
Helaman 6 — The Great Reversal — When the Lamanites Surpassed the Nephites

Helaman 6: the fruit of the prison conversion, and the shadow that grows beside it. After the events of Helaman 5, the more part of the Lamanites become a righteous people whose 'righteousness did exceed that of the Nephites, because of their firmness and their steadiness in the faith' — while many Nephites grow hardened and impenitent. The great reversal is complete: the missionaries' children's children now learn from the people their fathers once taught. Converted Lamanites come down to Zarahemla to preach repentance to the Nephites; there is peace, free intercourse between the peoples, trade, and exceeding riches in both the land north (Mulek) and the land south (Lehi). But prosperity does its old work. The Nephites set their hearts on riches and begin to commit secret murders to get gain — and the band of Kishkumen and Gadianton, dormant since Helaman 2, revives. Cezoram the chief judge and his son are murdered by unknown hands. Satan stirs the Nephites to unite with the robbers, entering their oaths and secret signs and words, a covenant to protect one another's wickedness. Mormon traces these secret oaths to their true source: not the records Alma sealed up, but 'that same being who did plot with Cain,' who built the tower, the author of all sin, who hands his works of darkness 'from generation to generation.' The two peoples diverge utterly: the Lamanites hunt the robbers to destruction, while the Nephites build them up until they obtain 'the sole management of the government.' Thus the Spirit withdraws from the Nephites and is poured out on the Lamanites — and the Nephites ripen for an everlasting destruction.

This is the chapter where the Book of Mormon turns one of its most important assumptions upside down, and it does it on purpose, to break something in the reader. For the entire record up to this point, the categories have been fixed: Nephites are the covenant people, the keepers of the record, the righteous line; Lamanites are the fallen, the cursed, the enemy laboring under the false traditions of their fathers. Helaman 6 detonates that. *The more part of the Lamanites... a righteous people, insomuch that their righteousness did exceed that of the Nephites* (v. 1). The cursed have become the faithful. The enemy has become the missionary. And the chosen people — the Nephites — have become the hardened ones, *impenitent and grossly wicked* (v. 2), so far gone that converted *Lamanites* now have to come down to Zarahemla to preach repentance to *them* (v. 4). It is the great reversal, and Mormon stages it deliberately to teach the lesson the whole record exists to teach: that the covenant is not a bloodline. It is a way of living. Lineage guarantees nothing. The "chosen people" can become the lost people in a generation, and the "cursed people" can become the saints — because what makes a people God's is not who their fathers were but whether they will *believe and obey*.

Hebrew Word Studies

berit / sod (בְּרִית / סוֹד) — "covenant" (berit) and "secret counsel, intimate circle" (sod) — **berit is the sacred bond, the covenant that binds God to his people and people to one another in faithfulness; sod is a confidential council, an inner circle, the secret counsel shared among intimates. The secret combination is a monstrous fusion: a berit (a sworn covenant) in service of a sod (a hidden conspiracy) — covenant turned inside out vv. 21–22 (they did enter into their covenants and their oaths... they did have their signs, yea, their secret signs, and their secret words).** To understand what the secret combinations truly are, you have to see them as the deliberate *inversion* of the two holiest things in Israel's life: the *berit*, the covenant, and the *sod*, the sacred inner counsel. *Berit* is the great word of the Bible's whole structure — the covenant God cuts with Noah, Abraham, Israel; the sworn, binding bond that makes a people God's people. To enter a *berit* is to bind yourself, by sacred oath, to faithfulness — to God above all, and to your covenant brothers under him. And *sod* is the intimate counsel, the inner circle of trust: *the secret (sod) of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant (berit)* (Ps. 25:14) — notice how the verse pairs them, the *sod* and the *berit* together, the holy secret and the holy covenant, both belonging to those who fear God. The prophets are those who stand in God's *sod*, his council: *the Lord God... revealeth his secret (sod) unto his servants the prophets* (Amos 3:7). So *berit* and *sod* together name the most sacred bonds a person can have — a covenant sworn before God and an intimate place in his counsel. Now look at what the Gadianton robbers do. They *enter into covenants and oaths* (v. 21) — a *berit* — and they share *secret signs and secret words* (v. 22) — a *sod*, an inner circle with its own confidential knowledge. They have taken the exact *forms* of the most sacred things — the sworn covenant and the secret counsel — and filled them with their exact opposite. The covenant that should bind men to God and to righteousness now binds them to *protect one another's murders* (v. 22). The secret counsel that should be the place where God reveals his will to the faithful is now the place where men plot *robbery, and murder, and all manner of wickedness* (v. 23). It is *berit* and *sod* turned inside out — covenant in service of treachery, secret counsel in service of darkness. And the inversion goes all the way down, even to the sacred *handing-down*. The holiest thing the Nephites do is *hand down* the sacred records *from one generation to another* (the *zikkaron* of Alma 63, the *remember, remember* of Helaman 5) — the transmission of the covenant across time. And Satan, Mormon says, *doth hand down their plots, and their oaths, and their covenants... from generation to generation* (v. 30): a counterfeit transmission, a dark inheritance passed down the centuries to mirror and oppose the holy one. This is why Mormon insists the oaths did *not* come from the sacred records (vv. 25–26) — he must rule out the holy source precisely because the secret combination is the perfect *forgery* of the holy thing, and a careless reader might confuse the counterfeit covenant with the true one. The secret combination is Satan's masterwork: not the absence of covenant, but its perversion — the sacred bond, the sacred secret, the sacred handing-down, every one of them stolen and inverted to bind men into darkness. And that is why it is so deadly to a covenant people. It does not look like the rejection of the covenant; it looks like a covenant. It offers belonging, brotherhood, sworn loyalty, secret knowledge — all the goods of the *berit* and the *sod* — in service of hell. A people that has forgotten the true covenant is exactly the people most easily captured by its counterfeit.

ha-satan (הַשָּׂטָן) — "the adversary, the accuser" — **satan, an adversary, opponent, one who obstructs; with the definite article, ha-satan, "the Adversary," the great opposer who works against God and man. Related to the legal world of the accuser who stands to oppose, and to the active work of opposition, plotting, and enmity vv. 26–30 (that same being who did entice our first parents... that same being who did plot with Cain... he is the author of all sin).** When Mormon traces the secret oaths back through Cain and the tower to *that same being*, and finally names him *the author of all sin* (v. 30), he is identifying the Adversary — in Hebrew *ha-satan*, "the satan," the opposer. The root *satan* means to *oppose, obstruct, act as adversary*; it can name any human opponent, but with the definite article it becomes a title for the great cosmic Opponent, the being whose entire work is *against* — against God, against man, against the good. And the most important thing Mormon does here is establish the *continuity* of this being's work across all of human history. Notice the phrase he repeats like a refrain: *that same being... that same being... that same being* (vv. 26, 27, 28). Mormon is hammering one point — that the evil of the Gadianton robbers is not a new thing, not a Nephite invention, but the latest move of a single, ancient, continuous Adversary who has been running the same play since the beginning. He *enticed our first parents* (the serpent in Eden); he *plotted with Cain* (the first murder, sealed by the first secret oath — *if he would murder his brother Abel it should not be known*, v. 27); he built the *tower* (Babel, the pride that storms heaven); he *led on the people who came from that tower* (the Jaredites, destroyed by their own secret combinations, their bones under this very land). It is one being, one strategy, one unbroken war, from Eden to Gadianton. And his signature move, the thing Mormon emphasizes, is the *secret* — *secret murder*, the killing that *should not be known unto the world* (v. 27). The Adversary's covenant is always a covenant of *darkness*, of concealment, because his works cannot survive the light: *every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved* (John 3:20). This is why the combinations live by *secret signs and secret words* — secrecy is not incidental to the Adversary's work; it is essential to it, the native element of *the works of darkness* (v.

28). And the title *author of all sin* (v. 30) places the Gadianton problem in its true frame. The Nephites think they are joining a profitable conspiracy for getting gain; they are in fact enlisting under *ha-satan* himself, in the oldest war there is. Moroni will later draw the lesson out to its fullest and aim it straight at the latter-day reader: *whatsoever nation shall uphold such secret combinations, to get power and gain, until they shall spread over the nation, behold, they shall be destroyed* (Ether 8:22), and he warns us to *awake to a sense of your awful situation, because of this secret combination which shall be among you* (Ether 8:24). The Adversary is still handing the same plots down, *from generation to generation, according as he can get hold upon the hearts of the children of men* (v. 30) — and the only defense is the opposite of secrecy and the opposite of the counterfeit covenant: to come into the light, and to remember, and to hold fast the true covenant on the true Rock. *Ha-satan* opposes; the Rock holds; and every soul stands, in the end, in one camp or the other.

From the Chapter's Architecture

``cross-references Gen. 4:6–10 (Cain's murder of Abel and the blood crying from the ground — the first secret murder that it should not be known, the original Gadianton plot, v. 27); Gen. 11:1–9 (the tower of Babel, the pride that storms heaven — that same being who put it into the hearts of the people to build a tower, v. 28); Ps. 25:14 (the secret — sod — of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant — *berit* — the holy counsel and covenant the robbers counterfeit, vv. 21–22); Amos 3:7 (the Lord God... revealeth his secret — sod — unto his servants the prophets — the true secret counsel, inverted by the band's secret signs); John 3:19–20 (men loved darkness rather than light... lest his deeds should be reprov'd — the works of darkness that live by secrecy, v. 28); Ether 8:18–26 (Moroni's full exposition: secret combinations have caused the destruction of this people, and the warning to the latter-day nation that upholds them — the genealogy of v. 30 aimed at the modern reader); 2 Ne. 26:22 (the devil's cords and flaxen cord by which he leads souls to secret works of darkness — the binding of the counterfeit covenant); Hel. 1:11 (the assassins swearing by their everlasting Maker to tell no man — the first secret oath, now grown to national scale); Hel. 2:4–13 (Gadianton's rise and Mormon's warning that he would prove the Nephites' overthrow — fulfilled as the robbers obtain the sole management of the government, v. 39); Hel. 4:24 (the Spirit not dwelling in unholy temples — now stated as a transfer, withdrawn from the Nephites and poured on the Lamanites, vv. 35–36); Acts 10:34–35 (God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him... is accepted — the great reversal of v. 1, the covenant not by lineage but by faith); Matt. 7:24–27 (the rock and the sand — the Lamanites firm and steady on the rock of Hel. 5:12, the Nephites' house falling); 3 Ne. 2:11–12; 4:1–10 (the Gadianton robbers grown to the national war that nearly ends the Nephites — the ripening for destruction of v. 40). ``