
Helaman 12 — Less Than the Dust — Mormon's Meditation on the Nothingness of Man

Helaman 12: Mormon stops the narrative to grieve. Watching the pride cycle spin faster and faster, the abridger steps fully forward and delivers one of the most searching meditations in all of scripture on the nature of the human heart. He marvels at 'how false, and also the unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men' — that at the very moment God prospers them, blesses their fields and flocks and delivers them from their enemies, that is the moment they harden their hearts and forget him. Except God chastens them with afflictions, death, terror, famine, and pestilence, 'they will not remember him.' Then the great lament: 'O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil, and devilish, and how quick to do iniquity, and how slow to do good, are the children of men... how slow are they to remember the Lord their God.' And the verdict that names the depth of it: 'O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth' — for the dust moves and obeys at God's command, while man, made of dust and given breath, refuses. Mormon then unfurls the power of God's voice over all creation — the hills tremble, the earth shakes and goes back so the sun appears to stand still ('it is the earth that moveth and not the sun'), the deep dries up, the mountain buries a city, the hidden treasure is cursed and made slippery, the wicked man is cut off from God's presence. And he turns it all to mercy: 'for this cause, that men might be saved, hath repentance been declared.' Blessed are they who repent and hearken; they shall be saved. 'And thus it is. Amen.'

This is the chapter where Mormon puts down the story and tells us what he thinks of us. After eleven chapters of watching the Nephites rise and fall and rise and fall, of famines and prophets and secret combinations and the wheel of pride spinning ever faster, the abridger — the man at the very end of the story, who has read the whole record and watched his own civilization die — stops narrating and delivers a meditation on the human heart that is one of the most unsparing and most important things in all of scripture. It is short, twenty-six verses, and it is Mormon's voice at its most personal and most grieved. He has just shown us, in Helaman 11, a people who would only remember God when they were starving and forget him the moment the rain returned, and now he steps forward and asks the question that the whole spectacle forces: *what is wrong with us? why are we like this?* And his answer is bracing: *O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth* (v. 7).

Hebrew Word Studies

■**aphar** (אפר) — "dust, dry earth, powder, ashes" — ■**aphar**, the loose dry dust of the ground; the stuff of which man was formed and to which he returns; an image of both lowliness (dust as the humblest matter) and mortality (dust as the grave). The dust is the most ordinary, least exalted material in creation vv. 7–8 (they are less than the dust of the earth. For behold, the dust of the earth moveth... at the command of our great and everlasting God). Mormon's devastating phrase — *less than the dust of the earth* — turns on the Hebrew ■**aphar**, "dust," and the word carries a whole theology of humanity that makes the comparison far sharper than it looks. ■**Aphar** is the lowliest stuff there is, the dry powder of the ground — and it is, pointedly, *what man is made of: the Lord God formed man of the dust (■aphar) of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life* (Gen. 2:7). Man is dust, animated dust, dirt that God breathed into. And dust is what man returns to: *dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return* (Gen. 3:19). So the dust is already the great biblical emblem of human lowliness and mortality — *I am but dust and ashes*, says Abraham, daring to speak to God (Gen. 18:27); *he remembereth that we are dust* (Ps. 103:14). Now watch the terrible precision of Mormon's twist. He does not say man is *equal* to the dust, which would already be humbling. He says man is *less than* the dust — and he proves it not by some new lowliness in man but by a *faithfulness in the dust* that man lacks. *The dust of the earth moveth hither and thither... at the command of our great and everlasting God* (v. 8). The dust obeys. When God speaks, the dust moves; the very dirt is perfectly, instantly responsive to its Creator's voice. And man — who is made of that same dust but given infinitely more, the breath of God, the image of God, a living soul and a free will — man hears the same voice and *refuses*. This is why man is *less than the dust*: not because he is smaller (he is greater), but because in the one thing that matters, obedience to the Creator, the dust outdoes him. The dust does freely... no, the dust does *by nature* what man, with all his exalted gifts, will not do by choice. The image is meant to shatter exactly the pride that the chapter diagnoses. Man's whole boast is that he is more than dust — more powerful, more free, more godlike. And Mormon agrees, and turns the boast into the indictment: *you are more than dust, and that is precisely your shame, because you use the "more" to do what the dust never does — to disobey God*. The dust cannot say no; man can, and does, and so the crown of creation becomes the one disobedient thing in a universe of obedience. There is a deep call hidden in the humiliation, though. If repentance is, as verse 23 says, to *hearken unto the voice of the Lord*, then to repent is to do at last what the dust already does — to become responsive to God's voice, to move when he speaks. The redeemed man is the man who has stopped being *less than* the dust and has rejoined the obedient creation, the image-bearer finally, freely, doing what the dust does by nature: saying *amen* to the voice that formed him from the ground.

■**hevel** (הֶבֶל) — "vapor, breath, vanity, emptiness, fleeting nothing" — **hevel**, a breath, a puff of air, a vapor; figuratively, that which is empty, fleeting, futile, without substance. The great keyword of Ecclesiastes ("vanity of vanities"), naming everything that is insubstantial and passing v. 4 (O how foolish, and how vain, and how evil... are the children of men). When Mormon laments how *vain* the children of men are, the Hebrew behind "vain" is almost certainly the haunting word **hevel** — "vapor, breath, emptiness" — the word that tolls like a bell through Ecclesiastes: *hevel havelim, hakol hevel*, "vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2). And **hevel** is a far more vivid and poignant word than the English "vanity" suggests. Its root meaning is *breath* or *vapor* — the little puff of fog you see on a cold morning that appears for a moment and vanishes. To call a thing **hevel** is to say it is *insubstantial and fleeting* — here and gone, weightless, impossible to grasp, like trying to hold your breath in your hand. Ecclesiastes uses it to name the futility of everything done *under the sun* apart from God: the pleasures, the labors, the riches, the wisdom, all of it **hevel**, a chasing after wind, because all of it passes and none of it satisfies. And this is exactly the diagnosis Mormon is making of the human heart. The children of men are *vain* — **hevel** — because they pour their lives into vapor: *they set their hearts upon the vain things of the world* (v. 4), the riches and the pride and the gain that are precisely **hevel**, breath, here-and-gone. The tragedy is not only that they sin but that they sin *for nothing*, trading the eternal for the evaporating, forgetting the everlasting God to chase a vapor. Notice how **hevel** and ■**aphar** (the dust of the other word study) work together in Mormon's meditation: man is *dust* in his substance (made of the ground, returning to it) and *vapor* in his pursuits (chasing what passes). Made of dirt, spending his days grasping at fog. And there is a further, sobering resonance: **hevel** is the Hebrew name of *Abel* — the first man to die, the righteous brother murdered by Cain, whose very name means "breath, vapor," as if to say his life was a breath, snuffed out in a moment. The book of Helaman has just traced the secret murder of a chief judge by his brother back through Cain and Abel (Hel. 6:27); and here Mormon names human life itself **hevel**, a breath. The whole meditation is a call to stop living for **hevel**. If man is dust chasing vapor, the only thing that is *not* vapor — not **hevel**, not fleeting, not breath — is God and the salvation he declares. *They that have done good shall have everlasting life* (v. 26): *everlasting*, the exact opposite of **hevel**. Mormon's lament over human vanity is, at bottom, a plea to trade the vapor for the eternal — to stop spending the brief breath of a life on things as fleeting as breath, and to spend it instead on the one God who endures, in whom alone the dust-and-vapor creature can find something that does not pass away.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Gen. 2:7; 3:19 (the Lord God formed man of the dust... dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return — man as ■aphar, dust, the comparison of vv. 7–8); Gen. 18:27 (I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes — the dust-creature's proper humility before God); Ps. 103:14–16 (he remembereth that we are dust... as for man, his days are as grass — the dust-and-vapor brevity of human life, vv. 4, 7); Eccl. 1:2, 14 (vanity of vanities... all is vanity — hevel — and vexation of spirit — the hevel, vapor-emptiness, of man's pursuits, v. 4); Josh. 10:12–14 (the sun standing still over Gibeon — the long day Mormon explains as the earth that moveth and not the sun, vv. 14–15); Job 9:5–7 (which removeth the mountains... which shaketh the earth... which commandeth the sun, and it riseth not — God's voice commanding the obedient cosmos, vv. 8–17); Ps. 33:6–9 (by the word of the Lord were the heavens made... for he spake, and it was done — the creation leaping to obey God's voice); Baruch 3:33–35 (the stars answering Here we are to God's call — creation's obedience set against man's refusal); Prayer of Manasseh 1:7 (thou hast appointed repentance unto sinners, that they may be saved — the doctrine of v. 22); 2 Pet. 3:9 (not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance — Mormon's I would that all men might be saved, v. 25); Matt. 25:46 (these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal — the final division of v. 26); Hel. 11:36–37 (the accelerating cycle of forgetting — the narrative this meditation interprets); Hel. 6:27 (the murder of brother by brother traced to Cain and Abel — Hevel, whose name means vapor, the resonance behind v. 4); Mosiah 2:20–25 (Benjamin: if ye should serve him... ye would be unprofitable servants... ye were created of the dust — the same doctrine of human nothingness and dependence). ``