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*Hubris* and *Atē*: A Latter-day Warning from the Book of Mormon

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Civilizations fall due to complex pressures, but the Book of Mormon points to one sin that assisted, if not drove, the demise of both the Nephite and Jaredite peoples. This sin was pride. This essay ties pride to the Old World concepts of *hubris* and *atē* as a means of revealing the dynamic nature of this sin and exploring its deadly character. It shows that pride leads to *hubris*, the attempt by individuals and nations to become a law unto themselves, and that the consequence of *hubris* is *atē*, a spiritual blindness that impels the individual or society toward its doom. The paper warns the Latter-day Saint about this vice.
**Hubris and Atē:**
**A Latter-day Warning from the Book of Mormon**

Richard D. Draper

Abstract: Civilizations fall due to complex pressures, but the Book of Mormon points to one sin which assisted if not drove the demise of both the Nephite and Jaredite peoples. This sin was pride. This essay ties pride to the Old World concepts of *hubris* and *atē* as a means of revealing the dynamic nature of this sin and exploring its deadly character. It shows that pride leads to *hubris*, the attempt by individuals and nations to become a law unto themselves, and that the consequence of *hubris* is *atē*, a spiritual blindness that impels the individual or society toward its doom. The paper warns the Latter-day Saint about this vice.

The Book of Mormon describes the bloody destruction of two former American nations. Will there be a third? A warning suggests the possibility: “Beware, . . . lest ye become as the Nephites of old” (D&C 38:39). Though this warning was directed specifically at the Church, this paper will show that the Church acts as a barometer of society. Any warning to the Church constitutes a warning to a nation. Since two former civilizations failed to heed the warning and perished, it seems well to examine the warning and God’s reason for issuing it.

Admittedly, civilizations are brought to ruin through complex pressures. But the Book of Mormon warns of one vice that stimulates and sustains other destructive forces. The book portends the destruction of nations by this ominous and pervasive power,
showing how it gradually weakens them until they finally collapse. The book gives a close look at the operation of that force not just once but twice.

The seedbed of this evil exists outside the clashes and conquests of cities and states and the fall of nations. Its ground is a certain condition that resides within the hearts of most individuals. Its fruit is what President Benson has called "the universal sin," one sin which makes all others pale in comparison, a sin so dark that once fully committed it allows no turning back, no repentance, no remorse.

Though ancient American prophets exposed this vile force and its consequences, they were not the only ones to perceive it nor explore its ramifications. Before turning to the specific details given in the Book of Mormon, insights gleaned by another ancient culture will provide an introduction and helpful terminology.

A number of the more religious people within Classical Greek society explored the idea of atē (pronounced AH-tay). The word captures the idea that people—due to overweening ambition, the lust for power, and a desire for the praise of the world—could actually suffer delusions, deceptions, and infatuations sent by the gods. These allowed individuals to bring about their own ruin. These individuals were, therefore, actively involved in bringing about their own downfall. Once the gods decreed against a person it was impossible for that person to resist impending doom.

Thus the word expressed a condition in which a person (or a people) came under a god's judgment, from which there was no escape. The idea conveyed by atē had two aspects. The first was

2 Albin Lesky, A History of Greek Literature, trans. by James Willis and Cronelis de Heer (New York: Corwell, 1966), 172; Mihai I. Spariousu, God of Many Names: Play, Poetry, and Power in Hellenic Thought from Homer to Aristotle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 26–27, 176. Studies in Greek literature abound with discussions on the idea of atē. There is no scholarly consensus on the precise meaning of the term, but general usage in ancient Greek sources show it to be a blindness or delusion sent by the gods, which infatuates and bewilders mortals and generally leads them to destruction. It is generally a punishment for insolent or rash behavior. See Homer, Iliad XVI, 805; VIII, 237;
from the viewpoint of the gods. It denoted the doom pronounced upon mortals who went beyond all limits and for whom there could be no turning back, and therefore no forgiveness. The second looked at the concept from a mortal viewpoint. It was a kind of spiritual blindness which at first flattered and encouraged but gradually deluded and finally impelled the individual down the path of his own destruction.  

The sin that led to atē was hubris (pronounced HYU-bris). This sin was committed when humans crossed over the bounds laid down by the gods and sought to become a law unto themselves. In doing so they disturbed the divinely ordered world or disrupted the plans of the gods. They thus came under the power of dikē (pronounced DEE-kay), or justice, and eventually fell victims to their own blindness.

Some of the ancient Greeks believed the word hubris derived from huper, connoting the idea "beyond measure." It is now doubted that huper was the source. Taking the ancient sources together, the idea of "determined excess" catches the meaning. The word hubris denotes the invasion of another's sphere (be he human or god) to that person's hurt. The nature of the hurt, however, was personal rather than physical harm. The foe trammled the ego and attempted to destroy the reputation of another. Out of this grew such additional meanings as "trespass," "arrogance," and particularly "pride" as expressed in insolent action.


3 Lesky, A History of Greek Literature, 176.

4 Broad Greek usage ties hubris to either pride or passion. Out of either of these grows the act of hubris. In its more mild form it expresses itself as insolence, a kind of disrespect for law, humankind, or the gods. In its strongest form it becomes wanton violence. See, for example, Homer, Odyssey XV, 329; XVII, 565; IV, 368; also Herodotus, I, 189; Hesiod, Opera et Dies 217. Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, s.v. "hubris." Lesky, A History of Greek Literature, 178; Spariosu, God of Many Names, 26, 53, 178. For a full treatment of this very complex idea, see N. R. E. Fisher, Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1992). For a good discussion of the word in Hellenic times, which forms the basis of usage in the New Testament, see Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 8:295-97.

5 Lesky, A History of Greek Literature, 178.
The verb form of the word, *hubrizō*, expressed arrogant conduct and scorn, which led to the harm, damage, injury, rough handling, or maltreatment of another. The basis of such behavior was self-conceit and a lack of fear or reverence toward the gods, which led to defiant insolence and deliberate violation of their will. In this light, *hubris* is an anti-god state of mind which expresses itself in deliberately profane activities.

An example seems in order. Aeschylus, a poet-playwright-theologian of the fifth century B.C., addressed the dual theme of *hubris* and *ate* in a number of plays. Influenced by Homeric ideas, he insisted that the cause of all suffering was moral defect, and the worst expression of this defect was *hubris*.

This theme he wove into his play *The House of Atreus*. The plot was built around the ancestral curse that was activated by an act of *hubris*. That deed, committed by Atreus, included killing the children of his kinsman, Thystes, and feeding their flesh to their unknowing father. Atreus’s motivation was to destroy Thystes and make his own position stronger. Atreus’s act, to the Greeks, constituted one of the most hideous sins. Its poison infected the next two generations, and the result was the destruction of the whole house. It particularly affected Agamemnon, Atreus’s son, on his way to the battles of Troy. Blind to its consequences, he yielded to pressure from his troops and sacrificed his daughter to the gods. This incautious act was neither willed nor sanctioned by the gods, but was an attempt to force the gods to do as Agamemnon desired. When his wife, Clytemnestra, heard the news, she sought revenge and, bringing in Aegisthus, plotted the assassination of her husband. Their success resulted in her son,

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6 In general Greek usage, the word denoted the idea of running riot or growing in wantonness often in sexual indulgence or use of power. See Homer, *Odyssey* I, 227. It revealed itself in the maltreatment, outrage, or mutilation of another as in Homer, *Iliad* XI, 695. See Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “hubrizō”; Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, 178. For a full treatment, see Fisher, *Hybris*.

7 Classical Greeks did not understand sin in the sense of enmity against God. The root meaning of their word often translated “sin” is to go beyond or miss a definite mark or goal. It carried the idea of failing to measure up and is best understood as moral defect. See Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “hamartanō.”
Orestes, killing her and bringing upon himself the curse of the Furies, which drove him mad.8

Aeschylus used the theme of the ancestral curse to probe the metaphysical problem of evil. His question amounts to this: In a divinely ordered universe, why are atrocities committed, and what is the reason for human suffering? A superficial look at the story suggests it is but a revenge tale. But looking deeper, we see a further message: crime begets crime. The gods do not will it, but humankind, being free, causes it. Individuals must, therefore, take full responsibility for their acts. So Agamemnon must fall. He brought Troy to rubble not for the glory of the gods or to fulfill their will, but because family honor and his own pride demanded it. He had to sustain his importance no matter what the cost. But in the process he killed his daughter and nearly destroyed all the youth of Greece.

The play repeatedly emphasizes the tragedy of a war for which Agamemnon was in large measure responsible. His pride caused him to become a kind of monster, grown fat and arrogant in his power, determined to reorder society according to his pleasure (hubris), yet blind (from atē) to the consequences of his own actions.

Clytemnestra was equally proud. Agamemnon unwittingly (from atē) goaded that pride by bringing his mistress, a war prize, home from the battles of Troy. She was no common slave, but Cassandra, daughter of the king of Troy and auguress of all the misfortune to befall Agamemnon. Already seeking revenge for the blow to her personal honor which Agamemnon unknowingly struck by sacrificing her daughter, Clytemnestra needed little encouragement to resort to assassination. Incited by the new blow to her vanity, she acted immediately, killing her husband within moments after he entered their palace. This she did knowing full well that it broke the order set down by the gods.

Her deed was abetted by Aegisthus, a demagogue turned tyrant to whom she was tied by adultery. Here another level of meaning becomes visible. The lust shared by the two was not mere

8 Aeschylus, The House of Atreus (also known as the Oresteia), a trilogy comprising the plays Iphigenia, Agamemnon, and Orestes. The reasoning here follows Lesky, A History of Greek Literature, 175–78, and parallels Spariosu, God of Many Faces, 26–27.
physical passion but a love for political intrigue and a desire for power. Agamemnon was king. With him out of the way, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus could become co-rulers of Argos. Every act of vengeance executed by some member of the house of Atreus carried some motive of gain, as well as an attempt to reorder the rules of the cosmos for his or her own end. But each attempt bred a reaction unanticipated by the players. All were blind to their own folly, and they unwittingly set off the charge of their own destruction.

We are shown an inevitable sequence of events. Power breeds insolence and crime, which brings judgment and retribution. But the retribution comes directly as a result of the activities of the individuals: they bring it about by their own blindness. *Hubris* leads to *atē* and then to ruin.

In sum, *hubris* can be translated as pride, that is, self-conceit, and the acts that grow out of that conceit. Therefore, the word catches the idea of both the attitude which drives an individual to commit defiant acts against the will of the gods and the acts themselves. Eventually, pride leads one to commit that one last act—an act of wanton deliberate rebellion possible only with a knowledge of the desires of the gods—which unleashed irreversible divine wrath. Here we see the intertwining of pride, *hubris*, and *atē*. Pride is not *hubris* but rather the evil disposition on which the sin is grounded and by which it is fueled. Pride does not necessarily lead to *hubris*. Yet one cannot commit *hubris* without first being filled with pride.

So much for philology. How common are these forces elsewhere? The Book of Mormon insists they were active in the Americas during ancient times and warns that they are active today. However, an understanding of the actual operation of these forces as revealed in the Book of Mormon requires a few refinements and modifications to the Greek ideas.

From a Book of Mormon perspective, we can define *atē* as the point at which a person or a people has become fully ripe in iniquity. At that moment they come under the judgment of a just God from whom there is no escape, for “the fulness of the wrath of God shall be poured out upon all the children of men; for he will not suffer that the wicked shall destroy the righteous” (1 Nephi 22:16). The Book of Mormon prophets feared that such
a condition would come upon their people. Lehi warned: "For the hardness of your hearts the Lord your God [will] come out in the fulness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed forever" (2 Nephi 1:17).

The movement which brought atē upon the Nephites began with determined acts of hubris—committing unforgivable sin. Both individuals and nations can commit such a sin (see, e.g., Matthew 12:31–32; Mark 3:28–30; Luke 12:10). When they do, there remains no repentance, only destruction. Paul wrote: "For it [i.e., repentance] is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4–8). Alma warned his son, Corianton, "If ye deny the Holy Ghost when it once has had place in you, and ye know that ye deny it, behold, this is a sin which is unpardonable" (Alma 39:6). According to the Prophet Joseph Smith a man commits such a sin (what this paper terms hubris) when he accepts the gospel, receives spiritually confirmed knowledge of the divinity of Christ, and then denies "the new and everlasting covenant by which he was sanctified, calling it an unholy thing, and doing despite to the Spirit of grace." For such there is no repentance because such offenders break the law in seeking to become a law unto themselves. They willfully abide in sin continually, and therefore "cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. Therefore, they must remain filthy still" (D&C 88:35).

The Book of Mormon describes conditions when these people get into power. They begin by

condemning the righteous because of their righteousness; letting the guilty and the wicked go unpunished because of their money; and moreover to be held in office at the head of government, to rule and do according to their wills, that they might get gain and glory of the world, and, moreover, that they might the

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9 TPJS, 128.
more easily commit adultery, and steal, and kill, and do according to their own wills. (Helaman 7:5)

Note that they attempt to reorder society so that they can do "according to their own wills." They are willing to destroy the righteous if necessary. Nothing is to get in their way.

The Book of Mormon attests that this state grows out of uninhibited pride—that one undergirding vice which lies at the heart of the destructive forces active upon the Americas.\(^1\) Pride, and its deadly manifestation hubris, has afflicted humankind through the ages, but more particularly those civilizations of the Americas. It is little wonder that in his first conference address as president of the Church, Ezra Taft Benson warned the Saints by saying:

May I now discuss a subject of grave concern that deserves deeper development than we have time. It is the subject of pride. In the scriptures there is no such thing as righteous pride. It is always considered as a sin. We are not speaking of a wholesome view of self-worth, which is best established by a close relationship with God. But we are speaking of pride as the universal sin.\(^1\)

The sin is universal because it forms the base of most other sins. This is no exaggeration. Pride is competitive. It pits person against person, and people against people. It allows for no equality. As President Benson noted, "pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man."\(^1\)

According to C. S. Lewis,

We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If every one else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be

\(^{10}\) Notice how pride escalates in the following references—Helaman 3:1, 33–34, 36—resulting in the conditions recorded in Helaman 4:1.

\(^{11}\) Benson, "Cleansing the Inner Vessel," 6.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 7.
proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone. That is why I say that Pride is essentially competitive in a way the other vices are not.13

Pride, ultimately, finds joy in only one thing: power. Nothing makes the proud feel better than being able to manipulate other people like little marionettes. "But pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God."14 This point is important. Pride eventually propels the proud to fight against God and his people—to commit hubris. They are like their master, the dark Lord, who boasted in his heart, "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north" (Isaiah 14:13). Like Satan, the proud seek the power and glory that belongs to God by destroying human agency. It is little wonder that such eventually find themselves the object of divine wrath.

As will be shown below, God punishes overweening ambition. There is a dark side to this fact: God actually assists in the move to destruction. But to allow such an idea to be troublesome is to misunderstand, as the Greeks did, the nature of God's judgment and its attendant curses. They viewed the gods as actively sending the delusions which infatuated the soul, encouraging it along the paths of self-ruin. Thus atē was an active agent of the gods which locked the individual on a course of destruction; it was the doom pronounced by the gods from which there was no turning back, no forgiveness. In reality God does not send delusions. He works to save humankind. But the Greeks did get one point right. When a people commit hubris, they will find that God is an agent of destruction. The reason is simple.

Before all else, God is a God of justice (Alma 42:25). He cannot look upon sin with any degree of allowance. The result of sin, as Paul states, is death—being cut off from the presence of God and thereafter forfeiting eternal life (Romans 6:23; see also 2 Nephi 2:17–20; Alma 42:9). What options are left to God when a

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14 Ibid.
people reject him? The dilemma, noted in the Book of Mormon, becomes clear in the call of Isaiah. Here the Lord commands Isaiah to go
tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and convert, and be healed. (Isaiah 6:9–10)

The command seems incongruous to the usual work of God until we realize how Isaiah was to fulfill the commandment. It was, ironically, by proclaiming, not withholding, the gospel of salvation to Israel. Here we see the critical significance of Isaiah's ministry. Israel was at the point at which one more rejection of the truth would condemn them fully to the judgment of the divine. The dilemma of the prophet was that there was no way to save Israel except by the very word that would condemn them.

This allows us to understand more properly the nature of hubris. This sin is committed not when God takes away the opportunity to repent, be forgiven, and come to him, but when he allows the opportunity and it is willfully rejected. Atē, a kind of spiritual blindness, results. God delivers offenders "to the hardness of their hearts and the blindness of their minds unto their being brought down into captivity, and also into destruction, both temporally and spiritually, according to the captivity of the devil" (1 Nephi 14:7). In the case of the Jaredites, "the Spirit of the Lord had ceased striving with them, and Satan had full power over the hearts of the people; for they were given up unto the hardness of their hearts, and the blindness of their minds that they might be destroyed" (Ether 15:19). This is atē at full play. The Lord withdrew his Spirit because the people had blinded their minds and hardened their hearts, and willed it that way. The result was self-destruction.

In this way God can be said to be the ready helper to those who insist on ruin. But what other choice does he have? If he were to withhold the gospel, then the unjust could honestly say that his judgment upon them was not fair. One overriding principle revealed clearly in the Old Testament is that the Lord will always vindicate himself such that no unjust judgment can righteously be
made against him. He will allow both individuals and nations to fall before he will permit his integrity to be questioned. But in doing so he participates in the destruction of the rebellious.

By proclaiming the gospel, God sets up the conditions by which the disobedient come under atē. Both the Old and New Testaments testify to the reality and power of God’s curse. Do not be misled into thinking a curse is something that it is not. Too often a cursing is seen as activating some kind of destructive force—some hex, spell, or enchantment which, by virtue of a supernatural nexus of operation, brings harm to its recipient. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A “curse” denotes something delivered up to divine wrath and dedicated to destruction. As we will see below, God’s curse does not consist of divine action but rather of divine inaction. When a people sin to the point that judgment must come, destruction results; but it comes because of the removal of God’s Spirit, prophets, and restraining hand. Thus it is by the wicked, unrestrained in their wickedness, that the wicked are destroyed (Mormon 4:5).

The Book of Mormon testifies clearly of this point. Nephi affirmed that he has seen the destruction of his people and, therefore, knew why they would be destroyed: “for the reward of their pride [hubris] and their foolishness [atē] they shall reap destruction. . . . For the Spirit of the Lord will not always strive with man. And when the Spirit ceaseth to strive with man then cometh speedy destruction” (2 Nephi 26:10–11). Such destruction is ultimately spiritual, though it often expresses itself first in the physical reality of temporal ruin.

The curse is, then, a judicial action of God in consequence of human sin, which causes the spirit to grieve and withdraw (note Galatians 3:10; Hebrews 6:8; 2 Peter 2:14; D&C 121:37). The

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15 An example of the Lord’s care for his name is clearly evident in Ezekiel 20:5–9. In 1 Nephi 20:11 the Lord is emphatic that he will not allow his name to be polluted or give his glory to another.

action leaves a people without divine protection from the machinations of their enemies.

The devastating force that destroyed the Nephites and the Jaredites was principally atē, brought on by hubris, but grounded in pride. The Lord had clearly set up the rules which those who inhabit the Americas must obey. Mormon declared:

[The Lord] had sworn in his wrath unto the brother of Jared, that whoso should possess this land of promise, from that time henceforth and forever, should serve him, the true and only God, or they should be swept off when the fulness of his wrath should come upon them.

And now, we can behold the decrees of God concerning this land, that it is a land of promise; and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall serve God, or they shall be swept off when the fulness of his wrath shall come upon them. And the fulness of his wrath cometh upon them when they are ripened in iniquity.

For behold, this is a land which is choice above all other lands; wherefore he that doth possess it shall serve God or shall be swept off; for it is the everlasting decree of God. And it is not until the fulness of iniquity among the children of the land, that they are swept off. (Ether 2:8–10)

The Lord himself has underscored the point:

Cursed shall be the land, yea, this land, unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, unto destruction, which do wickedly, when they are fully ripe; and as I have said so shall it be; for this is the cursing and the blessing of God upon the land, for the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance. (Alma 45:16; cf. Alma 37:28; Ether 2:15)

Obedience brings blessings: “Behold, this is a choice land, and whatsoever nation shall possess it shall be free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations under heaven, if they will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ” (Ether 2:12). But disobedience brings cursings: “Yea, and cursed be the
land forever and ever unto those workers of darkness and secret combinations, even unto destruction, except they repent before they are fully ripe” (Alma 37:31).

When iniquity ripens fully the cursings come. But what constitutes being ripe in iniquity? The Book of Mormon gives specific conditions: (1) when “the voice of this people should choose iniquity” (Alma 10:19); (2) when the people “turn aside the just for a thing of naught and revile against that which is good, and say that it is of no worth” (2 Nephi 28:16); (3) when they reject “every word of God” (1 Nephi 17:35); and (4) “when [they] shall cast out the righteous from among [them], then shall [they] be ripe for destruction” (Helaman 13:14).

The book of Ether traces, in capsulized form, the development of these conditions among the Jaredites. The unrelenting downturn occurred during the reign of the wicked king Shiblom when “there began to be an exceedingly great war in all the land” (Ether 11:4). Prophets moved among the people, testifying “that a great curse should come upon the land, and also upon the people, and that there should be a great destruction among them, such an one as never had been upon the face of the earth, and their bones should become as heaps of earth upon the face of the land except they should repent of their wickedness” (Ether 11:6).

Shiblom’s brother “caused that all the prophets who prophesied of the destruction of the people should be put to death” (Ether 11:5). The people in general “hearkened not unto the voice of the Lord, because of their wicked combinations; wherefore, there began to be wars and contentions in all the land, and also many famines and pestilences, insomuch that there was a great destruction, such an one as never had been known upon the face of the earth; and all this came to pass in the days of Shiblom” (Ether 11:7).

Responding to the misery, some of the people began to repent, and conditions gradually improved. However, the next generation did not heed the lesson. Iniquity quickly resumed:

And it came to pass that in the days of Ethem there came many prophets, and prophesied again unto the people; yea, they did prophesy that the Lord would utterly destroy them from off the face of the earth except they repented of their iniquities. And it came to
pass that the people hardened their hearts, and would not hearken unto their words; and the prophets mourned and withdrew from among the people. (Ether 11:12–13)

A rebellion soon erupted. The secret combination stirred up the people to insurrection and promoted war for its own ends. For a whole generation, riots and wars were the order of the day. In an attempt to redeem the Jaredites, God again sent his prophets who “prophesied of great and marvelous things, and cried repentance unto the people, and except they should repent the Lord God would execute judgment against them to their utter destruction; And that the Lord God would send or bring forth another people to possess the land, by his power, after the manner by which he brought their fathers” (Ether 11:20–21). The response of the masses was to “reject all the words of the prophets, because of [the people’s] secret society and wicked abominations” (Ether 11:22). In doing so, that generation precipitated the downfall of the nation.

Ether, the last Jaredite prophet, was born during this period of rebellion. When he came of age he “began to prophesy unto the people, for he could not be restrained because of the Spirit of the Lord which was in him. For he did cry from the morning, even until the going down of the sun, exhorting the people to believe in God unto repentance lest they should be destroyed” (Ether 12:2–3). In spite of the power of Ether and the clarity of his prophecies, the people “did not believe, because they saw them [great and marvelous things] not” (Ether 12:5). Atē was setting in. Their rejection was not only of his word but of his very presence: “they esteemed him as naught, and cast him out” (Ether 13:13). The consequences were immediate, for “in that same year in which he was cast out from among the people there began to be a great war among the people, for there were many who rose up, who were mighty men, and sought to destroy Coriantumr [the king] by their secret plans of wickedness” (Ether 13:15).

The war escalated to the point of mutual annihilation, but no one foresaw that end. Repentance was far from them, and Coriantumr, even though warned by Ether, “repented not, neither his fair sons nor daughters; neither the fair sons and daughters of Cohor; neither the fair sons and daughters of Corihor; and in fine,
there were none of the fair sons and daughters upon the face of the whole earth who repented of their sins,” even though “the sons of Coriantumr fought much and bled much” (Ether 13:17, 19).

During the second year of the rebellion, Ether once more approached Coriantumr, avowing

that, if he would repent, and all his household, the Lord would give unto him his kingdom and spare the people—Otherwise they should be destroyed, and all his household save it were himself. And he should only live to see the fulfilling of the prophecies which had been spoken concerning another people receiving the land for their inheritance; and Coriantumr should receive a burial by them; and every soul should be destroyed save it were Coriantumr. (Ether 13:20–21)

But “Coriantumr repented not, neither his household, neither the people; and the wars ceased not; and they sought to kill Ether, but he fled from before them” (Ether 13:22). This failure to repent constituted the last act of hubris which the Lord would allow. With it the cup of iniquity filled to overflowing.

The spirit of God ceased to strive with the people. As a result “there were robbers, and in fine, all manner of wickedness upon all the face of the land” (Ether 13:26). For two years, while Coriantumr was recuperating from war wounds, “all the people upon the face of the land were shedding blood, and there was none to restrain them” (Ether 13:31).

Conditions moved from bad to worse:

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

Wherefore every man did cleave unto that which was his own, with his hands, and would not borrow neither would he lend; and every man kept the hilt of his sword in his right hand, in the defence of his prop-
Before their eyes, the words of the prophets found fulfillment. The sword destroyed thousands, but the people were past seeing, feeling, and repenting. *Atē* had fallen upon them. Under these conditions the word of the Lord “came to Ether that Coriantumr should not fall by the sword. And thus we see that the Lord did visit them in the fullness of his wrath, and their wickedness and abominations had prepared a way for their everlasting destruction” (Ether 14:24–25). Note that they brought destruction upon themselves.

Finally, the destruction of human souls had been so great that only a few dozen were left to carry on the struggle. Still there was no repentance. They continued to fight, “and when the night came they slept upon their swords. And on the morrow they fought even until the night came. And when the night came they were drunken with anger, even as a man who is drunken with wine; and they slept again upon their swords. And on the morrow they fought again” (Ether 15:20–23). In the end, all were destroyed but Coriantumr. Beaten, bloody, and half dead physically and fully dead spiritually, he remained alive in the quiet hell he had created. Never again would a Jaredite voice ring in the vacant hills, or a Jaredite song echo along the empty roads.

Sad as it is to say, the bloody lesson was missed by the Nephites, and those living after A.D. 150 again filled the cup of iniquity to the brim. They, like their Jaredite brothers, met all the necessary conditions and became full in iniquity.

Once again the Book of Mormon shows that the driving force was pride, which led to *hubris*, and finally to *atē*. First, “there began to be among them those who were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of fine things of the world.” Further, “they began to be divided into classes”—pride being translated on a major scale into the structure of society (4 Nephi 1:24, 26). It was not long until the proud “denied the Christ; and they did persecute the true church of Christ” (4 Nephi 1:29). Soon “they did cast them [the Lord’s disciples] into prison . . . and did seek to kill them” (4 Nephi 1:30–31).
It must be emphasized that this people did not dwindle in unbelief, but willfully rebelled against God (*hubris*) at the very time when his gospel was preached among them with incredible power (4 Nephi 1:38). As the text states, some “did persecute the true church of Christ, because of their humility and their belief in Christ; and they did despise them because of the many miracles which were wrought among them” (4 Nephi 1:29).

The three disciples of the Savior were “cast . . . into prison; but by the power of the word of God, which was in them, . . . they went forth doing mighty miracles among them. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding all these miracles, the people did harden their hearts, and did seek to kill them” (4 Nephi 1:30–31).

These apostates rejected God, his leaders, and his gospel, and sought to destroy his people. Their intent seems to have been to take over the church of Christ through the use of force. This was *hubris* pure and simple. Apostates became filled with the heady power associated with dictating the moral standards of the community. The wicked people “were led by many priests and false prophets to build up many churches, and to do all manner of iniquity” (4 Nephi 1:34). Thus a frenzy of church building took place as the apostasy became ever more complete. Indeed, “there were many churches in the land; yea, there were many churches which professed to know Christ, and yet they did deny the more parts of his [the Savior’s] gospel, insomuch that they did receive all manner of wickedness, and did administer that which was sacred unto him to whom it had been forbidden because of unworthiness. And this church did multiply exceedingly because of iniquity” (4 Nephi 1:27–28). And “the more wicked part of the people did wax strong, and became exceedingly more numerous than were the people of God. And they did still continue to build up churches unto themselves, and adorn them with all manner of precious things” (4 Nephi 1:40–41)—all the while they actively persecuted the true church of God (4 Nephi 1:29).

In this way the child of pride, *hubris*, expressed its deadly desires. In response, priesthood authority and the power of the Holy Ghost were removed from the people, such that miracles and revelations ceased. Grieved, the Spirit departed; restraining power left (Mormon 1:17–19; 2:10–14; 4:5).
All along, forces moved from bad to worse. The saints themselves “began to be proud in their hearts, because of their exceeding riches, and become vain like unto their brethren” (4 Nephi 1:43). Soon the three disciples of the Savior remained as the last vestige of righteousness; the voice of the people had chosen iniquity. Seeing the condition of the people, the disciples “began to sorrow for the sins of the world,” for “both the people of Nephi and the Lamanites had become exceedingly wicked one like unto another” (4 Nephi 1:44–45).

Wickedness expressed itself in the toleration and encouragement of organized crime: “the wicked part of the people began again to build up the secret oaths and combinations of Gadianton” (4 Nephi 1:42). In this way they blindly planted the seeds of their own destruction (ate).

Before long these robbers “did infest the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof began to hide up their treasures in the earth; and they became slippery, because the Lord had cursed the land, that they could not hold them, nor retain them again” (Mormon 1:18). Then they “began to cry,” because “no man could keep that which was his own, for the thieves, and the robbers, and the murderers, and the magic art, and the witchcraft which was in the land” (Mormon 2:10). Everyone was robbing everyone else and using the black arts to do it. Indeed, “there were sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics; and the power of the evil one was wrought upon all the face of the land” (Mormon 1:19).

During this time, spiritual blindness, atē, deepened, and the people began to “boast in their own strength” (Mormon 3:9). They launched a war of aggression and “every heart was hardened, so that they delighted in the shedding of blood continually” (Mormon 4:11). The people became utterly blind to the destruction which their acts were causing. Their depravity, freed from any restraint of the Spirit, led to the full expression of the power of atē, and the people sank to depths never before found “among all the children of Lehi” or “even among all the house of Israel” (Mormon 4:12). Mormon recognized that they were “without order and without mercy, . . . without principle, and past feeling” (Moroni 9:18, 20).
With keen insight, Mormon said: "I saw that the day of grace was passed with them, both temporally and spiritually" (Mormon 2:15). By committing *hubris* they had procrastinated the day of repentance until it was everlastingly too late. Then the power of *atē* propelled them to their doom. When the inevitable judgment came, with its horrors, the people "did curse God, and wish to die," but "they would struggle with the sword for their lives" (Mormon 2:14). Their sorrow was not that which would or even could lead to repentance, but was "the sorrowing of the damned, because the Lord would not always suffer them to take happiness in sin" (Mormon 2:13). In other words, their sorrow sprang from not being able to reorder the universe to suit themselves. They felt the full depth of anguish, but it was because God and his justice proved supreme.

For a time Mormon attempted to preach to the people, but he was eventually forbidden, "for behold they had willfully rebelled against their God" (Mormon 1:16). Though they were past feeling, Mormon was not. He could see that even in their occasional victory "we were left to ourselves, that the Spirit of the Lord did not abide in us" (Mormon 2:26). The effects of *atē* were being felt. For a time Mormon held his silence. Then the Lord commanded him to preach again (Mormon 3:2-3). Much as with Isaiah, Mormon's ministry was not to bless but to bring judgment—the final end of *hubris*. Thus, it was during this period that the Nephites committed that final devilish act that led to their utter downfall, for "they had sworn by all that had been forbidden them" and sought the blood of their brethren (Mormon 3:14).

In sum, the Nephites committed *hubris* in two ways: they rebelled against God, attempting to relegate to themselves his power by force; and they sought that which was forbidden—to avenge themselves on their enemies. The work of pride caused them to compete with both God and man. The result was *atē*—spiritual blindness so profound that the people could neither see nor feel. Final catastrophe was their unsought reward—not ultimately of losing battles to the Lamanites but dying in rebellion against God. To those living in the last days the Lord warned: "Beware of pride, lest ye become as the Nephites of old" (D&C 38:39). The reason God's warning lies particularly upon the Americas seems to be the unprecedented wealth the land provides.
Partaking of its easy abundance, Americans often forget from whom the blessings flow. In their blindness, they attribute their success to themselves and desire more. Pride sets in. As in the case of Nephite society, "the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning, yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches" (3 Nephi 6:12). Nephi knew this was exactly the condition that would beset those upon this continent in the latter days. The Gentiles, he attested, "are lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and have stumbled, because of the greatness of their stumbling block, that they have built up many churches; nevertheless, they put down the power and miracles of God, and preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning, that they may get gain and grind upon the face of the poor" (2 Nephi 26:20).

The Lord directed his warning specifically to the Saints, and well he should. If they resist evil, they offer counterpoint to the problems of society and a haven of safety. If they do not, all moorings are lost, and society drifts into chaos. At the beginning of this paper, I said that the Church acts as a kind of barometer to society. The book of Helaman illustrates the point: it focuses on the period just before the first coming of the Lord. At the beginning of the book of Helaman, the Nephites were at peace with the Lamanites, and there was no contention among the people of Nephi themselves, "save it were a little pride which was in the church, which did cause some little dissensions among the people" (Helaman 3:1). This was in 46 B.C. By 43 B.C. the book reports that "there was exceedingly great prosperity in the church, insomuch that there were thousands who did join themselves unto the church" (Helaman 3:24). The church was in a period of tremendous growth. But this also presented a danger; many who joined were not really converted. Mormon reports that by 41 B.C.,

There was peace also, save it were the pride which began to enter into the church—not into the church of God, but into the hearts of the people who professed to belong to the church of God—and they were lifted up in pride even to the persecution of many of their brethren. (Helaman 3:33–34)
By 39 B.C., he observed that the year ended in peace, "save it were the exceedingly great pride which had gotten into the hearts of the people; and it was because of their exceedingly great riches and their prosperity in the land; and it did grow upon them from day to day" (Helaman 3:36). What had started out as a blessing for faithfulness to the church—prosperity—had spread to all the people. The Church did indeed act as a barometer to society. Unfortunately, the evil that afflicted the hearts of some of the Church members began to generalize as well. The result was felt the next year, when "there were many dissensions in the church, and there was also a contention among the people, insomuch that there was much bloodshed" (Helaman 4:1). Then certain dissenters went to the Lamanites and began to agitate them to war. The outcome brought death to many.

In his lamentation Mormon emphasizes the lesson the latter-day church must learn:

Now this great loss of the Nephites, and the great slaughter which was among them, would not have happened had it not been for their wickedness and their abomination which was among them; yea, and it was among those also who professed to belong to the church of God. And it was because of the pride of their hearts, because of their exceeding riches, ... and their boastings in their own strength, they were left in their own strength; therefore they did not prosper, but were afflicted and smitten. (Helaman 4:11-13)

The rest of the book of Helaman and some of 3 Nephi chronicles the breakup of the Nephite nation. The cause was pride, first found among the members of the Church but soon manifested in the society in general. The result was suffering and anarchy. The later Nephites learned neither from Jaredite history nor from their own. As noted above, when they again became proud, they destroyed themselves. Mormon affirms the process: "The pride of this nation, of the people of the Nephites, hath proven their destruction" (Moroni 8:27).

For the most part, the Church today finds itself in much the same circumstances as those in the beginning of the book of Helaman. It is wealthy and growing rapidly. Are we in danger?
The Book of Mormon suggests that the only real danger to the Church itself is not an outward foe but rather a more powerful and far more devastating enemy within—pride. It grows in the hearts of those who profess to be Saints. It is little wonder that President Benson has warned us against pride. 17 Will we heed the warning or become as the Nephites of old?