Divine Dream Time: The Hope and Hazard of Revelation

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Jacob's concluding words are among the most poignant in all of scripture: "the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream" (Jacob 7:26). However, far from being the mere poetic waxing of a dying man, I believe that the concept of "dreams" is critical to understanding Jacob's theology and his writings as a whole. Within our dreams, we experience time differently than when we are awake. Rather than events following after each other in a linear and understandable way, they often present a different sort of logic altogether—one where time is not linear and connections between events are mysterious at best. Jacob's description of revelation seems to reflect this sort of "dream time."[1] In fact, Jacob's father, Lehi, explicitly describes one of his own revelations as dreamlike: "Behold, I have dreamed a dream, or in other words, I have seen a vision" (1 Nephi 8:2).[2] In my view, Jacob 7 highlights the dreamlike nature of revelatory

1. Canonically speaking, Nephi's vision (1 Nephi 11–14) of Lehi's dream/vision (1 Nephi 8) is a good, proximate example of how an individual's experience of divine communication can be both temporally jarring and logically disconnected.

2. I have used Royal Skousen's *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) as my base text for Book of Mormon quotations; all emphasis has been added.

experiences, illustrates the dangers inherent in receiving a revelation of God, and demonstrates how to avoid these potential hazards through a "hope in Christ" (Jacob 2:19).

Isn't it about time?

Central to Jacob's perception of the world is his revelatory experience with Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote a letter puzzling over whether or not it is possible to have what he calls a "religionless Christianity."[3] In this letter, he wrestles with the relationship between the structural aspects of "religion" on the one hand and the essence of Christianity on the other, and he investigates how necessarily entangled those two ideas are. Ultimately, Bonhoeffer suggests that there *could* be a form of Christianity that is not bounded by the traditional strictures of religion. In Jacob 7, Sherem seems to be doing just the opposite—he has wrestled with the relationship between the structural aspects of the law of Moses and the essence of Jacob's Christian message and determines that they have been unnecessarily entangled in the public mind. He contends that there should be a form of Nephite religion—completely circumscribed by the law of Moses—that is *not* tied to the idea of Christianity. Instead of a religionless Christianity, Sherem argues for a Christless religiosity among the Nephites.

The conflict between Jacob and Sherem revolves not only around their acceptance of Christ but also around their understanding of time. Sherem begins the story with a very linear way of looking at time and life that is largely oriented toward the past—his knowledge is rooted

3. In a letter to Eberhard Bethge, 30 April 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote, "Our entire nineteen hundred years of Christian preaching and theology are built on the 'religious a priori' in human beings. 'Christianity' has always been a form (perhaps the true form) of 'religion.' Yet if it becomes obvious one day that this 'a priori' doesn't exist, that it has been a historically conditioned and transitory form of human expression, then people really will become radically religionless. . . . If religion is only the garb in which Christianity is clothed—and this garb has looked very different in different ages—what then is religionless Christianity?" See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 362–63.

squarely in the law of Moses that he so vigorously defends (Jacob 7:7). Sherem is clearly invested in this law and sees it as the necessary foundation of Nephite religion—his way of knowing the right way is focused on the past, through the clearly defined, linear terms outlined in the law of Moses. Sherem's problem with Jacob doesn't appear to be centered in the general concept of Christ's atonement. Rather, he seems much more concerned with Jacob putting so much rhetorical and theological weight on an event that will supposedly happen "many hundred years hence." This is "blasphemy, for no man knoweth of such things; for he cannot tell of things to come" (v. 7). Eschewing the future as unknowable, Sherem is focused on the permanence of the past, where events are fixed in a dependable linear chain that inevitably leads to the present.

At first Jacob seems to express a view that is the polar opposite of Sherem's, a view that is oriented toward the future. And, in a sense, this is correct: Jacob testifies that Christ will come and make an atonement at some unspecified point in the future. However, Jacob's Christ-centered religiosity does not simply require people to change their orientation from looking backward in time to looking forward in time. More is required. A Christ-centered religiosity requires people to step outside the tyranny of linear time and into a dreamlike space. In this dream space, the focus is not on permanence but on possibility. This sort of nonlinear, atemporal Christian framework gives Jacob the ability to see the past *in light of* the future, while still allowing for the mystery of God in the present.

Jacob describes his own particular dreamlike way of experiencing time and life as a "hope in Christ."[4] Jacob first uses this phrase in his sermon to the Nephites at the temple (Jacob 2:19) and then expands on this idea in Jacob 4. In this passage, he states that he "knew of Christ, . . . [having] a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming," and suggests it was this hope in Christ that allowed him to perceive that same hope in "all the holy prophets which were before us"

4. For a discussion of the inseparable connection between *hope* and *daydreaming*, see Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 77–113.

(Jacob 4:4). This hope in Christ served as an interpretive lens through which Jacob could enter into a qualitatively different relationship with the scriptures. In other words, this "hope" allowed Jacob to experience the words of the prophets not as permanently fixed statements trapped within a linear stream of time but as words suggesting expansive and redemptive possibilities. This also fits with Jacob's statement in chapter 7 that "none of the prophets have written nor prophesied save they have spoken concerning this Christ" (Jacob 7:11). On their surface, the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible appear to largely lack explicit references to Jesus Christ. But Jacob's atemporal "hope in Christ" allows him to see clearly the *implicit* Christian dimension of those very same ancient words. And, as one of Sherem's central concerns is with Jacob's "perversion" of the law of Moses (see Jacob 7:7), Jacob also suggests that it was his hope in Christ that allowed him to read even the law in terms of its redemptive possibilities: "For this intent we keep the law of Moses, it pointing our souls to [Christ]. And for this cause it is sanctified unto us for righteousness" (Jacob 4:5).

This reconfiguration of prophetic and legal words from the past and their relationship to Jacob in the present also extends into the future by virtue of his continued hope in Christ. In chapter 4, Jacob again posits a present reconciliation with God through the future atonement of Christ—what he calls a "good hope of glory in [Christ] before he manifesteth himself in the flesh" (Jacob 4:11). Jacob then explains that he received this significant knowledge of the present (in light of the future) through the divine intervention of the Spirit: "For the Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore it speaketh of things as they really are and of things as they really will be" (Jacob 4:13).[5]

Sherem, because of his own fixed, linear view of time, seems to misunderstand Jacob's worldview because it is centered in a hope in Christ. Jacob's prophecies do not isolate him in a projected future; they secure him firmly to the present. Once he has rooted himself in the

5. This particular phrase differs in an interesting way from a similar phrase in the Doctrine and Covenants: "And truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come" (93:24). Perhaps Jacob does not speak here of the Spirit's ability to communicate the truth of the past because he has already covered this subject earlier in the chapter when he discussed the law and the prophets (Jacob 4:4–5).

presence of Christ, Jacob can then perceive truths in both the past and the future. We see this "presentness" of Jacob as he opens his response to Sherem's accusations: "Behold, the Lord God poured in his Spirit into my soul" (Jacob 7:8). This pouring of God's Spirit suggests a present and immediate experience. The phrase is reminiscent of several passages in the Hebrew Bible, of which the book of Joel is a good example: "I will *pour out* my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall *prophesy*, your old men shall *dream dreams*, your young men shall *see visions*" (Joel 2:28, emphasis added). The Hebrew verb for "pour out" here is שפך (*shaphach*), which means "to pour out, [or] to shed," and "does not mean a gradual pouring . . . but rather a *sudden*, massive spillage."[6] Thus, the phrase "the Lord God poured in his Spirit into my soul" suggests a sudden reception of divine communication that grounds the individual in a revelatory present while opening both the future and the past to a person's understanding.

We can also see this idea of experiencing a divine dream time in Jacob's description of how he received heavenly knowledge. Jacob claims to have seen angels, to have been ministered to by them, and to have heard the Divine voice. Significantly, he frames his account of these experiences with the phrase "from time to time" (Jacob 7:5). The Lord speaking "from time to time" takes Jacob *out* of time and allows him to simultaneously perceive the past (the presence of Christ in the writings of the law and the prophets), the present ("things as they really are"), and the future ("things as they really will be," including Christ's advent in the flesh). Thus, I believe that Jacob's teachings were ultimately focused on becoming open to a temporally charitable hope in Christ. Such teachings helped the people to form a worldview that would allow the Divine to mysteriously and immediately impart knowledge in the present, allowing them to break free of linear time and experience—as Jacob did—the word of the Lord "*from* time [linear time] *to* time [dream time]."

6. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1629, s.v. שפך, emphasis added.

Jacob's dream and Sherem's nightmare

It appears as though Jacob is able to navigate this dreamlike experience of nonlinear time in a relatively productive way. But Jacob's ability to maintain a coherent framework capable of holding together past, present, and future at the same time was made possible only through his hope in Christ.[7] Jacob's distinctively Christ-centered religiosity created space for this mystery of divine dream time, whereas Sherem's Christless religiosity erected barriers God had to overcome in order to reveal that same mystery. To put it another way, Jacob is an open valley into which God can pour his Spirit. Sherem, on the other hand, has erected a dam against God's revelations by focusing entirely on the words of the past (especially as revealed in the law of Moses). Sherem's shattering encounter with God's revelations shows that these revelations can themselves be dangerous if they are forced to overcome human-created barriers.

Perhaps the "power of the Lord" that ultimately comes upon Sherem at the climax of his conflict with Jacob was one of these nonlinear, dreamlike experiences that allowed Sherem to truly know about Christ (Jacob 7:15, 17). This view appears to be substantiated by the frenzied shifting references to time in Sherem's confession:

> I *fear* [present] lest I *have committed* [past] the unpardonable sin, for I *have lied* [past] unto God . For I *denied* [past] the Christ and said that I *believed* [past] the scriptures—and they truly *testify* [present] of him. And because that I *have* thus *lied* [past] unto God, I greatly *fear* [present] lest my case *shall be* [future] awful; but I *confess* [present] unto God. (Jacob 7:19)

We can see here the power of the Lord violently breaking Sherem free from the tyranny of linear time and linear thinking—a radical departure from his Christless religiosity that had been oriented primarily

7. We can see this principle quite clearly in Alma the Younger's narration of his own "conversion" experience, where the only thing that spares him from the madness of an atemporal revelation (Alma 36:12–16) is his desperate hope in Christ (36:17–20).

toward the past and the heavily sequential nature of the law of Moses. However, this breaking free has a different effect upon Sherem than it does upon Jacob. Sherem doesn't see only the hopeful aspect of the gospel that Jacob has most recently emphasized—the ministering of angels and the word of the Lord. Rather, Sherem is at least equally struck by the nightmarish aspects of this divine dream time. On the one hand, Sherem tells us that through this revelation, he has now experienced "the Christ," "the power of the Holy Ghost," and "the ministering of angels" (Jacob 7:17). Here, three elements are specifically mentioned. But immediately thereafter, we see the other side of this revelation in verse 18. Sherem speaks of hell, of eternity, and of eternal punishment. Once again, three elements are specifically mentioned, but this time, with a much darker tone.

Sherem's problem seems to come from seeing not only the positive and negative repercussions of actions from a nonlinear, dreamlike point of view, but in also trying to fit his past actions *into* this newly acquired atemporal framework. He clearly recognizes both the positive and negative implications of an eternal perspective, but even after experiencing this perspective, he is still oriented toward the past. This is suggested by the language Sherem uses to describe his internal state. He says, "I *fear* lest I have committed the unpardonable sin," not "I *know* that I have committed the unpardonable sin." In other words, Sherem's revelation and his newfound knowledge is not about his definitive condemnation before God nor about his own eternal punishment. He doesn't know these things; he only fears them. But while he recognizes that he has received a knowledge of Christ in the present—Christ is a reality, he really was in the scriptures all along, and he will come "many hundred years" in the future—these revelations are still framed by his own past actions ("I *have lied* unto God").

I would like to suggest that Sherem was not intentionally lying to God or the people with his earlier teachings. I believe that Sherem's anxiety about lying is the result of his wrestle with a new and unfamiliar dream time that has been violently imposed upon him. Sherem is experiencing a sort of revelatory post-traumatic stress syndrome. In these passages, I see Sherem viewing God's revelations from his own personal framework, a framework that unfortunately lacks the sort

of charity that a hope in Christ would provide. Sherem is trying to reorganize the pieces of his previously linear worldview, but instead of completely embracing this different way of looking at time and life, Sherem keeps holding on to his previous perspective. In other words, he is trying to force God's new wine into his own old bottles (cf. Matthew 9:17).

In light of his overwhelming revelation of Christ, Sherem is now (understandably) even more sensitive to his past actions that ran counter to Christ. Consider, for instance, his declaration that Jacob was causing the people to "pervert the right way of God" by not keeping the law of Moses (Jacob 7:7) and his claim that "there is no Christ, neither hath been nor never will be" (v. 9). But Sherem still sees each of these past actions as being decisive for his relationship to God, in spite of his newfound knowledge. He has been exposed to a view of Christ's infinite atonement, but he cannot yet allow his own finite mistakes to be swallowed up by that infinite love.

Rather than being condemned by God, Sherem is here condemning himself—and condemning himself needlessly. He sees his past actions as incongruent with his present knowledge, but since time has been shattered for him, both events (his present knowledge of Christ and his past denial of Christ) carry an equal weight in his own judgment. For someone who had been functioning within a strictly linear and temporal framework, the sudden apprehension of a dreamlike, atemporal framework would be maddening (which might help to explain his fixation on eternity and eternal punishment) and could easily lead to Sherem's unnecessarily harsh self-judgment and self-condemnation. In this scenario, God does not strike a person dead after they recognize the error of their ways—Sherem's smiting here may very well be reflexive.[8] Though one could agree with Longfellow that "whom the gods

8. We see this very principle at work in Hamlet's famous soliloquy:

> To be, or not to be? That is the question—
> Whether 'tis nobler *in the mind to suffer*
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep—

would destroy, they first make mad,"[9] the text of Jacob nowhere states that God is directly responsible for Sherem's death. A self-inflicted descent into madness, on the other hand, would better explain the fact that in verse 15, Sherem does not die immediately but is "nourished for the space of many days" before he dies. For Sherem, the dreamlike experience of revelation threatens to become a living nightmare.[10]

Jacob, though he clearly understands both the positive and negative aspects of a nonlinear, atemporal framework, does not go mad because of his hope in Christ. In his dreamlike state, Jacob sees Christ not simply as existing in the past (in the words of the prophets—Jacob 7:10–11), the present (the "voice of the Lord" coming to him "from time to time," v. 5) and future (Christ's coming "many hundred years hence," v. 7), but he also understands that Christ's redemption can essentially

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> No more—and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished! To die, to sleep.
> *To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub,*
> *For in that sleep of death what dreams may come*
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause. There's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life. (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 1, lines 58–71, emphasis added)

9. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Masque of Pandora* (Boston, MA: James R. Osgood, 1875), 33.

10. There is an interesting connection between dreams, experiencing the Divine, and the possibility of madness at the very outset of the Hebrew Bible. Immediately preceding the creation of the woman, the Lord God causes a "deep sleep to fall upon Adam" (Genesis 2:21). This "deep sleep" (תרדמה, *tardemah*) was translated into Greek using the word ἔκστασις (*ekstasis*), which is related to the English "ecstasy" and "ecstatic." The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, "The classical senses of ἔκστασις are 'insanity' and 'bewilderment'; but in late Greek the etymological meaning received another application, viz., 'withdrawal of the soul from the body, mystic or prophetic trance'; . . . Both the classical and post-classical senses came into the modern languages, and in the present fig[urative] uses they seem to be blended" (*OED Online*, s.v. "ecstasy, n."). Thus, it is possible to see the "deep sleep" that God set upon Adam as involving some sort of experience with the Divine, which also carried with it the possibility of insanity.

reconfigure the past so that actions once made outside of (and even against) Christ are reconciled to one's present knowledge and experience of grace. Thus, for Jacob, time has not simply been freed from permanence and linearity, but it has also been unified and reconciled in Christ. In other words, both time and life itself have been brought into a special relationship with Christ.

However, this experience of a divine dream time is clearly not all rainbows and unicorns (or cureloms, if you prefer). We see the mental, emotional, and spiritual toll that this sort of nonlinear, atemporal view had on Sherem, and I believe that at the end of Jacob's writings, we see more clearly the sort of toll that even an atemporal view bolstered by a hope in Christ has had on this prophet—he is "lonesome," "solemn," a "wanderer," "hated," and "mourn[ful]" (Jacob 7:26). We can actually see glimpses of the toll that experiencing this divine dream time can cause throughout Jacob's writings—we read of Jacob's "anxiety" (which accounts for exactly half the references to the term *anxiety* in the entire Book of Mormon), his being "weighed down" (Jacob 2:3), his burden (vv. 9, 23), and his "grief" (vv. 6–7, which, incidentally, seems quite similar to the grief of the Lord—appearing a staggering eight times in Jacob's allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5—suggesting that even God's own dream time can sometimes be painful).

What, then, makes this temporally disorienting, dreamlike experience with the Divine worth the trouble? Perhaps Jacob found hope in his father Lehi's deathbed blessing for him that God would "consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain" (2 Nephi 2:2).[11] Yes, there would be afflictions—perhaps most especially in experiencing time and life "like as it

11. Echoes of priestly language in this phrase neatly tie together divine dream time and a hope in Christ. In Leviticus 21:10, the author explains that the high priest had not only been consecrated (literally, "his hand was filled [with sacred oil]"), but that the anointing oil (literally משיח [*meshiach*] or χριστος [*christos*] oil) had been "poured out upon his head" (my translation). Thus, in "pouring out" his disorienting, dream-inducing Spirit into Jacob's soul (Jacob 7:8), God could at the same time use that oil-like Spirit to anoint the priestly Jacob unto holiness (Jacob 1:18). Such priestly imagery may help to explain the frequent uses of the term Christ in Jacob 7 (nearly half of its uses in the entire book of Jacob), as opposed to other epithets for the Son of God that Nephi seems to prefer in his writings.

were unto . . . a dream" (Jacob 7:26)—but through such an experience in Christ, Jacob could also gain both time *and* life.

A waking dream

If we return to the final verses that Jacob wrote before he died and reread Jacob 7:26 carefully, we see that Jacob seems to be encouraging us to read his religious writings from within a similar dreamlike framework. He states that the Nephite experience of both time and life were "*like as it were* unto us a dream." The consecutive use of the comparative words *like* and *as it were* may be intentionally evoking a dreamlike state. In fact, Jacob's text seems to be structured in a way to bring us, the audience, into this divine dream time. Within this chapter alone, we are confronted with an odd shifting of tenses and strange ways of talking about time: "*now* it *came* to pass," "*from* time *to* time," "nourished for the *space* of many days," "*before* that I *should* die," "my Father which *was* in heaven," "they *sought* . . . to destroy us *continually*," "it came to pass that I Jacob *began* to be old," "the time *passed away* with us," and "I *saw* that I *must soon* go down to my grave." Such vacillations in temporal phraseology suggest a nonlinear sense of dreaming, preparing the audience for God to break into their own sense of time and life.[12]

By crafting his text in a way that would help ease his audience into a divine dream time (stabilized by a hope in Christ), Jacob's textual vision resonates strongly with that of the deeply Christian author George MacDonald, who wrote:

12. On a much larger scale, we can see a sort of dream logic organizing the entire book of Jacob in the constant shifting between genres from chapter to chapter—in the first chapter, narrative gives way to the quotation of a public sermon (in chapters 2–3), which is immediately followed by an editorial explanation (chapter 4), which leads directly into an extended allegory about plants (chapter 5), which is followed by an analysis of that allegory (chapter 6) that seems to definitively end his writings (6:13), before beginning a brand new narrative (chapter 7) that officially ends the book with the statement that Jacob's experience of time and life has been like a dream (7:26). It is almost as if Jacob has been inviting us to join him in this divine dream time all along.

> Strange dim memories . . . look out upon me in the broad daylight, but I never dream now. It may be, notwithstanding, that, when most awake, I am only dreaming the more! But when I wake *at last* into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more. . . . Our life is no dream, but it should—and *will* perhaps—become one.[13]

Like MacDonald, Jacob ultimately invites his audience into a relationship with Christ—one that can transform their broken lives into a redemptive, waking dream.

13. George MacDonald, *Lilith* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1896), 350–51.