
3 Nephi 7 — The Dog to His Vomit — A Nation Shattered into Tribes and a Prophet in the Ruins

3 Nephi 7: the collapse completed. The conspirators do not crown a king after all; instead they murder the chief judge on the judgment-seat, and the central government simply dissolves. The people divide one against another into tribes, every man clinging to his own family, kindred, and friends; the regulations of government are destroyed by the secret combination. In six short years a people who had nearly all been righteous have turned 'like the dog to his vomit, or like the sow to her wallowing in the mire.' The secret band gathers and crowns its own king, Jacob — one of the chiefest who had voted against the prophets of Jesus — and, outnumbered, flees to the northernmost land to build a kingdom and wait for dissenters. The tribes agree not to make war on one another, but they stone the prophets and cast them out. Into this ruin steps Nephi, son of Nephi — visited by angels and the voice of the Lord, an eyewitness of the ministry of Christ — grieved for the people's hardness, and he goes forth ministering with such power that 'it were not possible that they could disbelieve his words,' for angels minister to him daily; in the name of Jesus he casts out devils, works many miracles, and raises his own brother from the dead after he is stoned. Yet few are converted. Nephi ordains men to baptize all who repent, with water, as a witness before God. The chapter is the picture of a society reverting from covenant nation to warring clans, relapsing into the very evils it had forsaken — and of a single prophet standing in the rubble, ministering with the power of heaven to a people who will not, for all his miracles, return.

This is the chapter where the Nephite nation, as a nation, ceases to exist — and Mormon makes us watch it dissolve. The conspiracy of chapter 6 succeeds in its first aim: they *murder the chief judge of the land* on the judgment-seat (v. 1). But then something stranger and sadder than a coup happens. They do not manage to install a king; instead, *the people were divided one against another; and they did separate one from another into tribes, every man according to his family and his kindred and friends; and thus they did destroy the government of the land* (v. 2). The central government simply *collapses*, and the people fall back into the oldest social unit there is — the tribe, the clan, the extended family. A covenant nation, with laws and courts and a unifying faith, devolves into a patchwork of kinship groups, each loyal only to its own blood. This is what a society looks like when the things that held it together — shared law, shared faith, shared covenant — rot away: it does not become a different kind of nation; it *stops being a nation at all* and reverts to the tribe. Mormon is showing us the unmaking of civilization itself, the dissolution of a people into its constituent clans.

Hebrew Word Studies

kelev shav al qeo (כֶּלֶב שָׁב אֶל קֵוֹ) — "a dog returning to its vomit" — *kelev*, dog; *shav*, returning (from *shuv*, to return); *al qeo*, to its vomit. The proverbial image of the fool who returns to the folly and filth he had cast out — the relapse into forsaken sin, deliberately revolting in its imagery v. 8 (like the dog to his vomit, or like the sow to her wallowing in the mire). Mormon's image for the Nephite relapse — *the dog to his vomit, or the sow to her wallowing in the mire* — comes straight from one of the bluntest proverbs in scripture, and its deliberate ugliness is the whole point. *As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly* (Prov. 26:11). The Hebrew uses the verb *shuv*, "to return" — the same great verb that elsewhere means *to repent*, to turn back to God — but here it is *turned backward*, a return not to righteousness but to filth. This is the dark mirror of repentance: repentance is *shuv* toward God, the turning of a soul homeward; relapse is *shuv* toward the vomit, the turning of a soul back to the very thing it had vomited out. The dog had rid itself of something poisonous; and then, drawn by appetite, it returns to consume the foul thing again. That is the precise picture of a people who had *forsaken* their sins — cast them out, been cleansed, sung Hosanna — and then deliberately went back to them. The image is meant to be revolting because the act is revolting. There is a temptation to view backsliding with a kind of sympathy, as a sad weakness; Mormon and the proverb refuse that sentiment. To return to forsaken sin is to do what a dog does with its vomit, what a washed pig does with mud — and the New Testament makes the comparison explicit and even more severe. Peter applies the very proverb to those who, *after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, are again entangled therein, and overcome, and says the latter end is worse with them than the beginning*. For it had been better not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from it — and the proverb seals it: *the dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire* (2 Pet. 2:20–22). This is why the relapse of 3 Nephi 7 is so grave: it is not the sin of those who never knew, but of those who *knew, and forsook, and returned*. The *sow that was washed* is the haunting detail — these people *had* been washed, cleansed, made new, and they chose the mire again. And it connects directly to the willful rebellion of the previous chapter (the *pesha* of 3 Ne. 6:18): a people who sin against great light, who knew the way of righteousness and turned from it, are doing exactly what the dog and the sow do. Yet even here the word *shuv* holds its double edge as a quiet hope. The same verb that describes the return to the vomit describes the return to God — and the very next chapters will show the voice of Christ calling, *will ye not now return (shuv) unto me... that I may heal you?* (3 Ne. 9:13). The dog returned to its vomit; but the door of the other return — the homeward *shuv*, the turning back to God — stands open still, even for a people who had turned the wrong way. The tragedy of the relapse is real and revolting; and the mercy that calls even the relapsed to *return* is greater.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Prov. 26:11 (*as a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly* — the relapse of v. 8); 2 Pet. 2:20–22 (*the dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire... the latter end is worse than the beginning* — the washed who return to the mire, v. 8); Jer. 8:4–5 (*shall they fall, and not arise? shall he turn away, and not return?... why then is this people... slidden back by a perpetual backsliding?* — the backward *shuv* of relapse); Matt. 12:43–45 (*the unclean spirit returning to the swept house, the last state of that man is worse than the first* — the relapse made worse, v. 8); 1 Kgs. 17:17–24 (*Elijah raising the widow's son* — the prophet who raises the dead, as Nephi does, v. 19); John 11:43–53 (*Lazarus raised, and the rulers plotting against Jesus because of it* — the resurrection that produces rage rather than faith, vv. 18–19); John 12:37 (*though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not* — the undeniable power met with unbelief, v. 18); Hel. 16:13–23 (*the people reasoning away the signs* — the hardened heart that rages against undeniable evidence, v. 18); 3 Ne. 6:28–30 (*the secret covenant and the plot against the government* — the destruction of the government carried out, vv. 2, 6); 3 Ne. 9:9 (*the city of Jacobugath, king Jacob's people, burned for their wickedness above all* — the band of king Jacob, vv. 9–12); 3 Ne. 11:21–27 (*the risen Christ giving the authority and words of baptism* — the baptism Nephi keeps, vv. 24–25, perfected); Morm. 1:13–14 (*the day when there were no gifts from the Lord, and the Holy Ghost did not come* — the opposite of Nephi's daily angels, v. 18). ```