

# NEPHITE JEREMIAD OR LAMANITE ENCOMIUM?

Helaman 13–15 and Lamanite  
Exceptionalism

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In Helaman 13–15, Samuel the Lamanite delivers a powerful sermon castigating the Nephites for their decline into wickedness. Samuel's sermon is, without a doubt, a rhetorical and theological masterpiece. In her essay on the nineteenth-century ethnic contexts of the Book of Mormon, Elizabeth Fenton addresses the role of Samuel the Lamanite and his sermon within the book's narrative and makes the following observation:

Samuel is, in many respects, an atemporal figure. An American Jeremiah foretelling decline, Samuel could have stepped out of either the pages of the Hebrew Bible or a seventeenth-century Congregational Church.<sup>1</sup>

Fenton's observation is, I believe, a significant one, and one that serves as a jumping-off point for this essay. While Samuel's speech has been previously examined through a number of different lenses, such as its contribution to

narrative criticism of the Book of Mormon as well as its alignment with classic Hebrew prophetic laments,<sup>2</sup> I will follow Fenton's cue by reading Samuel's speech in a more modern context, namely the sociopolitical rhetoric of the American jeremiad. More specifically, I will argue that Samuel's speech can profitably be read through the lens of the American jeremiad in order to show (1) how Samuel's critique of the Nephites closely follows the pattern of the American *jeremiad*; and (2) how Samuel's praise of the Lamanites represents an inversion of that pattern and thus becomes a Lamanite *encomium*, a move that I suggest was made with the intention of speaking directly to modern readers of the Book of Mormon and highlighting what is one of the text's key teachings—the latter-day role of the Lamanites.

First I review the development and characteristics of the American jeremiad. Then I identify and examine those characteristics in Samuel's reprimand and warning to the Nephites and, more importantly, show how Samuel inverts these same characteristics when he turns his attention to the future Lamanites. Finally, I discuss the implications of Samuel's inverted jeremiad for the Book of Mormon's modern readers.

## THE AMERICAN JEREMIAD

The form of speech typically known as the jeremiad can be defined simply as "a sermon or theological-political treatise on the subject of moral decay, declension, and apostasy among those who had entered into a covenant of Reformation with God."<sup>3</sup> With roots in the laments of the biblical prophet Jeremiah (from which the genre gets its name), jeremiads were known for their tone of mournful complaint and bitter invective. Their authors tended to be "American writers [who] have tended to see themselves as outcasts and isolates, prophets crying in the wilderness."<sup>4</sup> The American form of the jeremiad has its roots in the strict rhetoric of the seventeenth-century Puritans who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Fleeing from the religious persecution of their native England, Puritan leaders such as John Winthrop adopted the existing English jeremiad and adapted it for their own purposes. Winthrop's famous "A Model of Christian Charity" lamented the decline of religion and urged reform, lest God withdraw his favor. While a call to repentance was not necessarily

innovative, Puritan preachers like Winthrop and Samuel Danforth were prone to extreme religious rhetoric because of the extreme sense of divine chosenness they ascribed to Puritan settlements, reminding their congregants that they were as a “City upon a hill”<sup>5</sup> engaged in an “errand into the wilderness.”<sup>6</sup> “Due to the perceived contingency of the colonists’ divine favor (i.e., the notion that, just as God had elected the Puritans to occupy America, he could just as easily reject them), problems that arose in the community were commonly interpreted as warnings from God, and jeremiads provided an “instrument of social cohesion and control.”<sup>7</sup> By the end of the seventeenth century, jeremiads had become popular enough that they were published at a remarkable rate and became what historian Perry Miller called America’s “first distinctive literary genre.”<sup>8</sup>

While declining membership among early eighteenth-century Puritan congregations led to the demise of the movement in New England, the jeremiad continued to be an influential rhetorical tool. Furthermore, it was a rhetorical tool that took on unique features in its American deployment. For instance, according to literary scholar Sacvan Bercovitch, the American jeremiad is distinct from its British counterpart in its relative hopefulness. While the latter foregrounds divine vengeance, the American jeremiad “inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming to the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the American jeremiad presents “unshakable optimism.”<sup>10</sup> Bercovitch goes on to track the influence of the jeremiad into the nineteenth century, finding its traces in Civil War sermons, the literature of women’s reform movements, and the works of Henry David Thoreau, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, among others. The American jeremiad continues to be a popular form of contemporary expression, as can be seen in writings ranging from the music of Bob Dylan<sup>11</sup> to reactions to the tragedy of 9/11<sup>12</sup> to the economic speeches of Barack Obama and the rise of hip-hop music among African Americans.<sup>13</sup> Because a jeremiad mourns the demise of a virtuous past, rails against the tumultuous present, and yearns for ultimate future promise, it continues to function as a potent rhetorical form into the present.

Apart from its historical roots in American Puritanism, what actually constitutes a jeremiad? Andrew R. Murphy and Jennifer Miller cite four

basic characteristics. First, a jeremiad identifies problems in contemporary society; second, a jeremiad attempts to identify the root or origin of the problem; third, the jeremiad locates the time period from which the root or origin appeared; and fourth, a jeremiad warns of the consequences that will follow if actions are not taken.<sup>14</sup> In his study of African American jeremiads, historian David Howard-Pitney identified the three following traits that serve to flesh out Murphy and Miller's characteristics. First, jeremiads cite the *promise* made by God to his people (typically a people's chosenness and their occupation of a sacred land); second, they criticize the present *declension* that has led God's people to fall short in their commitment to God; third, they contain a resolving *prophecy* that God's people can still rebound from the error of their ways and fulfill the mission God has laid before them. The optimism with which the jeremiad concludes is a critical part of its form and message. In Howard-Pitney's words, "The jeremiad's unfaltering view is that God will mysteriously use the unhappy present to spur the people to reformation and speedily onward to fulfill their divine destiny."<sup>15</sup>

For the purpose of this essay, I use an even fuller list of characteristics described by Andrew R. Murphy in his 2009 Oxford monograph *Prodigal Nation*.<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that every jeremiad must have all six of these, or that other characteristics cannot also be present, only that this list represents the traits that tend to appear in work characterized as a jeremiad. As such it provides a more succinct backdrop against which to further study Samuel's discourse. According to Murphy, a jeremiad

1. identifies problems and demonstrates a decline vis-à-vis the past. Typically, it explicitly lays out a catalog of affairs that demonstrates a spiritual decline.
2. identifies the turning point(s) leading to this spiritual decline. It's not enough to show *what* is wrong; the speaker must also show *when* and *how* things began to decline. This must be followed by an account of things that ancestors did right as a way of representing the ideal from which the present generation has fallen.
3. calls for repentance, reform, and renewal.

4. argues for the chosen status of its audience. The people are currently chosen, but they could lose that status—it is not set in stone. There is, in fact, a point of no return after which God will abandon his people.
5. posits a transactional relationship with God—he blesses or punishes based on human actions. There are victories and setbacks for communities that either do or do not follow his word.
6. invokes a sense of American exceptionalism—the community is connected to a larger, sacred story about God’s active involvement with the nation. Thus the actions of the people have larger implications for the world as a whole. This exceptionalism is stressed by the tension that exists between *hope* and *despair*.

Even according to these expanded and more detailed criteria, Samuel’s sermon in Helaman 13–15 can clearly be read as a jeremiad, as the following analysis seeks to demonstrate.

## SAMUEL’S INVERTED JEREMIAD

This section explores how Samuel’s speech incorporates each of the six elements. With one critical exception, Samuel follows the regular jeremiad pattern in his prophecies and predictions about the Nephites. Interestingly, he inverts that pattern when discussing the Lamanites.

*1. A jeremiad identifies problems and demonstrates a decline vis-à-vis the past. Typically, it explicitly lays out a catalog of affairs that demonstrate a spiritual decline.*

Samuel’s first major prolonged critique of the Nephites comes in Helaman 13:17, where he announces that a “curse shall come upon the land” owing to the people’s “wickedness and abominations.” The specific reason for this curse is apparently the Nephites’ attitude toward wealth, since the curse involves the loss of “treasures” (v. 18). This becomes clear in verse 21, where Samuel states that the Nephites “are cursed because of your riches,” which results in their riches being cursed as well. Toward the end of this

diatribe, Samuel enlarges upon the different issues that have led to Nephite unrighteousness:

Ye do not remember the Lord your God in the things with which he hath blessed you, but ye do always remember your riches, not to thank the Lord your God for them; yea, your hearts are not drawn out unto the Lord, but they do swell with great pride, unto boasting, and unto great swelling, envyings, strifes, malice, persecutions, and murders, and all manner of iniquities. (v. 22)

Because the Nephites at one time had been blessed by the Lord, the implication is that they were righteous (see 1 Nephi 2:20). Now, however, things have changed and the Nephites are guilty of everything from boasting to murders. It is clear that the Nephites are on a dangerous trajectory that, if unchanged, can only lead to sure destruction.

In Helaman 15, Samuel turns to the Lamanites, whose current spiritual status is also described in a “catalog of affairs” similar to that of the Nephites. However, in a rhetorical move he will employ repeatedly, Samuel subverts the expectation of a catalog of sins by focusing on the *righteous* qualities and deeds of the Lamanites, rather than on their wickedness, as he had done with the Nephites:

And I would that ye should behold that the more part of them are in the path of their duty, and they do walk circumspectly before God, and they do observe to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments according to the law of Moses. Yea, I say unto you, that the more part of them are doing this, and they are striving with unwearied diligence that they may bring the remainder of their brethren to the knowledge of the truth; therefore there are many who do add to their numbers daily. (vv. 5–6)

Rather than being caught up in the accumulation of wealth and the actions that often accompany it (swelling with pride, envying, causing strife, harboring malice, and so on), the Lamanites have carved out lives devoted to upholding the precepts of God. They do their duty, act circumspectly, and follow the law of Moses. Significantly, whereas the Nephites are prideful and self-absorbed, the Lamanites are concerned about one another

and work “with unwearied diligence” to bring their fellow Lamanites to a “knowledge of the truth.” And whereas the Nephites decrease in number through “persecutions” and “murders,” the righteous Lamanites “add to their numbers daily.” By inverting the genre conventions typically associated with a jeremiad, Samuel effectively positions the Lamanites as the protagonists in his speech and the Nephites as the antagonists. Furthermore, the presence of a recognizable jeremiad trope indicates that this reversal of fortune between Lamanite and Nephite represents the perspective not just of a heretofore unknown Lamanite prophet, but of God himself.

*2. A jeremiad identifies the turning point(s) leading to this spiritual decline. It's not enough to show what is wrong; the speaker must also show when and how things began to decline. This must be followed by an account of things that ancestors did right as a way of representing the ideal from which the present generation has fallen.*

While Samuel makes it clear that the Nephites have become a “wicked” people (e.g., Helaman 13:29), it is more difficult to pin down precisely *when* they became “wicked.” From Samuel’s perspective, the turning point appears to be the suppression of the righteous by the wicked. Up until this point in time, the Lord has spared Nephite cities such as Zarahemla from destruction owing to the presence of a sufficient number of righteous people. The implication is that as long as the wicked are balanced out, to some extent, by the presence of the righteous, then God will not act in judgment. However, when the Nephites do expel the righteous from their cities, when they “cast out the prophets, and do mock them, and cast stones at them, and do slay them” (v. 24), Samuel warns, the Lord will step in, for then will the Nephites be “ripe for destruction” (v. 14). Samuel does not identify a time in the past when the Nephites all coexisted in a state of complete righteousness; rather, the turning point in the Nephites’ fortune is the very point in time in which Samuel ascends the wall (“because of this time *which has arrived*,” v. 24). Perhaps, from Samuel’s Lamanite perspective, the Nephites have always been a people who coexist simultaneously as righteous and wicked.<sup>17</sup> It is certainly difficult to find a point before 4 Nephi where the Nephite nation could be described otherwise. But Samuel

leaves no doubt that the state of spiritual affairs among the Nephites has gone from bad to worse.

Here again, however, it's important to note that Samuel is not content simply to castigate the Nephites; he also inverts this element of the jeremiad in order to celebrate the Lamanites. Like the Nephites, the Lamanites also exhibit a moral turning point in relation to their ancestors:

But behold my brethren, the Lamanites hath he hated because their deeds have been evil continually, and this because of the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers. (Helaman 15:4a)

It is noteworthy that it is not the Lamanites themselves but the “tradition of their fathers” that is identified as the source of their iniquity.<sup>18</sup> It is the iniquity of the tradition that has led the Lord to “hate” the Lamanites and caused their actions to be “evil continually.” According to Samuel, the Lamanites committed wicked deeds because they had been taught a distorted version of truth. Perhaps this helps us understand why the Lamanites were able to turn their moral fortunes around so thoroughly:

And I would that ye should behold that the more part of them are in the path of their duty, and they do walk circumspectly before God, and they do observe to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments according to the law of Moses. Yea, I say unto you, that the more part of them are doing this, and they are striving with unwearied diligence that they may bring the remainder of their brethren to the knowledge of the truth; therefore there are many who do add to their numbers daily. (Helaman 15:5–6)

The contrast between Nephite and Lamanite can hardly be missed here. The Nephites have been blessed with every moral advantage—prophets, records, divine favor, and so on—yet they have forsaken all those blessings and become a wicked nation. The Lamanites, on the other hand, developed a culture independent of the Nephite record-keeping and prophetic tradition and renarrated their origins in a way designed to instill resentment against the Nephites. But once they did gain access to the truth, according to Samuel, they became “firm and steadfast in the faith” to the point where they even “fear to sin” (Helaman 15:8, 9). This contrast in origins and



spiritual development reverses the previous moral status of the Nephites and the Lamanites throughout much of the Book of Mormon—it is now the latter group that stands to be preserved while the former hangs on the precipice of destruction.

*3. A jeremiad calls for repentance, reform, and renewal.*

At this point Samuel begins to really drive home what is at stake for the Nephites. If they do not repent, then “heavy destruction awaiteth this people.” Their wicked behavior has left the Lord with no other alternative: destruction “surely cometh unto this people, and nothing can save this people” unless they recognize their current state of wickedness and choose “repentance and faith on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Helaman 13:6). By continuing along their current path, the Nephites risk incurring more than just their temporal destruction:

Therefore repent ye, repent ye, lest by knowing these things and not doing them ye shall suffer yourselves to come under condemnation, and ye are brought down unto this second death. (Helaman 14:19)

Samuel’s words have particular potency if his Nephites audience is aware of what ancestors such as Jacob and Alma the Younger had taught regarding the ultimate finality of the “second death,” which is an “everlasting death” (Alma 12:32). If the Nephites choose to ignore Samuel’s call for repentance and continue on their path, they risk losing not only their kingdom on earth, but a kingdom in heaven as well. The stakes, Samuel continues to emphasize, could not possibly be higher.

Samuel also inverts the jeremiad in his treatment of the Lamanites. The Lamanites will avoid sharing the Nephites’ terrible fate because they have begun to do what the Nephites refuse to do: repent. Samuel declares (with, one assumes, some degree of pride):

And behold, ye do know of yourselves, for ye have witnessed it, that as many of [the Lamanites] as are brought to the knowledge of the truth, and to know of the wicked and abominable traditions of their fathers, and are led to believe the holy scriptures, yea, the prophecies of the holy prophets, which are written, which leadeth them to

faith on the Lord, and unto repentance, which faith and repentance bringeth a change of heart unto them[,] . . . are firm and steadfast in the faith. (Helaman 15:7–8)

Knowledge, again, is key. Despite their centuries of messianic anticipation, the Nephites have chosen to forsake their religious knowledge and double down on a path of moral depravity. The Lamanites have not been privy to such knowledge, knowing only the “traditions of their fathers,” which stirred in their hearts a deep resentment of the Nephites. Now, however, prophets and scriptures have delivered that same knowledge to the Lamanites, and they are reacting in a fashion opposite that of their Nephite enemies. They have chosen faith and repentance and have experienced a “change of heart” so drastic that it has led them to “fear . . . lest by any means they should sin” (v. 9). Left unspoken by Samuel but surely understood is that the Lamanites are on a path that will avoid the second death that so ominously hangs over the heads of the Nephites. In place of the charge to repent, Samuel’s inverted jeremiad offers fulsome praise for the Lamanites. Their renewal has taken place, and their future is bright.

*4. A jeremiad argues for the chosen status of its audience. The people are currently chosen, but they could lose that status—it is not set in stone. There is, in fact, a point of no return after which God will abandon his people.*

One of the earliest promises made to the Nephites, arguably their foundational covenant, comes in the second chapter of 1 Nephi:

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. (v. 20)

This promise is so important to the Book of Mormon’s self-presentation that it occurs at regular intervals throughout the narrative. However, whenever God makes a covenant with a people, there is always the danger that the people will grow overly secure in their entitlement to divine protection and pay less heed over time to signs of their own moral failures. God, in his patience, grants to the Nephites a period of repentance,

reminding them that he offers them warnings and signs because he loves them and desires them to return to their previous righteousness:

Yea, wo unto this people who are called the people of Nephi except they shall repent, when they shall see all these signs and wonders which shall be showed unto them; for behold, they have been a chosen people of the Lord; yea, the people of Nephi hath he loved, and also hath he chastened them; yea, in the days of their iniquities hath he chastened them because he loveth them. (Helaman 15:3)

However, God's love for the Nephites and their chosen status will not protect them indefinitely if they choose not to repent. The consequence of disobedience, Samuel emphasizes, is that destruction will occur when the Lord withdraws his favor from the Nephites: "I will take away my word from them, and I will withdraw my Spirit from them, and I will suffer them no longer, and I will turn the hearts of their brethren against them" (Helaman 13:8). Whereas the Lord had previously been willing to actively intercede on their behalf, he now threatens to intercede on behalf of their enemies, withdrawing his protection from the Nephites and inciting the Lamanites against them. Although Samuel's oracle holds out the hope of repentance to the Nephites, the chances of such a change do not appear likely, as Samuel predicts that

in the days of your poverty ye shall cry unto the Lord; and in vain shall ye cry, for your desolation is already come upon you, and your destruction is made sure; and then shall ye weep and howl in that day, saith the Lord of Hosts. (v. 32)

While the point of no return may not have come yet, Samuel leaves little hope for a future Nephite spiritual renaissance, for the day is quickly approaching when their "destruction is made sure."

Yet again, Samuel inverts this element of the jeremiad when he discusses the Lamanites. While the Lamanites were never the chosen people in the sense that the Nephites were (indeed, quite the opposite—Samuel describes them as divinely "hated" because "their deeds have been evil continually," Helaman 15:4), Samuel argues that the Lamanites' spiritual state is in some way actually preferable to that of the Nephites. If the

Lamanites, Samuel says, “had the mighty works shown unto them which have been shown unto you, . . . ye can see of yourselves that they never would again have dwindled in unbelief” (v. 15). Samuel’s claim is remarkable: if the Lamanites had had the same advantages as the Nephites—if they had been taught properly, if they had seen what the Nephites saw—they would not have made the mistakes that the Nephites have made.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the Nephites, the Lamanites would have actually lived up to the status of God’s chosen people, if they had only been given the chance. That being so, there will be no point of no return for the Lamanites. They will continue to survive as a nation for centuries, far outliving the Nephite civilization. They may not have been the protagonists of the Book of Mormon, or the nation blessed initially with Christian revelations and prophecies, but they will be the ones, ironically enough, who receive the blessings initially extended to the Nephites. Lamanite civilization will continue while the Nephite nation will fall at their hands.

*5. A jeremiad posits a transactional relationship with God—he blesses or punishes based on human actions. There are victories and setbacks for communities that either do or do not follow his word.*

This characteristic is closely linked to number 4, but here the emphasis is on the terms attached to the chosen status. The terms of the Lehite covenant were very clear—obedience leads to prosperity for the nation, while rebellion leads to being cut off from among God’s people. That the Nephites are on the wrong side of God’s ledger becomes clear in Helaman 13:9:

And four hundred years shall not pass away before I will cause that they shall be smitten; yea, I will visit them with the sword and with famine and with pestilence.

It is not likely that the Nephites, even in their current state, would have missed the implications of these words. In the Hebrew Bible, famine, pestilence, and the sword are the specific curses allocated for a people who have violated the terms of the divine agreement, as laid out in Leviticus 26:

And your strength shall be spent in vain: for your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruits. (v. 20—famine)

And if ye walk contrary unto me, and will not hearken unto me; I will bring seven times more plagues upon you according to your sins. (v. 21—pestilence)

And I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste. (v. 33—sword)<sup>20</sup>

Samuel's language here is clear. The Nephites must repent or risk being cut off and becoming a desolate people. These are the terms of the covenant. This transactional quality of the covenant is soon reiterated:

But if ye will repent and return unto the Lord your God I will turn away mine anger, saith the Lord; yea, thus saith the Lord, blessed are they who will repent and turn unto me, but wo unto him that repenteth not. (Helaman 13:11)

The Nephites can bring either prosperity on themselves through obedience or punishment through disobedience. They will reap what they sow. Perhaps the ultraserious nature of the Nephites' violations leads Samuel to speak as viscerally as he does in Helaman 15, where he declares that women and pregnant mothers "shall be trodden down and shall be left to perish" (v. 2).<sup>21</sup>

This is, however, not the case for the Lamanites, as Samuel again inverts the terms of the jeremiad. At first Samuel describes the current Lamanite situation in a way that appears similar to the Nephite's transactional relationship:

And now, because of their steadfastness when they do believe in that thing which they do believe, for because of their firmness when they are once enlightened, behold, the Lord shall bless them and prolong their days, notwithstanding their iniquity. (Helaman 15:10)

The exchange seems clear: The Lord will bless the Lamanites and “prolong their days” because of their steadfastness and firmness. They have become a righteous people, and the Lord will treat them as such, setting aside their previous iniquity. These are the same terms that were imposed on the Nephites. However, notice the next verse:

Yea, even if they 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)

At this point, the Lord shifts the focus away from a transactional relationship to something closer to an unconditional one. Even if the Lamanites revert back to their previous state of iniquity and eventually dwindle in unbelief, the Lord will still prolong their days. There is no time frame pronounced similar to the Nephite’s limit of four hundred years, no threats of imposing famine, pestilence, or the sword. Whereas the Nephites will be destroyed *because of* their actions, the Lamanites will be preserved, one senses, *in spite of* their actions. Of course, the pathway to restoration may not be a pleasant one, as verse 12 describes some of the horrors that the Lamanite descendants will have to endure and struggle through, but through it all “the Lord shall be merciful unto them.”

*6. A jeremiad invokes a sense of American exceptionalism—the community is connected to a larger, sacred story about God’s active involvement with the nation. Thus the actions of the people have larger implications for the world as a whole. This exceptionalism is stressed by the tension that exists between hope and despair.*

This category requires us to pull back and examine how a nation or people fit into the broader perspective of God’s divine plan writ large. The Bible and the Book of Mormon operate under the assumption that God has designated a specific land as “his” and has led his chosen people to that land. Biblical sentiments like this have been part of the mythos surrounding the colonization and expansion of the United States from its inception up through the modern age. As a result, the jeremiad is able to expose and

leverage the tensions that exist between perceived national decline and the belief that one's nation ought to be an example to the rest of the world.

This tension between a community's sense of moral exemplarity and despair over current moral decline is central to the jeremiad and part of what separates the American jeremiad from other forms of political discourse. Andrew R. Murphy describes this tension:

America's decline in ordinary (historical) time is linked to an equally strongly held conviction that the United States is part of a larger, transcendent purpose. At the grandest level, we find interpretations of American history that root themselves in myths of the nation's origin and view its rise to world power as part of a divine blessing bestowed on the earliest settlers and national founders. This inheritance, furthermore, shapes, or ought to shape, the political decisions of subsequent generations.<sup>22</sup>

This tension between hope and despair becomes an important lens through which to interpret Samuel's speech. In a critical move, Samuel at this point inverts the jeremiad *against* the Nephites, rather than the Lamanites. To put it simply, and to highlight one of Sacvan Bercovitch's most important contributions, a jeremiad typically ends with "unshakable optimism."<sup>23</sup> The jeremiad, in Bercovitch's view, assumes that society will eventually snap out of its declension and fulfill, somewhat belatedly, its prophetic destiny. However, there is no sense that the future Nephites will be part of any larger divine plan, part of some sort of Nephite exceptionalism. Samuel at various points says that the land is cursed because of the Nephites, but that's as close as he gets to casting the Nephites' actions onto a wider stage. In fact, he seems to go to great lengths to inform them that they *won't* be playing a larger role in the future affairs of their nation, as twice he specifies that they will essentially cease to exist as a people four hundred years hence. It is true that because Samuel reveals the signs that will accompany Jesus's birth and death (see Helaman 14), we could view Jesus's appearance to the Nephites as a sign of favor toward the Nephites. But in that disclosure Samuel appears very careful to take emphasis off the Nephites. He speaks in general terms, "*whosoever* will believe," "*many* shall see greater things than these," and so on. There is little indication that

Jesus's appearance is an especially *Nephite* experience. In other words, the Nephites have no future—they are without hope, left with only despair.

The Lamanites, on the other hand, have a role in God's future plans. In his message Samuel develops something akin to a Lamanite exceptionalism, for it is to the Lamanites, not the Nephites, that he directs his unshakeable optimism. Indeed, it is the Lamanites who will survive far into the future, fulfilling multiple prophecies delivered by prophets six or seven centuries earlier. And it is the Lamanites who, again according to prophecy, will centuries later 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). The Nephites may be the protagonists of much of the Book of Mormon, but Samuel's prophecies suggest that the protagonists of the world-historical redemption announced *by* the Book of Mormon—the people God will watch over, protect, and eventually restore some two and a half millennia after their inception—are the Lamanites. Perhaps most damning, from a Nephite perspective, is that Samuel's crucial move here allows “the Lamanite Samuel [to] turn the tables to interpret the Nephites as *mere instruments* in the hands of the Lord to restore the Lamanites to their rightful place: ‘Salvation hath come unto [the Lamanites] through the preaching of the Nephites; and for this intent hath the Lord prolonged their [the Nephites'] days’ (1 Nephi 2:24; Helaman 15:4).”<sup>24</sup> By inverting the expected inversion, by directing his unshakeable optimism toward the Lamanites, Samuel forces his readers to focus on the inevitable and in the process tasks them with interpreting his sermon not simply as a Nephite jeremiad, but as a Lamanite encomium, one that looks ahead to the Book of Mormon's own coming forth for a full realization.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SAMUEL'S INVERTED JEREMIAD

What, then, to make of Samuel's rhetorically fascinating and theologically complex sermon? In his sociological study of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, Peter Coviello wrote:

If it's not wrong to say *The Book of Mormon* makes villains of the accursed dark-skinned Lamanites, neither is it quite right. *The Book*



*of Mormon* actually does something weirder and more elaborate. This is so not only because it is, finally, the Lamanites who *win* the millennial race war the book depicts, and so survive as the sacred remnant, the carriers of the seed of Lehi into the future. Rather, the work itself employs a narrative structure that, as many critics have noted, stands *The Book of Mormon* in vivid contrast to most sacred scripture.<sup>25</sup>

It is the first part of this “weird” and “elaborate” element of the Book of Mormon, its projecting of its own history nearly two thousand years into the future in the form of Lamanite triumph, that deserves more attention. For those who tend to read the Book of Mormon in a way that casts the Nephites as straightforward protagonists and the Lamanites as perpetual antagonists, Samuel’s sermon serves as a stark reminder that there are two modern audiences for the Book of Mormon. The title page explicitly states that the Book of Mormon was “written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile.” As Max Perry Mueller has noted, “That Moroni’s exhortation is addressed to the Lamanites is important. The Nephites do not keep this sacred record for their own posterity. They have none.”<sup>26</sup> Mueller’s point should not be easily brushed aside. While it is not wrong or unfair for those of us who see ourselves as latter-day Gentiles to read the Book of Mormon in a way that frames the text as speaking directly to us, it is not fully right either.

So what of the book’s primary nineteenth-century audience, the Lamanites? Significantly, the years immediately preceding and following the publication of the Book of Mormon found the jeremiad coming to be employed by African Americans and Native Americans as one means of navigating through their persecution at the hand of their white oppressors. In 1829 David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* appeared, in which he used the familiar stories of Noah and Moses to rail against slavery and warn slave owners that God “will one day appear fully on behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors.” As the work of Wilson Jeremiah Moses and especially David Howard-Pitney has demonstrated, the jeremiad form would become a crucial component of black protest rhetoric for the next two centuries.<sup>27</sup> Around the same time, in 1831, William Apess, a Pequot Indian, wrote

several tracts, including one entitled *The Indians: The Lost Ten Tribes* in which he argued that the Native Americans were the remnant of those “who were brought up out of Egypt” and that at the time of European colonization Native Americans were “a harmless, inoffensive, obliging people.” Following a lengthy indictment of white men for their “wrongs and calamities . . . heaped upon” the Native Americans, Apess closes with this poignant, somewhat optimistic sentiment: “A few, the remnant of multitudes long since gathered to their fathers, are all that remain; and they are on their march to eternity.”<sup>28</sup>

It is precisely here that Samuel’s speech is so valuable. By reading Samuel’s discourse as an inverted jeremiad, we see more clearly the Book of Mormon’s timely emergence, employing a popular and recognizable American rhetorical technique to foreground the promises made to the latter-day Lamanites.<sup>29</sup> Samuel’s jeremiad certainly acts as a fiery warning to the Nephites, but it is difficult to see them as his primary audience. He warns them to repent, but that warning is undercut by the four-hundred-year prophecy, a time so far in the future that it is almost meaningless to the Nephites he is addressing. Indeed, the finality with which he delivers that prophecy, and its eventual realization four centuries later, undercuts any argument that the prophecy may be intended for future Nephites, who by this later point in the story have been all but annihilated. Their fall and destruction have been made sure. But the Lamanites’ triumph, in whatever form that is to take, is yet to come, and thus Samuel’s Lamanite encomium acts as a beacon of hope for a latter-day people struggling to know where, exactly, they fit in God’s larger scheme.<sup>30</sup> That the post-ministry Jesus would reinforce many of Samuel’s claims about the future prosperity of the Lamanites in his own sermon to the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 20:21–22; 21:23–25) provides a valuable second witness to Samuel’s message. While Samuel’s appearance in the Book of Mormon is brief, his importance to the full realization of the future purposes of the restored Church cannot be overstated. In Mueller’s words, “Samuel embodies the principles of Joseph Smith’s early church and its hermeneutic of restoration. In the Book of Mormon’s most idealized vision, it is not the white Gentiles who will lead the building up of New Jerusalem. Instead this responsibility and authority will pass to yet-to-be named Lamanite leaders. Like Samuel, these future

leaders will transcend their own supposed racial limitations to rediscover who they are: lost and then found descendants of God's covenantal people, latter-day Lamanite Israelite prophets and priests of the New Jerusalem."<sup>31</sup>

Samuel's pivotal sermon is one of the key ways by which the Book of Mormon undertakes its overarching purpose to speak to the Lamanites.<sup>32</sup> It is through Samuel that the latter-day Lamanites finally hear a "familiar spirit" in the form of one of their own ancestors, a marginalized "voice . . . from the dust" rising up out of the ground to remind them of their covenant heritage (2 Nephi 26:16; 33:13; Isaiah 29:4). From the perspective of the claims made by the title page of the Book of Mormon itself, Samuel the Lamanite's discourse demands much more attention than it has been given. The Nephites were gently rebuked by the Savior for omitting Samuel's prophecies (see 3 Nephi 23:11). We would be wise not to repeat their mistake.<sup>33</sup>

## NOTES

1. Elizabeth Fenton, "Nephites and Israelites: *The Book of Mormon* and the Hebraic Indian Theory," in *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon*, ed. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 290.
2. See, for example, Edgar C. Snow Jr., "Narrative Criticism and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4, no. 2 (1995): 93–106; S. Kent Brown, "The Prophetic Laments of Samuel the Lamanite," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 163–80; and Donald W. Parry, "'Thus Saith the Lord': Prophetic Language in Samuel's Speech," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 181–83.
3. James Egan, "'This Is a Lamentation and Shall Be for a Lamentation': Nathaniel Ward and the Rhetoric of the Jeremiad," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 122, no. 6 (December 18, 1978): 401.
4. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 180.
5. John Winthrop, "Model of Christian Charity," in *Classics of American Political and Constitutional Thought*, ed. Scott J. Hammond, Kevin R. Hardwick, and Howard L. Lubert (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 1:18.

6. Samuel Danforth, "A Brief Recognition of New-England's Errand into the Wilderness," in *Writing New England: An Anthology from the Puritans to the Present*, ed. Andrew Delbanco (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 12–18.
7. Andrew R. Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 38. In the words of Harry S. Stout, "In sounding the rhetoric of failure . . . the founders and their children discovered a far better rhetorical strategy than words of fulsome praise. Such denunciations underscored the theological point that God was sovereign and merciful, and the giver of all things. Socially, the rhetoric impelled an earnest effort to conform to the teachings of God's Word before it was 'too late,' while it affirmed New England's special corporate status." Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 62–63.
8. Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 6. See also Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).
9. Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 7.
10. Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 7. Stout agrees, remarking that "for all its negations the language of condemnation inspired hope and confidence." Stout, *New England Soul*, 63.
11. "With God on Our Side" (1964).
12. See, for example, Virgil Goode, "Save Judeo-Christian Values," *USA Today*, January 2, 2007.
13. See, for example, Paul Williams, "Twenty-First-Century Jeremiad: Contemporary Hip-Hop and American Tradition," *European Journal of American Culture* 27, no. 2 (2008): 111–32.
14. Andrew R. Murphy and Jennifer Miller, "The Enduring Power of the American Jeremiad," in *Religion, Politics, and American Identity*, ed. Davis S. Gutterman and Andrew R. Murphy (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006), 51.
15. David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 7.
16. See Murphy, *Prodigal Nation*, 7–14. Murphy lays out the first three traits explicitly on pages 7–9 and the latter three more implicitly on pages 10–14.
17. This is certainly a departure from the lament of Nephi<sub>1</sub>, which shares many similarities with Samuel's speech. In Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s case, he is abundant in his praise of the righteous origins of the Nephites: "Oh, that I could have had my days in the days when my father Nephi first came out of the land of Jerusalem, that I

- could have joyed with him in the promised land; then were his people easy to be entreated, firm to keep the commandments of God, and slow to be led to do iniquity; and they were quick to hearken unto the words of the Lord—yea, if my days could have been in those days, then would my soul have had joy in the righteousness of my brethren” (Helaman 7:7–8). Perhaps Samuel, as a Lamanite, cannot quite share Nephi<sub>2</sub>'s exuberance as to the righteous origins of the Nephites. It is clear, however, that Nephi<sub>2</sub> shares Samuel's opinion on the current state of Nephite righteousness: “But behold, I am consigned that these are my days, and that my soul shall be filled with sorrow because of this the wickedness of my brethren” (v. 9).
18. The Book of Mormon is not very forthcoming about the specifics of these Lamanite traditions. One of the few places where readers are given a sample of Lamanite rhetoric comes in Mosiah 10:16, where Zeniff mentions the anger of the Lamanites over the actions of Nephi in splitting off from the Lehite party and the perception that the Nephites had stolen the plates and Liahona from Laman. It's possible that Samuel has these sorts of traditions in mind.
  19. Jared Hickman suggests that one of the biggest issues the Nephites faced, one that did not trouble the Lamanites, was their easy acceptance of a perceived racial divide: “Samuel is concerned not with the alleged signs of divine accursedness but the substance of moral failure. If the Nephites are cursed, Samuel suggests, it is because they have cursed themselves by believing in racial curses, by complacently trusting in whiteness and other superficial qualities as reliable indices of the providential direction of things.” Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (2014): 454.
  20. Amulek uses the same language in condemning the people in Ammonihah in Alma 10:22–23. Compare with Abinadi's prophecy about King Noah in Mosiah 12:4.
  21. The racial and gender implications of Samuel's prophecy in this verse are nicely teased out in Kimberly M. Berkey and Joseph M. Spencer's “Great Cause to Mourn: The Complexity of *The Book of Mormon's* Presentation of Gender and Race,” in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches*, 298–320.
  22. Murphy, *Prodigal Nation*, 13. In stressing the uniqueness of the American jeremiad versus other jeremiads, in particular British jeremiads, Murphy is building on Bercovitch's work in *The American Jeremiad*. Murphy's contribution comes through in how well he traces that tension into the twenty-first century.

23. Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 6–7. This move by Bercovitch represents one of his more significant departures from Perry Miller, who viewed the jeremiad more as representing pessimistic complaints than optimistic hope.
24. Hickman, “Amerindian Apocalypse,” 453; emphasis added. Note that Hickman’s bracketed interpolation identifying *their* in “for this intent hath the Lord prolonged their days” (Helaman 15:4) as referring to the Nephites rather than to the Lamanites goes against the reading of Alma 9:16 and Helaman 15:10–11. On the ambiguity of Helaman 15:4, see note 458 in appendix 1 in this volume.
25. Peter Coviello, “How the Mormon Became White: Scripture, Sex, Sovereignty,” in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches*, 262.
26. Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 38.
27. See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulation of a Religious Myth* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982); David Howard-Pitney, “The Enduring Black Jeremiad: The American Jeremiad and Black Protest Rhetoric, From Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Du Bois, 1841–1919,” *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 481–92.
28. *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, ed. Barry O’Connell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 112–14. For an analysis of how Apess’s works compare with contemporary jeremiads, see Willie J. Harrell Jr., “‘Sons of the Forest’: The Native American Jeremiad Materialized in the Social Protest Rhetoric of William Apess, 1829–1836,” *Americana—E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2011). For a detailed discussion of the importance of Apess, see Elizabeth Fenton, *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 100–112.
29. There remains the vexing question of how Book of Mormon readers should understand the terms *Nephite* and *Lamanite* after the events of 4 Nephi. However, the text itself makes little effort to reorient the meaning of those terms in 4 Nephi and beyond, so I will follow Mormon’s lead here and not assume a major distinction.
30. Readers will observe that I am careful not to identity any particular people or groups of peoples as the latter-day Lamanites who are addressed by the Book of Mormon authors. That is because I am unsure of their identity. Joseph Smith and other early leaders of the Church viewed the Native Americans as the latter-day Lamanites in question, and certain texts from the Doctrine and

Covenants support this identification (see Doctrine and Covenants 3:18–20; 49:24–25). For more on this question, see Mueller, *Race*, 60–91, 153–80; Ronald W. Walker, “Seeking the ‘Remnant’: The Native American during the Joseph Smith Period,” *Journal of Mormon History* 19, no. 1 (1993): 1–33; and Stanley J. Thayne, “We’re Going to Take Our Land Back Over: Indigenous Positionality, the Ethnography of Reading, and The Book of Mormon,” in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches*, 321–38.

31. Mueller, *Race*, 52–53.
32. Hickman astutely observes that “the inclusion of Samuel’s voice in *The Book of Mormon* represents not only an aporia but an apocalypse within and of the text that completes the internal—and thus divinely approved, as it were—case for reading the Nephite narrative with a hermeneutics of suspicion.” Hickman, “Amerindian Apocalypse,” 454.
33. Hickman may be right when he theorizes that “laid bare here is a reluctance on the part of the Nephite prophets to include in their narrative something they themselves recognize as true prophecy, because, at least in part it seems, it came from a Lamanite.” Hickman, “Amerindian Apocalypse,” 452.