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“THE TIME IS PAST”: A NOTE ON SAMUEL’S FIVE-YEAR PROPHECY¹

Neal Rappleye

Abstract: *The story of believers being nearly put to death before the appearance of the sign at Christ’s birth is both inspiring and a little confusing. According to the Book of Mormon, the sign comes in the 92nd year, which was actually the sixth year after the prophecy had been made. There is little wonder why even some believers began to doubt. The setting of a final date by which the prophecy must be fulfilled, however, suggests that until that day, there must have been reason for even the nonbelievers to concede that fulfillment was still possible; yet after that deadline it was definitively too late. An understanding of Mesoamerican timekeeping practices and terminology provides one possible explanation.*

One of the more interesting — and more perplexing — stories in the Book of Mormon is that of Samuel the Lamanite’s prophecy (and its fulfillment) that Christ would be born in five years (Helaman 14:2–7; 3 Nephi 1:5–21). Samuel’s prophecy is made at some point in the 86th year (Helaman 13:1–2) and declares, “Behold, I give unto you a sign; for *five years more cometh*, and behold, then cometh the Son of God to redeem all those who shall believe on his name” (Helaman 14:2).

Yet as the 92nd year commenced, the sign had not yet appeared (3 Nephi 1:4–5). At this time, some began to say it was too late for Samuel’s prophecy to be fulfilled (3 Nephi 1:5), and it is easy to understand why — the 92nd year was the *6th* year since the prophecy had been given (see

1. The ideas in this paper occurred to me as I was researching and writing, “Why Did Samuel Make Such Chronologically Precise Prophecies?” *KnoWhy*, 184, September 9, 2016, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-did-samuel-make-such-chronologically-precise-prophecies>.

fig. 1). Of course, Samuel’s prophecy need not be fulfilled literally five years *to the day*,² but even some believers began to doubt (3 Nephi 1:7).

Fig. 1: Years Counted from When Samuel Gave His Five-Year Prophecy	
86th Year	Samuel Gives 5-Year Prophecy
87th Year	1
88th Year	2
89th Year	3
90th Year	4
91st Year	5
92nd Year	6: Prophecy is Fulfilled

Despite believing that the time had passed, the skeptics “set apart” a specific day in the 92nd year as the deadline for the prophecy — literally, they planned to “put to death” all who believed in the prophecy, “except the sign should come to pass” (3 Nephi 1:9). Given this was a planned mass execution, it is safe to say this was not an arbitrary date. There was probably some reason for even the unbelievers to think the prophecy could potentially be fulfilled *before* that day and for believing that *after* that day it would be definitively too late for the sign to come.

So, for this whole story to make sense, there must be (1) good reason to think the prophecy *should* have been fulfilled by the end of the 91st year, yet also (2) good reason to think it could potentially be fulfilled if it came by a certain day in the 92nd year, and (3) good enough reason to think that after that day, the time for fulfillment was definitively passed — hence, those who persisted to believe deserved the death penalty.

It’s not hard to find a good reason for the first of these propositions — the 91st year was the fifth year since Samuel had prophesied. John L. Sorenson noted this chronological discrepancy, pointing out “the fulfillment of Samuel’s predictions should have commenced in the 91st year. The initial fulfillment is, instead, reported in the 92nd year.” Thus the peoples’ expectation that the time had passed, “would make

2. It is unknown on what day in the 86th year Samuel made his prophecy, so trying to hold the prophecy down *to the day* is difficult. But at some point in the 91st year, five years would have passed from the day Samuel prophesied — so waiting until the *end* of the 91st year probably seemed already to be a lenient interpretation from the skeptics’ point of view.

sense in terms of a five-year prediction."³ At some point during the 91st year, five full years had passed from the day Samuel prophesied. Thus, with that year's completion, it had already been *more than* five years, and many naturally felt the time had passed.

But what made even the skeptics think there was potential for the fulfillment before a certain day? And what made them confident that after that day, it was definitively too late for the sign to come? One potential answer to these questions can be found in a Mesoamerican setting for Samuel's prophecy.

Samuel's Prophecy in a Mesoamerican Setting

Others have already talked about how Samuel's time-specific prophecies are consistent with important time-periods in the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar system.⁴ John L. Sorenson, John E. Clark, and

3. John L. Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 409. Oddly, Sorenson never attributes the Nephites five-year expectation to the timeline Samuel himself gives in Helaman 14:2, but instead speculates that it might be related to a Mesoamerican expectation that the next *katun* would be prophesied of five years in advanced. Hence, Sorenson's full statement is, "In Yucatan at the time of the Spanish conquest, the ruler or his spokesman, the Chilam, had the duty to prophesy five years in advance what fate the next twenty-year *katun* would bring. Samuel the Lamanite prophesied 'in' the 86th year of the Judges (Helaman 13:1–2). If a related *katun* prophecy pattern prevailed then (and of course it might not), the fulfillment of Samuel's predictions should have commenced in the 91st year. The initial fulfillment is, instead, reported in the 92nd year. But the people might have expected the fulfillment sometime in the previous year, for 'there were some who began to say [in the 92nd year] that the time was past for the words to be fulfilled, which were spoken by Samuel, the Lamanite' (3 Nephi 1:5). This response would make sense in terms of a five-year prediction" (p. 409). While this potential Mesoamerican connection is interesting, to be sure (see below), it is unnecessary in order to explain why the people thought the time had passed, as Samuel himself gave the five-year deadline. See also John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 193, 441.

4. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 272–74; Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," 407–10; John E. Clark, "Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2005), 90; John E. Clark, "Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 46–47; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*,

Brant A. Gardner all noted that Samuel's 400-year prophecy correlates with a major time unit in the Long Count, the *baktun*, which consisted of 400 *tuns* (360-day years, see below).⁵ Only Mark Alan Wright has pointed out that the five-year prophecy correlates with the *ho'tun*, another significant time unit.⁶

Sorenson did notice another Mesoamerican connection to the five-year prophecy. When the Spanish arrived, some Mesoamerican groups had the custom of prophesying the outcome of the next *katun* five years in advance.⁷ Samuel was similarly predicting the outcome of the upcoming *baktun* (Helaman 13:5, 9) five years before it began (Helaman 14:2). While Sorenson cautiously acknowledged that the evidence for this custom was from 1,500 years later, and we cannot be certain the tradition existed in the first century BC, the comparison is nonetheless interesting.

On other hand, we can be confident that the Long Count was known at the right time and the right place. The earliest date recorded in the Long Count system is 36 BC and comes from Chiapas, Mexico, near the Grijalva River.⁸ Sorenson and others place the greater land of Zarahemla in Chiapas, with the Grijalva River as the Sidon (see fig. 2).⁹ So archaeological evidence attests to the use of the *tun* and the Long Count system in the same time and place as Samuel the Lamanite's prophecy.

6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:176–77; Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 192–95, 434–42; Mark Alan Wright, “Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon,” in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of the Expound Symposium*, 14 May 2011, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: Eborn Books and Interpreter Foundation, 2014), 252–53.

5. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 274; Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” 409; Clark, “Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins,” 90; Clark, “Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief,” 46–47; Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:176–77; Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 193, 440.

6. Wright, “Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon,” 253.

7. Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” 409; Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 193–94, 440–41.

8. See Kaylee Spencer-Ahrens and Linnea H. Wren, “Arithmetic, Astronomy, and the Calendar,” in Lynn V. Foster, *Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 255.

9. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 36, 37 (map 5), 46–47, 148–152; Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 128, 131, 581–594; Joseph L. Allen and Blake J. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, revised edition (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2011), 650–65, 745–75.



Fig. 2: Earliest Long Count date in the relation to Sorenson’s Zarahemla.
Map by Jasmin Gimenez.

The Mesoamerican setting for Samuel’s prophecy also provides a solution to the confusing details about the timing of its fulfillment in an interesting way that preserves the accuracy of Samuel’s prophecy and potentially sheds light on other aspects of Nephite chronology.

The *Haab* and the *Tun*

Ancient Mesoamericans had two different time-periods that served as a type of “year.” One was a 365-day cycle, typically called the *haab*, and the other was a 360-day cycle, commonly known as the *tun* and part of the “Long Count” calendar.¹⁰ While the terms *haab* and *tun*

10. For background on Mesoamerican calendrics, see Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 48–54; Spencer-Ahrens and Wren,

are frequently used by scholars in a way that distinguishes the 365-day period (*haab*) from the 360-day period (*tun*), among the ancient Maya, the terms were interchangeable.

This is made clear by Michael D. Coe and Stephen Houston, who described the “*Ha’b* of 365 days,” but then, while discussing the 360-day *tun*, noted, “in a switch sure to confuse modern readers, the *tun* was really called *ha’b*!”¹¹ Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo said the Long Count used a “*haab* of 360 days” and then explained, “*Tun* is the Yucatec word for *haab*, which is a Yucatec designation for a year of 365 days.”¹² Pharo laid out an entire *haab*-based lowland Maya terminology for the Long Count system, “with Yucatec designations in parenthesis” as follows:

Pik (Bak’tun): 144,000 days
 Winikhaab (K’atun): 7,200 days
 Haab (Tun): 360 days
 Winal/Winik: 20 days
 K’in: 1 day¹³

The exceptions to this *haab*-based terminology were five-year intervals in which “the classic inscriptions of the southern lowlands employ the designation *tun* for periods of 5 (*ho’tun*), 10 (*lajun tun*), or 15 (*ho’lajun tun*) *haab*.”¹⁴

John S. Justeson and Terrence Kaufman likewise explained the interchangeable use of these terms, noting that the Long Count “used 360 days as a canonical year length; among the Mayans, the word *ha7b*’ (‘year’) was used for both this period and the older 365-day year,” and the “*tu:n* referred to anniversaries using either year length ... and not, as is often stated, to the 360-day year per se.”¹⁵

“Arithmetic, Astronomy, and the Calendar,” 250–63; Janine Gasco, “Calendrics,” in *Archaeology of Ancient Mexico and Central America: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 90–92; John S. Justeson and Terrence Kaufman, “Calendars and Calendrical Systems: Mesoamerican Calendar,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America*, 3 vols., ed. David Carrasco (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:121–24.

11. Michael D. Coe and Stephen Houston, *The Maya*, 9th edition (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2015), 64, 67; also see p. 260: “a *tun*, or in Classic times, *ha’b*, of 360 days.”

12. Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo, *The Ritual Practice of Time: Philosophy and Sociopolitics of Mesoamerican Calendars* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 19 n.4.

13. *Ibid.*, 19.

14. *Ibid.*, 19, n.4.

15. Justeson and Kaufman, “Mesoamerican Calendars,” 122.

To avoid confusion, the convention of using *haab* for the 365-day year and *tun* for the 360-day year will be maintained throughout the rest of this article, but it is important to remember that among the ancient Maya, the terms were interchangeable — and periods of either five *haabs* or *tuns* would always be called a *ho'tun*.

Samuel's *Ho'tun* Prophecy: Five 365-day or 360-day Years?

If the Nephites and Lamanites lived in Mesoamerica, they most likely would have been familiar with both the *haab* and the *tun*, and like the Maya, they probably would have used the same word for both types of year. Thus, when Samuel made his five-year prophecy, he would have used the Nephite equivalent term for *ho'tun*, which could have referred to five *haabs* or five *tuns* — which makes for a difference of 25 days (see fig. 3).¹⁶

This, in turn, could have led to the scenario found in 3 Nephi 1. Some — perhaps everyone, initially — may have interpreted the prophecy to be fulfilled after five *tuns*. When five *tuns* passed at the conclusion of the 91st year, skeptics “began to rejoice” arguing, “Behold, the time is past, and the words of Samuel are not fulfilled; therefore, your joy and your faith concerning this thing hath been vain” (3 Nephi 1:6). Some who believed even feared that they may be right and were “very sorrowful” (3 Nephi 1:7).

Others, however, “did watch steadfastly” for the prophesied sign, “that they might know that their faith had not been vain” (3 Nephi 1:8). For these steadfast believers, the possibility that Samuel meant five *haabs* may have given them hope that it was not too late for the sign to come. The skeptics had to acknowledge this as a viable interpretation of the prophecy, so they marked the day five *haabs* would be completed as the final deadline. If the sign did not come by that day, “all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death” (3 Nephi 1:9).

16. This presumes that the first *tun* and first *haab* began at exactly the same time. If counting began at the start of the next New Year (whether *haab* or *tun*), there is no telling exactly how much of a time difference there might be, since the start of the new *haab* and the next *tun* could in theory be several months apart.

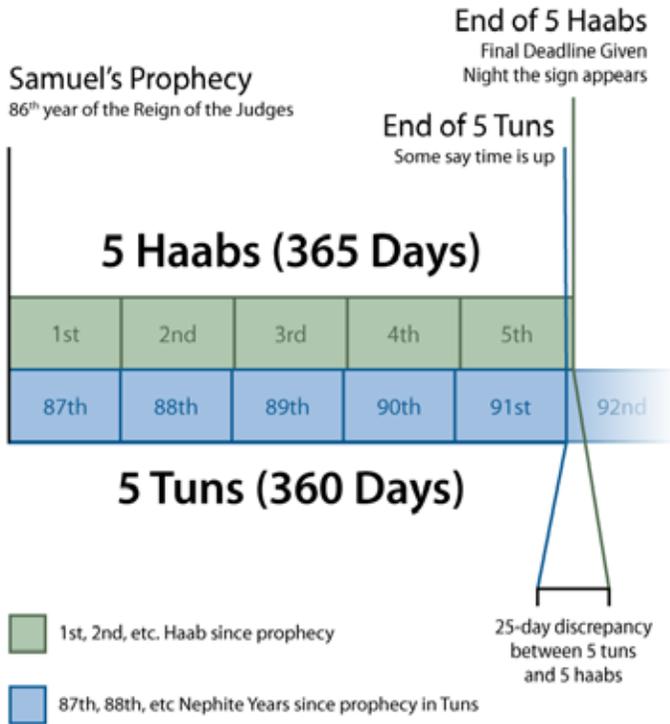


Fig. 3 Dual Timeline Showing the Passing of the *Haabs* and *Tuns*.
Chart by Jasmin Gimenez.

Implications for Book of Mormon Chronology

This solution works best if the “years” the Nephites were counting off from the start of the reign of the judges were *tuns* — 360-day years.¹⁷ Otherwise, the passing of the 91st year would have also concluded the passing of the fifth *haab* since Samuel’s prophecy, and there would be no additional 25-day period to hold out hope for.

This would suggest the other Nephite year systems — counting from the time Lehi left Jerusalem and the counting from the time the sign was

17. Theoretically, if the next Long-Count period ending came more than 25 days after the start of the first *haab* after the prophecy, then counting five *tuns* from the start of the first *tun* to being *after* the prophecy would have finished *after* the completion of five *haabs*. I imagine trying to convince one’s executioners of this possibility, however, would be much more complicated than simply pointing out that they had counted only the next five *tuns*, and Samuel might have meant the slightly longer period of the next five *haabs*.

given — were also *tuns*, since these three calendars were in sync with each other (3 Nephi 2:5–7).¹⁸ Proposals by previous scholars that the discrepancy with the 600-year prophecy can be solved by using *tuns*¹⁹ and correlation with Nephite destruction and the *baktun* cycle²⁰ further supports this possibility.

Ultimately, however, it must be admitted that this is just one possible explanation for the confusing situation set out in 3 Nephi 1. Whereas there is no way to prove this or any other explanation, the additional Mesoamerican connections found in Samuel's prophecy lend support to this idea. At the very least, they suggest the solution to this and perhaps other chronological puzzles in the Book of Mormon can be found in the calendrical practices of ancient Mesoamerica.

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18. Cf. Mosiah 29:46; 3 Nephi 1:1.

19. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 270–76.

20. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 274; Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," 409; Clark, "Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins," 90; Clark, "Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief," 46–47; Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:176–77; Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 193, 440.

