

Look to the Lord!

The Meaning of *Liahona* and the
Doctrine of Christ in Alma 37–38

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As studious readers of the Book of Mormon will note, the expression *Liahona* is used just once in the text. Alma mentioned *Liahona* to his eldest son, Helaman, when he gave him charge of the Nephite sacred records that Alma and his ancestors had kept along with other sacred heirlooms, including the *Liahona* itself (see Alma 37:38).¹ Alma and Helaman’s ancestor Nephi, who records the finding of the *Liahona* and describes its features in greatest detail, never uses the identification *Liahona* in the writings on his small plates, unless allusively.²

Why does Alma invoke the expression *Liahona* for his son? One study proposes that *Liahona* means “the direction of [to] the Lord.”³ I will supplement this suggestion with an additional Egyptian etymological explanation and offer evidence that the word *Liahona* is to be understood not simply as a question, “Whither to the Lord?” but rather (or also) as an imperative: “Look to the Lord!” or, literally,

“To Yahweh look!” I will show how the framing and content of Alma 37:38–48 support this idea, and I will explicate evidence in the Book of Mormon that suggests Alma uses *Liahona* with the sense “look to the Lord” or “look to God.”

The focus of Nephi and his successors on the doctrine of Christ in the same texts that mention the Liahona and discuss its importance further supports this thesis.⁴ Kristian Heal has noted that the idea of “looking to live” connects the brazen serpent (see Numbers 21:8–9) and the Liahona.⁵ Just as the idea of “looking to live” ties the brazen serpent to the doctrine of Christ (as in John 3:3–18 with Jesus’s explanation of the necessity of baptism, spiritual rebirth, and faith in Christ unto salvation), the term *Liahona* itself ties the compass/ball/director to the doctrine of Christ. Nephi and his successors understood looking to the Lord in terms of the first principle of the gospel, or first point of the doctrine of Christ, and living (eternal life) as its last. Thus, like the brazen serpent, the Liahona—the device and its name—could constitute a symbol of the *whole* doctrine of Christ: faith; repentance; baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; receiving (and retaining) the Holy Ghost; enduring to the end in faith, hope, and charity; and salvation in the kingdom of God, or eternal life. While etymological assessments of ancient names and expressions are always subject to reevaluation and sometimes amount to an adventure into the unknown, the proposed explanation “look to the Lord” (or “to the Lord, look!”) makes good sense in the context of what Nephi and Alma wrote.

Proposals Past and Present

There is a general consensus among those who have attempted etymological explanations of Liahona that the first element of the expression—“*Liaho-*”—is a combination of the Hebrew preposition *lě*, meaning “to,” with the theophoric element *yāhō*, a form of the divine name Yahweh (or Jehovah)—that is, “to Yahweh,” “to the Lord,” or “to God.”⁶

The second element—“-[o]na”—is less transparent; hence several differing explanations have been offered. For example, George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjö Dahl propose a mixed derivation from *lě* + *yāh* + *’ōn/’ōn* (i.e., the Egyptian city *’Iwnw*, or Heliopolis, which is written in cuneiform as *Ana* or *U-nu*).⁷ This derivation of *Liahona* could be rendered as “to God is light” or “of God is light.”⁸ However, this proposal incorrectly (and anachronistically) assumes an equation between Egyptian *’Iwnw* (< *’iwn.w* = “pillars”) and the Greek word *hēlios* (“sun”) and presumes, in any case, that the Lehitese would have taken *’ōn/’ōn* as a metonymy for “light.”

In 1961 Hugh Nibley wrote, “Our own preference has always been for *le-yah-hōn-na*, literally, ‘to God is our commanding,’ i.e., ‘God is our guide,’ since *hōn*, *hwn*, is the common late Egyptian word for ‘lead, guide, take command.’”⁹ Although this suggestion would make some sense in the context of the Book of Mormon’s narrative and history, it is made more difficult by the fact that Nibley’s proposed “*hōn hwn*” element derives from Egyptian *hn*, “command,” thus requiring an *h-h* consonant assimilation in “*yah-hōn*.” His proposal, too, remains therefore unlikely at best.

More recently, Jonathan Curci has offered the most plausible Hebrew linguistic explanation thus far, namely that *Liahona* is a combination of *liaho* (*lě* + *yāhō*, “to Yahweh”) and *’ānā* (“whither?”), thus “to the Lord belongs the direction,” or literally “to the Lord, whither?”¹⁰ Although the interrogative particle *’ānā* lacks an accompanying verb (which one would normally expect) and has taken the grammatical leap of being treated as a noun, this proposal has the benefits of being simple rather than tortuous and having a plausible basis within the text of the Book of Mormon itself.¹¹

A New Proposal

In what follows, I propose an Egyptian explanation that provides the expected verb. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow cite the cognate preposition *r* as the usual rection of the verb *nw* or *nw3* (“see” or

“look”).¹² Regarding the preposition *l-* in *Liahona*, the liquids *r* and *l* were frequently indistinguishable or interchangeable in Egyptian writing, a form which Nephi says he used (see 1 Nephi 1:2) and which Moroni states had been used for Mormon’s abridgment (see Mormon 9:32–34).

A well-known example of the aforementioned *r* for *l* phenomenon is the Egyptian transliteration of “Israel” in the Merneptah Stele, line 27: *yisri3r*. There was, in fact, no standardized writing for *l* as distinct from *r* in Egyptian until Demotic times (600 BC–AD 400), and even at that late stage many words with *l* and *r* continued to be spelled interchangeably.¹³ With the graphic nondistinction between *r* and *l*, sixth-century bilingual Judahites would have noted the correlation between the Egyptian preposition *r* and Hebrew preposition *lē*. The pronunciation of the Egyptian preposition *r*, which was already sometimes being written as *i* during the Twenty-Second and Twenty-Third Dynasties, continued to weaken to *e*, *ero*= by Coptic times.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the interchangeability of *r* and *l* in Egyptian writing and the significant semantic overlap between Egyptian *r* and Hebrew *lē* make them handy candidates for interlingual calquing.

Thus, if the final element *-na* ($[-^i]nā^i$) can be accounted for as an Egyptian element, *Liahona* need not be considered a “Hebrew” expression per se, particularly if the *lē-* can be viewed as a calqued form of the Egyptian preposition *r*. The possible objection that *Liahona* constitutes a mixed-language construction is mitigated if not obviated. Nevertheless, whether *Liahona* is analyzed as Hebrew or Egyptian, syntactical irregularities exist. In either language, the fronting of a prepositional phrase followed by a verbal construction represents a kind of hyperbaton, which denotes a “departure from ordinary word order,” or hysteron proteron, a “form of hyperbaton” with “syntax or sense out of normal logical or temporal order.”¹⁵ The syntax of *Liahona* emphasizes the divine name *yāhō* in a fronted prepositional phrase.¹⁶

During Lehi’s time, the commonest Egyptian term expressing the idea of “to look” or “to see” was the verb *nw*, earlier *nw3*.¹⁷ The

Egyptian imperative form of *nw* sounds almost identical to $-\text{[vowel]}$ *nâ* or *ʾânâ* (“whither?”), as evident in later Coptic *nau* and its imperative *anau*. (Compare especially the Demotic form of the imperative *ʾi nw*, which includes the *aleph* [ʾi], whence the initial *a* and thus the pronunciation *ʾânâ/anau*.)¹⁸ The **liabu* > **liaho* (*û* > *ô*) transformation as a lowering assimilation is plausibly helped by the *a* vowel that follows in the imperative form of *nw/nw3* (see *ʾi nw/anau*). If *Liahona*, so derived, originally ended in a pronounced rounded vowel (**-naw/-nao*), a defective (shortened), unvoiced spelling may have simply left such unwritten.¹⁹ (It is also possible that the Lehwites pronounced [ʾi] *nw* as $-\text{[a > o]}na$.)

Thus, in the speaking and perhaps in the unvoiced writing of the expression *Liahona* (**lyhwʾn[/h]*), it is possible to both hear and see an inquiry, “To Yahweh, whither?” but perhaps more particularly an imperative, “To Yahweh, look!”—that is, “Look to the Lord!” or “Look to God!” The latter imperative phrase actually works as a response to the former question. Beyond the important issue of knowing whither the family should go from the compass, Nephi comprehended that receiving ongoing revelation involved constant looking to Yahweh (or having faith in Christ).

“They Did Not Look unto the Lord”

Nephi emphasizes to his audience the importance of looking to Yahweh just prior to his description of the finding of the *Liahona* (see 1 Nephi 15). The failure of some of the Lehwite-Ishmaelite party to look to the Lord constitutes one of the major reasons why the family suffered after finding the *Liahona* and why it ceased to work when things might have gone otherwise.

The *Liahona* was not merely a compass as we understand that term today. The Hebrew term may have been *mēhûgâ*, “a circle-instrument” or “compass”—that is, a device for making circles (compare Isaiah 44:13).²⁰ It was a tangible object through which the Lord gave revelation to its possessor through faith, or as Elder David A.

Bednar puts it, “The director was a physical instrument that served as an outward indicator of their inner spiritual standing before God. It worked according to the principles of faith and diligence.”²¹ In addition to its apparent function as a kind of director, it was an oracular device through which one could inquire, like the Urim and Thummim or interpreters. Thus, Nephi’s first allusion to the Liahona may be in 1 Nephi 10:19, where he describes the guidance of the Holy Ghost and avers “the course of *the Lord*²² [*yāhō*] is *one eternal round* [Hebrew *dôr* = “generation” (circular time), *dûr* = “circle, ball”]” (emphasis added throughout).

Perhaps more importantly, the Liahona constituted a means of focusing their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the first principle of the gospel and the first point in what Nephi termed in this same pericope (which describes the finding of the Liahona) “the very points of his [Christ’s] doctrine” (1 Nephi 15:14). The Lehites knew their standing before the Lord and the quality of the faith that they were exercising (or not exercising) in him by the degree to which the Liahona worked and guided them in the “way” or the “course” they should travel.²³

Just prior to the finding of the Liahona, Nephi chides Laman and Lemuel and perhaps others in the Lehite group for their failure to inquire of the Lord on account of their hardness of heart, or their lack of faith (see 1 Nephi 15:8–11), and states that because of their “being hard in their hearts . . . they did not *look* unto the *Lord* as they ought” (15:3). Nephi here gives us an equation: a lack of faith (in failing to inquire of the Lord) + hardness of heart = not looking to the Lord. Their failure to look unto the Lord was thus a failure to observe the first principle of the gospel, or doctrine of Christ.

The opposite of this equation is confirmed in Nephi’s subsequent reproving response to his brothers’ failure to inquire of the Lord: “Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said?—If ye will not harden your hearts, and *ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments*, surely these things shall be made known unto you” (1 Nephi 15:11). “Faith and diligence and heed” (1 Nephi 16:28) would be the precise formula for getting the

Liahona to function. Likewise, faith is the first step in activating the doctrine of Christ and the plan of salvation; diligence and heed are essential in keeping them activated. Nephi's use of the words "look unto the Lord" both foreshadow the finding of the Liahona as well as the problems that will arise for the family on account of their sometimes lacking faith.

"Look Upon the Ball" and "The Ways of the Lord": Finding the Liahona

After Nephi rebukes his brothers for failing to look to the Lord, he reports that the Lord commanded Lehi to depart from the valley of Lemuel in haste (see 1 Nephi 16:9). Lehi finds the Liahona the very next day: "And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment *he beheld upon the ground a round ball* of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way *whither* we should go into the wilderness" (16:10).

The first thing that Nephi says about the Liahona is that his father Lehi beheld it upon the ground. In other words, the very first action associated with the Liahona is looking or seeing. Nephi characterizes the Liahona as a "round ball," and "ball" becomes his preferred designation for it thereafter.²⁴ Nephi also notably mentions the two spindles, one of which "pointed *the way whither* we should go into the wilderness." Thus we see that both a verb denoting "beholding" or "looking" and an adverb rendered "whither" accompany the first description of the Liahona and its finding. Moreover, Nephi connects the Liahona, which "did give [them] understanding concerning *the ways* of the Lord" (1 Nephi 16:29) with "the way" (16:10, 15), an expression Nephi later equates with the doctrine of Christ (2 Nephi 31:21; compare Isaiah 30:21).²⁵

By all appearances, the journey undertaken with the Lord's directions given upon the Liahona begins well (see 1 Nephi 16:13–16). Nephi states, "And *we did follow the directions of the ball, which led us*

in the more fertile parts of the wilderness" (16:16). However, the family's ability to make appropriate use of the Liahona fails quickly when the bows of Laman and Lemuel lose their springs and when Nephi himself breaks his bow and they are left without a means of obtaining food (see 16:21). From 1 Nephi 16:20, 24, it is clear that hard-heartedness resulted in a failure to inquire of the Lord, even on Lehi's part.

Nephi's faithfulness subsequently helps restore his father's faithfulness (see 1 Nephi 16:23–24). To Nephi's question ("Whither shall I go to obtain food?") put to the Lord by Lehi, the voice of the Lord responds: "Look upon the ball, and behold the things [words] which are written" (16:26). There follows an emphasis on beholding, or looking at, the words (of Christ) written thereon: "And it came to pass that when my father beheld the things which were written upon the ball, he did fear and tremble exceedingly, and also my brethren and the sons of Ishmael and our wives. And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld the pointers which were in the ball, that they did work according to the **faith** and **diligence** and **heed** which we did give unto them" (16:27–28). Brant A. Gardner writes, "This is the first time that they ha[d] seen words on the spindles, or at least ha[d] seen a change in the words on the spindles."²⁶ Although conjectural, it is not impossible that the expression *Liahona* derives from the new writing that appeared on the ball at that time.

Nephi uses a triad of terms to describe what activated the Liahona: the pointers "did work according to the *faith* and *diligence* and *heed* which we did give unto them" (1 Nephi 16:28).²⁷ The family learned from that experience and subsequent experiences over the next seven years as they "tarried in the wilderness" that when "they were unfaithful" they would "not prosper nor progress in their journey" or "travel a direct course" but would be "driven back, and [incur] the displeasure of God upon them" (Alma 37:42; Mosiah 1:17). In other words, it was not enough for them to just mechanically follow the directions on the Liahona, but they needed to give diligence and heed to the pointers and what was written. They needed to seek to know the mysteries of God contained in the textual directions that

had and would be given them and to consistently apply them (1 Nephi 2:16; 16:28; Alma 7:26; 12:9; 21:23; 49:30). Faith and faithfulness unto salvation consists in looking to the Lord and living thereby, or in the language of Deuteronomy, “man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live” (Deuteronomy 8:3; see Matthew 4:4; Doctrine and Covenants 84:44; 98:11). Nephi took the Liahona with him and used it to obtain the revelation that he needed to find the food that would prevent the family from physically perishing in the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:30–32), but it would be up to every member of the Lehi party to look to the Lord with such faith as to not perish spiritually (2 Nephi 2:5).

“I Did Look unto My God”: The Liahona on the Great Deep

Nephi describes another major event prior to the Lehiites’ arrival in the promised land that demonstrated a failure on the part of much of the family to look to the Lord as they should have. Once they had set sail from Bountiful, it was not long before Laman’s and Lemuel’s hard-heartedness—taking the form of physical and emotional abuse—caused “the compass, *which had been prepared of the Lord,*” to “cease to work,” and thus “they knew not whither they should steer the ship” and were “driven back” (1 Nephi 18:12–13). When Nephi states that the Lord allowed his brothers’ abuse because he intended to “show forth his power unto the fulfilling of his [the Lord’s] word which he had spoken against the wicked” (18:11), he consciously frames this episode in terms of his exchange with his brothers in 1 Nephi 15:2–16:4. Nephi there averred that they “did not look unto the Lord as they ought” (1 Nephi 15:3). They had again ceased to look to the Lord, whereupon the Liahona “did cease to work” (1 Nephi 18:12). The phrase “prepared of the Lord [*iaho* = Yahweh]” perhaps alludes to the unmentioned expression *Liahona*.²⁸ The words “they knew not *whither* they should steer the ship” also may allude to the name.

On the other hand, Nephi here asserts that he “did *look unto* [his *God*” in spite of the harsh treatment of his brothers (1 Nephi 18:16), another apparent allusion to the expression *Liahona*. He looked and obtained divine direction as when he looked upon the ball in 1 Nephi 16:26: “And it came to pass after they had loosed me, behold, I took the compass, and it did work *whither* I desired it. And it came to pass that I *prayed unto the Lord*; and after I had prayed the winds did cease, and the storm did cease, and there was a great calm” (18:21). Nephi’s looking unto his God involves, first, his taking the Liahona, which then “work[ed] *whither* [he] desired it.” *Desire* here probably refers to his inquiring or asking through it as an oracular device (compare Alma 16:5). Second, Nephi prays unto the Lord, and his prayer secures a change in the weather so that the family is able to travel upon the waters according to the directions given upon the Liahona.²⁹

“They Did Not Prosper nor Progress” (Mosiah 1:16–17)

There are several strong indications in the Book of Mormon text that the Lehiters’ prospering during their journey to the promised land required not only following divine directions on a ball or looking at the Liahona as a physical object, but also looking to God with faith, diligence, and heed. Moreover, the text gives clear hints that the party’s journey was greatly prolonged by a failure to look to God. The Liahona ceased to work for them when they forgot to look to the Lord and obey his word and doctrine.

Following King Benjamin’s final recorded *paraenesis* (religious advice or counsel) to his three sons and prior to his farewell speech and his son Mosiah’s ascension to the throne, King Benjamin gave Mosiah some additional instructions regarding the Liahona as one of several royal heirlooms (Mosiah 1:16–17). Mormon’s summary offers some insight into the Lehiters’ earlier struggle in the wilderness.

S. Kent Brown maintains that it took less than a year for the Lehite party to travel from the valley of Lemuel, where the marriages

with Ishmael's family took place, to Nahom, as suggested by Nephi's mention of the first births of children to members of the party.³⁰ Nephi informs us that from Nahom, the Lehite party turned nearly due east from that time forth: "And it came to pass that we did again take our journey in the wilderness; and we did travel nearly eastward from that time forth. And *we did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness*; and our women did bear children in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 17:1). It must have taken the party considerably longer to cross the Rub ' al-Khali ("the empty quarter") of the Arabian peninsula.

Nephi covers the entire time span between Nahom and Bountiful—perhaps seven of their eight-year sojourn—in four verses (1 Nephi 17:1–4). Lehi later describes this time period as "the days of my tribulation in the wilderness" (2 Nephi 2:1) and tells his son Joseph that he was "born in the wilderness of mine afflictions; yea, in the days of my greatest sorrow did thy mother bear thee" (2 Nephi 3:1). Brown believes that a major key to the time puzzle is Nephi's use of the term *sojourn* in 1 Nephi 17:3–4, a term which in the Hebrew Bible "often refers to servile relationships."³¹ The Hebrew verb *gwr*, a denominative verb formed from the noun *gēr* ("protected citizen, stranger," or resident alien), had the developed sense of "dwell[ing] as alien and dependent."³² As sojourners,³³ during this stage of their journey "they did not prosper or progress" (Mosiah 1:17).

Mosiah chapter 1 records King Benjamin's paraenesis to his sons Mosiah, Helaman, and Helorum, and then subsequently to just Mosiah (his heir). Mormon summarizes the content of Benjamin's instructions to Mosiah regarding the sacred heirlooms, including the "ball or director, which led our fathers through the wilderness, which was prepared by the hand of the Lord that thereby they might be led, every one according to the heed and diligence which they *gave unto him*" (Mosiah 1:16).

Mormon's expression "prepared by the hand of the Lord [*yhwh*]" seems to again play on or allude to the *-iāhō-* element in *Liahona*. Mormon here, in addition to summarizing or paraphrasing King

Benjamin, uses language that alludes to Nephi's explanation of how the Liahona functioned: "they [the pointers/spindles] did work according to the *faith* and *diligence* and *heed* which we did give unto them" (1 Nephi 16:28). Note how Benjamin or Mormon emphatically changes the pronominal phrase from "unto them" to "unto him," seemingly in recognition of the fact that it was not really pointers or spindles to which Lehi and his family were giving faith and diligence and heed but to the Lord himself—to Yahweh (*lě + yāhō = Liāhō-*). In other words, it was not simply the pointers or spindles to which the family needed to look, but to the Lord himself, just as it was not merely to a bronze serpent on a pole that the Israelites in the wilderness were to look to, but to Jehovah himself.

We note too Mormon's statement in Mosiah 1:17 "as they [Nephi and his family] were unfaithful"—that is, to the degree that they did not exercise faith, the first principle of the gospel—they "did not prosper nor progress in their journey." Repentance, baptism (and the sacrament), and receiving the Holy Ghost as a constant companion are the means whereby the Lord has prepared the way for us to progress toward eternal life and not stand condemned.

"Look to God and Live": The Paronomastic Inclusio of Alma 37:38–47

The conclusion of Alma's paraenesis to his son and spiritual heir, Helaman (Alma 37:38–47), unquestionably represents a distinct literary unit within Alma's larger paraenesis (Alma 36–37) and is similar in content to Benjamin's paraenesis to his son and heir, Mosiah, although the latter is preserved for us only in abridged form. In his charge to Helaman, Alma mentions the Liahona last of all, and this placement emphasizes the importance of Alma's counsel regarding the Liahona.

Although the structure of any text can be diagrammed in any number of ways, I believe Alma 37:38–47 exhibits a remarkable degree of chiasmity, as Stan Spencer has recently demonstrated.³⁴

Rather than repeat his arguments here, I will simply note that Alma 37:38–39 and Alma 37:46–47 (Spencer’s A-B and B’-A’ elements) constitute an inclusio—a bracketing or envelope figure—that demarcates Alma 37:38–47 as a distinct textual unit:³⁵

Alma 37:38–39 (opening bracket)

And now, my son, I have somewhat to say concerning the thing which our fathers call a ball, or director—or our fathers called it *Liahona*, which is, being interpreted, a compass; and *the Lord* prepared it. And behold, there cannot any man work after the manner of so curious a workmanship. And behold, *it was prepared to show* unto our fathers *the course which they should travel in the wilderness*.

Alma 37:46–47 (closing bracket)

O my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of *the way*; for so was it with our fathers; for *so was it prepared for them, that if they would look they might live*; even so it is with us. *The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever*. And now, my son, see that ye take care of these sacred things, yea, see that ye *look to God and live*. Go unto this people and declare the word, and be sober. My son, farewell.

I further wish to suggest here that the phrase “look to God and live” specifically corresponds to the expression *Liahona* and constitutes a play on that word. In transliterated form on Mormon’s plates, *Liahona*—if my thesis is correct—amounts to “to Yahweh, look!” (see discussion on pp. 277–79, herein). Alma’s declaration “look to God” in Alma 37:47 reverses the syntactic order of the elements in *Liahona*, this declaration appearing appropriately at the end of a long chiasmic structure and as part of the closing bracket of an inclusio. In Alma 37:38, the phrase “and the Lord [Yhwh] prepared it” plays on *-iāhō-* in *Liahona*, as do the phrases “prepared of the Lord,” “prepared for my father by the hand of the Lord,” and “prepared by the hand of the Lord” elsewhere (1 Nephi 18:12; 2 Nephi 5:12; Mosiah 1:16). The threefold repetition of “look” in the closing bracket (Alma 37:46–47), in concert with “show” in the opening bracket (Alma 37:39) and later

(Alma 37:41), gives especial emphasis to the -[ʼa]na (=ʼi nw/anau-) element in *Liahona*.

Moreover, seeing how Alma uses the *Liahona*—and its meaning “to Yahweh, look!”—to teach Nephi’s doctrine of Christ helps us to better appreciate the quality of Alma’s fatherly paraenesis here and why Mormon took pains to include it. The word *way* occurs three times within Alma 37:38–47, and *course* occurs six times. It should be noted that the terms *way* and *course*, as Alma uses them, do not refer just to Lehi’s family’s journey, but also in a typological way to the words, or doctrine of Christ, which “point[s] unto [us] a straight course” to the “far better land of promise” (Alma 37:44–45; compare especially 1 Nephi 16:29).

One can be taught the way—which Nephi defines as faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, reception (and retention) of the Holy Ghost, and enduring in faith, hope, and charity to the end—and still fail to fully follow the path or look to God. To truly look to God and live must ultimately mean continually having faith, repenting, receiving all the saving ordinances, living one’s life in such a way as to eventually be worthy to see God, and then having him “unveil his face” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:68) and yet live.³⁶ Jesus Christ commands us, “Follow thou me” (2 Nephi 31:10; compare John 21:22), which means learning to “look unto [him] in every thought” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:36). In the language of Isaiah, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else” (Isaiah 45:22).

“As You Have Commenced in Your Youth to Look to the Lord”

In his paraenetic counsel to Shiblon, Alma invokes the lesson of the *Liahona* without obscuring the entire typology: “And now, my son, I trust that I shall have great joy in you, because of *your steadiness and your faithfulness unto God*; for as you have *commenced in your youth to look to the Lord your God*, even so I hope that you

will continue in keeping his commandments; for blessed is he that endureth to the end" (Alma 38:2). Alma commends Shiblon's having commenced to look to the Lord with a view to the end result: the blessed state of those who continue in keeping his commandments (compare Mosiah 2:41).

Commencing to look to the Lord is equivalent to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the first principle of the gospel and the first point of Nephi's doctrine of Christ. The blessed state mentioned by Alma is equivalent to salvation in the kingdom of God, or eternal life, the sixth and final point in Nephi's doctrine of Christ. Alma's use of the statement "he that endureth to the end" confirms that he has the doctrine of Christ in mind. Shiblon's steadiness and faithfulness unto God consisted in his continuing to keep the Lord's commandments after he had commenced to look to the Lord. In other words, he was enduring to the end precisely as Nephi outlined in 2 Nephi 31:20.

Additionally, Shiblon's steadiness and faithfulness to God recall the faithfulness and diligence and heed that were needed to make the pointers of the Liahona work in giving continuous revelation like the Holy Ghost. Shiblon looked to the Lord not just once but continually, just as he had commenced. Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and their families may have physically survived the journey to the promised land, but they did not look to the Lord, nor did they continuously keep the commandments (see 1 Nephi 15:3; 2 Nephi 5:1-4). Thus they did not endure to the end in the most meaningful sense of that statement and did not receive the contingent blessings (compare Doctrine and Covenants 130:20-21). They did not qualify for Lehi's first blessing (see 2 Nephi 1:18-29), they did not "[live] after the manner of happiness" (2 Nephi 5:27), nor did they hear the declaration of the Father "ye shall have eternal life" (2 Nephi 31:20). Their lives stand as types of unfulfilled potential, the Lord's gifts and conditional promises remaining unreceived.

“Look unto Me, and Endure to the End, and Ye Shall Live”

As part of his postresurrection ministry among the assembled Nephites and Lamanites at the temple in the land Bountiful, Jesus gave numerous instructions and commandments. Those commandments included the following: “Behold, I am the law, and the light. *Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life*” (3 Nephi 15:9).

Kristian Heal has identified this statement as having reference to both the Liahona and the brazen serpent: “Christ’s use of the words look and live . . . suggests a connection back to the stories of the brazen serpent and the Liahona and points to Jesus as the true type adumbrated in each.”³⁷ Jesus’s Israelite-Lehite audience at the temple would have been familiar with both these stories. Any of them familiar with the meaning of Liahona would have especially appreciated Jesus’s identification of himself with that type. Here again we see a meristic invocation of the doctrine of Christ. Jesus’s command “look unto me” includes having faith in him, faith unto repentance, and the first ordinances of the gospel (see Alma 34:15–17; Ether 12:27; Moroni 7:33–34; Doctrine and Covenants 33:12). The end result will be that they will live with “that life which is eternal” (Helaman 8:15; compare brazen serpent), or, “thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20). Just as the Lehites obtained the promised land and lived in it by continually looking to God, who gave them the word of Christ, or doctrine of Christ, on the Liahona, we only inherit that far better land of promise by looking to Christ and enduring to the end in faith, hope, and charity.

Conclusion

Nephi’s early descriptions of the Liahona emphasize the importance of looking, especially to the Lord, in addition to using the device to find whither they should go. A careful reading of these texts suggests

that it was not enough for the Lehites to ask “whither?” (Hebrew *ʾānā*) and look upon the ball to be guided by the Lord, but they also needed to look (*ʾi-nw > anau*) to him. More to the point, they needed to look to the Lord “in every thought” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:36).

Although we do not know exactly what was written on the Liahona in 1 Nephi 16, it may be that the new writing that caused Lehi and the family to tremble was a command to look to Yahweh in order to live. This would have given the ball, compass, or director through which they had become accustomed to asking “whither?” striking new significance: “To Yahweh, look!” It would also explain Nephi’s and Alma’s linking the Liahona to “the way,” or the doctrine of Christ. Although any proposed etymology for *Liahona*, in the final analysis, constitutes an exercise in assessing probabilities and possibilities and not certainties (the results of which are always subject to revision), the proposal here makes linguistic sense and fits well in the context of what both Nephi and Alma wrote regarding the Liahona, its symbolism, and its use.

Thus, the expression *Liahona*—“to Yahweh, look!”—would have been a stark reminder of the fate that befell many Israelites in the wilderness who failed to look to Yahweh (of whom the brazen serpent was merely a type) and thus live. Lehi and his family at several points in their journey similarly stood in danger of perishing in the wilderness because of the easiness of the way. They were not to merely look or gaze at the Liahona any more than the Israelites were to merely gaze at the brazen serpent: both the Liahona and the serpent represented the Lord, the Savior Jesus Christ himself. It was to him the Lehites were to look. It is to Jehovah (*liāhō*) that we are still to look today. “Look to God and live” (Alma 37:47), or “Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live” (3 Nephi 15:9). Such is the doctrine of Christ (see John 3:3–18; 2 Nephi 31–32).

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Notes

1. Sacred heirlooms presumably included the sword of Laban and the seer stones originally given to the brother of Jared. In early editions of the Book of Mormon, these sacred things were called “interpreters” (Mosiah 8:13, 19; 28:20; Ether 4:5) and “directors” (Alma 37:21, 24). In the 1920 edition, “directors” was changed to “interpreters” for the sake of consistency and to avoid possible confusion with the Liahona. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Four: Alma 21–55* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 2359–61.
2. Brant Gardner writes, “[Liahona] is not in Nephi’s records, so it must appear either in the book of Lehi or Nephi’s large plates.” Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:518.
3. See Jonathan Curci, “Liahona: ‘The Direction of the Lord’: An Etymological Explanation,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 60–67.
4. For in-depth discussions on the doctrine of Christ, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” *BYU Studies* 31 (Summer 1991): 31–50; Reynolds, “The True Points of My Doctrine,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 26–56; Reynolds, “How to Come unto Christ,” *Ensign*, September 1992, 7–13; and Reynolds, “The Gospel according to Nephi: An Essay on 2 Nephi 31,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 51–75.
5. Kristian S. Heal, “Look to God and Live,” *Insights* 26, no. 2 (2006): 2–3, 6.
6. For a summary of some of the major proposals for the meaning of *Liahona* thus far, see *Book of Mormon Onomasticon*, s.v. “Liahona,” <https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/>.
7. See Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 22.
8. See George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjödahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1959), 4:178–79.

9. Hugh W. Nibley, "The Liahona's Cousins," *Improvement Era*, February 1961, 110. See also Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 479–80.
10. Curci, "Direction of the Lord," 60–67, 97–98.
11. For examples of *whither* used in the Bible, see Genesis 16:8; 32:17 (MT 18); 37:30; Deuteronomy 1:26–28; Joshua 2:5; Ruth 2:19; 1 Samuel 10:14; 1 Kings 2:36, 42; 2 Kings 5:25; Nehemiah 2:16; and Isaiah 10:3. See especially 2 Samuel 1:1; compare Psalm 139:7 and Ezekiel 21:21 (MT 21:26).
12. For the main lexical entries, see Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1971), 2:218.
13. John Gee notes that "in Dynasty 19 a new attempt is made to distinguish *r* and *l* graphically, although this does not become standardized until Demotic." John Gee, *An Outline of Egyptian Grammar* (unpublished, 2006), 7.
14. See Gee, *Outline of Egyptian Grammar*, 7, and Jaroslav Černý, ed., *Coptic Etymological Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 31.
15. Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 86, 89. Hysteron proteron = "latter before" or "the latter (in place of) the former." Edward Hirsch, *A Poet's Glossary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 291.
16. Some examples of lengthier fronted adverbial phrases include Genesis 2:16b ("of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat"); 2:17 ("But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it"); Isaiah 62:6a; and Joel 2:29 (MT 3:2).
17. See Erman and Grapow, *Wörterbuch*, 2:218; and Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999), 127.
18. See Černý, *Coptic Etymological Dictionary*, 113.
19. Older Hebrew writing tended to be "defective" rather than "full" (*plēnē*), that is, lacking additional written *waws* (*w/o/u*), *yods* (*y/i*) and *hes* (*h/long vowel*) to guide pronunciation.
20. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996),

294. The noun *mēhûgâ* derives from the verb *hûg*, which means to “draw a circle.”
21. David A. Bednar, “That We May Always Have His Spirit to Be with Us,” *Ensign*, May 2006, 30.
22. I have used additional underlining when one of the etymological elements of *Liahona* occurs.
23. “The way” is a phrase that Nephi also uses to describe the doctrine of Christ; see 2 Nephi 31:20–21, and compare Isaiah 30:21. “Course” is used in 1 Nephi 16:33 and is then quoted by Alma in Alma 37:39, 42.
24. The Nephite word for “ball” could have possibly been the Egyptian *hm3* or Hebrew *dâr* (compare Isaiah 22:18; Arabic *daur*). After his first mention of the Liahona as a “round ball” in 1 Nephi 16:10, Nephi calls it a “ball” in 1 Nephi 16:16, 26–28, 30; and 2 Nephi 5:12. He calls it a “compass” in 1 Nephi 18:12, 21 and 2 Nephi 5:12.
25. See note 23.
26. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:285.
27. See Robert E. Wells, “The Liahona Triad,” in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 80–96.
28. See Stan Spencer, “Reflections of Urim: Hebrew Poetry Sheds Light on the Directors-Interpreters Mystery,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 192n8.
29. Nephi makes his final mention of the Liahona amid his description of his people’s final separation from the Lamanites. He describes it there as “the ball, or compass, which was prepared for my father by the hand of the Lord, according to that which is written” (2 Nephi 5:12). This description probably constitutes a wordplay on the *-iâhò-* element in the expression, echoing 1 Nephi 18:12. Compare Spencer, “Reflections of Urim,” 192n8. Between Nephi’s time and King Benjamin’s time, there are virtually no explicit mentions of the Liahona on the small plates. However, the Liahona remained an important Nephite religious symbol. For example, Jacob seems to describe the law of Moses—with all of its types and shadows of Jesus

- Christ—in terms of the Liahona, another type and shadow of Christ: “it [the law of Moses] pointing our souls to him” (Jacob 4:5).
30. S. Kent Brown, “A Case for Lehi’s Bondage in Arabia,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997): 206–8.
 31. Brown, “Case for Lehi’s Bondage,” 208–10.
 32. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 184, 201.
 33. Compare especially Exodus 12:40. Compare also, for example, Genesis 12:10; Deuteronomy 26:5; Psalm 105:23; Isaiah 52:4.
 34. Spencer, “Reflections of Urim,” 187–207.
 35. For information on inclusios, see Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 323–25.
 36. Scriptural references to being worthy to see God include Matthew 5:8, 3 Nephi 12:8, and Doctrine and Covenants 97:16. Compare 2 Nephi 9:4 and Moses 5:10.
 37. Heal, “Look to God and Live,” 6.