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Narrative Doubling
and the Structure of Helaman

Kimberly M. Berkey

The Book of Helaman is a segment of the Book of Mormon whose study is both imperative and complicated in underappreciated ways. The imperative behind the book of Helaman’s study lies in the text’s significance for the self-conception of the Book of Mormon as well as its mythmaking function for the early Saints in their imaginative mapping of the American West. Like the Book of Mormon, Helaman traffics in buried texts that disclose signs and covenants and makes explicit the latent Lamanite frame that undergirds the Book of Mormon as a whole. It presents, as well, the Book of Mormon’s most robust account of secret combinations—a group that then entranced the text’s earliest readers to such a degree that they used this characterization to imbue their landscape with religious significance, describing the mountains surrounding the Salt Lake Valley as “the abode of the

1. The Book of Mormon is oriented by and sympathetic to the Lamanites more than many Latter-day Saints recognize. It explicitly addresses itself to the Lamanites (see Title Page), identifies them as the covenant remnant responsible for building the New Jerusalem (3 Nephi 21:23–24; cf. D&C 28:8–9), and consistently holds up Lamanite faithfulness as a contrast to the Nephite infidelity that resulted in their eventual destruction. These, among other prioritizations of a Lamanite frame, led Jared Hickman to credit the Book of Mormon as a “theology of Native and/or nonwhite liberation” and a text that performatively undoes its own instances of racism (Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” American Literature 86/3 [2014]: 435).
spirits of Gadianton robbers." 

To understand the Book of Mormon's sense of itself as a material artifact, to clarify the theological status of the Lamanites, and to explore the way the Book of Mormon helped sculpt a sense of place for early Latter-day Saints, close attention to the book of Helaman is an unavoidable prerequisite.

Complicating that imperative, however, is the book's structural density, which I will treat here as a problem of doubling. Nearly every major character or object or social group within Helaman's text is doubled with another character or object or social group. Everything comes in twos: murdered chief judges (Helaman 1:9; 8:27), Lamanite conversions (Helaman 5:19, 50–51), buried objects (Helaman 5:51; 11:10), slippery treasures (Helaman 12:18–19; 13:18–20), angelic ministrations (Helaman 5:48; 16:14), and so on.  

The book opens with two distinct threats to the Nephite government and concludes with the sermons of two prophets, who each give two signs relative to the prediction of Jesus's future advent. The book of Helaman also contrasts the dualistic split in Lehi’s posterity more pointedly than any other Book of Mormon text. This doubling extends even to seemingly basic


3. Even this attempt to name the structural density of the text obscures the complexity of the situation. My point is less to claim Helaman's rigid adherence to the number two and more to note the proliferation of parallels that often—but not always—present as doubles. There is, for instance, one other mention of a chief judge's murder in Helaman 6:19 (although it is not part of the narrative action as are the other two instances), and depending on how we group buried objects, this theme could also be read to occur more than twice (should we include, for instance, references to the "hiding up" of treasures/tools?). It should also be noted that the two cases of angelic ministrations referenced here represent the appearances of angels to large groups in Helaman, and not appearances to individuals. However, the prophets Nephi and Samuel also exhibit individual relationships with angels in private theophany settings, which could be taken to form yet another double (see Helaman 10:6; 13:7).
concepts such as motion: Helaman twice highlights the motility of the Earth (Helaman 5:27, 31–33; 12:13–15) and twice reports major characters falling to the ground (Helaman 9:3–4; 14:7). In this strategy of doubling, Helaman carries forward the trajectory of the book of Alma, which is also organized around a set of detailed parallels. But where Alma’s parallels are stable, precise, and neatly composed, Helaman’s doubles seem messy and erratic, collapsing together only to bleed into other doubled pairs and trouble their borders. Helaman is thus both a priceless moment of clarity through which a better understanding of the Book of Mormon can be reached and also simultaneously opaque as a nebulous text whose precise shape is difficult to pin down. It is, in other words, not unlike the “slippery treasures” encountered for the first time within its pages.

This paper tracks the structural shift from Alma’s tidy parallels into the seemingly erratic doubles of Helaman and suggests one possible culprit behind that collapse. Put simply, the blame seems to fall on what the text presents as a new Nephite technology for subverting the law. It is no coincidence that the book of Helaman appears to abandon every attempt at structural coherence at the very same moment that it narrates the rise of secret combinations. Indeed, what might at first appear to be an accidental degradation in the structure of Helaman reveals itself to be, instead, a deliberate response to the narrative instabilities inherent in describing the Gadianton robbers. What I call narrative doubling, then, refers to the structural forms correlated by the book of Helaman with its description of events among the Nephites between the fortieth and ninetieth year of the reign of the judges. In order to make that case, I highlight two kinds of doubling in Helaman (narrative juxtaposition and prophetic mirroring) in which the former showcases the purported cause of structural erosion while the latter showcases the text’s (and, perhaps, the entire Book of Mormon’s) attempt to halt that erosion. After a brief overview of the structural patterns of Alma and Helaman as I see them (still preliminarily, it must be noted), the paper will examine the narrative juxtaposition between secret combinations and Nephite dissenters in order to reveal the disruptive novelty of the
secret combinations’ subversion. Following that, I turn to Helaman 8, where the prophet Nephi exhibits the second kind of doubling characteristic to the book of Helaman—a specular or mirroring double that is leveraged here to disrupt the Gadianton robbers. By tracing Helaman’s structural phenomena, the technology of secret combinations, and the prophetic mirroring that attempts to undermine that technology, this paper hopes to clarify the structure of Helaman at the same moment that it reveals the real obstacles complicating its study.

Alma and Helaman: Structural Preliminaries

In 2017, Joseph Spencer published a brief article outlining the “intentional organizational structure of the book of Alma” as a two-dimensional grid in which Alma 30–44 mirrors the narrative of Alma 1–16, while Alma 45–63 inverts the narrative of Alma 17–29. Quite handily, for our purposes, Spencer concludes his article by laying out the parallels in a single table, which I reproduce here.

Table 1.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>First quarter (Alma 1–16)</th>
<th>Third quarter (Alma 30–44)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nehor (Alma 1)</td>
<td>Korihi (Alma 30)</td>
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<td>The Amlicites (Alma 2–3)</td>
<td>The Zoramites (Alma 31–35)</td>
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<td>Alma in Zarahemla (Alma 4–6)</td>
<td>Alma to Helaman (Alma 36–37)</td>
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<td>Alma in Gideon (Alma 7)</td>
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<td>Alma in Ammonihah (Alma 8–15)</td>
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<td>Details about war (Alma 16)</td>
<td>Details about war (Alma 43–44)</td>
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<td><strong>Second quarter (Alma 17–29)</strong></td>
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<td>Alma’s interrupted journey (Alma 17)</td>
<td>Alma’s interrupted journey (Alma 45)</td>
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<td>Ammon’s mission (Alma 17–20)</td>
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<td>Aaron’s mission (Alma 21–26)</td>
<td>Ammoron’s dissension (Alma 52–62)</td>
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<td>Aftermath and cleanup (Alma 27–29)</td>
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Spencer’s article is cogent, and the theological provocations he offers along the way are well worth readers’ attention. My purpose in citing it here is simply to contrast the structure of Alma with the structure of Helaman. Like Alma, the book of Helaman seems intent on organizing Nephite history around a series of comparisons, but Helaman’s comparisons are strung along in a linear chain rather than stacked in the sort of two-dimensional grid suggested by Spencer. The book opens with the juxtaposition of two attempted political coups that threaten Zarahemla in the years following Pahoran’s death (Helaman 1–2), then looks to a broad comparison between Nephites and Lamanites along both military and religious metrics (Helaman 4–6), followed by the prophet Nephi’s inverted echoes of secret combination techniques in his effort to destabilize Gadianton operatives’ seizure of judicial power (Helaman 7–9). Mormon then interrupts the narrative in order to emphasize Nephite wickedness by way of an overt comparison with the divine responsiveness of a kinetic earth (Helaman 10–12), and the book concludes with Samuel’s elevation of Lamanite faithfulness as a mirror to Nephite instability along once-more racialized lines (Helaman 13–15). That these doubles are intentionally comparative is evident in statements of explicit appraisal peppered throughout the book.6

6. As a representative sample drawn from texts not discussed in more depth in what follows, see Helaman 4:24 (the Nephites “had become weak, like unto their brethren the Lamanites”); Helaman 12:7 (“O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth”); Helaman 15:15 (“Had the mighty works been shown unto [the Lamanites] which have been shown unto you [Nephites] ... they never would again have dwindled in unbelief”).
When compared to the structure of Alma, one is struck by the way the book of Helaman fails to align its pericopes with others in the text; Helaman's doubles consistently gaze inward on the contents of its narrative rather than across the narrative to compare it with later or earlier narrative events. Where Alma 1–16 renders itself parallel to Alma 30–44, for instance, Helaman 1–2 exhibits no structural interest in what, say, Helaman 10–12 might signify. Helaman may carry forward Alma's strategy of doubling, in other words, but it does not seem to carry those doubles forward in a way that gives shape and coherence to the book as a whole.

We might notice, as well, that while the parallels in Helaman are not only more tightly condensed, they are also proliferating. Alma's organization pairs together fifteen-chapter sections of the narrative. At best, Helaman's parallels only ever unite three-chapter text blocks, any one of which contains several smaller doubles that haphazardly pick up themes and images from elsewhere in the text. It's as if as soon as the narrator finds a useful comparison around which to organize the account, it immediately slips away, until the entire book of Helaman is composed of successively pinned-together parallels that fail to hold. The juxtaposition of dissenters with secret combinations characterizes Nephite politics for only a single year; after that, the most pertinent illustrative contrast is the military failure of the Nephites compared to Lamanite success; that situation likewise diffuses itself in rapid order, and the text scrambles to compare the prophet Nephi's revelatory capacity with the fraternal knowledge of secret combinations, and so on. The book of Helaman is deeply invested in comparisons, and yet that comparative framework fails to sustain itself in any thematically cohesive way.

The fact that doubling remains so prominent in Helaman all the same suggests that we are witnessing not simply a novel narrative technique keyed to a new era of Nephite history so much as the simultaneous failure of the same narrative techniques that had succeeded so well in the previous book. Readers are meant to understand that Nephite history is no longer sufficiently stable to bear the kind of tidy structuring that had been imposed on the book of Alma, and so we witness the
previous two-dimensional grid collapse into the one-dimensional linear organization of Helaman. As the Nephites hurtle toward large-scale destruction in Third Nephi and (later) Mormon, so, too, the parallels that organize their narrative—and the auto-deconstruction of those parallels—pick up in tempo, leaving the structure of Helaman caught in the Nephites’ breakneck gallop toward total political collapse.

Given that this structural disintegration and increasing tempo occurs so soon after the transition between books, Helaman’s opening chapters warrant extra attention in accounting for this shift. Helaman’s first stretch of text narrates the rise of secret combinations set against the backdrop of the more familiar Book of Mormon phenomenon of militarized dissent. As many Latter-day Saint commenters have noted, secret combinations are the novelty that sets Helaman apart from previous sections of the Book of Mormon, and so it is to secret combinations that we should look in order to understand the novel textual structure used to narrate their rise. Helaman opens with the account of their development, is dogged by their political disruption at every step of its narrative, and sets the stage for dire prophetic warnings about the latter-day destruction that secret combinations portend. If the structure of Helaman is indeed characterized by seemingly erratic parallels, its

7. Brant Gardner, for instance, dedicates an entire introductory chapter of his commentary on the book of Helaman to the identity and theological significance of secret combinations; see Brant Gardner, “The Gadianton Robbers in Mormon’s Theological History: Their Structural Role and Plausible Identification,” in *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:11–29. Reynolds and Sjodahl go so far as to describe the years narrated in the book of Helaman as “among the most important in Nephite history” specifically because “at that time arose that terrible and devilish organization, the Gadianton Robbers” (George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973], 5:202). And McConkie and Millet place first on their list of “timely messages” in the book of Helaman the “rise of secret combinations and the Gadianton bands,” which they take as evidence “that Satan . . . is alive and well on planet earth” today (Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991], 3:331). The rhetoric of the latter two examples is illustrative of the imaginative sway Gadianton robbers continue to exercise for many Latter-day Saints well into the twentieth century.
content is undoubtedly characterized by secret combinations. My suggestion is that the book of Helaman, like many sophisticated narratives, intends to correlate that content with its structural form.

**Narrative Juxtaposition: Secret Combinations versus Militarized Dissent**

Significant as the account of secret combinations is to the opening chapters of Helaman, however, it is not narrated in a vacuum. Kishkumen’s band (the first secret combination recorded in the Book of Mormon) arises as a new method for subverting Nephite law—a method whose innovation is thrown into relief by overt comparison with another, more traditional method of legal disruption among the Nephites: militarized dissent. The titular “secrecy” of secret combinations is pointed up by contrast with the overt displays of the aggrieved dissenters, while the difficulty of identifying Kishkumen’s operatives and plans is juxtaposed with the brazen visibility of dissenter aims. In order to elaborate on these differences, readers are encouraged to look to the political conditions narrated in Helaman’s opening chapter, the several similarities between secret combinations and dissenters, and the crucial divergences between the two groups in dress and tactics. Over the course of these comparisons, it becomes clear that no parallel or double remains structurally stable in Helaman because secret combinations erode binaries altogether.

Helaman 1 opens with a succession crisis that splits three ways rather than two; it adds, that is, a third political option to the more conventional dual lines of rivalry that characterize previous stretches of the Nephite narrative. Among the political constituencies of Pahoran’s three sons are represented not just the anticipated winners (Pahoran is elected chief judge; Helaman 1:5) and losers (Pacumeni; Helaman 1:6). There is also a third brother, Paanchi, who represents a group of sore, nearly dissenting losers. Here, too, the story seems to proceed at first along predictable lines. Paanchi and his followers are “exceedingly wroth” at their loss and are just “about to . . . rise up in rebellion” when
the judicial machine suddenly incarcerates their leader and condemns him to death (Helaman 1:7–8). Instead of amping up the conflict in the form of full-blown dissent, however, Paanchi’s followers resort to more subtle disruptions of power by assassinating Pahoran and taking a protective oath of secrecy (Helaman 1:9–11). Three brothers vying for government office thus provide the narrative backdrop against which can appear a third way to exert political power. Rather than splitting predictably into the binary camps of winners and losers or, more accurately, majority populists and minority dissenters, the Nephite populace here finds itself divided between the winning majority, the defeated minority, and those who cannot be neatly grouped with either.

Of special note here is the way that this new group is explicitly set alongside the more familiar phenomenon of Nephite dissent. Not only is this juxtaposition internal to the band’s initial formation (Kishkumen’s group, remember, is populated by those who were “about to ... rise up in rebellion” [Helaman 1:7] but opted for murder instead); the chapter also supplies an external specter of dissent in the form of the army that threatens Zarahemla the following year—an army led, notably, by “a man whose name was Coriantumr; ... and he was a dissenter from among the Nephites” (Helaman 1:15). Due to the political distractions attending Pahoran’s succession, the Nephites found themselves insufficiently prepared for an attack on their capital city such that Coriantumr “did take possession of the whole” of Zarahemla, executed their newly appointed chief judge, and immediately launched a campaign against outlying Nephite territories (Helaman 1:20–22). The Nephites scrambled for several months to gain their military footing, but no sooner had the general Moronihah “established again peace” (Helaman 2:1) than the text pivots straightaway to secret combinations once again (Helaman 2:3ff.). The formation of Kishkumen’s band of robbers is framed internally and externally by both the threat and the realized consequences of dissent.

8. It is suggestive that Kishkumen and his fellows exhibit something like fraternal unity at the same moment that they concretize the fraternal division between Pahoran’s three sons.
The intentional comparison between secret combinations and Nephite dissenters is signaled by more than their tightly interlacing narratives, however. Kishkumen's group is also framed in terms similar to Coriantumr's army. Both are explicitly motivated by "anger" (Helaman 1:9, 16–17). Each is also oriented toward political power and wealth, with dissenters being characterized throughout the Book of Mormon by their regnal aspirations (of which there are also hints here; see Helaman 1:16), while secret combinations are known for government maneuvering and "robbery" (Helaman 2:4). Both groups seem to have some kind of Jaredite connection, suggested by the recognizably Jaredite names of their leaders, Kishkumen and Coriantumr. And both are also introduced, oddly enough, with an emphasis on their dress. The dissenter-led army comes notably bedecked in armor (Helaman 1:14), while Kishkumen makes his first narrative appearance in disguise (Helaman 1:12). Each group is also numerically undetermined: Coriantumr heads an army that cannot be counted due to its excess (an "innumerable army of men" [Helaman 1:14]), while Kishkumen's band is untotalizable due to its secrecy (they "did mingle themselves among the people, in a manner that they all could not be found" [Helaman 1:12]). Note, as well, that each group is responsible for the death of a chief judge in Helaman's opening chapter: Kishkumen famously murders Pahoran (Helaman 1:9), while Pacumeni is killed by Coriantumr in battle (Helaman 1:21). Point by point, secret combinations and Nephite dissenters are set up as doubles of each other in the first chapter of Helaman.

This pairing not only forms the first and most paradigmatic double of the book of Helaman; it also delineates with particular clarity the distinction between secret combinations and Nephite dissenters that is responsible for the structural instability of the text and the political instability of the subsequent Nephite government. For all their

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9. One Coriantumr figures prominently in the final Jaredite battles described in Ether 13–15. The name Kish (and related variants) also appear frequently in names from the book of Ether; see Ether 1:18–19; 8:10–17; 9:1–12; 10:17–18. For more on the connection between Jaredites and Kishkumen's band, refer to Gardner, "Gadianton Robbers."
similarities, the narration of these two groups sharply differentiates their methods. Our first hint of this distinction occurs with the different clothing associated with each group's grab for power, which provides a contrast in visibility versus secrecy. The dissenters lead an army dressed conspicuously in armor—a type of clothing with nothing duplicitous about it. Armor registers immediately as armor, announcing unironically the anticipated military conflict propagated by its wearers. Indeed, armor's function depends on that visibility precisely in order to intimidate opposing armies. A disguise, by contrast, works through its invisibility. If a disguise is identifiable as a disguise, it has already failed. Disguises cannot straightforwardly perform their own utility in a recognizable way without immediately compromising that utility. Through something as seemingly inconsequential as the descriptions of their appearance, the text positions Nephite dissenters as relying on straightforward, conspicuous display, and secret combinations, by contrast, as depending on enigmatic and covert acts.

Similar to the brazen visibility of their dress, dissenters operate along external, visible axes of movement and behavior—axes, moreover, that are consistently linear. This pattern is evident throughout the long history of Book of Mormon precedents for dissent in which a Nephite faction grows dissatisfied with either the Church or the government and makes a beeline for Lamanite territory, cutting an externally oriented line from one side of the binary to the other and trading their Nephite identity for a Lamanite affiliation. This was the tactic by which Amalickiah famously assumed the Lamanite throne in Alma 46–47, causing his followers to join "with the traditions of the Lamanites" (Alma 47:36). Less famously but following the same pattern of dualistic territory-switching, the Book of Mormon reports dissenters joining with Lamanites in the thirty-ninth, fifty-fourth, fifty-sixth, and eightieth years of the reign of the judges (Alma 63:14; Helaman 4:1–4; 11:24). Secret combinations, by contrast, work orthogonal to grand displays of political affiliation and the external axes of militarized allegiance. Rather than venting their frustrated electoral ambitions by turning outward and allying themselves with a warring clan,
members of Kishkumen’s band turn inward and ally themselves with one another, exhibiting a tactical reliance on the invisibility provided by oath-bound confidentiality. Thus, Kishkumen and his group avoid detection by “mingl[ing] themselves among the people” (Helaman 1:12), evincing the broad diffusion by which secret combinations operate. Once again, the text pointedly contrasts their tactics with Coriantumr’s military transparency by noting that his goal was “to cut his way through with the sword” (Helaman 1:23), bifurcating Nephite lands by carving a straight line from one exterior territorial boundary to the other.

This same distinction between visible linearity and invisible diffusion is also on display in the way each group exits Zarahemla. After the death of Kishkumen, the band’s new leader and the remaining members quietly diffuse themselves into the wilderness: “They took their flight out of the land, by a secret way, into the wilderness; and thus . . . they could nowhere be found” (Helaman 2:11). When Coriantumr exits the narrative, however, he does so with a conspicuous trajectory: “[Coriantumr] did not tarry in the land of Zarahemla, but he did march forth with a large army, even toward the city of Bountiful” (Helaman 1:23). Notice as well how these different technologies of power are reflected in each group’s murder of a chief judge. Secret combinations are described as looking inward, taking aim at the very heart of Nephite government, such that Kishkumen killed Pahoran “as he sat upon the judgment-seat” (Helaman 1:9) at the inmost nucleus of Nephite territory and governance. It should come as no surprise that Coriantumr kills Pacumeni “against the wall” of the city (Helaman 1:21), along a boundary—indeed, at the precise external limit he hoped to breach. Each group’s dress, movement, and even the deaths of their most prominent victims are narrated in a way that exhibits their aims and methods. While dissenters are boundary-crossing, allegiance-switching groups, secret combinations are oriented internally, flouting traditional political binaries in favor of diffuse, networked tactics. It is this tactical distinction, I want to claim, that proves so disastrous for both governmental and textual stability.
Although dissenters have plagued Nephite politics throughout the Book of Mormon, such rebellions typically resolve themselves in a more or less straightforward fashion, often giving way to long stretches of peace. The new technology of secret combinations, however, cannot seem to resolve into any stable equilibrium. Readers are meant to understand that secret combinations prove so disastrous to the Nephite government because of their impact on the social binaries that organize Nephite life. Where dissenters reinforce social boundaries, secret combinations erode them—precisely the distinction on display in the narrative juxtaposition of Helaman 1–2. To switch national allegiance, as the Nephite dissenters have done, is to reinforce the difference between the two identities being exchanged (judges vs. king-men, say, or Nephites vs. Lamanites). To affiliate oneself with one side of that binary over and against the other is to make use of the binary to ground one's identity. Just as the full force of a law is not felt until it is broken or a geographic border is not firmly maintained unless it is felt to be under threat, so, too, the social boundaries that structure the Nephite narrative are reinforced whenever a dissenter crosses them.

Secret combinations, however, weaken and erode those boundaries in that they never transgress those limits. Rather than joining with the Lamanites and thereby shoring up the Nephite/Lamanite division, Kishkumen's band expresses its dissent internal to the Nephite polity. Their invisible, networked, and diffuse approach to power throws the sovereign model of Nephite legal authority into complete disarray. It is, paradoxically, through their disinterest in the traditional binaries of Nephite life that secret combinations so successfully erode them. It may be no coincidence, then, that it is a literal boundary that is threatened as a consequence of their scheming in the opening chapter. Helaman 1:18 records that "because of so much contention and so much difficulty in the government, [the Nephites] had not kept sufficient guards in the land of Zarahemla." No sooner do secret combinations emerge in the Book of Mormon than even something as literal as the border enforcement of the Nephite capital is immediately eroded.
To return briefly to the structural questions that opened this article, at least one way should now be clear in which the political instability of the Nephite government is reflected in the structural instability of the book of Helaman, and how secret combinations, as a narrative phenomenon, are responsible for both. Social and narrative binaries can no longer map a terrain thrown into binary-eroding chaos. It is a measure of the slipperiness of secret combinations that the group associated with binaries and visibility can be cleanly dispatched ("[Coriantumr] himself was slain, and the Lamanites did yield themselves into the hands of the Nephites" [Helaman 1:32]), while the group associated with diffusion and secrecy can only be temporarily forced underground just to recur in equally nebulous and ever more disruptive forms for the rest of the Nephite story. Structural parallels come undone when they narrate a history haunted by that underground.

And yet, although Helaman dispatches with the tidy, two-dimensional parallels of the sort displayed in the book of Alma, this is not to say that parallels and doubles are entirely discontinued in Helaman. Nor does the book of Helaman represent a mere structural flop, as if the narrator was stubbornly forwarding a set of authorial tactics without any heed for their obvious failure. The erosion of political binaries by secret combinations is not the last word on doubling in Helaman. There is another kind of doubling running through the text that functions as something other than the broad-scale historical juxtapositions we saw in Alma. These are the moments where doubling is leveraged as a mirror, which I will illustrate with two occasions, both of which cluster around the prophet Nephi. In the first, Nephi uses his prophetic power to mirror the logic and methods of secret combinations, and, in the second, the Earth reflects the instability of the Nephite situation (initially by way of a famine invoked through Nephi's newly bestowed sealing power). Helaman may be rife with quickly proliferating and seemingly unstable doubles, but not all of those doubles function in the same way. Additionally, it is in this second method of doubling that we find hints of intention behind Helaman's structural instability.
The metaphor of mirroring will be useful to us here for two reasons. First, mirroring emphasizes visibility. A reflective surface doubles an image in such a way that it reproduces the entirety of the image and makes that entirety open to a gaze. While narrative juxtaposition also aims to underline a motif through its repetition or to highlight a contrast by way of its opposition, such juxtapositions only aim at isolated motifs or contrasts. Mirroring instead produces visibility in a broader register. As we saw in the previous section, juxtaposition rendered visible only certain points of comparison—particular items of clothing, specific patterns of movement, or certain behavioral tactics. To hold a mirror up to secret combinations is not to emphasize a solitary feature (a nose here or an eye there) but to reproduce the whole face in perfect clarity. Given this emphasis on visibility, it is no coincidence that the book of Helaman associates mirroring doubles most closely with the interruption of secret combinations—that is, precisely when the book hopes to counter strategies based on secrecy and hiddenness. Beginning in Helaman 7–9, Nephi’s task is to disrupt Gadianton tactics (to disrupt their disruption, we might say), and the way he proposes to do so is by behaving like a reflective surface alongside their operation. Rendering them and their methods public and visible—especially on the broad scale that the term “mirroring” invokes—obviously hampers secret combinations’ reliance on invisibility. Using a mirroring metaphor thus allows us to highlight the visibility specific to this kind of doubling, which renders secret combination tactics inoperative.

Second, I use the language of “mirror” to indicate that this doubling is not as dualistic as a narrative juxtaposition. The goal here is not to compare and contrast two groups, but instead to reveal the traits of one. A mirror reproduces the same image with which it is faced; the person who stares back at you in a mirror is your twin, your own self rendered into an object and presented to you for inspection. There may be two visual surfaces in play—one on each side of the mirror—but there is arguably only one subject being rendered. Thus, rather than setting secret combinations against some other group in order to shed light on
both, the prophet Nephi sets secret combinations against themselves. In this way, he can perhaps disrupt their operation without re-inscribing the previous binaries that have been so problematic for Nephite/Lamanite politics. Assuming the language of mirroring is doubly useful in this way, let me now illustrate that mirroring with some details.

At the opening of Helaman 7, Nephi returns home to Zarahemla following a preaching circuit in the land northward and is emotionally overwhelmed by the degree of government corruption he finds among the Nephites. In particular, he is struck by the “state of such awful wickedness” in which “those Gadianton robbers fill[ed] the judgment-seats” (Helaman 7:4). When a histrionic display on his garden tower draws a crowd, Nephi seizes the opportunity to call his audience to repentance (Helaman 7:6–13). Although the ensuing sermon contains a notable prophecy of the coming Son of God (Helaman 8:14), less frequently observed is the fact that Nephi shapes that prophecy into a mirror image of the secret combinations against which he preaches. Even his well-known prophecy of an approaching messiah is framed as secret knowledge held by a prophetic brotherhood: “Behold, I say unto you, that Abraham not only knew of these things, but there were many before the days of Abraham who were called by the order of God . . . and this that it should be shown unto the people . . . that even redemption should come unto them” (Helaman 8:18). Like the Gadianton robbers, Abraham and his predecessors are here portrayed as a fraternal “order” oriented around a piece of information that is not public knowledge.

Nephi’s reflections grow more pointed as the chapter progresses. In a sudden twist at the close of his sermon, Nephi proves the extent of government corruption by announcing the murder of yet another chief judge. What makes this revelation so shocking, in addition to its abrupt delivery, is its specificity. Nephi is able not only to announce that “your judge is murdered, and he lieth in his blood;” but also to expose the culprit (“and he hath been murdered by his brother”), thereby exposing the very identity that secret combinations were initially formed in order to conceal: the identity of a chief judge’s assassin (Helaman 8:27; cf. 1:11). With that identification, moreover, Nephi exposes the hypocrisy of their
oaths, revealing their fundamental commitments as little more than fantasy. Whereas secret combinations use “signs, and . . . secret words” in order “that whatsoever wickedness [a] brother should do he should not be injured by his brother” (Helaman 6:22), the chief judge has here been killed by his literal brother. Even the means by which Nephi comes to this surprising knowledge echo secret combination methods. “The Lord God has made them known unto me,” Nephi explains (Helaman 7:29), echoing the only other instance of the phrase “made known” in the book of Helaman, which describes Kishkumen’s disclosure of an assassination attempt to a disguised servant (Helaman 2:7).

Beyond simply mirroring the logic of secret combinations, Nephi also mirrors their methods. He, too, uses signs to prove his identity and the veracity of his revelations (Helaman 9:24–25; cf. Helaman 2:7). He likewise duplicates the elaborately scripted scenarios required by political intrigue. Much as secret combinations must presumably plan out the lines they will deliver while performing their deceptions, Nephi stages beforehand the interchange his audience of judges will have with their suspect: “Say unto him—Has Nephi . . . agreed with thee, in the which ye have murdered . . . your brother? And behold, he shall say unto you, Nay. And ye shall say unto him: Have ye murdered your brother? And he shall stand with fear, and wist not what to say” (Helaman 9:27–30). Nephi can preemptively script a political scene with the accuracy of the most meticulous Gadianton operative.

Nor is all this mirroring lost on Nephi’s audience. His display of presumably confidential information leads them to assume, rather sensibly, that he has gained this knowledge by emulating their conspiratorial tactics: “Behold, we know that this Nephi must have agreed with some one to slay the judge, and then he might declare it unto us” (Helaman 9:16). Because Nephi has reflected their fraternal logic, use of signs, and political scripting, they assume he must be playing their game in its entirety, including conspiring with unknown allies to stage murder and leverage that violence in bids for power. The measure of how fully Nephi functions as a mirror for the Gadianton robbers is the degree to which they respond to him as if he represented a rival secret combination.
The text stresses, of course, that Nephi is working on the basis of divine revelation rather than conspiracy, but the reflective surface presented to his audience is no less clear. Mormon reports that “those judges were angry with him because he spake plainly unto them concerning their secret works of darkness” (Helaman 8:4). Their anger, note, is not due simply to the public broadcasting of what they intended to keep secret, but rather to the mirrored quality of that broadcast. They complain not that he “spake plainly” unto the people, for instance, but that he “spake plainly unto them.” The Gadiantons see themselves reflected in Nephi’s prophetic display and are simultaneously suspicious of and incensed by the clarity of the image.

The result of Nephi’s confrontation with secret combinations is curious both for the ambivalence of its outcome and the persistence of mirroring themes in the narrative aftermath. Some people “believed on the words of Nephi,” others identify him as a prophet, and an especially enthusiastic faction of the crowd identify him as “a god, for except he was a god he could not know of all things” (Helaman 9:39–41). Although all three sound like the sort of valuations with which a preacher could turn his audience to conversion, the outcome is instead strangely anticlimactic: “There arose a division among the people, inso-much that they divided hither and thither and went their ways, leaving Nephi alone, as he was standing in the midst of them” (Helaman 10:1). Perhaps as a consequence of the mirroring function he has performed for the past two chapters, appellations fail to stick to Nephi and instead simply refract to the identitarian politics of those who offer them.

In spite of the odd tonality and ultimate ambivalence of the people’s response, and in spite of the fact that the text now leaves behind such exclusive focus on secret combinations, the book of Helaman does not leave behind the specular technique Nephi represented. The text continues to hold up mirrors on a wider scale that no longer operates along interpersonal or even anthropocentric lines. To capture the expanding range of Nephite wickedness and instability, the book of Helaman selects what is, in some ways, the largest possible mirror one could identify for mortals: the very dust from which they were formed. Nephi’s
local and particular mirroring gives way to mirroring on such a large scale that the very Earth is enlisted to reflect back to the Nephites the instability of their situation. Thanks to Nephi’s request for famine, the seasons no longer bring rain and harvest at predictable intervals (Helaman 11:3–5). As far back as chapter 5, the earth is presented as liable to sudden shaking (Helaman 5:27), and, in chapter 9, it was explicitly the earth that displayed the blood of the murdered chief judge (Helaman 9:3), mirroring political violence back at its perpetrators. By the end of Helaman, the earth is further portrayed as an unreliable repository for treasures or hidden plans that will be “[found] . . . again no more” because of the curse upon their owners. In the book of Helaman, the earth is made to be as unstable as the Nephite situation is precarious, and so it is to the earth that we must look for the continuation of the narrative’s mirroring technique.

It is precisely this logic, for instance, that lies behind Mormon’s odd interpolation in Helaman 12—a chapter that breaks with the narrative action of the previous and following chapters in order to wax rhapsodic about “the unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men” (Helaman 12:1). Curiously, the theme of Nephite wickedness and instability gives way almost immediately to a long reflection on “the dust of the earth” that “moveth hither and thither” in response to divine command (Helaman 12:7–8). The Earth is here represented as radically unstable, prone to earthquakes, shattering mountains, interrupting its own orbit, and evacuating entire oceans (Helaman 12:8–16). Much like Nephite fidelity, the Earth is radically in motion. It is within this chapter—in fact, within one of its most maligned verses—that the mirroring quality of this geological dynamism is made explicit. In the infamous “Copernican verse” of Helaman 12, the Earth is celebrated not only for its obedient motility but also for revealing what is actually the case despite appearances to the contrary. Mormon writes: “And thus, according to [God’s] word the earth goeth back, and it appeareth unto man that the sun standeth still; yea, and behold, this is so; for surely it is the earth that moveth and not the sun” (Helaman 12:15). Under normal circumstances, it appears to creatures
on the surface of the Earth that the Sun moves while the Earth remains fixed; from our perspective, the Sun rises in the east each morning, travels across the sky, and sets in the west each evening at dusk. In the book of Helaman, however, the Earth is instead reflective of the post-Copernican perspective that knows, despite appearances, that it is the Earth that moves rather than the Sun. The Earth's obedient dynamism here functions as a mirror of planetary reality in a way that is not immediately visible on the ground. This association is useful shorthand for the larger function of the Earth in the book of Helaman: to make visible through reflection the objective reality of a situation in order to disrupt the Nephites' subjective blindness. As long as the Nephites are erratically unfaithful, given to secret murders, and obsessed with wealth, the Earth will mirror their instability, violence, and greed.

Mirroring is thus a consistent and deliberate type of doubling in the book of Helaman, always leveraged against Nephite wickedness in a way calculated to disrupt the invisibility of secret combination tactics. The intentionality behind Nephi's doubling hints at the possibility of an equally deliberate intention behind the doubles characterizing Helaman's structure. If the narrator can depict doubling as a calculated tactic for Nephi's countering of Gadianton robbers, it stands to reason that the narrator's own deployment of doubles at a structural level is equally calculated. In Helaman's condensation and proliferation of narrative doubles, the text mirrors the political and spiritual instability of its Nephite protagonists and displays the diffusive tactics of its Gadianton antagonists. In its obvious borrowing from the structural techniques of the preceding book, Helaman likewise mirrors the structure of Alma in order to render visible that structure's subsequent collapse. In sum, where narrative juxtaposition provided a contrast that highlighted secret combinations' novel technologies for gaining power, prophetic and geological mirroring seem designed to counter those technologies without simply reverting to the binaries that had previously structured Nephite history. That this prophetic/narrative technique is ultimately unable to halt the Nephites' mad dash toward political collapse should
not cause us to miss the determined care with which the book of Helaman deploys its doubles, nor the intentionality that lies beneath what seemed at first glance to be their erratic arrangement.10

Conclusion

Through the narrative juxtaposition of secret combinations with Nephite dissenters and through the mirrored displays held up by the prophet Nephi and a dynamic earth, we see just two instances of Helaman’s saturation with doubles. The task of this paper has been to put just the barest sample of these doubles in conversation with others as a way of introducing the structural questions that attend the study of this book. The parallels within Helaman seem, at first, to be a kind of editorial holdover from Alma that reflect a binary structure to Nephite public life. When that structure is then eroded by the Gadianton robbers (whose technology of power is devastatingly fluid, networked, diffuse, and invisible), the book of Helaman counters with another model of doubling that is specular rather than comparative. It is to this second, mirroring technique that readers ought to look for the intentionality behind Helaman’s narrative structure. While this is far from the last word on the structure of the text, at the very least, it seems clear that we cannot sort out the role and status of Helaman within the Book of Mormon until we have sorted through some of its doubles, a task made all the trickier by the fact that not all these doubles operate in the same way.

What’s more, the stakes of this task are especially high given the relationship between the book of Helaman and the Book of Mormon as a whole. Like the hidden plans of secret combinations, the Book of Mormon is also a buried text that discloses signs and covenants. Like the

10. Although I don’t take it up here, Samuel the Lamanite represents further evidence of that determined care. Samuel is also a figure of doubling in the way he holds up the Lamanites as a comparative foil for the Nephites, and in how he himself structurally doubles the prophetic interventions of Nephi and invokes cosmic parallels between the events surrounding the birth and death of Jesus. See Kimberly M. Berkey, “Temporality and Fulfillment in 3 Nephi 1,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 24 (2015): 53–83.
disruptive mirroring of Nephi's prophecy, the Book of Mormon aims to reveal secret works of darkness (see 2 Nephi 10:15; Alma 37:23–25) and shatter certain pretensions among its latter-day audience (e.g., 2 Nephi 29:3–4). Much of the Book of Mormon's framing is markedly Lamanite in a way that comes into view most clearly in Helaman, where Samuel analyzes the Nephites' erratic spiritual condition (what has colloquially come to be known as "the pride cycle") and identifies the Lamanites as the covenant remnant. The Book of Mormon also speaks about its constituent records being "hidden up" in the earth, a phrase used only to refer either to sacred records or to the buried objects that populate the book of Helaman. Even the slipperiness of these buried treasures seems to reflect nineteenth-century American folklore about hidden wealth that slips away from its seekers' grasp. Many of the Book of Mormon's themes find their most potent doubles here, nested among a flurry of other parallels and mirrorings. Whatever we ultimately make of these parallels on top of all the others, it seems evident that the book of Helaman is key to the Book of Mormon's self-conception and that doubles are, in turn, key to the book of Helaman. Our reading of both will be measured by what we find doubled within their pages.

Kimberly Berkey is a doctoral student in theology at Loyola University Chicago. She holds degrees from Brigham Young University and Harvard Divinity School, and she currently serves on the board of both the Mormon Theology Seminar and the Book of Mormon Studies Association.

11. Indeed, Samuel the Lamanite provides the most systematic articulation within the Book of Mormon of what has come to be known colloquially among Latter-day Saints as "the pride cycle." If, as many readers claim, the pride cycle is one of the most dominant themes of the Book of Mormon, it ought not be missed that this theme originates from an emphatically Lamanite perspective. See Helaman 15.