

Helaman 1 — The Unguarded City — A Throne Contested and a Capital Nearly Lost

Helaman 1: the fortieth year of the reign of the judges opens in crisis. Pahoran the chief judge dies, and three of his sons — Pahoran, Paanchi, and Pacumeni — contend for the judgment-seat, dividing the people three ways. The voice of the people chooses Pahoran; Pacumeni submits, but Paanchi, about to flatter away his followers into rebellion, is tried and condemned to death. His enraged partisans send a man named Kishkumen, who in disguise murders the new chief judge Pahoran on the seat itself and escapes; the assassins bind themselves by a covenant of silence — the first appearance of the secret band that will become the Gadianton robbers. While the government is paralyzed by all this contention, the watch over Zarahemla is left thin: the Nephites suppose the Lamanites would never dare strike the heart of the land. They are wrong. A Nephite dissenter named Coriantumr, set at the head of an innumerable Lamanite host by king Tubaloth, marches with such speed that the capital cannot assemble its armies; he cuts down the watch, takes Zarahemla, kills the fleeing chief judge Pacumeni against the wall, and drives north toward Bountiful. But his own boldness undoes him: by plunging through the center of the land he is cut off and surrounded by Moronihah's and Lehi's armies, Coriantumr is slain, and Zarahemla is recovered. The chapter is the war record's lesson that a people divided against itself leaves its own gates unguarded — and that the deadliest threat to the Nephites has shifted from the border to the throne room.

The book of Alma ended with the great captains going home and the record handed safely on. The book of Helaman opens by showing us what the Nephites do with the peace those men bought them: they nearly throw it away in a single year, not to any enemy but to themselves. If you read Helaman 1 right after Alma 62, the contrast is jarring and deliberate. There, men were dying to hold the borders; here, the borders are wide open and the capital itself falls — and it falls not because the Lamanites grew stronger but because the Nephites grew divided. This is the new shape of the danger, and the whole book of Helaman is going to hammer it: the threat has moved inside. The Lamanite at the wall was never the real problem. The real problem is the empty seat, the contested throne, the assassin in disguise, and the watch left unmanned because everyone was too busy fighting over who gets to be in charge.

Hebrew Word Studies

shamar / *tsaphah* (שָׁמַר / צָפַה) — "to keep, guard, watch" (*shamar*) and "to keep watch, look out as a watchman"

(*tsaphah*) — *shamar* is to keep, guard, tend, preserve; *tsaphah* is the watchman's act of looking out from a height for approaching danger. Together they name the vigilance that keeps a city safe — the guard kept, the watch watched vv. 18, 20 (they had not kept sufficient guards... Coriantumr did cut down the watch by the entrance of the city). The whole disaster of Helaman 1 turns on a failure of *watching*, and the Hebrew Bible has two great words for the thing the Nephites stopped doing. *Shamar* is to keep, guard — the verb of the very first human job (*to dress the garden and to keep it*, Gen. 2:15) and of the priest's charge to keep the watch of the sanctuary. And *tsaphah* is the specific work of the watchman on the wall, the lookout who scans the horizon and sounds the alarm — the office God gives Ezekiel: *I have made thee a watchman (tsophet) unto the house of Israel; therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me* (Ezek. 33:7). The watchman's whole value is his wakefulness; a sleeping watchman is worse than none, because the city trusts him and is undone. This is exactly what happens in verse 18 — *they had not kept (shamar) sufficient guards* — and the cost arrives in verse 20, where Coriantumr *cut down the watch by the entrance*. The thin, neglected watch is the first thing the enemy reaches and the first thing he removes, and the city falls behind it. And the scriptural point about watching is always the same: it is a discipline that must be kept *precisely when nothing seems to be happening*, because the danger comes *when you have stopped expecting it*. *Except the Lord keep (shamar) the city, the watchman (shomer) waketh but in vain* (Ps. 127:1) — the city's safety finally rests on God's keeping, but the human watch is the form that trust takes; you keep watch *and* trust the Lord to keep. The Nephites failed at both ends: they neither kept the watch nor remembered the God who keeps the city, because they were consumed with watching *each other*, fighting over the throne. There is a hard lesson here about where vigilance goes when a community turns inward on its own quarrels — every eye fixed on the internal fight is an eye taken off the wall. Jesus draws the same line into the life of every disciple: *Watch (gregoreite) therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come* (Matt. 24:42); *what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch* (Mark 13:37). The unguarded city is not only a military fact in Helaman 1; it is a picture of any soul or any people that stops watching because it has grown sure of its own safety and distracted by its own contention. The enemy needs no special strength to take such a city. He only needs to find the watch unkept.

***qol ha-am* (קול העם) — "the voice of the people" — qol, voice, sound; ha-am, the people. The phrase names the collective will of a people expressed as a binding voice. In the Nephite constitution it is the mechanism by which leaders are chosen and law is made; in its most famous biblical appearance it is the demand that brought Israel a king vv. 5–8 (Pahoran was appointed by the voice of the people... Paanchi... was tried according to the voice of the people, and condemned).** The phrase that governs the whole opening crisis — *the voice of the people* — is the cornerstone of the Nephite political order that King Mosiah built, and it carries a deep and double history in scripture. The Hebrew *qol ha-am*, "the voice of the people," appears at one of the great hinges of Israel's story, and there it is a *warning*: the people come to Samuel demanding a king *like all the nations*, and God tells Samuel, *hearken unto the voice of the people (qol ha-am) in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them* (1 Sam. 8:7). There the voice of the people demands a *king* — it is the voice of a nation rejecting God's direct rule for a human throne, and it ends in the bondage Samuel foretold. Now watch what Mosiah did with that same voice in his great reform (Mosiah 29). He took the *qol ha-am* — the very instrument that, in Israel, demanded a king — and made it the safeguard *against* kings: *let this be done by the voice of the people... and if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then is the time that the judgments of God will come upon you* (Mosiah 29:26–27). Mosiah inverted the biblical pattern: in Israel the voice of the people installed a monarch; in Nephite law the voice of the people abolished monarchy and chose judges, dispersing power so that no single man could seize the throne. And in Helaman 1 you watch that constitution *work* — beautifully, at first. The voice of the people fairly chooses Pahoran (v. 5); the losing brother Pacumeni *unites with the voice of the people* (v. 6), submitting to the result like a true citizen; even the rebel Paanchi is tried *according to the voice of the people* (v. 8), due process rather than mob justice. The system does exactly what it was built to do. What breaks it is not a flaw in the *qol ha-am* but a man who will not accept its verdict — Paanchi, who answers the voice of the people with rebellion, and whose partisans answer a lawful execution with assassination. This is the permanent vulnerability of any government by the voice of the people, and the Book of Mormon names it without flinching: the system is only as good as the people's willingness to *abide* its outcomes. Mosiah's own warning hangs over the whole book — *if the time comes that the voice of the people doth choose iniquity, then... the judgments of God will come upon you* — and Helaman 5:2 will record the moment it arrives, when *they who chose evil were more numerous than they who chose good*, and the voice that was meant to protect liberty instead ratifies destruction. The *qol ha-am* is a holy instrument and a fragile one: it can choose Pahoran or it can choose a king, it can abolish tyranny or it can vote in iniquity, and which it does depends entirely on the hearts of the people who lift the voice. A free people is never more than a generation of bad hearts away from voting its own chains.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Ezek. 33:1–7 (the watchman — tsofeh — set to warn the city, whose failure to watch brings the people's blood on his head — the unkept watch of vv. 18, 20); Ps. 127:1 (except the Lord keep — shamar — the city, the watchman waketh but in vain — the human watch resting on God's keeping, both of which the Nephites neglect); Gen. 2:15 (to dress it and to keep it — shamar — the first charge to guard, the vigilance abandoned here); Matt. 24:42; Mark 13:33–37 (watch... for ye know not what hour — the discipline of watching when nothing seems to threaten, lost the moment a people grows sure of its safety); Prov. 25:28 (he that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls — the self divided is the city unguarded); 1 Sam. 8:5–7 (the people demanding a king like all the nations — the contest for the seat that Mosiah's voice-of-the-people was meant to prevent, vv. 1–8); Mosiah 29:25–27 (let this inequality be no more in this land... by the voice of the people — the constitution that works in vv. 5–6 and that Paanchi rejects in v. 7); Alma 61:9 (Pahoran the elder's it mattereth not; I am not angry — the magnanimous father whose sons now fight over his seat, vv. 1–4); Hel. 2:3–13 (Gadianton's rise from the band of Kishkumen — the secret covenant of v. 11 grown into the combination that will overthrow the Nephites); Hel. 6:21–30 (the satanic genealogy of the secret oaths back to Cain — the covenant sworn by their everlasting Maker unmasked as the devil's counterfeit of covenant, v. 11); Hel. 2:13–14 (Mormon's flag that Gadianton did prove the overthrow... of the people of Nephi — the seed planted in v. 11). ```