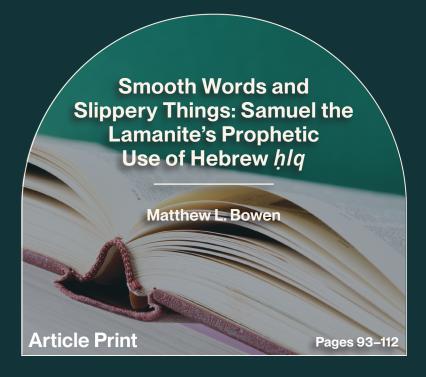


# Interpreter

A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship



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ISSN 2372-1227 (print) ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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### Smooth Words and Slippery Things: Samuel the Lamanite's Prophetic Use of Hebrew *hlq*

### Matthew L. Bowen

**Abstract:** Samuel the Lamanite expressly drew on the words of Isaiah (Isaiah 30:10) and possibly Jeremiah (Jeremiah 23:12) with a clever, powerful wordplay on forms of the Hebrew verbal root hlg: hălāgôt ("flattering words," literally "smooth things") and halaglaggot ("slippery [things]") in Helaman 13:28-36. This wordplay established a genetic relationship between yielding oneself to those who "speak flattering words unto [us]" (Helaman 13:28) and material riches and treasures becoming "slippery that [we] cannot hold them" (Helaman 13:31, 36). This use of smooth/slippery, closely tied to the discussion in the Hebrew Bible of giving heed to false prophets over true prophets. is thus an apt marker of Samuel's meaning, and perhaps also of his training. Samuel's pronouncement of this unique curse, linguistically correlated with rejecting prophetic words, described a loss of worldly wealth and vividly depicted the accompanying spiritual desolation of slippery ways and dark places. Mormon and Moroni offered their latter-day readers a way out of the cycle of "slippery" possessions and destruction that befell the Jaredites and the Nephites: Jesus Christ, who showed us how to lay up treasures in heaven. Mormon's preservation of Samuel's prophetic wordplay stands as a significant, additional confirmation of the ancient provenance of the text.

Unlike the antichrists, false prophets, and other deceivers who came from outside the Nephite community to destroy faith (see Helaman 13:37–38), Samuel the Lamanite spoke from the walls of Zarahemla as a witness of Jesus Christ, the God of Israel from whom

the Nephites were apostatizing and whom they were actively betraying. Politically a stranger, he stood at the edge of the city against the armed assaults of the enraged Nephites within. Yet, he was no stranger to their history, their scripture, and their supposedly identity-defining relationship with the Lord. He, himself, embodied it. From the walls of Zarahemla, Samuel delivered a sermon that is a masterclass in the use of prophetic rhetoric,¹ including the use of a Hebraistic wordplay that giving heed to "flattering words"/"smooth things" (ḥǎlāqôt) would bring the spiritual loss and ruin evoked by the image of ḥǎlaqlaqqôt ("slippery [things]," Helaman 13:28–36).

In this study I argue that Samuel the Lamanite quoted Isaiah 30:10, and possibly also alluded to Jeremiah 23:9–12 and the Psalms, in a marvelous wordplay on forms of the root ħIq (hereafter noted with √): ħăIāqôt ("flattering words," literally "smooth things") and ħăIaqlaqqôt ("slippery [things]," sometimes also spelled ħăIāqôt). This wordplay is strongly associated with the context of responding to the prophetic word. It establishes a genetic relationship between the love of and hearkening to those who "speak flattering words unto [us]" (Helaman 13:28) and the strikingly unique curse of riches and treasures (material possessions) becoming "slippery that [we] cannot hold them" (Helaman 13:31, 36; see also Helaman 13:33; Mormon 1:18–19; 2:10; Ether 14:1).

### A Methodological Note

For the purposes of my thesis, I assume that the language or dialect in which Samuel the Lamanite delivered his speech in Zarahemla was a Nephite variant of Hebrew. As preserved in Mormon's record, Samuel demonstrates a deft command of the various biblical Hebrew prophetic conventions. Samuel hints at his consciousness of his Semitic/Hebrew personal name (šěmû'ēl = "His name is El/God," šěmô/û + 'ēl) in Helaman 14:2, 12–13 ("believe on his name"). He also displays his thorough awareness of the doctrine of Christ as taught by Nephi, and thus perhaps also Nephite prophecy and scripture. I also assume that that the Hebraisms (like Semitisms and Semitic interference in the text of the Greek New Testament) remain detectable, whatever language or script Mormon used to compile his abridged record.

### The Polysemy of Hebrew √hlq

As a verb, Hebrew <u>hālaq</u> (I) in its base stem<sup>7</sup> denotes "to be smooth, slippery." In its causative stem, this verb denotes "to make smooth" or "to use a smooth tongue, to flatter."

As an adjective,  $h\bar{a}l\bar{a}q$  has the basic meaning of "smooth" or "smooth and insinuating." As a substantive noun,  $h\bar{a}l\bar{a}q$  denotes "smoothness, falsehood," including "smooth words" or "smoothness, flattery" (as in Daniel 11:32 and Isaiah 30:10). However,  $h\bar{a}l\bar{a}q$  as an adjective can also denote "slippery." The reduplicated substantivized form as plural feminine abstract noun denotes "smoothness, slipperiness, flattery, fine promises" or "slippery places." All of these senses of  $\sqrt{h}lq$  suggest important implications for the meaning of Samuel's speech in Helaman 13:28–35.

### "Because He Speaketh Flattering Words unto You": The Nephites' Desire for "Smooth Things"

From atop the walls in Zarahemla, Samuel the Lamanite pointedly critiqued the Nephites' diminishing ability to distinguish between the true prophets the Lord had sent among them and the crass manipulators who made their living off them. The Nephites essentially "buil[t] the tombs of the prophets" (Matthew 23:29) who were dead and "stoned" the living ones:

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. Behold ye are worse than they; for as the Lord liveth, if a prophet come among you and declareth unto you the word of the Lord, which testifieth of your sins and iniquities. ve 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. (Helaman 13:25–27)

The Nephites gave clear preference to public figures who came proclaiming messages that validated and encouraged their immoral and apostate behavior vis-à-vis messengers, like Nephi and Lehi (the sons of Helaman) and like Samuel himself, who came proclaiming messages of repentance and reform. The Nephites not only preferred crass manipulators and false prophets, they confirmed their preference by financially supporting them:

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; and because he *speaketh flattering words unto you*, and he saith that all is well, then ye will not find fault with him. (Helaman 13:28)

As noted above, the Hebrew root most often translated "flatter," "flattering," or "flattery" is √hlq. The language and context of Helaman 13:28 thus strongly suggests that Samuel quoted from, paraphrased, or otherwise alluded to the words of the prophet Isaiah, who characterized the inhabitants of Jerusalem during his time as "a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord" and who "say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things [hălāgôt] prophesy deceits" (Isaiah 30:10). The strength of Isaiah's critique and choice of words were so evocative that the Qumran community designated their opponents, particularly the institutional Zadokite priesthood at Jerusalem who evidently became the Sadducees, as "the Seekers of Smooth Things" (dwršy hhlgwt), a direct coinage from Isaiah 30:10.16 With his call to repentance and testimony of a coming Messiah (see 1 Nephi 1:19-20), Lehi almost certainly enraged the institutional religious authorities of his time, "the brethren of the church" (1 Nephi 4:26), of whom Laban seems to have been a member, or "the elders of the Jews" (1 Nephi 4:22, 27).17 Jacob, led on by the Spirit and perhaps also by his father's and Jeremiah's experiences with the institutional religious elite, prophesied that the Messiah would be put to death because of "priestcrafts" at Jerusalem: "But because of priestcrafts and iniquities, they at Jerusalem will stiffen their necks against him, that he be crucified" (2 Nephi 10:5).

The Nephites of Samuel's time — like the Jerusalemites of Isaiah's time, Lehi's time, and later—wanted prophets who would tell them what they wanted to hear, rather than what they needed to hear. They wanted "smooth things" or "flattering words" (ḥǎlāqôt) rather than

what Nephi's brothers described as "hard things" (1 Nephi 16:1–3) or uncomfortable words that require attention and motivate action, like sharp gravel in a running shoe. Brant Gardner links the false prophets speaking "flattering words" in Helaman 13:28 with "Nehor [who] is the very model of the flattering priest who receives wealth and status from the people." Gardner further notes that "the order of the Nehors had flourished briefly in the days of Alma<sub>2</sub> but was rejected. Now, less than a hundred years later, Nehorism is being embraced."

An examination of some of the Hebrew Bible passages that use the terms "flatter" and "flattery" helps us see more clearly that Samuel was quoting from or paraphrasing Isaiah 30:10. It also illustrates how "smooth things" are indeed "flattering words." In Psalm 5, a psalm attributed to David, the psalmist lists speaking flattery as one of the distinguishing characteristics of the covenant infidelity and wickedness of his enemies: "For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; **they flatter** [yaḥālīqûn; literally, **make smooth**] with their tongue" (Psalm 5:9 [MT 10]). In Psalm 36:2 [MT 3], the psalmist states that the wicked "flattereth himself [heḥēlīq] in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful." Other relevant examples come from the Proverbs:

For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life: to keep thee from the evil woman, **from the flattery** [*mēḥelqat*; literally, **from the smoothness**] of the tongue of a strange woman [NRSVUE: from **the smooth tongue** of the adulteress]. (Proverbs 6:23–24)

Compare this to Job 17:5, "He that speaketh **flattery** [lěḥēleq] to his friends [or, he that tells on his friends for the sake of **flattery**], even the eyes of his children shall fail." From these examples it should be abundantly clear how "flattering words" are the equivalent of the "smooth things" mentioned in Isaiah 30:10. It also prepares us to understand Samuel's rhetorical shift from "flattering words" or "smooth things" (ḥālāqôt) to material riches and treasures as "slippery" things.

## "He Curseth Your Riches That They Become Slippery": The Love of Flattering Words Leads to Slippery Riches and Treasures

Samuel's prophecy welds a causative link between the Nephites' love of "flattering words" (or "smooth things") in Helaman 13:28 and their

riches and treasures "becoming slippery" in Helaman 13:31–36. As Kevin Barney demonstrated more than two decades ago, the concept of "slippery treasures" belonged to the ancient Near East of Lehi's time. <sup>20</sup> Citing the *Instruction of Amenemope*, a text familiar to ancient Israelites and Judahites and with clear parallels to Proverbs (e.g., Proverbs 23:4–5), Barney concludes:

It seems more than coincidental—yet not surprising—that the concept of slippery, disappearing treasures is found both in an Egyptian text known to the ancient Israelites and in the Book of Mormon, a record with cultural, linguistic, and literary roots in the ancient Near East.<sup>21</sup>

In Samuel's evident use of forms of Hebrew  $\sqrt{h}lq$ , we have a firm linguistic basis for his transition from "flattering words" or "smooth things" (harmanile harmanile harman

And behold, the time cometh that he curseth your riches, that they become slippery, that ye cannot hold them; and in the days of your poverty ve cannot retain them. And in the days of your poverty ve 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 ve 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. 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. (Helaman 13:31-34)

We also begin to grasp the full spiritual curse implicit in Samuel's prophecy when we recognize that the Hebrew adjective for "slippery" derives from the same Hebrew word for "smooth," "flattery," or "flattering." In Psalm 35 (attributed to David), the Psalmist prays concerning his enemies, "Let their way be dark **and slippery** [waḥālaqlaqqōt; literally, darkness **and slippery things**]: and let the angel of the Lord persecute [pursue] them" (Psalm 35:6). The term translated "and

slippery" is Hebrew wahălaglaggōt, "slippery things."22 The timbre of Psalm 73:18 is like Psalm 35:6. In the temple, the psalmist learns the fate of the wicked: "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places [bahălāgôt]: thou castedst them down into destruction" (Psalm 73:18). This term also literally means "slippery things." To lose treasures can be dismaying, but to lose one's way is devastating—to the potential loss of physical life or even eternal life. Samuel's wordplay points beyond the curse on the wealth of the wicked to the real tragedy of their choices. Would they trade Jesus Christ and his doctrine as the "sure foundation"<sup>24</sup> for the slippery place?

Jeremiah also used a reduplicated form of *ḥālāq* almost identical to wahălaglaggōt in Psalm 35:6. The context for Jeremiah's prophecy, as in Isaiah 30:10, is giving heed to false or corrupt prophets and priests in Judah: "Mine heart within me is broken because of the prophets" (Jeremiah 23:9); "both prophet and priest are profane; yea, in my house have I found their wickedness" (Jeremiah 23:11). Jeremiah then declares:

Wherefore their way shall be unto them as slippery ways [kahălaglaggôt, literally slippery things] in the darkness: they shall be driven on, and fall therein: for I will bring evil upon them, even the year of their visitation, saith the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:12)

The KJV translators' addition of "way" as an italicized word underscores the fact that kahălaglaggôt means "as slippery things." Its form is very similar to wahălaglaggōt in Psalm 35:6.

Thus, in juxtaposing halagôt ("flattering words," "smooth things") with hălaglaggōt or hălāgôt ("slippery [things]"), Samuel establishes a cause-and-effect relationship between the former and the latter. Samuel's point is that the Nephites' desire for false prophets who would "speak flattering words unto [them]" (hălāqôt, Helaman 13:28) and validate their wicked behavior would result in the Nephite riches becoming "slippery things" (hălaqlaqqôt). Indeed, Samuel's cursing the wealth and riches of the Nephites to become "slippery" things appears to be specifically aimed at those who did not want to hear his words ("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" [Helaman 13:39]). Thus, the force of Samuel's curse is like Isaiah 1:19–20 with its wordplay on 'ākal ("eat"): "If ye be willing and obedient [ûšĕma'tem, and hear], ye shall eat [tō'kēlû] the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, **ye shall be devoured** [te'ukkelû] with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it." Jesus uses a similar ancient Israelite and Judahite prophecy-rooted concept when emphasizing the importance of self-denial and "following" him:

For whosoever will **save** his life shall **lose** it: but whosoever will **lose** his life for my sake, the same shall **save** it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and **lose himself**, or be cast away? For **whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed**, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels. (Luke 9:24–26)

Those who refuse to "hear" and simultaneously grasp onto their wealth and life shall find those very things slipping from them.

### "All Things Are Become Slippery, and We Cannot Hold Them": Gadianton Redivivus

Samuel prophesies that the very words they refuse to hear from him—"he curseth your riches, that they become slippery, that ye cannot hold them" (Helaman 13:31)—will eventually be found on the Nephites' own lips:

- A Yea, we have hid up our treasures and **they have slipped away** from us.
  - B because of the curse of the land.
    - C O that we had repented in the day that the word of the Lord came unto us:
  - B' for behold the land is cursed,
- A' and all things are become slippery, and we cannot hold them.

This short chiastic structure (Helaman 13:35–36) doubly emphasizes the "slipperiness" or illusiveness of the Nephites' treasures and other material wealth (A/A′). Indeed, the very nature of the wickedness that they practice ultimately corrupts their peace, removes the protection of their laws, and dilutes the prosperity they would otherwise enjoy in the chosen land. As Samuel the Lamanite states in Helaman 13:38, "Ye have sought for happiness in doing iniquity, which thing is contrary to the nature of that righteousness which is in our great and Eternal Head."

The chiastic structure of Helaman 13:35–36 also underscores the "curse" on the land that would make these riches "slippery" (B/B′). In

the focal center of the chiasmus stands the true "word of the Lord," spoken by Samuel, the sons of Helaman (Nephi and Lehi), and others, vis-à-vis the "flattering words" mentioned earlier that were relished by the Nephites.

Gardner notes that Samuel is, in a literal sense, "describing rampant theft." In other words, Samuel is describing a time in which Gadianton lawlessness, which had been temporarily subdued during Samuel's time, would again run amok. The Gadianton robbers would again become a major problem just years after Samuel's prophecy. Samuel's prophecy would be fulfilled a final time during Mormon's lifetime when Gadiantonism would constitute a major factor in the Nephites' final destruction. This squares nicely with what Mormon had stated at the end of Helaman 2:

And behold, in the end of this book ye shall see that this Gadianton did prove the overthrow, yea, almost the entire destruction of the people of Nephi. Behold I do not mean the end of the book of Helaman, but I mean the end of the book of Nephi, from which I have taken all the account which I have written. (Helaman 2:13–14)

### "And They Became Slippery": The Fulfillment of Samuel's Prophecy in Mormon 1:18–19 and 2:10

Mormon reports the fulfillment of Samuel the Lamanite's prophecy during his own time. He records the fulfillment in language that nearly matches Samuel's prophecy, which, as Gardner notes, "prophesies about a period when the Gadiantons, or secret combinations, are at their most destructive stage." Mormon lived to see the Gadianton robbers reach that stage:

And these Gadianton robbers, who were among the Lamanites, did infest the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof began to hide up their treasures in the earth; and they became slippery [cf. hălaqlaqqôt] because the Lord had cursed the land, that they could not hold them, nor retain them again. And it came to pass that there were sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics; and the power of the evil one was wrought upon all the face of the land, even unto the fulfilling of all the words of Abinadi, and also Samuel the Lamanite. (Mormon 1:18–19)

More than simply citing Samuel by name, Mormon unmistakably also recalls the language of Samuel's prophecy. The use of "slippery" in reference to plural objects — probably <u>hālaqlaqqôt</u> — as well as the phrase "they could not hold them, nor retain them" makes the identification easy.

Mormon subsequently reports, again using language from Samuel's prophecy and mentioning Samuel himself, that the people even "began to repent" as prophesied:

And it came to pass that the Nephites **began to repent** of their iniquity, and began to cry even as had been prophesied by Samuel the prophet; **for behold no man could keep that which was his own**, for the thieves, and the robbers, and the murderers, and the magic art, and the witchcraft which was in the land. (Mormon 2:10)

The center of the chiasmus in Helaman 13:35–36 emphasized the repentant Nephite recognition that the word of the Lord had been spoken to them: "O that we had repented in the day that the word of the Lord came unto us." When the prophecy was first given, the prophets through whom the word of the Lord "came unto" them were Samuel and the sons of Helaman (Nephi and Lehi), among others. During Mormon's time, the prophet through whom the word of the Lord came was Mormon himself (Mormon 3:2–3), to the degree that he was allowed to preach unto them (cf. Mormon 1:16–17). Mormon must have keenly felt the poignancy of that prophecy and he duly records its exact fulfillment.

When the Nephites during this later time "began to repent" (Mormon 2:10), Mormon began to feel a renewed hope:

And it came to pass that when I, Mormon, saw their lamentation and their mourning and their sorrow before the Lord, my heart did begin to rejoice within me, knowing the mercies and the long-suffering of the Lord, therefore supposing that he would be merciful unto them that **they would again** [cf. wayyôsîpû] **become a righteous people**. (Mormon 2:12)

Just as Mormon prayed that "his brethren," the Lamanites, "may once again [cf. wayyôsîpû ('ôd)] come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ; that they may once again [cf. wayyôsîpû ('ôd)] be a delightsome people" (Words of Mormon 1:8–9) — meaning they would regain their identity as the seed of "Joseph" (and as

Israel) — he hoped his people would become a righteous remnant of Joseph.

Painfully for Mormon, their repentance was abortive. They had no desire to complete the circuit of repentance and follow the word of God: "But behold this my joy was vain, for their sorrowing was not unto repentance, because of the goodness of God; but it was rather the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin" (Mormon 2:13; paraphrasing Samuel's words in Helaman 13:38). Even then, the Lord gave them one more chance to hear his prophet:

And it came to pass that the Lord did say unto me: Cry unto this people — Repent ye, and come unto me, and be ye baptized, **and build up again my church**, and ye shall be spared. And I did cry unto this people, but it was in vain; and they did not realize that it was the Lord that had spared them, and granted unto them a chance for repentance. And behold they did harden their hearts against the Lord their God. (Mormon 3:2–3)

The Lord gave the Nephites the remedy to their desperate situation: reject the "smooth things" and hear the Lord's "hard things" (cf. 1 Nephi 16:1–3; 2 Nephi 9:40) — that is, his rough words — so that their possessions would not remain slippery, and the situation of their entire society would not remain precarious. Sadly, the Nephites at this stage wanted nothing to do with the doctrine of Christ or his Church.

## "If a Man Should Lay His Tool": Moroni's Use of Samuel's Prophecy in Telling Jaredite History

In writing the conclusion of the history of the Jaredites, Moroni turned back to Samuel's prophecy and his father's reported fulfillment of that prophecy. Moroni had set the stage with "And there were robbers, and in fine, all manner of wickedness upon all the face of the land" (Ether 13:26). Following the mutual *crushing* of the armies of Coriantumr and Shared on the plains of Heshlon ("the place of crushing"),<sup>27</sup> there was no governing power with enough controlling force to "constrain"<sup>28</sup> or restrain these pre-Gadianton Jaredite robbers.

Gardner notes Moroni's keen interest in the curse on the land: "Moroni patterns the history of the Jaredites to emphasize the covenant of the land." Moroni records:

And now there began to be a great curse upon all the land because of the iniquity of the people, in which, if a man should lay his tool or his sword upon his shelf, or upon the place whither he would keep it, behold, upon the morrow, he could not find it, so great was the curse upon the land. (Ether 14:1)

Gardner draws a distinct parallel between Ether 14:1–2 and Mormon 1:18,<sup>30</sup> noting that "it is no coincidence that the slippery possessions and presence of robbers occur in both Mormon's and Moroni's narrative."<sup>31</sup> Moroni, however, also seems to have gone back directly to Samuel's prophecy in composing the language for what now constitutes Ether 14:1 (see table 1).

Table 1. Moroni cites Samuel's "curse of the land."

Helaman 13:34-35	Ether 14:1
Behold, we lay a tool here and on	And now there began to be a great curse
the morrow it is gone; and behold,	upon all the land because of the iniquity
our swords are taken from us in the	of the people, in which, if a man should lay
day we have sought them for battle.	his tool or his sword upon his shelf, or
Yea, we have hid up our treasures	upon the place whither he would keep it,
and they have slipped away from us,	behold, upon the morrow, he could not
because of the curse of the land.	find it, so great was the curse upon the
	land.

For Moroni, as for Mormon and their predecessors all the way to Nephi, history and prophecy was cyclical. What Samuel prophesied happened to the Nephites, but it had happened long before to the Jaredites. Moroni prophesied that it would all happen again to the latter-day inhabitants of the land, who like the Jaredites, were Gentiles. In a Hebraistic wordplay on "Jaredites" in terms of the causative form of  $\sqrt{yrd}$  ("come down," "descend"; "bring down")<sup>32</sup> imitative of his father's method (compare Helaman 6:25, 38), Moroni warned, "And this cometh unto you, O ye Gentiles, that ye may know the decrees of God—that ye may repent, and not continue in your iniquities until the fulness come, that ye may not **bring down** the fulness of the wrath of God upon you as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done" (Ether 2:11). "All things ha[d] become slippery" for the Jaredites and the Nephites (cf. Helaman 13:36), which stands as a terrifying possibility for those who occupy their former and adjacent lands.

Nevertheless, Moroni also provided a way of breaking this cycle: "Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess

it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ, who hath been manifested by the things which we have written" (Ether 2:12). The answer for every human being, then and now, is Jesus Christ.

### Samuel's *hlq*-Wordplay and the Rod of Iron: The Context of Nephite Cultural Narrative

Daniel L. Belnap has conclusively shown that Lehi's dream of the tree of life (1 Nephi 8) and Nephi's vision of "the things which [his] father saw" (1 Nephi 11–14) became a dominant cultural narrative among the Nephites.33 Evidently on the basis of the polysemy of Egyptian mdw as both "rod" and "word" (and perhaps too on homonymy of the cognate md.t/mt.t, "word," with Hebrew matteh, "rod"), Nephi identified the "rod of iron" as "the word of God" (1 Nephi 11:25: 15:23-25).34 Lehi and Nephi both emphasize that the divine "word" as a "rod" was something that one could "ca[tch] hold of" (1 Nephi 8:24, 30) "cling to" (1 Nephi 8:24); and "[continually] hold fast [un]to" (1 Nephi 8:30; 15:24). Nephi further explained that Moses's rod-word that divided the sea and struck the rock in the wilderness and brought forth water ("and ye know that by his word the waters of the Red Sea were divided hither and thither"; "and ye also know that Moses, by his word according to the power of God which was in him, smote the rock, and there came forth water" [1 Nephi 17:26, 29]),35

Belnap points out that Alma the Younger invokes Lehi's dream as cultural narrative when he describes having "remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world" and that "as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God" (Alma 36:17–18). Here the concept of the divine word is clearly Christological as it is in John 1:1; 1 John 1:1; Revelation 19:13; and Moses 1:32; 2:5, which helps us to see the Christological dimension in 1 Nephi 8 and 11 and elsewhere. As part of his abridged book of Helaman, Mormon also appeals to Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision as cultural narrative:

Yea, we see that whosoever will [may] **lay hold upon the word of God**, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course

across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked — And land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and with Jacob, and with all our holy fathers, to go no more out. (Helaman 3:29–30)

Thus, firmly entrenched in Nephite cultural memory and reemphasized in the book of Helaman is the concept that the "word of God," like a rod, is tangible — something that one can "lay hold upon." The contrast between the "word of God," which one can "lay hold upon," "catch hold of," and "hold fast to," and "flattering words"/"smooth things" or "slippery things" which lead to "all things . . . becom[ing] slippery, and we cannot hold them" (Helaman 13:36; see also Mormon 1:18) could hardly be more striking. Moreover, the function of the "rod of iron" or "word of God" in Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision and the function of the "word of God" in Helaman 3:29 was to provide surety in an ascent through mists of darkness in the types of "slippery" places mentioned in Psalm 35:6; 73:18; and Jeremiah 32:12.

In the context of Lehi's dream and Nephi's vision of the tree of life and the rod of iron, it is also worth considering the relationship between the "plain and precious things" that were "taken away" (1 Nephi 13:28-29, 40) through the agency of "the great and abominable church" (the "great and spacious building")37 and the "smooth things" or "flattering" things" of which Isaiah and Samuel spoke.<sup>38</sup> We can almost certainly equate the "rod of iron" or "word of God" that leads to the "the tree which is precious above all" (1 Nephi 11:9) with those "plain and precious things" that Nephi mentions later in the account of his vison. The individuals in Lehi's dream who ceased to grasp or "hold fast" to the rod of iron, or who left the tree and ceased partaking of its fruit, lost the "plain and precious things" of the gospel of Jesus Christ and became susceptible to the "mocking" and "scorn" coming from the denizens of the great and spacious building (1 Nephi 8:27, 33), who were seekers and speakers of "smooth" and "flattering things" rather than the words or things of God. Thus, these individuals who heeded them ceased to have surety in "slippery" places, but "wandered off and were lost," "fell away into forbidden paths and were lost," or "were lost... wandering in strange roads" (1 Nephi 8:23, 28, 32). This happened in large measure to the first century CE church established in Jerusalem and throughout the Greco-Roman world. When it happened to the Nephites as a society, everything became "slippery" and unsure until they too "were lost" and perished (compare 1 Nephi 12:14–19 and Helaman 13:31, 36; Mormon 1:18).

Undoubtedly, Samuel's prophecy of slippery riches could have been - and seemingly was - understood merely as a curse on wealth. The Nephites' laments revolve closely around the loss of wealth and riches. Samuel prophesied that the Nephites would recognize that "we are surrounded by demons, yea, we are encircled about by the angels of him who hath sought to destroy our souls" (Helaman 13:37). The fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy is captured in Mormon's own recognition: "There were sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics: and the power of the evil one was wrought upon all the face of the land, even unto the fulfilling of all the words of Abinadi, and also Samuel the Lamanite." The broader context of ancient Israelite history and prophecy, as well as Mormon's own narrative, underscore the spiritual truth: we lose what Jesus described as "the true riches" (vis-à-vis mammon, Luke 16:11) when we do not "hearken to the word of God" through his prophets and "hold fast to it" (1 Nephi 15:24). The words they deliver are "the plain and precious things" and the rod (or divine word) along the sure path that leads us to "the tree of life, whose fruit is most precious and most desirable above all other fruits" (1 Nephi 15:36) and "sweet above all that is sweet" (Alma 32:42; cf. 1 Nephi 8:11): the personal knowledge of God's love and Jesus's Christ's atoning grace. To lose hold of these "plain and precious things" through neglect or rejection means the further fulfillment of Samuel's words: "And in the days of your poverty ve shall cry unto the Lord; and in vain shall ve cry, for your desolation is already come upon you, and your destruction is made sure" (Helaman 13:32; cf. Amos 8:11-12).

### **Conclusion and Praxis**

Samuel the Lamanite knew the scriptures and he knew the doctrine of Christ. He was not only well-versed in ancient Israelite prophetic conventions—what Nephi described as "the manner of the prophesying among the Jews"—but also Hebrew (or the Nephite form of it). He expressly drew on the prophetic words of Isaiah and possibly also Jeremiah and the Psalms in constructing and deploying a marvelous wordplay on forms of \( \frac{h}{l} \) \( \frac{h}{a} \) \( \frac{a}{a} \) \( \frac{c}{a} \) \( \fra

and treasures (material possessions) as they become "slippery that [we] cannot hold them" (Helaman 13:31, 36; see also Helaman 13:33; Mormon 1:18–19; 2:10; Ether 14:1).

Samuel seems to have been well-aware of the frequent Nephite rejection of Nephi<sub>2</sub>, the son of Helaman who declared and warned, "But behold, ye have rejected the truth, and rebelled against your holy God; and even at this time, instead of laying up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where nothing doth corrupt, and where nothing can come which is unclean, ye are heaping up for yourselves wrath against the day of judgment" (Helaman 8:5). Nephi<sub>2</sub> was one of the prophets who had been rejected in favor of conmen speaking "flattering words." The deep irony was that in rejecting the prophets to secure the treasures of the world, those very treasures were thus destined to become "slippery."

Jesus, of whom Samuel prophesied, was not speaking "flattering words" or "smooth things" when he told his disciples:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. (Matthew 6:19–20; 3 Nephi 13:19–20)

Perhaps no group of people had a greater need to internalize these words than the Nephites with their "slippery treasures."

Jesus spoke neither "flattering words" or "smooth things" when he told the rich young man (sometimes called Dives [Latin "riches"]), "If thou wilt be perfect [Greek teleios], go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Matthew 19:21; cf. Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). He was telling him—and all of us—how we can hold on to or "retain" what really matters. Helaman, the son of Helaman and father of Nephi and Lehi, desired his sons to "lay up for yourselves a treasure in heaven, yea, which is eternal, and which fadeth not away; yea, that ye may have that precious gift of eternal life, which we have reason to suppose hath been given to our fathers" (Helaman 5:8). Through his atonement Jesus Christ wants to secure (or make "sure")<sup>39</sup> for us what is described in modern revelation as "the riches of eternity" (Doctrine and Covenants 38:39; 67:2; 68:31; 78:18). For those who heed his word, who hold fast to the iron rod, the way and the treasures of eternity are sure. Those

"true riches" (cf. Luke 16:11) are found in exaltation, in our transformative relationship with our Heavenly Parents and our Savior, our eternal relationships with our families, and a Christlike character. Ultimately, what else matters?



[Author's note: I express my deep thanks to Suzy Bowen, Rebecca Reynolds Lambert, Godfrey Ellis, Allen Wyatt, Tanya Spackman, Victor Worth, and Alan Sikes for making the publication of this article possible.]

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### **Notes**

1. Donald W. Parry has convincingly shown that Samuel the Lamanite was well-versed in Hebrew prophetic conventions, or what Nephi called "the manner of prophesying among the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:1). See Donald W. Parry, "'Thus Saith the Lord': Prophetic Language in Samuel's Speech," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 181–83, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=jbms. I have previously suggested that Samuel skillfully used Hebraistic wordplay on his own name in his speech. See Matthew L. Bowen, "'If Ye Believe on His Name': Wordplay on the Name Samuel in Helaman 14:2, 12–13 and 3 Nephi 23:9 and the Doctrine of Christ in Samuel's Speech," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021): 49–76, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/if-ye-believe-on-his-name-wordplay-on-the-name-samuel-in-helaman-142-12-13-and-3-nephi-239-and-the-doctrine-of-christ-in-samuels-speech/.

- 2. Parry, "Thus Saith the Lord," 181-83.
- 3. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2001), 1554–55. Hereafter cited as *HALOT*. Other proposed meanings for Samuel—e.g., "one who hears God," as Samuel does in 1 Samuel 3:9–11, or "heard of God," are based on the aural similarity of *šěmû'ēl* to the Hebrew verb *šāma*, "to hear." Bowen, "If Ye Believe on His Name, "51–56, 63.
- 4. Bowen, "If Ye Believe on His Name," 49-76.
- Noel B. Reynolds, "Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 128. See also Bowen, "If Ye Believe on His Name," 57–67.
- 6. Semitisms and Semitic interference—Hebraisms and Aramaisms—abound throughout the New Testament text, just as Hebraisms and some Egyptianisms abound in the Book of Mormon text. By "Semitisms" I mean features of a text that are best explained as reflecting Semitic thought or language in a text or in the underlying text from which the said text was translated (*Vorlage*). For example, the Gospel of Matthew, a work almost-universally recognized as having been written to a Jewish audience, explains the meaning of the name Jesus (yĕhôśûaʿ or yēśûaʿ, "Jehovah saves" or "Jehovah is salvation") thusly: "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name **Jesus** [Greek: *Iēsoun*; Hebrew yĕhôśûaʿ yēśûaʿ]: for **he shall save** [Greek sōsei; Hebrew yôśîaʿ) his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). This Semitism can be detected both at the secondary Greek level and even at the tertiary translation level.
- 7. In linguistics, the word "root" describes the most basic level or form of a word or a cluster of derived words. In Hebrew, as in all Semitic languages, roots are overwhelmingly three-consonant (or triliteral) roots, from which verbal stems and their associated nouns and adjectives are built. Stems can have active, passive, durative, and causative meaning (and more). An example in English is the verb "learn." The basic meaning of "learn" is to acquire knowledge about something. As a passive verb, "to be learned" has come to denote being highly educated. This may be related to an archaic form of "learn" which has the causative sense of "teach" (i.e., to cause to learn.) As a substantive, "learning" has the sense of acquired knowledge. The noun "lore" is built from the underlying root (cf. Old English leornian).
- 8. *HALOT*, 322. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 325. Hereafter cited as *BDB*.
- 9. HALOT, 322.
- 10. HALOT, 323.
- 11. BDB. 325.
- 12. HALOT, 323.
- 13. HALOT, 323.
- 14. BDB, 325. In its reduplicated stem, a basic stem-form like the adjective hālāq or

its plural (feminine) form *ḥălāqôt* becomes *ḥălaqlaqqôt*, which intensifies the meaning of "smooth" and "slippery."

- 15. HALOT, 324.
- 16. See Reinhard G. Kratz, "Riddles and Revelation: The Re-use of Isaianic Prophecies Within and Outside the Book of Isaiah," in *Texts as Revelation*, ed. Hanna Tervanotko and Jonathan Stökl (London: Bloombury/T&T Clark, 2023), 19–20. On the use of the "Seekers of Smooth Things" and other pejoratives derived from the Isaianic writings, see Matthew A. Collins, "Text, Intertext, and Conceptual Identity: The Case of Ephraim and the Seekers of Smooth Things," in *Is There a Text in This Cave? Studies in the Textuality of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of George J. Brooke*, ed. Ariel Feldman, Maria Cioata, and Charlotte Hempel (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2017), 209–25.
- 17. Ontheidentity of "the Elders of the Jews," see Scripture Central Staff, "Who Were 'the Elders of the Jews' Mentioned by Zoram?" KnoWhy 464, 21 August 2019, scripture central.org/knowhy/who-were-the-elders-of-the-jews-mentioned -by-zoram.
- Brant Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume Five: Helaman–3 Nephi (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2007), 184.
- 19. Gardner, Second Witness, 5:184.
- 20. Kevin L. Barney, "'Slippery Treasures' in the Book of Mormon: A Concept from the Ancient World," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* 20, no. 6 (June 2000); 2.
- 21. Barney, "Slippery Treasures," 2.
- 22. Hebrew waḥālaqlaqqōtis afeminine plural adjectival form of ḥālāqfrom are duplicated stem (a stem in which part of the word's form is repeated) that has been substantivized—that is, made into an abstract noun.
- 23. Here a substantivized feminine plural adjectival form of *ḥālāq* is again used, but in this instance the stem is not reduplicated.
- 24. On Jesus Christ, the doctrine of Christ, the revealed testimony that Jesus as the Christ, and revelation (more generally), as the "rock" and a "sure foundation," see Matthew L. Bowen, "Founded Upon a Rock: Doctrinal and Temple Implications of Peter's Surnaming," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 9 (2014): 1–28, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/founded-upon-a-rock-doctrinal-and -temple-implications-of-peters-surnaming/.
- 25. Gardner, Second Witness, 5:188.
- 26. Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume Six: Fourth Nephi–Moroni (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2007), 55.
- 27. Matthew L. Bowen and Pedro Olavarria, "Place of Crushing: The Literary Function of Heshlon in Ether 13:25–31," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 227–39, journal.interpreterfoundation.org /place-of-crushing-the-literary-function-of-heshlon-in-ether-1325-31/.

- 28. See Royal Skousen, The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 788; see also Royal Skousen, Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Six: 3 Nephi 19–Moroni 10, Addenda (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 2009), 3822, 3858; Royal Skousen, Analysis of the Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part One: Title Page, Witness Statements, 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 490–91.
- 29. Gardner, Second Witness, 6:313.
- 30. Gardner, Second Witness, 6:313
- 31. Gardner, Second Witness, 6:313.
- 32. Matthew L. Bowen, "Coming Down and Bringing Down: Pejorative Onomastic Allusions to the Jaredites in Helaman 6:25, 38; Ether 2:11," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 397–410, journal .interpreterfoundation.org/coming-down-and-bringing-down-pejorative -onomastic-allusions-to-the-jaredites-in-helaman-625-638-and-ether-211/.
- 33. Daniel L. Belnap, "Even as Our Father Lehi Saw: Lehi's Dream as Nephite Cultural Narrative," in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision* (2011 Sperry Symposium), ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 214–39; Daniel L. Belnap, "There Arose a Mist of Darkness: The Narrative of Lehi's Dream in Christ's Theophany," in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 92–93.
- 34. Matthew L. Bowen, "'What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?," *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 25, no. 5 (2005): 2–3.
- 35. Bowen, "What Meaneth the Rod?" 2-3.
- 36. Belnap, "There Arose a Mist of Darkness," 92-102.
- 37. See Matthew L. Bowen, "'Unto the Taking Away of Their Stumbling Blocks': The Taking Away and Keeping Back of Plain and Precious Things and Their Restoration in 1 Nephi 13–14," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Faith and Scholarship* 53 (2022): 145–70, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/unto-the-taking-away-of-their-stumbling-blocks-the-taking-away-and-keeping-back-of-plain-and-precious-things-and-their-restoration-in-1-nephi-13-15/.
- 38. Ithank Rebecca Reynolds Lambert (personal communication) for inviting me to consider this relationship.
- 39. Compare the use of *ne'ĕmān(îm)* in Isaiah 55:3 ("sure mercies of David") and Isaiah 22:23–24 ("nail in a sure place").

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