

"Thus Saith the Lord": Prophetic Language in Samuel's Speech

"Therefore, thus saith the Lord: Because of the hardness of the hearts of the people of the Nephites, except they repent I will take away my word from them." (Helaman 13:8)

Ancient scriptures contain a number of revelatory speech forms or formulaic expressions which are unique to the prophetic writings.¹ That is to say, the prophetic speech forms are present in sections of scripture where God reveals his word directly to the prophets (i.e., Isaiah, Amos, Nephi, Joseph Smith). As might be expected, the same prophetic forms are also present in the Book of Mormon, for it, too, consists of prophetic writings.

To demonstrate the usage of prophetic language in the Book of Mormon, we will take a brief look at the prophetic writings of Samuel the Lamanite (Helaman 13–15). Six speech forms will be identified:

1. *Messenger Formula*. "Thus saith the Lord" (found thirty-nine times in the Book of Mormon, e.g., 1 Nephi 20:17; Mosiah 3:24; Alma 8:17). Samuel twice used the expression *saith the Lord* (Helaman 13:8, 11). The formula introduces oracular language, and hence is often found at the beginning of a pericope or section. Either God or a prophet is the speaker of the messenger formula. Its purpose is to indicate the origin and authority of the revelation.²

2. *Proclamation Formula*. "Listen to the words of Christ" (Moroni 8:8) or "Hearken to the word of the Lord" (Jacob 2:27; see Helaman 12:23) or "Hear the words of Jesus" (3 Nephi 30:1). Samuel told his audience to "hearken unto the words which the Lord saith" (Helaman 13:21). Similar to the messenger formula, the proclamation formula is often found at the beginning of a revelation or announcement. It is used as an emphatic summons to hear the word of the Lord.

3. *Oath Formula*. "As the Lord liveth" (1 Nephi 3:15, 4:32; 2 Nephi 9:16; see 25:20). The declaration is added to a testimony to accentuate the words of the speaker. For instance, Samuel stated: "As surely as the Lord liveth shall these things be, saith the Lord" (Helaman 15:17; compare Helaman 13:26).

4. *Woe Oracle*. An accusation form usually found as part of a judgment speech. Some forty examples of the woe oracle are attested in the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 1:13; 2 Nephi 9:27; 2 Nephi 15:21). The characteristic woe oracle consists of the accusation, the addressee, the intent of the accusation, and the promise of judgment. The prophet Samuel uttered a number of woe oracles against the Nephites (see Helaman 13:11–12, 14–17, 24; 15:2–3). Helaman 13:16–17, for example, contains the following elements:

Accusation: Yea, and wo

Addressee: be unto all the cities which are in the land round about

Intent: because of the wickedness and abominations which are in them

Promise of Judgment: And behold, a curse shall come upon the land, saith the Lord of Hosts

5. *Announcement Formula*. “I say unto you.” The revelation formula is well attested in the Book of Mormon. The Lord speaks to his audience (an individual or group) in the first person (see 3 Nephi 12:22; 20:15), or a prophet speaks to his audience using the formula, adding authority and emphasis to the revelation. The formula is found at the beginning of a clause, often accompanied with the particles *yea*, *behold*, or *therefore*. Samuel employs the formula three times (see Helaman 15:6, 12, 14).

6. *Revelation Formula*. “The word [of the Lord] came unto me, saying” (Jacob 2:11; see Alma 43:24; Ether 13:20). At the beginning of Samuel’s ministry to the Nephites, “behold, the voice of the Lord came unto him” (Helaman 13:3). Samuel told the Nephites that they would cry unto the Lord, “O that we had repented in the day that the word of the Lord came unto us” (Helaman 13:36).

Six prophetic speech forms present in Samuel’s speech—the messenger formula, the proclamation formula, the oath formula, the woe oracle, the announcement formula, and the revelation formula—are indicative of prophetic authority and prerogative. These speech forms and others dealing with the commission and divine workings of a prophet are also present in other sections of the Book of Mormon. It is hoped that this brief report will give birth to additional and in-depth studies on the topic of prophetic language in the Book of Mormon.

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Notes

1. For a complete study on the subject, see David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 88–101.

2. Modern prophets have commented concerning the import of this expression; see, for example, Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 136; *Journal of Discourses*, 23:370–72; 22:291–92; *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 38, 330.