
Helaman 7 — The Lament on the Tower — Nephi Pours Out His Soul

Helaman 7: the sixty-ninth year. Nephi, son of Helaman, returns from a rejected mission in the land northward to find Zarahemla in a far worse state than he left it — the Gadianton robbers now filling the judgment-seats, condemning the righteous, freeing the guilty for money, ruling for gain and glory. His heart swollen with sorrow, Nephi climbs a tower in his garden by the highway to the chief market and pours out his soul to God in public lamentation. Passersby see him and gather a multitude to learn the cause of so great a mourning. Rising, Nephi turns his grief into a prophetic cry: he laments that he could not have lived in the righteous days of the first Nephi; he names the devil's grip on their hearts and asks why they have forgotten the God who delivered them; he calls them to repent — 'Turn ye, turn ye unto the Lord your God' — and warns that unless they repent, their great cities will be taken, the Lord will withdraw the strength that has preserved them, and they will be destroyed, for the Lamanites are now more righteous than they. He closes insisting he speaks not of himself: 'I know that these things are true because the Lord God has made them known unto me, therefore I testify that they shall be.' The chapter is the portrait of the prophet's anguish — a man who loves a people he must condemn, weeping on a tower in the sight of a city that will not turn.

After the great miracle of Helaman 5 and the heartbreaking reversal of Helaman 6, the book now turns to a single prophet and a single, almost unbearable scene: a man weeping on a tower in his garden, in full view of the city, because the people he loves are destroying themselves and will not listen. This is the beginning of the Nephi arc — Nephi the son of Helaman, the man who walked away from the judgment-seat back in chapter 5 — and it opens not with a sermon or a miracle but with a lament. Before Nephi prophesies, before he detects a murderer, before he is given the sealing power, we see him *grieving*. And that ordering is the chapter's whole point. The prophet's power, when it comes, will grow out of the prophet's sorrow — out of a heart so broken over his people's sin that he cannot keep it private, and climbs a tower to pour it out to God where the whole city can see.

Hebrew Word Studies

shuv (שׁוּב) — "to turn, return, turn back" — **shuv, to turn around, go back, return to a starting point; the ordinary verb for physical turning that becomes the great theological word for repentance — to turn back to God from whom one has strayed. To repent, in Hebrew, is simply to turn around and come home v. 17 (Turn ye, turn ye unto the Lord your God. Why will ye die?).** When Nephi cries *Turn ye, turn ye unto the Lord your God*, he is using the single most important word for repentance in the Hebrew Bible — *shuv*, "to turn, to return." And the beauty of *shuv* is its sheer concreteness: it is not an abstract religious term but the plain word for turning your body around and walking back the way you came. To repent is to be walking away from God and simply *turn around* and walk back. This is why the prophets, when they call Israel to repentance, almost always use *shuv*: *Turn ye (shuvu), turn ye (shuvu) from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?* (Ezek. 33:11) — which is, almost word for word, Nephi's cry in verse 17, *Turn ye, turn ye... Why will ye die?* Nephi is quoting, or reaching independently, the exact language of Ezekiel, down to the doubled imperative and the anguished *why will ye die*. The same call rings through all the prophets: *Turn ye (shuvu) unto him from whom the children of Israel have deeply revolted* (Isa. 31:6); *Turn, O backsliding children* (Jer. 3:14); *O Israel, return (shuvah) unto the Lord thy God* (Hos. 14:1); *Turn ye (shuvu) even to me with all your heart* (Joel 2:12). And the deepest promise attached to *shuv* is reciprocal: *Turn ye (shuvu) unto me... and I will turn (ashuv) unto you* (Mal. 3:7; Zech. 1:3) — you turn back to God, and God turns back to you. The motion is mutual; the moment the straying soul turns homeward, God is already turning toward it. This is the whole theology of repentance compressed into one verb. Repentance is not, at root, feeling bad, or doing penance, or earning your way back. It is *turning* — a change of direction, a reorientation of the whole self away from sin and back toward God. And it carries enormous hope, because *shuv* assumes the road home is open. You are not lost; you are merely *facing the wrong way*, and the remedy is to turn around. Nephi's *why will ye die?* (v. 17) carries the full force of the Hebrew idea — death is not the inevitable end of these people; it is a *choice*, a refusal to make the simple turn. They are walking toward the cliff, and all that is asked is that they *shuv*, turn, and walk back toward life. The tragedy Nephi grieves is not that turning is hard but that they *will not do* the one thing that would save them — the easiest and the hardest thing, to turn around. And the *good shepherd* of the next verse is the one who stands calling them home: the whole point of *shuv* is that there is Someone to return to, a Shepherd whose voice still calls across the distance, *turn, turn, and live*.

ro■eh (רועה) — "shepherd, one who tends a flock" — **ro■eh**, the active participle of **ra■ah**, to pasture, tend, feed; the shepherd who leads, feeds, guards, and gathers the sheep. In scripture the great image for God and for the rulers he sets over his people — and the title the Messiah claims as his own v. 18 (*ye will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd; yea, ye have provoked him to anger*). When Nephi grieves that the people *will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd*, he is invoking one of the oldest and tenderest images in all of scripture — the **ro■eh**, the shepherd. In the ancient Near East "shepherd" was the standard title for a king, the one who was supposed to feed and protect the flock of his people; and Israel applied it supremely to God. *The Lord is my shepherd (ro■i); I shall not want... he leadeth me beside the still waters* (Ps. 23:1–2). *He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom* (Isa. 40:11). The shepherd knows his sheep, leads them to water and pasture, carries the weak, seeks the lost, and stands between the flock and the wolf. And the sheep, for their part, *know the shepherd's voice* — that is the whole basis of the relationship: the shepherd calls, and his own sheep follow because they recognize his voice and trust it. This is precisely what makes Nephi's lament so piercing. The tragedy is not that the shepherd has abandoned the sheep; it is that *the sheep will no longer hear the shepherd's voice. Ye will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd* (v. 18) — they have gone deaf to the one voice that could lead them to safety, water, and life. And the danger that follows is the danger of every sheep that strays from the shepherd's voice: *instead of gathering you... he shall scatter you forth that ye shall become meat for dogs and wild beasts* (v. 19). The shepherd's two great works are *gathering* and *guarding*; a flock that will not hear his voice forfeits both, and is left exposed to the very beasts the shepherd existed to keep away. Ezekiel's great shepherd-chapter stands behind all of this: God condemns the false shepherds of Israel who *fed themselves, and fed not my flock* (Ezek. 34:8) — exactly the Gadianon judges of Helaman 7, ruling for their own gain while the flock is *scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them* (Ezek. 34:6) — and then God promises, *I will set up one shepherd over them... my servant David... and he shall feed them* (Ezek. 34:23). That one Shepherd is the Christ whom Nephi here calls the *good shepherd* — the very title Jesus will claim: *I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep... my sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me* (John 10:11, 27). So Nephi, centuries early, names the coming Christ by the name Christ will give himself, and names the Nephites' sin by its deepest spiritual form: not merely breaking laws, but *refusing to hear the Shepherd's voice*. And this connects to the chapter's central call, *turn ye, turn ye* (the *shuv* of the other word study): to repent is to *turn back toward the Shepherd and start following his voice again*. The lost sheep is not destroyed; it is merely facing the wrong way and deaf to the call. The whole remedy is to grow ears for the Shepherd's voice once more and turn and follow it home — for the good Shepherd is still calling, still seeking, still ready to gather the flock that will only stop and listen.

From the Chapter's Architecture

```cross-references Ezek. 33:11 (*Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? — the near-exact source of Nephi's cry, the shuv call doubled, v. 17*); Isa. 31:6; Jer. 3:14; Hos. 14:1; Joel 2:12 (*turn ye... return unto the Lord thy God... turn ye even to me with all your heart — the prophetic call to shuv, repentance as turning*); Mal. 3:7; Zech. 1:3 (*turn ye unto me... and I will turn unto you — the reciprocal turning, God meeting the one who repents*); John 10:11–14 (*I am the good shepherd... my sheep hear my voice — the good shepherd whose voice the hardened will not hear, v. 18*); Luke 19:41–44 (*Jesus weeping over Jerusalem because it knewest not the time of thy visitation — the prophet's grief over a city that will not turn, the tower lament's New Testament echo*); Jer. 9:1 (*Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep... for the slain of the daughter of my people — the weeping prophet, Nephi on the tower*); Luke 12:48 (*unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required — the Nephites' greater guilt for sinning against great knowledge, v. 24*); Hel. 6:34–36 (*the great reversal — the Lamanites more righteous, now turned into Nephi's rebuke, vv. 23–24*); Hel. 4:13, 24 (*the strength withdrawn from the wicked — the Lord will not grant unto you strength, v. 22*); Hel. 8:27–28; 9:6–38 (*the prophecy of the murdered judge — Nephi's it is not of myself claim, v. 29, about to be put to the test*); Mosiah 3:17–19 (*the natural man and the call to put off the carnal — the hardened hearts Nephi diagnoses, v. 18*). ```