
Helaman 16 — Some Things They May Have Guessed Right — The Reasonings of Unbelief

Helaman 16: the close of the book. Samuel's words divide the people. Those who believe go forth and seek Nephi, confessing their sins and asking baptism; Nephi is already baptizing, prophesying, and working miracles, that the people might know Christ must shortly come. But the unbelievers are angry, and cast stones and shoot arrows at Samuel on the wall — and the Spirit of the Lord is with him, so they cannot hit him. When they see they cannot harm him, some more believe; but the rest cry to their captains that he has a devil, and as they move to seize him, Samuel casts himself down from the wall, flees to his own country, and is never heard of more among the Nephites. Over the next years the people remain mostly in pride and wickedness; then, in the ninetieth year, the prophesied signs begin — angels appear to wise men, the scriptures begin to be fulfilled. And yet the people harden, beginning to 'depend upon their own strength and upon their own wisdom,' reasoning that 'some things they may have guessed right, among so many,' that it is 'not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come,' and that the whole hope of a distant Redeemer is a 'wicked tradition' designed by their teachers to keep them in ignorance and servitude. Satan stirs up rumors and contentions across the land to harden hearts against the good and against that which should come. And notwithstanding the signs and miracles, 'Satan did get great hold upon the hearts of the people upon all the face of the land.' Thus ended the book of Helaman.

The book of Helaman ends here, and it ends on one of the most unsettlingly *modern* passages in all of scripture — the careful, plausible, sophisticated reasonings by which people talk themselves out of believing in Christ even while the signs of his coming pile up around them. This is the chapter where the unbelievers stop merely sinning and start *arguing*, constructing a whole rational case against the gospel, and their arguments sound so contemporary that a reader today can feel the hair rise on the back of the neck. They appeal to probability (*some things they may have guessed right, among so many*), to reasonableness (*it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come*), to skepticism about distant claims (*why will he not show himself unto us as well as... at Jerusalem?*), and to suspicion of religious authority (*the prophets just want to keep us in ignorance... servants to their words*). It is unbelief dressed in the robes of intelligence, and Mormon places it at the very end of his book as a warning aimed straight across the centuries at us.

Hebrew Word Studies

■*okhmah* (חֲכָמָה) — "wisdom, skill, shrewdness" — ■*okhmah*, wisdom in the broadest sense: skill, insight, prudence, cleverness. It can be the holy wisdom that begins in the fear of the Lord, or the merely human cleverness that, trusting itself, becomes folly — the same word for both, the difference lying entirely in whether it bows to God v. 15 (they... began to depend upon their own strength and upon their own wisdom). The hardening that ends the book of Helaman has a precise name: the people *began to depend upon their own... wisdom* — and the Hebrew ■*okhmah*, "wisdom," carries within it the whole tragedy of intelligence turned against God. ■*okhmah* is one of the great words of the Old Testament, and it is morally double. On one side, it is the highest human good: *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (■*okhmah*) (Prov. 9:10); the wisdom that begins in reverence and submission to God, that knows its own limits, that *leans not unto its own understanding* (Prov. 3:5). But on the other side, the very same word names the deadliest spiritual danger: *wisdom* that trusts *itself*, that becomes the ground a person stands on *instead of God*, the cleverness that reasons its way past revelation. And the Bible is relentless about the second kind. *Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!* (Isa. 5:21). *Be not wise in thine own conceits* (Prov. 3:7). *Lean not unto thine own understanding* (Prov. 3:5) — which is *exactly* the sin of Helaman 16:15, a people leaning on their own ■*okhmah* against the wisdom of heaven. The deepest warning is that self-trusting wisdom does not look like folly from the inside; it looks like intelligence, like sophistication, like the only reasonable position. The unbelievers of Helaman 16 are not stupid — their arguments are clever, plausible, even partly sincere (probability, reasonableness, suspicion of authority). They are *wise in their own eyes*. And that is precisely why they cannot believe: their ■*okhmah* has become a fortress against God, a self-sufficiency of mind that has already decided what is possible and bends every sign to fit. Paul names this exact phenomenon: *professing themselves to be wise, they became fools* (Rom. 1:22); *the world by wisdom knew not God* (1 Cor. 1:21); *the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God* (1 Cor. 3:19). The world's ■*okhmah*, trusting itself, reasons its way right past the God it was meant to find — and the cleverer it is, the more elaborately it can justify its unbelief. This is the mirror image of the ■*okhmah* that saves, which begins by *fearing the Lord*, by bowing, by admitting that there is a wisdom higher than one's own. The whole difference between wisdom and folly, in the end, is not intelligence but *posture* — whether the mind kneels before God or stands on itself. The Lamanites of the last chapter were saved by a *change of heart*; the Nephites here are damned by a *fortress of mind*. And Mormon's placement of this at the book's end is a warning aimed straight at every reader who prides himself on his reasoning: that the most dangerous thing in the world is not ignorance but *wisdom that will not bow* — a cleverness so confident in itself that it can explain away angels, reason past miracles, and argue a soul, intelligently and plausibly, into the great hold of Satan. *Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding* (Prov. 3:5) — the whole book of Helaman ends as the living proof of what happens to those who do the opposite.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Prov. 3:5–7 (*trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding... be not wise in thine own conceits* — the exact opposite of the people depending on their own wisdom, v. 15); Isa. 5:21 (*woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!* — the self-trusting ■*okhmah* of v. 15); Prov. 9:10 (*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* — the true wisdom the unbelievers abandon); Rom. 1:21–22 (*professing themselves to be wise, they became fools... their foolish heart was darkened* — the reasonings imagined in darkened hearts, vv. 21–22); 1 Cor. 1:18–25 (*the world by wisdom knew not God... the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God* — the worldly wisdom that reasons past Christ, v. 15); 1 Cor. 2:14 (*the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned* — why the signs convert some and harden others, vv. 3, 6); Matt. 12:24 (*the Pharisees: this fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub* — the identical charge that the prophet hath a devil, v. 6); John 12:37 (*though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not* — the notwithstanding of v. 23, evidence that does not compel belief); Luke 16:31 (*if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead* — the hardened heart unmoved by any sign); Wisd. 2:1–22 (*the ungodly reasoning with themselves, but not aright, blinded by their own wickedness* — the reasonings of vv. 17–22); Hel. 13:27–28 (*the flatterer who says all is well received, the prophet who testifies of sin rejected* — the same divided response, vv. 1–6); Hel. 14:28–29 (*the signs given that there should be no cause for unbelief* — now reasoned away, vv. 15–22); 3 Ne. 1:4–21 (*the signs of Christ's birth fulfilled* — the dawn the unbelievers of v. 18 denied was coming); 3 Ne. 2:1–3 (*the people beginning to forget the signs and imagine up some vain thing, Satan getting hold* — the continuation of v. 23). ```