

Chapter Two

“IN THE DAY OF MY WISDOM”

The Prolongation of Days among Israel

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In the Book of Mormon, Samuel the Lamanite teaches that the Lamanites have received a promise from God that their days would be prolonged as part of their future “restoration . . . to the knowledge of the truth” (Helaman 15:4–16). Under what circumstances and what conditions has God offered to prolong the existence of a nation or individual? In this study I examine the notion of the prolongation of life through divine intervention of both individuals and specific groups, such as Israel. First, I examine the Old Testament broadly to better understand the relationship between righteous living and a possible prolongation of one’s mortal existence.¹ This study also considers the theological complexities associated with God’s promising a longer life based on righteous living, when the lives of the righteous are regularly cut short and the less righteous can in fact live out long and full lives. Secondly, I look at specific promises made to the Lamanites throughout the Book of Mormon, in particular Samuel’s

promises that his people would be preserved—an assurance the Nephites were conspicuously not given—and explore the reasons for this found in the text. Furthermore, I investigate the competing notions of prolongation of days being linked to obedience in most cases but, in the unique case of the Lamanites, being promised *in spite of* their unrighteousness.

PROLONGING LIFE THROUGH OBEDIENCE

Various scriptures in the Bible and the Book of Mormon promise a prolongation of one's days in mortality based on the following actions:

- keeping the commandments—Deuteronomy 4:40, “that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth”; 6:2, “that thy days may be prolonged”; Ezekiel 18:21, “he shall surely live, he shall not die”; 1 Kings 3:14, “I will lengthen thy days”; Psalm 92:12–14, “They shall still bring forth fruit in old age”; Proverbs 3:1–2, “For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee”; 4:10, “and the years of thy life shall be many”; Helaman 15:10, “the Lord shall bless them and prolong their days”
- honoring parents—Exodus 20:12, “that thy days may be long upon the land”; Ephesians 6:2–3, “thou mayest live long on the earth”
- having “accurate and honest weights and measures” (NIV)—Deuteronomy 25:15, “that thy days may be lengthened”
- not speaking deceit—1 Peter 3:10, “For he that will love life, and see good days”
- directly petitioning God—Psalm 21:4, “even length of days for ever and ever”; Isaiah 38:5, “I will add unto thy days fifteen years”
- exercising wisdom—Proverbs 3:16, “Length of days is in her [Wisdom’s] right hand”; 9:11, “For by me thy days shall be multiplied, and the years of thy life shall be increased”
- hating unjust gain—Proverbs 28:16, “shall prolong his days”

- fearing the Lord—Proverbs 10:27, “The fear of the Lord prolongeth days”
- worshipping God—Exodus 23:25–26, “the number of thy days I will fulfil”

Do these references to “prolonging days” literally mean a divine extension of one’s life span? In the Old Testament the most common verb in Hebrew for “lengthening” one’s days is *ʾarak*, which is translated as “prolong” fourteen times in the King James Version. The semantic range of *ʾarak* includes “to be long,” “to prolong (days),” “to grow long,” to “draw out,” and “to live” or “tarry (long).” This Proto-Semitic root has cognates in Aramaic (*ʾarak*), Akkadian (*arā:ku*), Arabic (*ʾaraku*), Ethiopian, Syriac, and Ugaritic. The cognate Ethiopian form, *ʾarga*, specifically means “he became old,” as well as having the sense of “delay” or “defer” (compare Isaiah 48:9). Thus in the context of the above scripture verses, the meaning of *prolong* does indeed seem to refer to the lengthening out of one’s time in this life, a delaying of one’s ostensible appointed time of death (see Ecclesiastes 3:2).

Another verb in Hebrew that appears in the context of lengthening out one’s days in mortality is *yāsaph*, which means “to add” or “to increase” (compare Psalm 61:6). For example, Isaiah is told to tell King Hezekiah that the Lord will “add (*yāsaph*) fifteen years to [his] life” (Isaiah 38:5 NIV). In this case time is literally added to the king’s life span. The same verb appears in a couplet in Proverbs 9:11: “For by me your days will be multiplied (*rābāh*), and years of life will be added (*yāsaph*) to you” (NASB). Here *yāsaph* is synonymously linked to one’s days being “multiplied” (*rābāh*), again a direct attribution of additional time in this life. Thus, through divine intervention God can and does extend life in specific circumstances. In another instance the Psalmist implores, “Increase the days of the king’s life, his years for many generations” (Psalm 61:6 NIV). Similarly, in Psalm 21:4 the Psalmist speaks of himself in the third person and thanks God for protecting his life during a dangerous expedition: “He asked you for life, and you gave it to him,” but he also believes God had promised him “length of days, for ever and ever” (NIV). David’s son, Solomon, was given a similar promise while in Gibeon: “If thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father

David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days” (1 Kings 3:14). The Hebrew Bible is full of examples of God reaching out to certain individuals with a promise of increasing the length of their lives. However, this paradigmatic promise does not appear only in the wisdom literature or in the narratives of kings and prophets. It is also prioritized in one of the most influential portions of the Torah: the command to honor one’s father and mother. It is to this commandment and its resultant life-extending blessing that we now turn.

“HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER: THAT THY DAYS MAY BE LONG UPON THE LAND”

One of the boldest statements in scripture regarding a prolongation of days is in the context of honoring our fathers and mothers. Of the Ten Commandments, only one specifies a blessing for obedience to its injunction. This is the fifth commandment, which states, “Honour thy father and thy mother: *that thy days may be long upon the land* which the Lord thy God giveth thee” (Exodus 20:12; compare Deuteronomy 6:2). A slightly expanded version of this covenantal phrase appears in Deuteronomy 5:16: “Honour thy father and thy mother, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, *and that it may go well with thee*, in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.” Two promises are expressly linked to honoring one’s parents: a prolongation of days and a general assurance of things going well in one’s life. Paul, recognizing the singular nature of the fifth commandment, qualifies his discussion of it this way: “Honour thy father and mother; (*which is the first commandment with promise*),” and then he describes that promise as “that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Ephesians 6:2–3). Here we have a clear reference to the possibility of a prolongation of days by keeping this particular commandment of God. What, however, does it mean to “honor” one’s parents? Is this the same as obey? Paul does introduce his discussion of the fifth commandment by saying, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1). Yet honoring one’s parents seems to refer more broadly to how we treat our parents in addition to obeying their counsel.

The Babylonian Talmud goes to great lengths to describe just what fulfilling the fifth commandment of honoring one's parents looks like. In the Talmud, in *Kiddushin* 39b, Gersonides recounts the events of Elisha ben Abuya becoming a nonbeliever in God. Elisha saw a boy honoring his father's request one day by climbing a tree to get bird eggs for them. However, on his way down he slipped and was killed. Elisha then questioned, "Where is this boy's happiness and where is his prolonging of days?" Elisha's grandson R. Jacob explains in effect that the boy's happiness will come in the next life, that is, his prolongation of days.²

In Jewish customs, circumspectly looking after the needs of one's parents is an important aspect of honoring them. Rabbi Y'huda the Prince, who was responsible for codifying the Mishna, wrote that if a *paterfamilias* passes away, his wife must be afforded all of the same living conditions she previously enjoyed by her children: "Let the lamp remain lit in its place, let the table remain set in its place, and let the couch remain standing in its place."³ Rabbi Eleazar was once asked, "What is the limit for honoring one's father and mother?" He responded, "To the point where the parent takes [his or her child's] wallet or money and throws it in the ocean, and his child does not rebuke him."⁴ As Harris notes, Rabbi Eleazar's answer "removes all limits for honoring parents."⁵ The motivation should come from a place of love and respect, and not simply because one wants the longer life promised by such actions. Indeed, Jewish tradition has struggled to understand the scope of the fifth commandment precisely because of the self-benefit associated with this commandment. As Sherwin and Cohen note, the fifth commandment states that "the reason for the observance is the promise of longevity and the threat of a curtailed life for non-observance."⁶ This "self-serving" motivation, however, did not sit well with some rabbis, who believed the desire to honor one's parents should be "natural."⁷

Jewish interpretations of the fifth commandment often stress the eternal blessings associated with it, not always those realized here in mortality. For instance, Deuteronomy 4:40 states, "Thou shalt keep therefore his statutes, and his commandments, which I command thee this day, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth, which the Lord thy God giveth

thee, *for ever*.” The Psalmist assumed he would likewise be granted “length of days, for ever and ever” (Psalm 21:4 NIV), that is, the blessings of eternal life.⁸ In the Talmud, Simon, son of Jochai, certainly interpreted the fifth commandment in these terms, arguing that honoring one’s parents would result in a prolongation of days “not only in this world, but also in the world to come.”⁹ In modern Jewish tradition, the obligation associated with the fifth commandment is known as the *Kibbud av ve’aim* in Hebrew, the term *kibbud* deriving from the root *k-b-d*, meaning “heavy” or “weighty.”¹⁰ Today it is considered one of the six *mitzvahs* (precepts or commandments) that earns one rewards in this life but whose ultimate payout will be in the world to come.¹¹

The fifth commandment, therefore, provides a key lens through which we can interpret the promise of both a prolongation of days and of living a better life (“that it may be well with thee”) based on obedience to God’s laws. And according to Jewish tradition, both of these blessings have ramifications not only in mortality but into the eternities.

AN INDIVIDUAL LIFE SHORTENED BY SIN

If honoring one’s father and mother together with righteous living affords the possibility of a longer life, is the converse true—that breaking God’s laws leads to a shorter life? Proverbs 10:27 answers this question with clarity: “The fear of the Lord prolongeth days: but the years of the wicked shall be shortened.” The verb for *shorten* here is *qâtsar*, whose root means “to dock off” and is used for harvesting or reaping grass or grain (compare Psalm 89:45; 102:23). This verse suggests God may “cut short” the lives of the wicked at times just as one cuts off a head of grain of a yet-growing plant when harvesting. Contrast this with Exodus 23:25–26, where the Israelites are told: “Worship the Lord your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. *I will give you a full life span*” (NIV). Here the people of Israel are promised a “full” (Heb. *mâlâ*) life span for those who worship God. The “full/cut short” dichotomy is also found in God’s assurance to Solomon: “I will lengthen thy days” (1 Kings 3:14). In the Septuagint the term *lengthen* is *πληθυνῶ* (*plēthynō*) and means “properly, made *full*, especially to *maximum capacity* (*potential*).” In the Hebrew

text the verb is *ʾarak*, which (as we saw above) means “to be long, reach, meet,” but also, nicely paralleling the Greek of the Septuagint, similarly means “fitting, proper.” Reassuringly, it would seem that the blessing of a long life is something “fitting” or “proper” in God’s eyes.

If righteousness may lead to the blessing of a longer life, how do we understand unrighteous people also living long, full lives? And if the wicked are said to have their lives cut short, how do we explain their longevity at times? First, a long life is never said to be *reserved* solely for those who keep the commandments; through the natural courses of mortality, one who lives an unrepentant life of sin may live to a ripe old age. Ecclesiastes 8:12 recognizes this fact: “Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him” (NIV). The difference, we are told, is that “it will go better with those who fear God”; that is, they will be the recipients of greater blessings in the next life. Indeed, this promise of “things going better” for those who keep the commandments is explicit throughout scripture. For example, Old Testament scripture promises more than just a prolonged life to the righteous; in the same breath Deuteronomy 4:40 (KJV) states that “keep[ing] . . . his statutes, and his commandments” will ensure “that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee.” Deuteronomy 5:16 then repeats this promise conditioned on honoring one’s father and mother.

In somewhat cryptic imagery, the NASB translation of Ecclesiastes 8:13 refers to the days of the wicked as being “like a shadow”: “But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.” The expression “like a shadow” (כַּצֵּל) is both poetic and somewhat enigmatic. The Hebrew term צֶלַח (*tsêl*) refers to a shadow (such as the shadow cast by a sun dial) or shade (literal and figurative) together with the proclitic preposition (כִּי) “like, as.” The Septuagint has ἐν σκιά (*en skia*), where the term σκιά (shadow) similarly refers to shade or a shadow, both in a literal or figurative sense. It can be used in expressions such as σκιά θανάτου, “shadow of death” (compare Lat. *umbra mortis*), as well as in reference to spiritual death (see Matthew 4:16; Luke 1:79). However, in Ecclesiastes 8:13 (NASB) the sense of the term is likely

a shadow that represents the transitory¹² nature of mortality that for the wicked is not being drawn out or extended.

THE THREAT OF GROUP DESTRUCTION OWING TO DISOBEDIENCE

The converse of prolonging days, of course, is the shortening of life when divine threats of destruction are carried out. Shortening the lives of individuals and the duration of societies is a regular theme of the biblical text, but it is also prominent in the Book of Mormon. In this section I briefly explore some biblical references to shortening lives and then turn attention back to the Book of Mormon to see how this type of divine punishment operated in Nephite history.

In the Old Testament, God wipes out Sodom and Gomorrah en masse because of the collective wickedness of the people (see Genesis 18–19). Similarly, the Nephites, as a society, are told that they will prosper in the New World only so long as they keep the commandments. While still in the Old World, Nephi was given this promise by the Lord: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands” (1 Nephi 2:20). This covenant, Nephi was told, would apply to all “whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem” (2 Nephi 1:9). This bilateral agreement was foundational to Book of Mormon peoples and regularly cited and understood (see 2 Nephi 4:4; Jarom 1:9; Alma 9:13; 36:1, 30; 38:1; 50:20). However, the potential curse stipulated in this covenant was as clear as the promise: if the people were disobedient, they would “be cut off from the presence of the Lord” (1 Nephi 2:22).

In fact, the destruction of the Nephite civilization was prophesied from the earliest times of the Book of Mormon and repeated throughout the text.¹³ The first realization of this prophecy occurred just before the coming of Jesus Christ to the New World (see 1 Nephi 12:2–5), when the wicked of that day (principally Nephites) were destroyed (see 2 Nephi 26:2–6). A view of this large-scale destruction of the wicked caused Nephi to mourn, “O the pain, and the anguish of my soul for the loss of the slain of my people!” (v. 7). The second fulfillment of this prophecy took place

in AD 385 when the Nephite civilization fell. Nephi had seen in vision that after Christ’s ministry in Bountiful up to four generations would pass away “in righteousness” and then “a speedy destruction cometh unto my people” (vv. 9–10). The language of “four generations” is echoed by two later prophecies predicting the end of the Nephite society. Alma₂ told his son Helaman that “the Nephites, . . . in four hundred years from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them, shall dwindle in unbelief” (Alma 45:10). Similarly, Samuel the Lamanite prophesied “that the sword of justice hangeth over this people; and four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people” (Helaman 13:5). The Nephite civilization was thus foreseen to fall in the late fourth century AD because of disobedience.

The prophecies of Nephite destruction are stark not only in their repetition throughout the Book of Mormon or the scale of the destruction they portend, but also in how plainly they contrast with a reassuring promise given to the Lamanites that the Lord would prolong their existence into the latter days. This represents a special dispensation from God to fulfill a covenant he made at beginning of the Lamanite civilization, one that would have at least two chronologically distinct realizations. What the Bible portrays as a related blessing and punishment faced by individuals in light of their obedience or disobedience to the commandments (i.e., prolonged or shortened life), Samuel’s prophecy stages through the opposing fates of entire New World societies.

THE COVENANT OF PROLONGED LIFE FOR THE LAMANITES

The group promise of prolonged existence to the Lamanites is singular in the history of ancient Israel (see Alma 9:16–18). It represents, somewhat remarkably, an assurance of group survival despite the people’s largely unrighteous track record. The first major transition among the Lamanites occurred with conversion of the high-ranking Lamanite kings Lamoni and his father (see Alma 19–20), which opened a floodgate for Lamanites to embrace the gospel. By the time of Samuel the Lamanite, the legacy of the first Lamanite converts from the book of Alma had expanded to include the majority of the Lamanite nation. Samuel praised his Lamanite

brethren for being more righteous than most of the Nephites of his day. It should be noted that the promise of a prolongation of days is something the Lamanites at that time were already enjoying: “The Lamanites hath he hated because their deeds have been evil continually, and this because of the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers. But behold, salvation hath come unto them through the preaching of the Nephites; and for this intent hath the Lord prolonged their days” (Helaman 15:4). The Lamanites had been preserved precisely so they would have opportunity to hear and accept the gospel—in this case, just before the coming of Jesus Christ to the New World. Samuel, however, also prophesied a further extension of this prolongation into their future (v. 11). As Brant Gardner has noted, Mormon carefully constructs this portion of the record “to show us that what happened before will happen again. Samuel the Lamanite becomes, in Mormon’s text, the symbolic survival of the Lamanites when the Nephites are destroyed, a situation that will occur again at the end of the Book of Mormon.”¹⁴

Samuel lauds the Lamanites’ “steadfastness when they do believe in *that thing* which they do believe,” a belief system that, according to the previous verse, includes an exemplary “faith in Christ.” That faith proves capable, according to Samuel, of overcoming even a variety of past national sins. As he goes on to explain, God promises that he will “bless them and prolong their days, *notwithstanding their iniquity*” (Helaman 15:10). In other words, this prolongation of days will be given by God not strictly based on their keeping the commandments. Samuel further assures his audience that “*even if they* [the Lamanites] *should dwindle in unbelief* the Lord shall prolong their days, until the time shall come which hath been spoken of by our fathers, and also by the prophet Zenos, and many other prophets, concerning the restoration of our brethren, the Lamanites, again to the knowledge of the truth” (v. 11). This verse is remarkable for several reasons. First, the prolongation of days for the Lamanites will occur even though the Lord knows they will “dwindle in unbelief.” Also, note here that Samuel the Lamanite states that other prophets such as Zenos likewise saw the day when the Lamanites would be restored to the truth of the gospel. God has a purpose for the Lamanites in the last days, and their

prolonged existence in the land ensures they will be able to fulfill those covenanted tasks.

Samuel the Lamanite then paints a gloomy picture of the generations of Lamanites who continue after the destruction of the Nephite civilization:

Yea, I say unto you, that in the latter times the promises of the Lord have been extended to our brethren, the Lamanites; and notwithstanding the many afflictions which they shall have, and notwithstanding they shall be driven to and fro upon the face of the earth, and be hunted, and shall be smitten and scattered abroad, having no place for refuge, the Lord shall be merciful unto them. (Helaman 15:12)

Many of the “afflictions” referred to here may have included the catastrophic interactions between indigenous peoples and European colonizers at the beginning of the modern era. As we view these events through a historical lens, however, it is important to understand that while the ebb and flow of civilizations has affected peoples of all eras, the Lamanites’ wicked past and colonially exploited future are eclipsed by the glorious promises of their role in the last days. Samuel, a Lamanite himself, states that the Lamanites “shall *again* be brought to the true knowledge, which is the knowledge of their Redeemer, and their great and true shepherd, and be numbered among his sheep” (Helaman 15:13). In his day it is the Lamanites who are more righteous than the Nephites.¹⁵ Samuel declares such days will come again when the Lamanites come to know Christ as their Redeemer in the latter days.

Why does God make this ostensible exception for the Lamanites by promising a prolongation of days *in spite of* their often iniquitous ways? The Book of Mormon contains direct answers to this question. In Helaman 7:24, Nephi, the son of Helaman, explains to the Nephites that the Lamanites “are more righteous than you, for they have not sinned against that great knowledge which ye have received; therefore the Lord will be merciful unto them; yea, he will lengthen out their days and increase their seed, even when thou shalt be utterly destroyed except thou shalt repent.” In other words, the Lamanites have not had the constant preaching and gospel influence that the Nephites had, and therefore they are not under

the same condemnation as the Nephites (compare Luke 12:48). Samuel states clearly that God understands that the Lamanites' wickedness in part comes from "the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers" (Helaman 15:4).

God, in an act aptly described as "merciful," promised that the Lamanite civilization would be allowed to continue for millennia for the express purpose of having the chance to learn of the gospel and accept its message at some point in the future.¹⁶ God states, "I will not utterly destroy them, but I will cause that in the day of my wisdom they shall return again unto me, saith the Lord" (Helaman 15:16). Nephi similarly taught that in the last days, "the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be declared among them; wherefore, they shall be restored unto the knowledge of their fathers, and also to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, which was had among their fathers" (2 Nephi 30:5).¹⁷ This aligns with one of the main stated purposes of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon itself, to "show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever" (Book of Mormon title page).

The importance of the Lamanites' latter-day restoration, however, extends far beyond Samuel's sermon and a few scattered references throughout the Book of Mormon. This theme constitutes a primary purpose of Mormon's abridgment of the Nephite records. Some of his last recorded words were directed to Lamanites who survived the great and last battle. He implores them to recognize their heritage as "a remnant of the seed of Jacob," being those "numbered among the people of the first covenant" (Mormon 7:10). Mormon reminds them of their divine lineage¹⁸ and calls them to return to God: "And ye will also know that ye are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; therefore ye are numbered among the people of the first covenant; and if it so be that ye believe in Christ, and are baptized, first with water, then with fire and with the Holy Ghost, following the example of our Savior, according to that which he hath commanded us, it shall be well with you in the day of judgment. Amen" (v. 10).

It is noteworthy that Mormon places such importance on their ties to the "seed of Jacob." Why? Because we are told that the Lamanites will also "blossom as a rose" in the last days (Doctrine and Covenants 49:24) and that they will be tasked with the building of New Jerusalem. In

3 Nephi 21:22–23, the Lord taught that those who would later come to the New World (European settlers) would “come in unto the covenant and be numbered among *this the remnant of Jacob* [i.e., the indigenous populations of the Americas] unto whom I have given this land for their inheritance.” Significantly, Christ then states that these more recent settlers “shall *assist* my people, the remnant of Jacob, and also as many of the house of Israel as shall come, that they may build a city, which shall be called the New Jerusalem” (3 Nephi 21:24). Here the Lamanites take the lead in building the New Jerusalem, and nonindigenous Church members will support them in that effort.¹⁹ Moroni, summarizing Ether’s teachings, states that this New Jerusalem would be built “unto the remnant of the seed of Joseph” *by* the seed of Joseph (see Ether 13:6, 8). The city will be “like unto the Jerusalem of old,” and those who dwell in it will have been cleansed “through the blood of the Lamb” (vv. 8, 10).

The restoration of the knowledge of the gospel to the Lamanites, therefore, is a manifestation “that the covenant of the Father may be fulfilled which he hath covenanted with his people” (3 Nephi 21:4). The Book of Mormon is to play a key role in this conversion process; indeed, the Lord has stated that “*for this very purpose* are these plates preserved, which contain these records—that the promises of the Lord might be fulfilled, which he made to his people” so that “the Lamanites might come to the knowledge of their fathers, and that they might know the promises of the Lord, and that they may believe the gospel” (Doctrine and Covenants 3:19–20). The magnificence of the promise of the Lord to the Lamanites as a whole cannot be overstated. Through this covenant, the Lord shows himself “merciful unto them” by “lengthen[ing] out their days and increas[ing] their seed” (Helaman 7:24).

THE PURPOSE OF A PROLONGATION OF DAYS: A TIME TO REPENT

While most people would view the prospect of a long life favorably, what reasons does the Lord give for bestowing longevity as a blessing? If granted the blessing of a longer life, what does the Lord expect us to do with that time? President Lorenzo Snow spoke of a long life as both a blessing and an obligation: “Among us, I am happy to say, old age is honorable,

and regarded as a blessing from the Lord. It is our duty to desire to live long upon the earth, that we may do as much good as we possibly can.”²⁰ Another advantage of a long life is that we have more time to work through our weaknesses and learn the lessons of mortality. “A knowledge of good and evil is essential to progress,” noted Elder James E. Talmage, “and the school of experience in mortality has been provided for the acquirement of such knowledge.”²¹ Just as Paul, writing to the Galatians, described the law of Moses as a “schoolmaster” whose purpose was “to bring us unto Christ” (Galatians 3:24), so too our mortal experience is designed for us to learn of Christ and thereby learn to do better. Nephi succinctly expressed the reason for God’s granting a longer life in just such terms: “And the days of the children of men were prolonged, according to the will of God, *that they might repent while in the flesh*” (2 Nephi 2:21). Herein lies one of the primary blessings of a longer life—more time to repent and improve. This “state of probation,” according to Nephi was provided, and the “time [of the children of men] was lengthened” so they could fulfill the commandment of God “that all men must repent” (v. 21).

Speaking to his son Corianton, Alma₂ also described this life as a “probationary state,”²² “a state for [humankind] to prepare; it became a preparatory state” (Alma 42:10). God’s plan of redemption, he continues in verse 13, “could not be brought about, only on conditions of repentance of men in this probationary state, yea, this preparatory state.” Here Alma₂ uses “probationary state” and “preparatory state” as synonyms, both structurally and theologically. It should be understood, however, that the notion of a probationary state makes specific reference to a spiritual testing condition. The term *probation* comes from the Latin *probāre*, meaning “to examine, test, try, prove, demonstrate,” as well as “to approve, pronounce good” (i.e., acceptable). Later reflexes in Romance languages bear this out. For instance, in Spanish, *probar* means “to test, try, taste,” as well as “prove” (English *prove* derives from the Latin *probāre*). Considering the semantic range of *probāre*, we should view mortality as a literal “proving ground” where we are *tried* and *tested*, where we *taste* of the good and evil, and ultimately *demonstrate* ourselves worthy or not to inherit “all things that the Father hath” (John 16:15; compare Doctrine and Covenants 84:38; Romans 8:17). This theological meaning of the term *probation* in English

developed in the early sixteenth century and was the dominant definition in 1830.²³ The legalistic usage of the term is first recorded in 1866, long after the publication of the Book of Mormon. It is therefore clear that the “probation” Alma₂ spoke of was that of a state of *moral* probation in which humanity is proved worthy or not of God’s promised eternal blessings. It is, as Alma₂ so poignantly reminds, “a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead” (Alma 12:24).

Alma₂ thus provides one of the clearest summaries of what this time in mortality is for, boiled down to two things: “a time to repent and serve God” (Alma 42:4). Hugh Nibley echoed Alma₂’s emphasis on repentance, saying that we are here in this life to be tested for our moral qualities, “and above all [for] the two things we can be good at, and no other two things can we do: We can forgive and we can repent. Nobody’s very clever, nobody’s very brave, nobody’s very strong, nobody’s very wise, we’re all pretty stupid. That’s why we’re not tested in those things.” What we *are* tested on is what Nibley considers to be the two most important moral qualities: “We can forgive and we can repent, so three cheers. Let’s start repenting as of now.”²⁴

The blessing associated with “length of days” is not strictly an extension of mortality; rather, it also defines the *type* of life one lives. A life spent keeping the commandments of God leads to a higher quality of life, a life of enjoyment that can only come from avoiding the inevitable consequences of sin. Plato alluded to this form of existence as βίος βιωτός (*bios biōtos*), “a life worth the trouble to live it,” or “a life worth living.” The father of Roman poetry, Ennius,²⁵ expressed this concept of βίος βιωτός as “*vita vitalis*,” “a life worth living” or “a true life.” A longer life often brings into sharp focus just such simple pleasures of life. This gradual realization is often the result of a life spent making mistakes, and watching others do the same. The follies of mortality and the weaknesses inherent in the “natural man” (Mosiah 3:19) can be overcome through trial and error, and a longer life can provide more time to get it right.

Therefore, when we speak of the blessing of a prolongation of days from a scriptural perspective we see three key aspects of this divine promise. First, obeying God’s commandments will keep one from the consequences of sin, many of which are related to health problems (both physical and

mental), injury, and premature death. Second, an extension of one's time in this life provides additional time to repent and root out the imperfections we all bear. And third, the quality of one's life increases as one finds pleasure in a purer, fuller life, one progressively freed from more and more of the petty concerns and selfish indulgences so common in our society today. A life of peace of conscience²⁶ and contentment accompanies those who know they are living up to their covenants and commitments made with God. It is not surprising, therefore, that Proverbs 3:2 promises in the same breath "length of days, and long life, and *peace*." This, then, is truly *vita vitalis*.

CONCLUSION

Samuel the Lamanite found himself living in a moment of prophetic fulfillment. The Lamanites had become for the most part a righteous people in his day, walking "circumspectly before God" and "striving with unwearyed diligence" to bring the remaining nonbelieving Lamanites to the truth (Helaman 15:5–6). Samuel, who likely belonged to a culture in which the cyclic nature of history was deeply meaningful,²⁷ forcefully reiterated that this miraculous event would happen again in the future. For this cause the Lord would "prolong their days, until the time shall come which hath been spoken of by our fathers," when they would be restored "again to the knowledge of the truth" (v. 11). What is noteworthy in the case of the Lamanites is that their prolongation of days was promised not because of past righteousness, but rather because of their *future* righteousness, evidenced by the key roles they would play in the latter days.

The blessing of living a longer life is a scripturally based promise that is often linked to one's obedience to God's commandments (e.g., "if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die," Ezekiel 18:21 NRSV). A natural result of carefully living according to gospel precepts is that one avoids the harmful effects that often come from sin, many of which lead to poor health or even death. Thus, through divine intervention God can extend life here in mortality. He also has provided a set of commonsense guidelines in the form of commandments that lead to better physical and mental health in this life, with

the added assurance that one’s prolongation of days will mercifully last into the eternities.

NOTES

1. The fifth of the Ten Commandments provides a natural point of departure for this discussion: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12, New American Standard Bible (hereafter NASB)). Bible citations in this study follow the King James Version unless otherwise noted. Italic type in biblical and other scripture citations marks the author’s emphasis.
2. See Menachem Marc Kellner, “Gersonides, Providence, and the Rabbinic Tradition,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 4 (December 1974): 681. See also p. 91 of Steven Bob, *Jonah and the Meaning of Our Lives: A Verse-by-Verse Contemporary Commentary* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).
3. Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Mind* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 484.
4. Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 32a.
5. J. Gordon Harris, “Rabbinic Responses to Aging,” *Hebrew Studies* 48, no. 1 (2007): 192.
6. Byron L. Sherwin and Seymour J. Cohen, *Creating an Ethical Jewish Life: A Practical Introduction to Classical Teachings on How to Be a Jew* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001): 163.
7. Sherwin and Cohen, *Creating an Ethical Jewish Life*, 163. See also Ronald Pies, *Becoming a Mensch: Timeless Talmudic Ethics for Everyone* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 2010), 125.
8. But see Doctrine and Covenants 132:39.
9. Hymen Polano, *Selections from the Talmud: Being Specimens of the Contents of That Ancient Book, Its Commentaries, Teachings, Poetry, and Legends. Also, Brief Sketches of the Men Who Made and Commented upon It* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1876), 245. Also see p. 263 of Charles F. Horne, ed., *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East: With Historical Surveys of the Chief Writings of Each Nation*, vol. 5, *Ancient Arabia, the Hanged Poems, and the Koran* (New York: Parke, Austin, and Lipscomb, 1917).

10. Gerald J. Blidstein, *Honor Thy Father and Mother: Filial Responsibility in Jewish Law and Ethics*, ed. Norman Lamm (New York: Ktav, 1975). In fact, the Hebrew term for “honor” in the fifth commandment is *kâbad*, whose same *k-b-d* root means “to be heavy.”
11. Charlotte K. Goldberg, “The Normative Influence of the Fifth Commandment on Filial Responsibility,” *Marquette Elder’s Advisor* 10 (Spring 2009): 230.
12. For other examples of its use for temporary, transitory, or fleeting things, see Job 8:9 and Psalm 102:12.
13. It might be best to imagine the “destruction” of the Nephites as more of a societal dismantling than a full-scale extinction. This destruction of the Nephite civilization does not represent the erasure of all Nephites. As Hugh Nibley points out, *destroy* has a more general sense in the Book of Mormon that does not necessarily entail annihilation. He writes: “The Nephites were destroyed, we are told, but . . . what does the Book of Mormon mean by ‘destroyed’? The word is to be taken, as are so many other key words in the book, in its primary and original sense: ‘to unbuild; to separate violently into its constituent parts; to break up the structure.’ To destroy is to wreck the structure, not to annihilate the parts.” See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 239. That Nephites exist into our own day is clear from Doctrine and Covenants 3:17.
14. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:205.
15. Earlier in the Nephite record, Mormon showed that Lamanites are not only capable of redemption but also of becoming more righteous than Nephites by including the account of the sons of Mosiah converting the Lamanites in the cities of Middoni, Ishmael, Nephi, Shilom, Shemlon, Lemuel, and Shimnilom (see Alma 23:11–18).
16. Alma₂ also taught this principle to those in Ammonihah (see Alma 9:16–17): “For there are many promises which are extended to the Lamanites; for *it is because of the traditions of their fathers that caused them to remain in their state of ignorance*; therefore the Lord will be *merciful* unto them and prolong their existence in the land. And at some period of time they will be brought to believe in his word, and to know of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers; and many of them will be saved, for the Lord will be merciful unto all who call on his name.”

17. Referring to the latter-day restoration to the covenant, Spencer W. Kimball noted, “The Lord’s work in these latter days can in no wise be complete until these children of great promise are brought back into the fold.” Spencer W. Kimball, “Our Paths Have Met Again,” *Ensign*, December 1975, 4.
18. Israel is called God’s “firstborn” (*bĕkôr*) in Exodus 4:22 (compare Jeremiah 31:9).
19. Orson Pratt further explained: “Zion must be redeemed before the coming of Christ, the temple must be built upon the consecrated spot, the cloud and glory of the Lord rest upon it, and the Lamanites, many of them, brought in, and they must build up the New Jerusalem.” Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:18–19 (May 20, 1855). On another occasion, Pratt added: “These Lamanites, these American Indians, will come to the knowledge of the covenant, and they will arise and will build upon the face of this land a magnificent city called [New] Jerusalem, after the pattern and in the same manner that the Jews will build old Jerusalem. That is what the Lamanites will do, and we will go and help them too, for it is predicted in the Book of Mormon” [see 3 Nephi 21:22–25]. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:44 (February 11, 1872).
20. Lorenzo Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow: Fifth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 94.
21. James E. Talmage, *The Vitality of Mormonism: Brief Essays on Distinctive Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Boston: RG Badger, 1919), 46.
22. A number of Book of Mormon authors also refer to our mortal experience as a period of *probation*. Nephi condemns those who “do wickedly in the days of [their] probation” (1 Nephi 10:21) and urges all to “continue in the path until the end of the day of probation” (2 Nephi 33:9). Jacob laments one who “wasteth the days of his probation” (2 Nephi 9:27). Samuel the Lamanite decries the wickedness of his day by, perhaps rhetorically, stating the people’s “days of probation are past” (Helaman 13:38). Finally, Mormon encourages all to be “wise in the days of your probation” (Mormon 9:28).
23. Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary* defines *probation* as “moral trial; the state of man in the present life, in which he has the opportunity of proving his character and being qualified for a happier state.”
24. Quoted in Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 115–16.

25. Citing Ennius, Cicero probed the meaning of this phrase and linked it to the simple, honest pleasures of living, such as having good friends: “*Principio, cui potest esse vita vitalis* (ut ait *Ennius*), *qui non in amici mutua. benevolentia conquiescat? Quid dulcius, quam habere, quicum omnia audeas sic loqui, ut tecum?*”
“Firstly, who is able to have a life worth living, as Ennius says, who does rely on the mutual benevolence of a friend? What is more pleasant than having someone with whom you can speak as freely as with yourself?”
26. Compare Psalm 119:165: “Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them.”
27. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:203, 301.