
3 Nephi 8 — Darkness That Could Be Felt — The Destruction at the Death of Christ

3 Nephi 8: the thirty-fourth year, the sign of Christ's death. The people watch earnestly for the three days of darkness Samuel foretold, amid great doubtings. Then, on the fourth day of the first month, there arises a storm such as was never known — a terrible tempest, thunder that shakes the whole earth, sharp lightnings. The city of Zarahemla takes fire; the city of Moroni sinks into the sea and its people drown; the earth is carried up upon Moronihah and a mountain stands in its place. The whole face of the land is changed — highways broken, smooth places made rough, great cities sunk and burned and shaken to the ground, many slain, some carried away in the whirlwind never to be found, the rocks rent into seams and fragments across the whole earth. All this in about three hours. And then comes the darkness: a thick darkness over all the land, so that the people who survived could feel the vapor of darkness; no light could be kindled, not candle nor torch nor even their fine dry wood; no sun, moon, or stars seen for the space of three days. And there was great mourning and howling and weeping, the people crying, 'O that we had repented before this great and terrible day,' that their loved ones might have been spared, that the prophets had not been stoned and cast out. The chapter is the fulfillment of Samuel's sign of the death of Christ — the Creator's death convulsing the creation, the Light of the world extinguished and the world plunged for three days into a darkness so total it could be touched — and the anguished, too-late repentance of those who survived to feel it.

This is the chapter of the great destruction — the sign of Christ's *death*, the photographic negative of the night with no darkness that announced his *birth*. When the Light of the World was born, the world had a night with no darkness; now, when the Light of the World dies on a cross on the far side of the earth, the world is plunged into a darkness so total it can be *felt*. The whole creation convulses at the death of its Creator: storm, tempest, earthquake, fire, the land itself reshaped — cities burned, cities sunk into the sea, cities buried under mountains — and then three days in which no light of any kind can shine. Mormon narrates it with a kind of awed restraint, and the reader who has followed the book understands what the cataclysm *means*: this is what it costs the creation when its God dies. The rocks rend, the mountains move, the sea swallows cities, and the sun goes black, because the One by whom and for whom all things were made is, at this moment, yielding up the ghost.

Hebrew Word Studies

■*oshekh* (חֹשֶׁךְ) — "darkness" — ■*oshekh*, darkness, obscurity, the absence of light; in scripture both a physical reality and a symbol of chaos, death, judgment, and separation from God, who is light. The primeval darkness over the deep before God said "let there be light," and the darkness of the ninth plague that "may be felt" vv. 20–22 (there was thick darkness... the inhabitants... could feel the vapor of darkness... neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars). The darkness of 3 Nephi 8 — thick, palpable, a *vapor* that could be *felt*, in which no fire would burn — has a precise and profound biblical ancestor, and the Hebrew ■*oshekh*, "darkness," carries the whole theological weight of it. ■*oshekh* is one of the first words of the Bible: *and darkness (■oshekh) was upon the face of the deep* (Gen. 1:2) — the primeval chaos before creation, the formless dark that God's first creative word dispels: *Let there be light... and God divided the light from the darkness (■oshekh)* (Gen. 1:3–4). From the very beginning, darkness is what *precedes* and *opposes* God's light; it is the realm of chaos, the not-yet-created, the un-illuminated. And throughout scripture ■*oshekh* becomes the symbol of everything opposed to God — death (*the land of darkness*, Job 10:21), judgment (*the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light*, Amos 5:18), and the moral and spiritual void of those cut off from God. But the closest parallel to 3 Nephi 8 is the ninth plague of Egypt, and the resemblance is exact. *The Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt (■oshekh)... and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days: they saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days* (Ex. 10:21–23). *Darkness which may be felt* — the very phrase Mormon echoes in the *vapor of darkness* that the people *could feel* (v. 20); and *three days* of it, exactly as in Egypt and exactly as Samuel foretold. The Egyptian darkness was a judgment on a people who had rejected God's word through Moses, a darkness so thick it was tangible, in which no one could see or move — and the Nephite darkness is its echo, a judgment-darkness on a people who rejected God's word through the prophets, falling at the very hour their Creator died. And here the deepest meaning emerges. In Egypt the darkness was a plague *before* the deliverance, the prelude to the Passover and the exodus. In 3 Nephi the darkness falls at the death of the true Passover Lamb, the Light of the World himself — and so it is the deepest ■*oshekh* of all, the darkness not merely *over* the world but *because* the Light of the world has died. *In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness (■oshekh); and the darkness comprehended it not* (John 1:4–5). When that Light is extinguished on the cross, the ■*oshekh* rushes back in, as if creation had reverted to Genesis 1:2, the formless dark over the deep, light itself failing because the source of light has died. No human fire can pierce it (v. 21), because the darkness is not the absence of a sun but the absence of *the* Light, the Word by whom light itself was made. And the three days are the measure of the entombment: three days of ■*oshekh*, the world back in primeval night, until the morning of the third day when the Light rises and, as at the first creation, the darkness is divided from the light and the long night ends. The darkness that could be felt is the creation's grief made tangible — and its lifting, three days later, is the first dawn of the new creation that the risen Christ brings.

From the Chapter's Architecture

“cross-references Ex. 10:21–23 (*darkness which may be felt... thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days — the ninth plague, the model for the felt darkness of vv. 20–22*); Gen. 1:2–4 (*darkness — ■oshekh — was upon the face of the deep... and God divided the light from the darkness — the primeval darkness the world reverts to when the Light dies*); John 1:4–5 (*in him was life; and the life was the light of men... the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not — the Light whose death darkens the world*); Matt. 27:45, 51–52 (*there was darkness over all the land... the earth did quake, and the rocks rent — the same signs at the cross in Jerusalem, vv. 18–20*); Amos 5:18, 8:9 (*the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light... I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day — the judgment-darkness, vv. 20–22*); Amos 5:18–20; Joel 2:10, 31 (*the sun and the moon shall be dark... the great and the terrible day of the Lord — the darkened heavens at the day of the Lord*); Hel. 14:20–27 (*Samuel's prophecy of the three days' darkness, the rocks rent, the cities desolate — fulfilled every whit, vv. 5–23*); Hel. 13:33, 38 (*the lament Samuel foretold — O that I had repented... procrastinated... everlastingly too late — spoken in vv. 24–25*); 3 Ne. 1:15–21 (*the night with no darkness at Christ's birth — the inverse sign this chapter fulfills*); 3 Ne. 9:13–18 (*the voice of Christ breaking the darkness — will ye not now return unto me... I am the light and the life of the world — the answer to the dark*); 3 Ne. 10:9 (*the darkness dispersing on the morning of the third day — the dawn after the entombment*); Mosiah 3:27 (*the imagery of the unquenchable as against the ■oshekh of judgment*).”