
3 Nephi 6 — Distinguished by Ranks — The Inequality That Broke the Church

3 Nephi 6: the years of prosperity and the swift return of pride. The people return to their lands, rebuild cities, cast up highways, and prosper in great order under just laws — there is nothing to hinder them from prospering continually 'except they should fall into transgression.' And they fall. By the twenty-ninth year pride and boasting because of exceeding riches breed persecution; the people become 'distinguished by ranks,' some ignorant in poverty and others learned through riches, a great inequality opening across the land until 'the church began to be broken up' — saved only among a few firm and steadfast Lamanites. Satan stirs the people to seek power, authority, riches, and the vain things of the world; they do not sin ignorantly but wilfully rebel against a God whose will they know. Men inspired from heaven preach boldly of Christ's death, suffering, and resurrection — and the chief judges, high priests, and lawyers, enraged, secretly put these prophets to death, contrary to the law. When the murdering judges are brought to trial, their friends and kindreds — nearly all the lawyers and high priests — unite in the old secret covenant 'given and administered by the devil,' combining to deliver the murderers from justice, to set the law at defiance, to destroy the governor, and to establish a king. The chapter is the anatomy of how a righteous, prosperous, orderly society unmakes itself in a few short years — pride breeding inequality, inequality breaking the church, and the secret combination rising again to murder the prophets and overthrow the rule of law.

This is the chapter where it all comes apart — and the speed of it is the point. A few years ago the Nephites were unanimous in faith, wholly repentant, serving God day and night, delivered from their enemies by a miracle, singing Hosanna. Now, in 3 Nephi 6, Mormon shows us that same people rebuilding their cities, prospering in great order under just laws — and then unmaking themselves so fast it takes the breath away. By the end of the chapter the church is broken up, the prophets are being murdered, and a secret combination is plotting to overthrow the government and install a king. The whole collapse happens *in the same generation that saw the heavens declare the birth of Christ*. Mormon is showing us, one more time and at its starkest, how quickly prosperity rots a people — and he names the exact mechanism, which is worth attending to because it is so precise and so contemporary: pride breeds *inequality*, and inequality breaks the church.

Hebrew Word Studies

pesha (פֶּשָׁע) — "transgression, rebellion, revolt" — **pesha**, a deliberate breach of relationship, a willful rebellion against a known authority; not an accidental fault or an unwitting error but a conscious, defiant breaking-away. The strongest of the Hebrew words for sin, naming sin as rebellion rather than mere mistake v. 18 (they did not sin ignorantly... therefore they did wilfully rebel against God). Mormon insists that the Nephites *did not sin ignorantly... therefore they did wilfully rebel against God* — and that distinction, between the sin of ignorance and the sin of willful rebellion, is built deep into the Hebrew vocabulary for sin. The Old Testament has three main words for wrongdoing, and they form an ascending scale of seriousness. *Chatat* is to miss the mark, to err, to fall short — sin as failure, often unintentional. *Avon* is iniquity, crookedness, the guilt that twists a life. And *pesha* — the word that stands behind Mormon's *willful rebel* — is the gravest of the three: it means *transgression* in the sense of *rebellion, revolt, a deliberate breach of covenant against a known lord*. *Pesha* is the word for a vassal state throwing off its king: *Moab rebelled (pasha) against Israel* (2 Kgs. 3:5). Applied to sin, it names not the stumble of the ignorant but the *defiance* of one who knows his Lord and rises against him anyway. This is exactly why Mormon is so careful to specify it. The Nephites' sin was not *chatat*, an honest missing of the mark by people who didn't know better. *They knew the will of God concerning them, for it had been taught unto them* (v. 18). They had the law, the prophets, the signs, the very heavens split open at Christ's birth. And against all that light, *they did wilfully rebel* — *pesha*, the conscious, defiant breach of a covenant they fully understood. The Law itself marks this distinction as decisive: sins committed *through ignorance (bishgagah)* could be atoned by sacrifice (Lev. 4), but the sin done *with a high hand (beyad ramah)* — defiantly, knowingly, in open rebellion — *reproacheth the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off* (Num. 15:30–31). The "high hand" is *pesha*, the raised fist of deliberate revolt, and the Law treats it as a different order of sin entirely, because it is not weakness but *defiance*. This is the tragedy Mormon names. A people who sins in ignorance can be taught; a people who sins in *pesha*, with full knowledge, against all the light God has given, has crossed into the most dangerous territory there is — not because the act is worse in itself, but because the heart behind it has knowingly chosen against the God it knows. And yet — here is the hope hidden in the word — *pesha* is also the very thing the Atonement is aimed at. The suffering servant was *wounded for our transgressions (pesha)* (Isa. 53:5); God is the one who *blotteth out thy transgressions (pesha)* (Isa. 43:25); *as far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions (pesha) from us* (Ps. 103:12). The rebellion that no sacrifice in the Law could cover, the high-handed *pesha* — that is precisely what Christ came to bear. So even as Mormon names the Nephites' sin as willful rebellion, the reader who knows the rest of the story knows that the very next chapters bring the voice of the One who was *wounded for transgressions*, extending the *arm of mercy* even to a people drowning in *pesha*. The defiant breach is the gravest sin; and the grace of Christ is great enough even for that.

From the Chapter's Architecture

“cross-references Num. 15:30–31 (the sin done with a high hand — *beyad ramah* — that reproacheth the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off — the willful rebellion, *pesha*, of v. 18); 2 Kgs. 3:5 (Moab rebelled — *pasha* — against Israel — *pesha* as the revolt of a vassal, the model for rebellion against God); Isa. 53:5 (he was wounded for our transgressions — *pesha* — the rebellion the Atonement bears); Ps. 103:12 (so far hath he removed our transgressions — *pesha* — from us — the grace great enough even for willful rebellion); Gal. 3:28; James 2:1–9 (neither rich nor poor... have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ... with respect of persons — the equality of the church that ranks destroy, vv. 12–14); Deut. 8:11–17 (beware that thou forget not the Lord... when thy silver and thy gold is multiplied... thine heart be lifted up — prosperity breeding the pride of v. 10); Hel. 12:1–2 (at the very time he doth prosper his people... then is the time that they do harden their hearts — the law of prosperity, v. 5); Hel. 3:33–34 (pride entering the hearts of the professing, to the persecution of the humble — the same pattern, vv. 10–14); Hel. 6:21–30 (the secret combination's satanic genealogy back to Cain — the covenant given by them of old... administered by the devil, v. 28); 3 Ne. 7:1–6 (the murder of the chief judge and the destruction of the government — the plot of v. 30 carried out); 3 Ne. 9:9–11 (the cities burned because they cast out the prophets and the blood of the saints — the murders of vv. 21–23 judged); 4 Ne. 1:2–3 (the future Zion with no rich and poor... all things common — the equality whose opposite breaks the church here, v. 12).”