
Helaman 4 — Left in Their Own Strength — The Loss of the Land Southward

Helaman 4: the slide that pride begins. Dissensions in the church boil into bloodshed; the rebellious are driven out and go to the Lamanites, stirring them to war. Over several years the Nephites, weakened from within, lose ground steadily until — by the fifty-eighth and fifty-ninth years — they have lost the land of Zarahemla and all their lands southward, driven back to a fortified line at Bountiful. Mormon names the cause without flinching: the great loss 'would not have happened had it not been for their wickedness' — the pride of their hearts, their exceeding riches, their oppression of the poor (withholding food from the hungry and clothing from the naked, smiting the humble), their mocking of the sacred, their denying the spirit of prophecy. Boasting in their own strength, 'they were left in their own strength' — and so did not prosper. Moronihah, Nephi, and Lehi preach and prophesy; the people repent in part and regain half their lands, but no more. In their fear they begin to remember the prophecies of Alma and the words of Mosiah, and see that they have become a stiffnecked people who trampled the law, that the church has dwindled, that the judgments of God stare them in the face — because 'the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples.' The Lord ceases to preserve them by his matchless power; man for man the Lamanites now equal them. In the space of not many years a strong people has been made weak — not by the enemy, but by its own transgression.

Helaman 3 ended with pride growing daily on the soil of riches. Helaman 4 is what that pride costs. If the previous chapter showed you the seed, this one shows you the harvest, and it is bitter: in the space of a few years the Nephites lose the land of Zarahemla and *all their lands southward* — everything Moroni and the stripling warriors bled to hold, gone. And the thing to fix in your mind from the very start, the thing Mormon will not let you misread, is *why* they lost it. Not because the Lamanites got stronger. Because the Nephites got wicked. Mormon states it as flatly as he ever states anything: *this great loss... would not have happened had it not been for their wickedness* (v. 11). This is a chapter-length argument that the deadliest enemy a people faces is its own sin, and that no fortification, no army, no past victory can save a nation that has hollowed itself out from within.

Hebrew Word Studies

koa / **zeroa** **basar** (קֹחַ / זְרוֹעַ בָּסָר) — "strength, power" (**koa**) and "arm of flesh" (**zeroa** **basar**) — **koa** is might, power, the capacity to do and to withstand; **zeroa** is the arm, the biblical symbol of strength in action; **zeroa** **basar**, "arm of flesh," names merely human strength, the power of mortal effort set in contrast to the arm of the Lord v. 13 (because of their boastings in their own strength, they were left in their own strength). The whole chapter turns on a single, terrible exchange — they *boasted in their own strength*, so God *left them in their own strength* — and the Hebrew Bible has built an entire theology around exactly this word, **koa**, "strength," and its great contrast, the *arm of flesh*. Scripture is relentless on the point that human strength, trusted in itself, is a lie that fails at the worst moment. *Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm (zeroa)*, and whose heart departeth from the Lord (Jer. 17:5); set against *blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord* (Jer. 17:7). *Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the Lord our God* (Ps. 20:7). *There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength (rav-koa)* (Ps. 33:16). And most pointedly, the warning against the very boast the Nephites make: *thou say in thine heart, My power (ko*i*) and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power (koa) to get wealth* (Deut. 8:17–18). That is the Nephite sin named centuries early — the prosperous people saying *my power got me this* — and Helaman 4 is what Deuteronomy warned would follow. Now here is the deep and frightening logic of verse 13. God does not strike the boasters down with a new affliction; he simply *grants their boast*. They claimed their strength was their own and sufficient, so he *left them in it* — withdrew the help they said they didn't need and let their **koa** be exactly as much as they claimed it was, which was nothing. This is the exact inverse of the great refrain that won every Nephite war: *in the strength of the Lord* (Alma 56:56; 60:16; 61:18). The faithful went up *in the strength of the Lord* and could not be beaten; the proud were *left in their own strength* and could not stand. Same battles, same enemy, opposite outcomes — and the only variable is *whose* strength they leaned on. The whole secret of the Book of Mormon's military history is in that contrast: the **zeroa** **basar**, the arm of flesh, always fails, and it fails most completely in the people most confident it would hold. *They were left in their own strength* is not merely a defeat; it is the unmasking of a delusion. The Nephites were never strong. They were *held* by a strength not their own, and they mistook the holding for their own muscle. The moment they boasted as if the strength were theirs, God let go — and they learned, *in the space of not many years*, that the arm of flesh they had trusted could not hold up a single city. *Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might* (Eph. 6:10) — there is only one strength that does not fail, and it is borrowed, and the proud are those who forgot they were borrowing.

shakhan / **heikhal** (שָׁכַן / הֵיכָל) — "to dwell, settle, abide" (**shakhan**) and "temple, palace" (**heikhal**) — **shakhan** is to dwell, to settle in, to make one's abode (the root behind **mishkan**, the tabernacle, and **Shekinah**, the dwelling-presence of God); **heikhal** is the temple, the house built for God to dwell in. A temple is, by definition, a dwelling place — and a temple's whole purpose is to be inhabited by the One it was built for v. 24 (the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples). The cause beneath the whole collapse is named in one phrase — *the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples* — and both key words carry deep freight. *Dwell* is the idea of **shakhan**, to settle in and abide; it is the root of **mishkan**, the tabernacle (literally "the dwelling"), and of the later Jewish term **Shekinah**, the glory-presence of God that *dwelt* between the cherubim. And *temple* is **heikhal**, the house built precisely so that God's presence might dwell in it. Put them together and you have the foundational idea of all biblical worship: God *dwells* with his people in a *dwelling* set apart and made holy for him. *Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell (shakhanti) among them* (Ex. 25:8) — the whole purpose of the tabernacle was *indwelling*. But the *indwelling* was always conditional on holiness. A defiled temple could not hold the presence; when Israel's temple was profaned, the prophet Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord *depart* from it, the **Shekinah** lifting off and leaving the house empty (Ezek. 10–11). A temple made unholy is simply a temple the holy God will not, cannot, inhabit. Now Mormon — and Paul independently — make the staggering move of relocating the temple from a building to a *people*, and even to a *body*. *Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are* (1 Cor. 3:16–17); *your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you* (1 Cor. 6:19). This is exactly Mormon's logic. The Nephites — as a people, as a covenant community, and one by one as souls — are the temple, the **heikhal**, built to be the dwelling of God's Spirit. And the rule for the temple of stone holds for the temple of flesh: *the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples*. When the people made themselves unholy — proud, oppressing the poor, mocking the sacred — they did to themselves what wicked Israel did to the temple in Jerusalem: they defiled the dwelling, and the *indwelling Presence*, being holy, withdrew. The **Shekinah** lifted off the Nephite people the way it lifted off Ezekiel's temple, and for the same reason. And once the Presence is gone, the house is just a house — or, here, a people is just a crowd, *weak, like unto their brethren*, with no preserving power left, because the power was never the building's and never the people's; it was the *Presence* that dwelt in them. The chapter's deepest lesson is therefore not military but architectural in the spiritual sense: you

are a temple, and a temple's strength is entirely the Guest who dwells in it. Keep the temple holy and the Presence stays and the house stands against anything. Defile it, and the Presence departs, and the most magnificent temple in the world becomes an empty shell that the first strong wind brings down. *The Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples* — and a people who forget it will lose, in a few years, everything the Presence was holding up.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Deut. 8:17–18 (thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power — the exact boast in one's own strength that v. 13 punishes); Jer. 17:5–7 (cursed be the man that... maketh flesh his arm... blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord — the arm of flesh that fails the Nephites); Ps. 20:7; 33:16 (some trust in chariots... but we will remember the name of the Lord... a mighty man is not delivered by much strength — the futility of trusting one's own koad■); Ex. 25:8 (let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them — the shakhan, the indwelling, that withdraws in v. 24); Ezek. 10:18; 11:23 (the glory of the Lord departing from the defiled temple — the Shekinah lifting off, as the Spirit withdraws from the unholy Nephites); 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19 (ye are the temple of God... if any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy... your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost — the people and body as the unholy temple of v. 24); Eph. 6:10 (be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might — the borrowed strength the Nephites abandoned); Isa. 1:15–17 (your hands are full of blood... seek judgment, relieve the oppressed — the oppression of the poor that defiles worship, v. 12); Alma 56:56; 60:16; 61:18 (in the strength of the Lord — the refrain of victory inverted into left in their own strength, v. 13); Alma 5:53–56 (Alma's earlier rebuke of those who turn their backs upon the poor and the needy — the prophecy now remembered, v. 21); Hel. 3:33–36 (the pride that grew daily, here ripened into oppression and loss); Hel. 12:1–6 (Mormon's coming meditation on how quickly the prospered forget God — the not many years of v. 26 generalized into doctrine). ```