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# Temporality and Fulfillment in 3 Nephi 1

*Kimberly M. Berkey*

THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT THE BOOK OF 3 Nephi takes fulfillment as one of its main themes.<sup>1</sup> When the resurrected Jesus appears midway through the book, himself the realization of centuries of Nephite prophetic anticipation, fulfillment is his constant refrain: “I have come to fulfil the law” (3 Nephi 15:5), “then will I fulfil the covenant” (3 Nephi 16:5), “this is fulfilling my commandments” (3 Nephi 18:10).<sup>2</sup> In fact, a full third of Book of Mormon occurrences of the word *fulfill* are found in 3 Nephi alone. But if fulfillment might be called a main theme for this book, it is a theme that is far from straightforward, and this is on display most clearly in the opening chapter. Third Nephi 1 complicates this theme by cautioning that fulfillment entails more than simply verifying predictions or accomplishing anticipated events and by demonstrating that how the Nephites understood fulfillment was conditioned by how they both conceptualized and related to time. Indeed, a close reading of 3 Nephi 1 shows that the Nephites’ obsession with the signs of Samuel the Lamanite obscures the temporal implications of fulfillment, implications which the signs themselves make blatantly obvious through their cosmic symbolism. Samuel’s message—and the message of the Book of Mormon itself—is that fulfillment of prophecy forms the beginning of a new era, rather than its end, and that such fulfillment is

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1. Grant Hardy has emphasized this point, though perhaps not in a distinctly theological vein. See *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 180–213.

2. See also 3 Nephi 9:16–17; 10:7; 12:17–19; 15:4, 6–8; 16:17; 18:27; 20:11, 22, 46; 21:4, 7; 28:7.

primarily intended less to validate any one particular prophet than to reorient our experience of time.

Toward that end, this paper aims to uncover the latent temporal thematic in 3 Nephi 1 and explain its implications for the larger project of the Book of Mormon as a whole. The first section will provide an exegetical introduction to the context and structure of the chapter in order to highlight the complexity of the theme of fulfillment, after which the second section will analyze the role of time in the narrative, discussing the ways in which the Nephites' problematic conceptions of time cause them to misunderstand the implications of Samuel's prophecy. The third section will argue that the signs delivered by Samuel the Lamanite offer a kind of corrective to this problematic temporality by reorienting the Nephites to the present and calling them to a particular task. The paper will then conclude by briefly discussing the implications of this corrective for understanding Jesus's prophecy in 3 Nephi 21, arguing that the Book of Mormon itself functions as a sign, which, like Samuel's, orients its readers to both a new experience of time and a novel task.

## Context and structure

Although 3 Nephi, like most books within the Book of Mormon, opens with a transition between record keepers (3 Nephi 1:2–3), this first chapter seems in most other respects an unlikely place to begin a new book.<sup>3</sup> Third Nephi 1 shares a high degree of continuity with the book of Helaman, opening *in medias res* and borrowing both its plot and its main characters from events set in motion in the preceding book. For instance, although Samuel the Lamanite had announced an imminent

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3. Brant Gardner posits that the transitions between books are largely dynastic ("related to the shift in the ruling lines") but also notes that the shift from Helaman to 3 Nephi fails to follow that pattern, arguing that this particular transition instead indicates Mormon's use of a new source. See Brant A. Gardner, "Mormon's Editorial Method and Meta-Message," *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 87–90. For a more detailed examination of the breaks between books and the larger trajectory they indicate, see Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012), 110–14.

sign in the book of Helaman, the narration of that sign's arrival is reserved for 3 Nephi 1, and although Samuel's announcement had drawn sharp critique from an unbelieving contingent of his audience, we do not learn what befalls those individuals until, again, the opening chapter of 3 Nephi. It would seem more natural, in many ways, had Mormon contained the entire exposition, climax, and denouement of this narrative within the book of Helaman, instead of suspending the storyline across such a major internal division. This pronounced relationship between 3 Nephi and Helaman continues in the following chapters, as well—3 Nephi 2–7 seems more like a continuation of the previous book than a genuinely new story. These chapters recount the murder of a chief judge (3 Nephi 7:1), something that elsewhere occurs only in the book of Helaman (Helaman 1:9; 6:15–19; 8:27–28), and government corruption through secret combinations, another prominent theme again almost entirely unique to Helaman. All in all, the tone and content of these opening chapters has more in common with the previous book than with what follows in the rest of 3 Nephi, and the reader is left wondering why Mormon chose here, of all places, as the dividing point between books. The precision to what might otherwise appear an arbitrary boundary, however, may provide a clue to Mormon's editorial motivations in dividing the books of Helaman and 3 Nephi as he does. We might note, for example, that dividing the books in this way places the *exposition* of Samuel's two messianic signs firmly on one side of the break, while the *fulfillment* of both those signs is placed firmly on the other. It seems that Mormon may have wanted to reserve two of the most dramatic fulfillment narratives in Nephite history for a book dedicated to that theme.

But 3 Nephi 1 calls for our attention in other ways, as well. There is something curiously deliberate about the way this chapter structures itself. Third Nephi 1 splits into two main pericopes, each centering on the fulfillment of a particular aspect of Nephite tradition. In order to clarify why this structural division is so striking, we need first to lay out the contents of these two stories. The first pericope (3 Nephi 1:4–20) takes place approximately five years after Samuel the Lamanite's famous

wall-top sermon and its included promise of a sign of Christ's birth (see Helaman 13–15). At the time the chapter opens, the anticipated miracle has apparently not taken place within the expected “five years” (3 Nephi 1:5; cf. Helaman 14:2), and the unbelievers gleefully begin to “rejoice over” (3 Nephi 1:6) the faithful. Their mockery is far from benign, however: so convinced are these unbelievers that the sign had passed its deadline that they designate a day for the mass slaughter of their believing brethren. Duly alarmed by this turn of events, Nephi, the current record keeper, prays for divine intervention. After a full day of “cr[ying] mightily unto the Lord” (3 Nephi 1:12), he receives good news: “The voice of the Lord came unto him, saying: Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given” (3 Nephi 1:12–13). True to the divine message, Samuel's predicted sign occurs that very night. With deliberate care, Mormon sums up the scene by concluding that “it had come to pass, yea, all things, every whit, according to the words of the prophets” (3 Nephi 1:20).<sup>4</sup> The second pericope (3 Nephi 1:23–26) presents the theological aftermath of the previous episode. A small group takes Samuel's fulfilled prophecy to imply a parallel fulfillment of the law, “endeavoring to prove . . . that it was no more expedient to observe the law of Moses” (3 Nephi 1:24). Mormon is quick to assure us that “in this thing they did err” and dismisses the scene in short order, informing us that “in this same year” they were “brought to a knowledge of their error” (3 Nephi 1:24–25).<sup>5</sup>

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4. The “deliberate care” I have in mind here refers to the fact that the division into two pericopes is not only thematic, but also marked textually by the phrase “every whit,” which appears toward the end of each scene. This point will be returned to below, albeit only briefly.

5. Although John Welch asserts that Nephi is the person correcting this interpretive error, he overlooks the text's own ambiguity. The verse in question is almost self-consciously passive, saying only that “the word came unto them.” It is possible that perhaps even Mormon did not know who was responsible for correcting this group. At any rate, if it had been Nephi, odds are that Mormon would have simply stated that fact. See John W. Welch, “Seeing 3 Nephi as the Holy of Holies in the Book of Mormon,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Salt Lake City: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and Deseret Book, 2012).

Crucially, both pericopes center on the topic of fulfillment, but fulfillments of a different sort: where the first deals with prophetic fulfillment (will Samuel's words be accomplished?), the second deals with legal fulfillment (has the law of Moses come to fruition?). While this structure serves to again highlight the general theme of fulfillment that preoccupies 3 Nephi, its intertextual allusions are even more striking. By juxtaposing the fulfillment of the law with the fulfillment of the prophets in this way, the text echoes a famous proverb from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17–18)

Thus, 3 Nephi 1 directly addresses the two objects of concern in Matthew 5:17–18 (“the law” and “the prophets”), similarly affirming the fulfillment of the law of Moses and the words of prophets in the face of what might be too easily misunderstood as their destruction. Additionally, further inspection reveals that the relationship between these two texts runs deeper still. When those who overzealously anticipate the law's fulfillment are finally disabused, they are informed that “one jot nor tittle should not pass away till [the law] should all be fulfilled” (3 Nephi 1:25).<sup>6</sup> The dependence of 3 Nephi 1 on Matthew 5:17–18 is thus not only thematic and structural, but explicitly textual.<sup>7</sup>

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6. I here use *nor* following Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2008), 5:3195, rather than the *or* of the modern LDS version of the Book of Mormon.

7. Although Brant Gardner sees in this echo an instance of Joseph Smith's familiarity with the language of the King James Version—see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:242—it is also entirely possible to see 3 Nephi 1's dependence on Matthew originating from Mormon himself. The Sermon on the Mount is also found, with some variation, in 3 Nephi 12. For those who wish to take the Book of Mormon's historical claims at face value, it is possible to allow that 3 Nephi 1 takes its structural cues from 3 Nephi 12 rather than from Joseph Smith. For a particularly

The incorporation of Matthew 5:17–18 into both the structure and the narrative of this text demonstrates the deliberate care with which 3 Nephi 1 treats the theme of fulfillment and the meticulous attention with which Mormon crafts the opening chapter of this book. The way 3 Nephi 1 adapts Matthew 5:17–18 obviously has much to teach us about Mormon’s editorial interests and what is at stake in 3 Nephi more generally, and so warrants at least a few further comments regarding this textual and structural allusion.

First, it is worth noting that Mormon seems to afford greater narrative weight to prophetic fulfillment over legal fulfillment, and this inclination marks the first important difference between Matthew 5:17–18 and Mormon’s adaptation in 3 Nephi 1: the order and significance of “law” and “prophets” is reversed. Where Matthew’s primary focus is on the law, mentioning law first and prophets second in verse 17, and then focusing on the question of the law alone for the remainder of verse 18, Mormon instead privileges the prophetic, leading out with the fulfillment of Samuel’s words and touching on the question of the law’s fulfillment only secondarily.<sup>8</sup> For Matthew, of course, the law and the prophets were textual designations, portions of the Hebrew Bible listed in sequential order—*torah* followed by *nevi’im*. For Mormon, however, there appears to be a greater ontological distance between law and prophets; prophets figure more prominently as characters in history rather than authors associated with particular writings. In addition to reversing the order in which law and prophets are mentioned

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productive perspective on open canon and the textual relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Bible, see Elizabeth Fenton, “Open Canons: Sacred History and American History in *The Book of Mormon*,” *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1 (2013): 339–61.

8. This is not to say that Matthew is uninterested in “the prophets.” On the contrary, it is likely that he added the words τοὺς προφητάς (“the prophets”) to his received tradition. See Robert Banks, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5:17–20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 228; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 78–79. In a sense, then, Mormon and Matthew are more similar in this respect than might at first appear; both writers built on their received tradition by gradually increasing the importance of the prophets in their relative texts.

in Matthew and treating prophets as characters rather than textual designations, Mormon emphasizes the prophetic pericope by granting it more space than the legal pericope (seventeen verses as opposed to two) and endowing it with more pathos. This story includes the relative joy and sorrow of the unbelievers and believers, Nephi's distress and heartfelt prayer, and the "astonishment" of the people at the sign's dramatic appearance; it introduces a fatal threat to the believers and their cathartic rescue in the nick of time; and the reader cannot help but relish the gratifying comeuppance of the would-be murderers. The legal pericope, by comparison, comes across as cerebral and abstract; a few aspiring interpreters of scripture simply misunderstand the scriptures and are corrected. There is no emotion, no dramatic story arc, and not even individual characters. Third Nephi 1 alters its Matthean source text by placing prophets and their fulfillment at the fore.

Despite that significant difference, Matthew 5:17–18 and 3 Nephi 1 share at least one potent similarity: an interest in totality.<sup>9</sup> This is the force behind Matthew's "one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law"—he portrays Jesus preserving Mosaic law in its entirety, down to the smallest marks on the page; indeed, "*all* [will] be fulfilled" (Matthew 5:17–18, emphasis added). But if the totality in question in Matthew 5 refers to the enduring validity of the law *prior* to its fulfillment, totality in 3 Nephi 1 takes on a slightly different cast. Here, the completeness in view is not the completeness of *the law*, but of *the fulfillment*, whether legal or prophetic, and this totality manifests at several places in the text. First, both pericopes emphasize the totality of

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9. Mormon's interest in totality in this chapter is another element of continuity between 3 Nephi 1 and the preceding book of Helaman. Mormon's drive to show fulfillment as inarguably comprehensive may stem in part from an implied challenge in the unbelievers' initial response to Samuel's words: "*Some* things they may have guessed right, among so many; but behold, we know that *all* these great and marvelous works cannot come to pass" (Helaman 16:16). The unbelievers will readily admit a kind of luck involved in the accomplishment of any number of the prophetic signs, but their refusal to believe the prophets is staked on the claim that the *total* number of signs cannot possibly occur. Piqued, Mormon is all too happy to prove them wrong in 3 Nephi 1, and he does so repeatedly and with relish.

fulfillment by concluding with the phrase “every whit.” After Samuel’s sign is given and the people fall to the earth, Mormon reports that “it had come to pass, yea, *all things, every whit*, according to the words of the prophets” (3 Nephi 1:20),<sup>10</sup> leaving no doubt that the fulfillment has indeed been complete and total. As part of the corrective to those who think the law’s fulfillment has already been achieved, Mormon notes that “it was made known unto them that the law . . . must be fulfilled *in every whit*; . . . it should *all* be fulfilled” (3 Nephi 1:25). Totality also finds a voice in the words of the Lord to Nephi, who describes the purpose of his coming not just in terms of fulfillment, but specifically total fulfillment: “On the morrow come I into the world, to show . . . that I will fulfil *all* that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets. Behold, I come unto my own, to fulfil *all* things which I have made known” (3 Nephi 1:13–14). The people’s reaction to Samuel’s sign is also instructive: “*All* the people upon the face of *the whole earth* from the west to the east, both in the land north and in the land south, . . . fell to the earth” (3 Nephi 1:17). A total fulfillment has here induced a kind of aggregated, totalized response from the people. By shifting the force of Matthew’s totality from the unfulfilled law to fulfillment as such, Mormon not only reveals his personal eagerness for the complete realization of the law and the prophets, but also adds yet another degree of emphasis to the theme of fulfillment.

Fulfillment, then, is undoubtedly a primary theme contained in 3 Nephi 1, and the deft incorporation of Matthew 5:17–18 into both the structure and wording of the chapter should alert us to the fact that the theology of fulfillment at work is quite complex. As will be shown below, 3 Nephi 1 cautions that fulfillment demands more from its beneficiaries than a mere recognition that predictions have been verified or that anticipated events have been accomplished, and the chapter makes clear this complexity through its temporal thematic. In this thematic, the Nephites are portrayed as consistently misunderstanding the nature of fulfillment because of the various ways in which they conceptualize

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10. Any emphasis appearing in Book of Mormon quotations has been added.

and experience time, and it is this situation Samuel attempts to obviate with his sermon. What the Nephites consistently fail to understand is that fulfillment here has a temporal inflection—the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy is more about *time* than it is about validating Samuel’s prophetic credentials, and Samuel primarily hopes to correct Nephite *temporality* rather than grant certain abstract, cognitive facts about the Messiah. To better illuminate this complexity, we turn now to examine the role of temporality in 3 Nephi 1.

### Problematizing time: Nephite temporality

In addition to its obvious preoccupation with fulfillment, 3 Nephi 1 is also heavily invested in a temporal thematic, something evident at both the linguistic and narrative levels of the text. The word *time* occurs in six places throughout the chapter, and a subtle fascination with units of time and the duration of events appears in practically every scene. When the unbelievers dismiss Samuel’s prophecy, for instance, they present their skepticism in specifically temporal terms: “Behold *the time is past*, and the words . . . are not fulfilled” (3 Nephi 1:6). As their critique develops into radical violence the narrative continues to mark temporal overtones to the conspiracy, reporting that “*there was a day set apart* by the unbelievers, that all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death” (3 Nephi 1:9). Even Nephi’s prayerful response is narrated with attention to time. The text reports that he “cried mightily . . . *all that day*” (3 Nephi 1:12), echoing the unbelievers’ action by likewise singling out a particular day, but characterizing it with prayer rather than violence. Continuing the theme, the divine response to Nephi also emphasizes temporality: “Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, *the time is at hand*” (3 Nephi 1:13). Not only does the Lord emphasize time explicitly, but he echoes the structure of the unbelievers’ critique in verse 6, implicitly correcting it.<sup>11</sup> When, at

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11. The skeptics had asserted “behold the time is past” (3 Nephi 1:6), to which the Lord emends, “behold, the time is at hand” (3 Nephi 1:13).

last, the sign finally arrives, the information the Nephites acquire bears a kind of temporal specificity: they “knew *that it was the day* that the Lord should be born” (3 Nephi 1:19). And even the chapter’s conclusion underlines the temporal thematic running through this text. Mormon concludes the chapter with what at first glance seems to be an entirely typical summary statement: “And thus the ninety and second year did pass away, bringing glad tidings unto the people” (3 Nephi 1:26). However, in a startling deviation from Book of Mormon convention, “glad tidings” are here delivered not by divinely appointed messengers but by the year itself—*time* becomes the messenger in question.<sup>12</sup>

Temporality is also brought into focus in 3 Nephi 1 by the way the Nephites consistently misunderstand the timing of fulfillment. In each pericope a group of Nephites anticipates fulfillment prematurely, only to be corrected that the expected event will take place at a later date. When the unbelievers insist, for instance, that Samuel’s sign ought to have happened by now, they are startled at its appearance several days later. When another group of Nephites argues that “it was [now] no more expedient to observe the law” (3 Nephi 1:24), they learn instead that fulfillment “was not yet” (3 Nephi 1:25). In other words, although the unbelievers claimed that the sign’s fulfillment belonged to the past, subsequent events located its fulfillment in the present; and although some believers insisted that the law’s fulfillment belonged to the present, the narrative positions its fulfillment in the future. What this consistent error reveals is that, rather than simply misunderstanding the nature of fulfillment alone, the Nephites’ mistake is slightly more specific: they misunderstand fulfillment’s *relationship with time*. The Nephites know what sort of sign to expect, what it would mean about the Messiah, and even what kind of Mosaic revisions it would entail. What they fail to understand is precisely *when* these things will take place.

This underdeveloped sense of fulfillment’s timing hints at a deeper problem. What 3 Nephi 1 ultimately shows is that the Nephites manifest a problematic temporality, both in how they think about time’s

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12. For the Book of Mormon’s usual convention, see Mosiah 3:3; Alma 13:22–23; 39:15–16, 19; Helaman 13:7; 16:14.

operation and in how they experience time's passage, and this further threatens a parallel understanding of and relationship to the fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy. Following a brief exploration of the unbelievers' linear model of time, I want to present the two problematic temporal relationships portrayed in 3 Nephi 1—one belonging to those who believe in Samuel's prophecy, and another belonging to those who disbelieve.

The temporal model with which Samuel will most directly contend is that of the unbelievers, whose conception of time is first exposed in verse 6 with the statement "Behold the time is past, and the words of Samuel are not fulfilled." Despite its brevity, this assertion reveals a great deal about how the unbelievers think about both time and fulfillment, and it does so primarily by raising a pair of questions. First, what exactly is time *past*? Or, put verbally rather than adjectivally, what is time supposed to have *passed*? The unbelievers seem to be operating under a linear temporal model in which time is mobile, while historical events remain fixed. In this case, the unbelievers assert that time has *passed* a deadline for Samuel's prophecy to be fulfilled, a deadline which stands as a kind of fixed marker in history; once time moves beyond that deadline, Samuel's prophecy can be neatly categorized as belonging to the "past." Our second question addresses the curious structure of the unbelievers' assertion, and this, too, hints at a linear model. Rather than stating, perhaps more naturally, "the time is past *for* the words of Samuel *to be* fulfilled," why do the unbelievers separate the two phrases with the conjunction *and* ("the time is past, *and* the words . . . are not fulfilled")? In this way, strictly speaking, the unbelievers assert that time alone is past rather than *time for* a particular occasion, and thus betray a belief, however implicit, that the operation of time and the operation of fulfillment are distinct phenomena. Time is perceived to be a general, universal system functioning indifferently with respect to the specific events it maneuvers, all of which are largely interchangeable.<sup>13</sup> In this way, time can be thought of here as a kind of container that various

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13. Implicit here is the classic distinction between *chronos* and *kairos*. The former refers to undifferentiated, successive time (clock time), while the latter refers to the appropriate moment (opportunity).

events (including prophecies and their fulfillment) come to fill. Events can belong to containers marked either “past,” “present,” or “future,” but the sorts of events it contains does not determine the nature of time. By separating the operation of time from the operation of fulfillment in this way, the unbelievers tacitly insist that fulfillment is the province of historical contents (events and prophecies) rather than the province of the container (temporality itself). The failure or success of Samuel’s prophecy is thus seen as merely coincident to, not integrally connected with, how the Nephites identify and characterize time. As it turns out, it is this disjunction between time and fulfillment that Samuel’s sermon will reveal as most problematic about the unbelievers’ temporal model.<sup>14</sup>

How the unbelievers think about time’s mechanics naturally conditions how they relate to and experience time’s passage, and that relationship might be summed up as a kind of dismissive attitude toward the past. According to Mormon, they toss off their statement that “the time is past” without further comment, as if it contains all that needs to be said about time and the past in a straightforwardly evident way. With these four perfunctory words the unbelievers also hint at the motivation for their dismissive attitude—a belief that the past is irrelevant. Thus, their eagerness to identify the deadline for the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy is not driven by faith, but rather by a desire to relegate this prophet and his words to the past, where they can be effectively ignored. This indifference to the past also explains how the unbelievers can view time and fulfillment as fundamentally disjoint operations. If the past renders particular content completely irrelevant, there is no need to pay any real attention to that content. Rather, the exigent task is simply to keep an eye on the movement of time; one only needs to know the

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14. By way of clarifying this point (and anticipating my later argument), we might at least briefly mention the sort of contrasting temporal model Samuel will offer. In the language of this metaphor, Samuel suggests that temporal “containers” are fundamentally changed based on the types of events they hold. When Christ arrives, for instance, he does not simply fill an indifferent “present” but alters the entire temporal situation by ushering in a messianic era. In other words, once Christ arrives, his mortal ministry changes time itself, characterizing it as the crucially important and decisively salvific lifetime of the Messiah.

point at which a prophecy is past relevance and can be safely disregarded. From their opening words, the unbelievers' every subsequent expression and action is based on a view in which the past—precisely because it *is* past—can be effectively ignored.

A related implication of this dismissive attitude is the unbelievers' interest in *ending* or termination, and this is evident in the particular conclusions they draw from their critique: "Behold the time is past . . . ; therefore, your joy and your faith . . . hath been vain." Because Samuel's prophecy has passed its deadline, they argue, the believers' joy and faith are rendered nonsensical and futile. Or, in more general terms: once an event is safely in the "past," its prior implication and relevance are effectively canceled. Indeed, this obsession with the terminating effect of an event becoming "past" may even provide the key to understanding how the unbelievers' behavior escalates into such extreme violence. Their insistence that Samuel's prophecy no longer holds any implication for the present is threatened by the believers' continued faith (and apparently distinct approach to time) and so, asserting that the erstwhile implications of Samuel's prophecy have been entirely ended, the unbelievers threaten to likewise end anyone who insists otherwise. One of the most problematic results of the unbelievers' temporal relationship is thus the way it leads them to (mis)understand the lack of fulfillment as a question of ending—an end to anticipatory hope and joy, and, at its most perverse and grotesque, an end even to the believers' very lives. But it is important to notice that something like this perspective continues among the Nephites more generally even when fulfillment does occur: after Samuel's signs are accomplished, this miraculous event is thought to primarily imply an *ending* to observance of the law of Moses (3 Nephi 1:24). Whether Samuel's prophecy is understood as fulfilled or unfulfilled, there is a strong strain of Nephite thought that sees the implications of the prophecy as a question of *terminating* prior attitudes and devotional practices.

Situated over against the unbelievers with their trivializing disregard for the past are "all those who believed in those traditions" (3 Nephi 1:9). Although the text does not hint in any clear way at their temporal

model, there is abundant evidence that the believers also experience a problematic relationship with time. In contrast to the unbelievers, who manifested a dismissive relationship with the past, the believers instead exhibit a peculiar orientation to the future, and this is made evident by a subtle shift in their anticipatory focus. The text reports that the initial object of their belief is specifically “those traditions,” in reference to the Nephite messianic tradition with its anticipation of Christ’s birth—a tradition that the unbelievers immediately begin to mock.<sup>15</sup> Recall the unbelievers’ critique in full: “Behold the time is past,” they tell the believers, “therefore, your joy and your faith concerning this thing hath been vain” (3 Nephi 1:6). The believers—whom the text had just before characterized as “joy[ful]”—“began to be very sorrowful, lest by any means those things which had been spoken might not come to pass” (3 Nephi 1:7). Once they begin to doubt, the believers turn their anticipatory attention away from the Messiah to a more concentrated focus on the sign of his coming: “But behold, they did watch steadfastly for

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15. It is clear that the believers are initially more attuned to the Christ-event than its associated sign, though the point is subtle. The word *tradition(s)* (3 Nephi 1:9) is particularly telling—it is used throughout the Book of Mormon to indicate ancestral religious beliefs handed down across generations (as used, for instance, in Enos 1:14; Mosiah 1:5; 10:12; 26:1; Alma 8:11; 21:8; Helaman 15:7, 15; incidentally, 3 Nephi 1:9, 11 are the last two instances of the word *tradition* or *traditions* in the Book of Mormon). Also indicative is the fact that these believers are described as experiencing “joy” (3 Nephi 1:6), echoing Nephite religious texts that encourage anticipatory rejoicing in Christ (see Jarom 1:11 and 2 Nephi 25:25–26). As strong as this Nephite messianic tradition is, there is an equally strong tradition of its criticism of which the unbelievers’ response is entirely characteristic. Consider, for example, the striking parallels between 3 Nephi 1 and Jacob 7: criticism of the peculiar Nephite admixture of Mosaic observance and Christian anticipation, demand for a sign, a religious leader “cry[ing]” to the Lord, and a collective collapse of the people when the sign occurs. Seen in this light, the prophetic pericope in 3 Nephi 1 is simply another iteration of a more or less continuous conflict throughout Nephite religious history. For a philosophical and theological exploration of the anachronistic nature of Book of Mormon Christianity, see Adam S. Miller, “Messianic History: Walter Benjamin and the Book of Mormon,” in *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities*, ed. James M. McLachlan and Loyd Ericson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 227–43; reprinted in *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 21–35.

that day and that night and that day which should be as one day as if there were no night, that they might know that their faith had not been vain” (3 Nephi 1:8).

Two observations follow. First, it is significant that joy is removed from the narrative. Not only has their joy been exchanged for sorrow—an indication that their temporal orientation has also undergone a subtle shift—but when the believers turn their attention to the sign for confirmation of their past faith, joy remains conspicuously absent; they only wish to know “that their *faith* had not been vain,” despite the unbelievers’ initial criticism of both “joy and . . . faith” (3 Nephi 1:6). Although their faith remains, the absence of joy suggests a kind of hopeless anticipation; the unbelievers’ critique has, in some fashion, struck home. Second, notice how the unbelievers’ ridicule alters the believers’ relationship with the future. What had previously been joyful anticipation of the Messiah becomes anxious sign seeking. Both attitudes are oriented to a future event, but where the former was characterized by faith, the latter is motivated by desperation. Indeed, the believers’ desperation seeks a very particular aim: they watch for the sign specifically “that they might know” the validity of their devotion. The believers hope to acquire a kind of knowledge for themselves—a knowledge that will secure the potential “vanity” of faith—and they fixate on the future as the source for that knowledge. The future becomes a meager prop for their hopes, a kind of crutch on which the believers pin their now-desperate faith, even while they begin to fear the apparent unlikelihood of the prophecy’s fulfillment. Rather than seeing in the future something to be assertively anticipated in joy, the believers now see the future as something to be desperately obsessed over in fear. What had been a kind of jubilant confidence in the Messiah’s coming becomes a kind of mere desperation, and thus, by the time Samuel’s sign finally does arrive, the believers are in as much of a problematic temporal relationship as their unbelieving brethren.<sup>16</sup>

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16. The distinction between hope and desperation here follows Joseph M. Spencer, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 15–23.

The import of these dual relationships with or experiences of time is revealed in the aftermath of the sign's fulfillment. As Samuel had foretold, "at the going down of the sun there was no darkness" (3 Nephi 1:15). Here the narrative splits, reporting the effects of this event in two scenes—one to describe the unbelievers' reaction (3 Nephi 1:16) and the other to illustrate the response of the believers (3 Nephi 1:17–18).<sup>17</sup> As we might expect, the outcome is significantly more damning for the unbelievers. The presence of the sign forces them to reinterpret both the content of the past and their earlier dismissal of it. This reevaluation is evident in the sheer number of past tense verbs in the scene: the unbelievers see that they "had not believed the words of the prophets," that they "had laid [a] great plan of destruction"—a plan which "they knew . . . had been frustrated"—and that the sign "had been given." Here, in the light of this miraculously lengthened day, the unbelievers' past is revealed as skeptical and violent, a time of refusing both prophetic words and cosmic signs. The same past that they had so quickly dismissed returns in full force, and it bears with it all the implication they had earlier attempted to deny. Finding themselves condemned, the unbelievers "fell to the earth and became as if they were dead" (3 Nephi 1:16). Importantly, although the next verse reports that eventually all the people fell "to the earth" (3 Nephi 1:17), it is only the would-be murderers who assume a fatal posture ("as if they were dead"). Their earlier haste to violently impose murderous endings doubles back on them and the termination they had intended to inscribe on the bodies of the believers is written on their own flesh.

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17. I am here making an axiomatic interpretive decision about one of the ambiguities of 3 Nephi 1:17. This verse opens with the words "and they began to know that the Son of God must shortly appear," but it is not immediately clear to whom "they" refers. At first glance, these words seem to point back to the unbelievers of verse 16, but if this is the case, it is difficult to understand why Mormon would call what follows a "fine[r]" clarification, or why he would continue to narrate their response at such great length after describing them as fallen "to the earth . . . as if they were dead" (3 Nephi 1:16). Rather, I understand the "they" of verse 17 to refer to the believers and the rest of the Nephites, and the phrase "yea, in fine" to function as Mormon's attempt to subsequently explain this ambiguity.

The believers fare somewhat better than their brethren. The narrative reports that, in addition to remaining conscious, the believers begin to focus anew on the Messiah. Ultimately, however, this outcome is not as positive as it first appears; their reaction bears more similarity to the unbelievers' response than difference. Like the unbelievers, the believers come to "know" something, and it is worth noting that whatever temporal relationship each group had manifested in anticipation of the sign persists as the context of their knowledge once the sign arrives; the direction of their prior focus determines the direction of their knowledge. Thus, where the unbelievers "knew" that their "great plan . . . had been frustrated" (a look into the past), the believers "began to know that the Son of God must shortly appear" and that "the Lord should be born" (a look into the future) (3 Nephi 1:16–17, 19). Even here, though, joy does not return to the narrative, and its absence is revealing. When the sign arrives, the only emotion on display—for both unbeliever and believer alike—is astonishment (3 Nephi 1:15, 17). The believers may have had a better outcome than the unbelievers (that is, in addition to remaining conscious they perhaps have reason to again hope in the Messiah) but the conspicuous absence of anything like joy in their reaction still hints at a kind of loss when the believers' response is compared to their earlier faith.

But perhaps the most striking similarity between the two responses concerns a detail that will prove particularly salient for our discussion of Samuel: from the Nephite perspective, fulfillment is narrated almost obsessively in terms of the sign. In each of the two scenes recounting the aftermath of the sign's occurrence, the sign is curiously described as being "already at hand." In the first instance, the unbelievers know that their planned genocide has been thwarted because "the sign which had been given was already at hand" (3 Nephi 1:16), and in the second instance, the believers fall to the earth in astonishment for an identical reason: "The sign which had been given was already at hand" (3 Nephi 1:18). For the Nephites, what is most readily "at hand"—most immediate, most visible, uppermost in their attention, and the most important implication of fulfillment—is the sign. However, in the very same

chapter, an alternative perspective is offered, and that perspective belongs to the Lord himself. When the Lord reassures Nephi about the fate of the faithful, he began by announcing, “Behold, the *time* is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given” (3 Nephi 1:13). In fact, that same phrase is repeated at the end of the Lord’s words (3 Nephi 1:14), as if to explicitly counter the double insinuation elsewhere in the chapter (in verses 13 and 18) that the crucial element is actually the *sign*’s imminence. When the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy occurred, the sign dominated the Nephites’ attention; however, according to the Lord, what ought to have been uppermost in their thoughts was something about time.

A close reading of 3 Nephi 1 indicates that fulfillment’s most immediate implication has something to say about temporality—that time, not the sign, is what is most properly “at hand,” and thus it is time, not the sign, that is fulfilled. To this point, the Nephites have been so focused on the sign (either in trying to deny it or fretfully awaiting its arrival) that once it actually arrives it obscures both groups’ experience of temporality. Apparently the Nephites are only able to experience time as the anxious “not yet” or the resistant “not ever,” and the result is that they do not know what to do with the graceful “at hand.” Where the Nephites’ language of fulfillment was expressed in terms of the sign, the divine language of fulfillment was expressed in temporal terms, suggesting that while the Nephites (unbelievers and believers alike) cannot make sense of a fulfilled temporality, this temporal paradigm for fulfillment is precisely the paradigm 3 Nephi 1 intends to privilege. On this model, what is fulfilled is not a particular prophet’s words or a visible omen, but rather a particular era or period of history, suggesting that fulfillment is less about validating prophetic credibility and more about changing how God’s people experience time.

It is to this situation that the mechanics of Samuel’s sign are meant to respond, and the corrective is twofold: first, to clarify the relationship between time and fulfillment, and second, to alter the posture of Nephite discipleship according to a new, redemptive temporality.

### Solving time: Samuel's corrective

Samuel the Lamanite is widely recognized as a singular character in the Book of Mormon,<sup>18</sup> and the signs he delivers are equally unique in a number of ways. To begin with, it is noteworthy that Samuel delivers *two* paired signs (although 3 Nephi 1 recounts the fulfillment of the first only). Coupled with his sign of the Messiah's birth, Samuel also predicts "a sign of [the Messiah's] death" (Helaman 14:14), and where the first sign involved roughly three days of miraculous illumination, the second is characterized by "no light . . . for the space of three days" (Helaman 14:20). This obvious pairing and correspondence stands out noticeably in the Book of Mormon, in which signs otherwise occur only as single, discrete miracles. The nature and purpose of Samuel's two signs are also distinctive. Signs appear only rarely in the narrative action of the Book of Mormon, and when they do occur they are generally punitive, given to demonstrate the falsity of an anti-Christ (Jacob 7:14–15; Alma 30:43–50) or to convict an unbelieving audience of a prophet's credentials (Helaman 9:24–25). Although Samuel's first sign does have a kind of retributive outcome (3 Nephi 1:16–17) and the second sign is fulfilled to the effect of "great mourning and howling and weeping among all the people" (3 Nephi 8:23), these signs are not primarily punitive. Rather, they are primarily *temporal*, and this is marked by another unique element they hold in common: both signs concern themselves with the sun, moon, and stars (see 3 Nephi 1:15, 19; 8:22), the temporal import of which almost goes without saying.<sup>19</sup> No other signs in the Book of Mormon are delivered as a corresponding pair for

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18. For instance, on the significance of Samuel as a rare Lamanite voice within a predominantly Nephite record, see Jared Hickman, "The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse," *American Literature* 86 (2014): 429–61.

19. Samuel's interest in temporality can be traced back to the first chapter of his sermon as well. See Joseph M. Spencer, "The Time of Sin," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 9 (2014): 87–110.

a nonpunitive purpose while being involved with planetary bodies—put simply, there are no other signs quite like Samuel’s.<sup>20</sup>

The temporal overtones of Samuel’s signs are made explicit from the moment they are introduced. In announcing the first sign, Samuel tellingly refers to it not as a sign *of* Christ’s coming, but rather “a sign *at the time of his coming*” (Helaman 14:3), thus indicating that this omen is intended not to point to Christ directly, but more precisely to point to the particular era in which Christ’s coming is inscribed. This temporal intent is further developed in the symbolism of each sign, where the sign’s operation demonstrates deliberate and explicit involvement with time. (Here we will confine ourselves once again to the fulfillment of the first sign as narrated in 3 Nephi 1, although the parallels with the second sign should be obvious.) The first sign functions by taking the illumination characteristic of daytime and extending it past its regular duration, and in so doing, the Messiah’s birth is marked by what is effectively described as a kind of temporal contraction. In the words of Samuel, “there shall be one day and a night and a day, *as if it were one day*” (Helaman 14:4; cf. 3 Nephi 1:8). In the mechanics of the sign, two days and one night masquerade as one day, as if time has been compressed. Samuel’s sign thus marks out the Christ-event by figuratively condensing the time in which that event is inscribed, and it is not difficult to see the relevance of this gesture for the Nephites in 3 Nephi 1. We mentioned that in both pericopes a group of Nephites identified fulfillment prematurely, and although their timing was ultimately revealed to be incorrect, their initial confidence betrayed a kind of temporal oversight. Their unexamined assurance that they understood the operation of time led the Nephites to rashly stipulate the occasion when the sign or Mosaic revision ought to occur. In response, Samuel’s sign takes something as predictable as nightfall and upends it, showing the Nephites their utter inadequacy to dictate the timing of fulfillment and

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20. There is, however, some biblical precedent for signs of this sort. In the battle with the Amorites, for instance, Joshua commanded the sun to stand still (Joshua 10:12–13), and Isaiah’s sign to King Hezekiah involved the shadow of a sundial moving both forward and backward by ten degrees (2 Kings 20:8–11).

striking at the heart of what they had taken for granted. In a radically humbling gesture, the sign sweeps aside every Nephite confidence that the operation of time is straightforward or easily fathomed.

If we might thus understand Samuel's sign as clearly attempting to communicate something about temporality, we now need to examine the precise content of that message and how it counters the Nephites' problematic relationships with time. Samuel's first corrective appears only as we further explore the Lamanite prophet's direct comments about his signs—comments which repeatedly (if implicitly) emphasize that fulfillment cannot be understood separate from time. Recall how the Nephites' experience of fulfillment neglected adequate attention to temporality; they not only misunderstood the timing of fulfillment, but when the sign occurred they experienced the sign itself as most readily "at hand," rather than "the time" mentioned by the Lord (3 Nephi 1:13–14, 16, 18). The Nephites lost sight of time in the face of fulfillment, and this took on a stark cast particularly for the unbelievers, who verbally separated time and fulfillment with the conjunction *and*. Samuel's diction, however, is surprisingly consistent in the other direction: whenever Samuel mentions a period of time in Helaman 14, it is always characterized by a Messianic event. Fulfillment, for Samuel, is never a thing in itself, but rather what orients his experience of time. For instance, when he announced that "five years more cometh, and . . . then cometh the Son of God" (Helaman 14:2), Samuel positioned his audience's experience of temporality around a particular occasion—in this case, the event of the Messiah's birth. Likewise, in Helaman 14:3 he refers to "the time of his [Christ's] coming" and in 14:4 "the night before he is born," again consistently mentioning periods of time ("the time of" and "the night before") only in conjunction with a corresponding Messianic fulfillment ("his coming" and "he is born"). In so doing, Samuel assigns a very specific role to his paired omens: signs are the tertiary element that bind fulfillment with time. "Behold, I give unto you a sign," he announces, "*for* [that is, *because*] five years more cometh" (Helaman 14:2). One of the main purposes for signs, according to Samuel, is to orient temporality around fulfillment, binding up their relationship. Samuel wants to be clear that

fulfillment always carries temporal implications, and towards this end he delivers a sign to cement that connection. To focus only on the sign or the fulfilling event to the exclusion of its accompanying temporality is to miss something crucial. This is why the Nephites were incorrect to lose sight of time in light of the sign's fulfillment, and this may explain why the specific signs Samuel delivered are so invested in temporality. The temporal overtones of these signs—through their association with heavenly bodies and their symbolic compression of time—attempt to help the Nephites focus on the particular era inaugurated by fulfillment. Signs, according to Samuel, join fulfillment with a certain experience of temporality, although what this means in more concrete terms will be spelled out more fully below.

In dramatically counteracting the Nephites' loss of temporal focus, however, the sign repositions their attention in a surprisingly precise direction: the sign directs Nephite awareness specifically to the present. Where the Nephite unbelievers focused on the past and characterized it as fundamentally irrelevant, and where the believers focused on the future and utilized it as an anchor to secure their desperate hopes, Samuel attempts to redirect both groups' focus to the present, which he characterizes as the time of the Messiah, and he delineates the parameters of what constitutes that present era through the signs themselves. We mentioned above the strong correspondence between the signs—in addition to their joint delivery, both involve similar phenomena (light and darkness) and take roughly the same amount of time (three days)—but here that pairing becomes decisive.<sup>21</sup> When Samuel's signs are taken together as a pair, something interesting emerges in their symbolism: they can be understood as establishing a kind of cosmic day. The excessive light surrounding Christ's birth acts as a kind of morning, while the darkness surrounding Christ's death acts as a kind of evening. The (roughly) thirty intervening years are symbolically contracted into a

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21. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:198, has also recognized the symbolic correspondence between these signs: "Just as the Messiah's birth would be indicated by a night that was not night, so his death will be indicated by days that are not days. Miraculous light will accompany his birth; miraculous darkness will signal his death," additionally noting that "they form contrasting parallels" (5:191).

single day, a day that corresponds quite directly and purposefully to the Messiah's mortal sojourn on another continent. Thus, rather than designating Christ's birth and death as isolable events with discrete salvific import, Samuel's signs bookend Christ's entire ministry.

By bracketing and highlighting the present in this way, and by so directly identifying the present with the Messiah, Samuel's signs not only call Nephite attention to the here and now, but also saturate the present with salvific meaning. The signs clearly outline what constitutes the present by bookending it with temporal miracles that catch the Nephites' attention, marking it with a definite beginning and end, and characterizing it with its own unique temporality. And all of this has an important effect on how the Nephites will experience the years corresponding to the Messiah's lifetime. Feeling themselves suspended between the already-accomplished fulfillment of the first sign and the anticipated fulfillment of the second, the Nephites are given a heightened sense of the reality of the Messiah, and their every experience from now until Christ's death can be viewed as parallel to a discrete moment in the Messiah's own life. The signs thus become a way of marking what is taking place on a separate continent, and the Nephites thus experience Christ's life somewhat similar to the first-century Palestinian Jews, but in its *extent* rather than its particular *content*. In fact, the very lack of shared content among the Nephites and the Jews highlights the importance of the temporal correspondence. Although Jesus will come to the Americas and retroactively fill in some of the subject matter (i.e., he will deliver some of the same teachings in the Sermon at the Temple, etc.), there is an apparent importance to the Nephites experiencing the raw *duration* of Jesus's ministry. And in experiencing only the raw duration of Christ's ministry without the content of Christ's physical presence or particular teachings, the Nephites are further directed to focus on the temporal implications of fulfillment. In other words, they are given to experience the *time* of the Messiah alone, without the potential distraction of the Messiah himself.<sup>22</sup>

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22. The conception of time I see here finds its philosophical parallel in the work of Giorgio Agamben. See, for instance, Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary*

Thus, where the sign in 3 Nephi 1 indicates the Messiah's arrival in a general sense, it also calls attention to the Nephites' experience of time by filling the present with sufficiently important content that it will hold Nephite attention—after all, now is the time of the Messiah! The sign is meant to correct the Nephites' problematic temporal relationships by directing attention—as all good signs do—beyond itself. Where the Nephites manifest obsession with the sign, it points them to the nature of time; where the Nephites fixate on the past or the future, the sign points them back to the present.<sup>23</sup> But the question is not yet entirely settled. We still have yet to clarify exactly why Samuel is so interested in temporality and why he is so eager to redirect Nephite attention to the present, in particular. It is here, finally, that we can begin to clarify the relationship between temporality and fulfillment. I want to argue that Samuel's emphasis on the present is for two reasons: fulfillment comes with both a task (repentance) and a problem (invisibility), and the solution to each involves a proper understanding of temporality.

The majority of Samuel's sermon in the book of Helaman is occupied with this first task. He views his own role primarily as a prophet preaching repentance and opens his discourse with the announcement that "nothing can save this people save it be repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Helaman 13:6). Not even delivering the two signs distracts him from his intent; sandwiched between them is a lengthy theological aside about the possibility of repentance through Jesus Christ and his resurrection (Helaman 14:11–19). Part of the reason Samuel insists on directing Nephite attention to the present, then, is that repentance is the present task with which the Nephites ought to be occupied in light of the Messiah's arrival, and if they reside in the fantasies of past or future, they will never get to work on the task at hand.

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on the *Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 59–78.

23. In fact, there is some indication in the text that Samuel succeeded in reorienting Nephite temporality. Third Nephi 2:8 reports the introduction of a new Nephite calendar, stating that "the Nephites began to reckon their time from this period when the sign was given, or from the coming of Christ."

And here, again, the key to accomplishing this task is found in Samuel's sign; it is as he describes the sign's aftermath that Samuel provides the formula for redemption. Helaman 14:4 describes the anticipated outcome of the sign: "[The Nephites] shall *know of a surety* that there shall be two days and a night; *nevertheless* the night shall not be darkened." It is in the tension between "know[ing] of a surety" and this "nevertheless" that the possibility of redemption occurs. The sign presents the Nephites with two conflicting observations—they can see "the rising of the sun and also . . . its setting," they "know of a surety" that two days and one night are passing, and yet, "nevertheless," there is no darkness where they expect it (Helaman 14:4). Samuel's sign is designed to call their sure knowledge into question—indeed, to strike at the heart of what is most fundamental to their mortal experience—in order to show that even *this* is open to miraculous possibility.<sup>24</sup> If something as fundamental as time can bear this divine irruption, they are led to wonder what else might be possible? And the precise possibility Samuel seems to have in mind is the birth of faith:

And ye shall hear my words, for, for this intent have I come up upon the walls of this city, **that ye might hear and know** of the judgments of God which do await you because of your iniquities, and also **that ye might know** the conditions of repentance; and also **that ye might know** of the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning; and **that ye might know** of the signs of his coming, *to the intent that ye might believe* on his name. (Helaman 14:11–12)

Despite his repeated emphasis of the phrase "that ye might know," Samuel paints a picture in which knowledge is not the desired culmination of his preaching; rather, he gives the Nephites knowledge in hopes that

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24. For a slightly different theological treatment of the redemptive possibilities of the word *nevertheless*, see Adam S. Miller, "Notes on Life, Grace, and Atonement," in Adam S. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 3–20.

it will open onto belief, and it is this same process (knowledge opening onto belief) that Samuel hopes will occur in conjunction with his first sign.<sup>25</sup> After delivering the sign and alerting the Nephites to the tension between what they will “know of a surety” and “nevertheless” witness, he delivers this promise: “whosoever shall *believe* on the Son of God, the same shall have everlasting life” (Helaman 14:8). Thus, the sign’s temporal elements are a way of keeping the Nephites rooted in the present and focused on the Messiah, but also interrupting their knowledge and assumptions, all so that they can begin to attend to the task of “believ[ing] on his name” and “repent[ing] of all [their] sins” (Helaman 14:12–13).

There is also a second reason for Samuel’s emphasis on time and the present: the problematic invisibility, from the Nephite perspective, of the Messiah’s coming. The Book of Mormon situates the Nephites in the Americas, several thousand miles away from Palestine and the events of Christ’s ministry, and since Christ does not appear in the Book of Mormon until after his resurrection (and even that appearance may not have been widely anticipated),<sup>26</sup> the Nephites would presumably have no way of knowing of his birth or death unless it was indicated to them through supernatural means. It is precisely this invisibility that the unbelievers criticize in Helaman 16: “[If] such a being as a Christ shall come,” they ask, “why will he not show himself unto us as well as unto them who shall be at Jerusalem? Yea, why will he not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem?” (Helaman 16:18–19). Perhaps this is why Samuel’s signs are almost over the top with drama,

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25. This privileging of faith over knowledge bears certain affinities with Alma’s presentation of faith. See Adam S. Miller, “Ye Must Needs Say That the Word Is Good,” in *An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma* 32, ed. Adam S. Miller (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2011), 31–42.

26. Despite several prophecies about the coming of Christ into the world, the Nephites seem unaware that the Messiah would visit them directly in the Americas. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 182–83.

indeed, arguably the most dramatic signs contained in the Book of Mormon—they need to be exceptionally visible to counteract the relative invisibility of the fulfillment they indicate. This invisibility is even thematically contained in the narrative of 3 Nephi 1. Notice that when Nephi prays for a solution to the pending genocide, the Lord reports that the sign will be given “on this night.” And yet Samuel had indicated that the sign would occur beginning, not at night, but rather on “one day” (Helaman 14:4; cf. 3 Nephi 1:8). Nephi, it appears, has already been living through the sign. “All that day” in which he was praying was actually the promised “one day” on which the sign was to begin (3 Nephi 1:8), but because the proposed miracle was simply an extension of daylight, it was undetectable until nightfall. Thus, when the Lord says “be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand” (3 Nephi 1:13), he is not alerting Nephi to the impending arrival of the sign but to its simultaneity; it is already happening. This thematic invisibility echoes the historical invisibility the Book of Mormon ascribes to Christ’s birth for the Nephites; although Christ will be born, it is not an event they can witness, and hence the necessity for a sign.

In sum, Samuel’s sermon and signs are heavily invested in temporality because a newly reconfigured experience of time provides the possibility and formula for the Nephite task of repentance, and Samuel’s particular characterization of the present alleviates the difficulties imposed by fulfillment’s invisibility. Keeping tabs on the march of time will ensure that the Nephites can follow the progression of the Messiah’s life, even though he has yet to appear to them in the flesh, and the interruption of time’s normal flow provides evidence for the possibility of redemption and inspires the kind of humility necessary to attain it. If the task of fulfillment is thus catalyzed by the unique temporality of Samuel’s signs, and the resultant present focus allows the Nephites to counteract fulfillment’s invisibility, it begins to become clear why time and fulfillment cannot be separated for Samuel and why understanding temporality is so crucial: the way in which the Nephites think about and experience time is vital to accomplishing the task fulfillment has given them.

## Concluding time: The Book of Mormon

While everything we have explored thus far illuminates the phenomenon of Samuel's sign and the theme of temporality in 3 Nephi 1 in new and significant ways, it is also important to recognize that this argument has essential implications for the Book of Mormon as a whole. Samuel's sign and its paradigm for fulfillment and temporality runs parallel to the paradigm the Book of Mormon outlines for itself, and this is best revealed in 3 Nephi 21, where the text portrays the resurrected Jesus prophesying about the future gathering of Israel. What is crucial for our purpose here is that, included in this prophecy, Jesus also announces the emergence of the Book of Mormon as a sign to mark the fulfillment of God's eschatological restorative work with Israel, and what is said about the Book of Mormon bears important affinities with Samuel's signs from Helaman 14.<sup>27</sup>

In both cases, signs are explicitly temporal. Jesus announces "I give unto you a sign, that ye may know *the time* when these things shall be about to take place" (3 Nephi 21:1), thus indicating, like Samuel, that signs not only alert their audience to fulfillment alone, but also introduce them to a certain experience of time. Additionally, as in the case of Samuel's sign, fulfillment will be already underway by the time the sign is recognized: "It shall be a sign unto them, that they may know that the work of the Father hath *already commenced*" (3 Nephi 21:7). The sign, again, is not an indication that fulfillment is imminent, but that it is presently in progress. And in this case, too, the sign prepares the way for its audience to complete a particular task. At the same moment that the Book of Mormon introduces the Gentiles to a new eschatological era, it also commissions them with the affiliated task of taking the gospel—in

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27. Modern LDS scholars generally agree that the sign in question in 3 Nephi 21 refers to the Book of Mormon. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:537, 539; and Victor L. Ludlow, "The Father's Covenant People Sermon: 3 Nephi 20:10–23:5," in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, 147–74. For a more in-depth look at the role of the Book of Mormon in this covenant sermon, see Gaye Strathearn and Jacob Moody, "Christ's Interpretation of Isaiah 52's 'My Servant' in 3 Nephi," in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, 175–90.

the form of the Book of Mormon—to the Lamanite remnant of the house of Israel.<sup>28</sup> Just as the Nephites were alerted by Samuel's sign to a messianic era, prophetic fulfillment, and the task of repentance, so the Gentiles will be alerted by the Book of Mormon to the arrival of the last days, fulfillment of the record's own self-aware prophecies, and the task of delivering that record to its original audience.

In addition to the similarities between the respective presentations of Samuel's sign and the Book of Mormon, striking similarities also emerge when we compare their reception. Just as the Nephites understood Samuel's sign to be a question of termination, concluding the prophetic arc of an obscure Lamanite preacher, the Book of Mormon has likewise all too often been taken as the conclusion to a previous era rather than the beginning of a new age. Latter-day Saints are quick to talk about the present as “the *last* days,” understanding by that term a kind of conclusion to world history, on the cusp of the eschaton.<sup>29</sup> And just as the Nephites took the intention of the sign to be primarily a question of validating Samuel's prophetic credentials, so too the Book of Mormon is often understood exclusively as a sign of Joseph Smith's divine commission, thereby inadvertently obscuring the task it intends to inaugurate.<sup>30</sup>

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28. This is the duty hinted at in 3 Nephi 21:5 (“these works . . . shall come forth from the Gentiles”), Mormon 5:15 (the “gospel . . . shall go forth unto them from the Gentiles”), and the title page to the Book of Mormon (“to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile”).

29. In this regard, Jesus's words in 3 Nephi 21 are again instructive—the Book of Mormon is a sign that “the work of the Father hath already *commenced*” (3 Nephi 21:7), suggesting that the last days might be more productively thought of as a last *beginning*, in which the Father's work commences one final time, rather than as a kind of conclusion.

30. Terryl Givens helpfully summarizes this phenomenon: “Looking at the Book of Mormon in terms of its early uses and reception, it becomes clear that this American scripture has exerted influence within the church and reaction outside of the church not primarily by virtue of its substance, but rather its manner of appearing, not on the merits of what it *says*, but what it *enacts*. Put slightly differently, the history of the Book of Mormon's place in Mormonism and American religion generally has always been more connected to its status as *signifier* than *signified*, or its role as a sacred sign rather than its function as persuasive theology.” Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The*

These similarities between the Book of Mormon and the signs of Samuel the Lamanite are instructive, and it is here, perhaps, that the tangle of temporality and fulfillment can be most clearly understood at a general level. These parallels make clear that the Book of Mormon must be understood to have an identical purpose to Samuel's signs: it is intended to seal up a particular relationship between temporality and fulfillment, ensuring that fulfillment doesn't slip into the past, a mere memory or set of facts about a past event, but rather that fulfillment opens onto a task. By inaugurating a new temporal era and a conscious awareness of it, the sign in each case guarantees that fulfillment is viewed as a beginning rather than an end—the beginning of a new work and a new temporality, even as it climactically closes the era of prophetic anticipation that preceded it. Thus, the temporal inflection of each sign is central to ensuring that the implications of fulfillment are borne out in the present. Just as the sign shifted the Nephites from a passive anticipation of the Messiah to a more active discipleship experienced through a temporal parallel with the Israelites, the Book of Mormon hopes to shift the posture of the modern Gentiles from passively awaiting the gathering of Israel to actively accomplishing this task themselves. And if the lessons of Samuel the Lamanite are any indication, this will be best achieved when the Book of Mormon successfully alerts its audience to the new era underway, thus granting the Gentiles urgency for their work and a conscious awareness of what that work is supposed to accomplish.

If the structural and linguistic allusions to Matthew 5 alerted us to the importance of fulfillment in 3 Nephi 1, and if the symbolism of Samuel's sign communicated the equivalent importance of temporality for relating to that fulfillment in productive ways, the parallels with 3 Nephi 21 allowed us to reflect on what the tangle between fulfillment and temporality has to say about the greater project of the Book of Mormon. For fulfillment to achieve its larger aims it must be coupled with an awareness of its own temporal implications and a willingness to take

up the work that inevitably follows. Toward this end, time itself can be a messenger, alerting its addressees to the problematic invisibilities of fulfillment and ensuring that fulfillment opens beyond itself to a new posture of discipleship.

Here, at long last, we may finally be in a position to reflect once more on one of the questions with which this paper opened—namely, the curiously positioned division between the books of Helaman and 3 Nephi. If fulfillment is indeed most productively understood as a *beginning* rather than an end, placing the fulfillment of Samuel's prophecy at the beginning of 3 Nephi is entirely fitting and suggests that this fulfillment most properly belongs to an opening chapter because of the nature of fulfillment itself. In fact, when considered in this light, the narrative's apparent ability to fit so seamlessly into Helaman's conclusion may be the precise problem Mormon wishes to counteract! The potent similarities between 3 Nephi 1–8 and the book of Helaman create a kind of invisibility that risks obscuring the inaugural force of fulfillment. Had Mormon included 3 Nephi 1 at the end of the book of Helaman, modern readers (much like the Nephites) would likely have misunderstood these fulfilled signs to indicate a mere conclusion to Samuel's story. By positioning this text as he does, Mormon instead editorially alerts us to the proper paradigm for understanding fulfillment, showing that fulfillment is a beginning and inviting us to the task of actively working out those implications.

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