



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 26 | Number 2

Article 3

January 2006

“Look to God and Live”

Kristian S. Heal

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Heal, Kristian S. (2006) "“Look to God and Live”," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 26: No. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol26/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

“Look to God and Live”

Near the end of the children of Israel’s journey to the promised land following their miraculous escape from Egypt, they once again began to complain against the Lord and against Moses. As a result of this sin, the Lord sent “fiery serpents” among them (Numbers 21:6). Faced with physical death, the people went to Moses, confessed their sins, and entreated him to pray to the Lord to take the serpents away. However, the serpents were not taken away as requested. Instead, in what may have seemed an expression of deep irony—but was in reality a sacred symbol—

Moses was instructed to raise up a brass serpent as the means of healing those bitten. This Moses did: “And it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived. And the children of Israel set forward” (Numbers 21:9–10). There ends the story in the Bible account.

When the story is first introduced in the Book of Mormon, however, it is augmented by an exegetical narrative expansion that is not contained in our King James Bible (of course, it is also not impossible that this expanded version of the story was derived from the brass plates). Two Book of Mormon passages in particular (1 Nephi 17 and Alma 33) illustrate this expansion.

Nephi is the first Book of Mormon prophet to discuss the brazen serpent. In a great sermon that rebukes his older brothers for opposing him in building a ship as the Lord had commanded, Nephi recounts the history of Israel’s exodus from Egypt (1 Nephi 17:23–47). Nephi explicitly

identifies his brothers with the obdurate Israelites who were straitened in the wilderness by the fiery serpents “because of their iniquity” (1 Nephi 17:41). Nephi continues, “And after they [the Israelites] were bitten he [the Lord] prepared a way that they might be healed; and the labor which they had to perform was to look” (1 Nephi 17:41).

From the Numbers account of this story, we could reasonably assume that once the children of Israel were provided with a means to be healed from the fiery serpents’ bites, all would have looked and been saved. It is clear from Nephi’s account, however, that this was not the case: “And because of the simpleness of the way,

or the easiness of it, there were many who perished” (1 Nephi 17:41). Surprisingly, although the means of salvation was placed in their midst, there were still “many” who did not look, because it seemed too simple.

Alma employs the expanded version of the story of the brazen serpent in his sermon to the downtrodden Zoramites, most likely drawing from Nephi’s record. He first lays out before them the way to salvation—faith in the Savior—through his comparison of faith to a seed and his subsequent teachings (Alma 32–33). Alma next

warns the Zoramites that many of the children of Israel, who similarly had salvation—a type of Christ in the form of the brazen serpent—laid out before them, nevertheless perished (Alma 33:19–22). He explains, “But there were many who were so hardened that they would not look, therefore they perished. Now the reason they would not look is because they did not believe that it would heal them” (Alma 33:20).



Moses and the Brazen Serpent, engraving by Gustave Doré

Hoping that the Zoramites will find the story applicable to their lives, Alma asks, “O my brethren, if ye could be healed by merely casting about your eyes that ye might be healed, would ye not behold quickly, or would ye rather harden your hearts in unbelief, and be slothful, that ye would not cast about your eyes, that ye might perish?” (Alma 33:21).

The power of the story of the fiery serpents is multiplied when we learn from the Book of Mormon text that many perished because they refused to look upon the brazen serpent. With this additional detail, the story provides not only

a type of Christ raised up as Savior but also a challenge for all people to choose Christ through simple obedience to his word.

The brazen serpent is not the only type of Christ adopted by Alma. In counseling his son Helaman (see Alma 36–37), Alma discusses Nephi’s account of his journey in the wilderness and the gift of the Liahona. Alma points out that the Liahona worked “according to . . . faith” (Alma 37:40) and warns Helaman not to “be slothful because of the easiness of the way” (Alma 37:46) as Laman and Lemuel had been. Alma’s

continued on page 6

Nibley Fellowship

Each year at this time we remind graduate students about the Nibley Fellowship Program and its application deadline. Named in honor of the late eminent Latter-day Saint scholar Hugh Nibley, this program provides financial aid to students enrolled in accredited PhD programs in areas of study directly related to the work and mission of the Maxwell Institute, particularly work done under the name of FARMS—studies of the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Old and New Testaments, early Christianity, ancient temples, and related subjects. Applicants cannot be employed at the Institute or be related to an Institute employee.

Those interested in applying for the first time or who wish to renew their fellowships for the 2006–2007 academic year must do so by **30 June 2006**. To obtain guidelines and an application form, contact M. Gerald Bradford, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 200 WAIH, Provo, UT 84602 (telephone: 801-422-8619; e-mail: bradfordmg@aol.com).

The Maxwell Institute awarded Nibley Fellowships to 17 graduate students for the 2005–2006 academic year.

Continuing Nibley Fellows are **Sharon Mar Adams**, biblical interpretation, philosophy, theology, Department of Religious and Theological Studies, Iliff School of Theology, University of Denver; **Jared William Anderson**, history of

the Bible, gospel traditions, textual criticism, Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; **Mindy J. Anderson**, Hebrew Bible, Department of Theological Studies, Harvard Divinity School; **Lincoln H. Blumell**, early Christianity, Department and Centre for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto; **David E. Bokovoy**, Hebrew Bible, Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, Brandeis University; **David Calabro**, Hebrew Bible, ancient Near East, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago; **Cory Daniel Crawford**, Hebrew Bible, preexilic history, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University; **Matthew J. Grey**, Jewish studies, Oriental Institute, Oxford University; **Brent James Schmidt**, classics, ancient history, late antiquity, Department of Classics, University of Colorado, Boulder; **Thomas Benjamin Spackman**, comparative Semitics, Hebrew Bible, Arabic, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago; **Valerie Triplet-Hitoto**, Second Temple period, Department of Religious Sciences, École Pratique des Hautes Études, La Sorbonne, Paris; and **Mark Alan Wright**, Mesoamerican archaeology, Maya religion and epigraphy, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside.

New Nibley Fellows are **Carl Joseph Cranney**, New Testament, history of Christianity, Department of Biblical Studies, Yale Divinity

continued on page 6

“Look to God” cont. from page 3

wording seems to indicate that he saw the Liahona as a complementary type to the brazen serpent. For example, the only instances in the Book of Mormon of the word *slothful* occur in Alma’s sermons about the brazen serpent and the Liahona (compare Alma 37:41, 43, 46; Alma 33:21). The phrase “easiness of the way” is also used only in connection with the story of the Liahona and the story of the brazen serpent (1 Nephi 17:41; Alma 37:46), a fact that provides another link between Nephi’s record and Alma’s instruction to his son. Similarly, the combination of the words *look* and *live* is used in the Book of Mormon almost exclusively in passages about the Liahona or the brazen serpent (compare Numbers 21:8; Alma 33:19; Alma 37:46–47; Helaman 8:15), with only one exception.

However, the exception is significant: during his sermon to the Nephite remnant, Jesus admonishes the congregation to “look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live” (3 Nephi 15:9). Christ’s use of the words *look* and *live* in this way 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. 📖

By Kristian S. Heal, director of CPART

Nibley Fellowship cont. from page 3

School; **Robert Garrett**, New Testament, early Christianity, Department of Theology, Loyola University, Chicago; **Cameron Gabe LaDuke**, Judaism of the Second Temple period, Department of Biblical Studies, Yale Divinity School; **Paul Derek Miller**, early Christianity, Department of Theology, Harvard Divinity School; and **Shirley (Shirl) Irene Wood**, biblical interpretation, New Testament, Iliff School of Theology, University of Denver. 📖

Insights

A Window on the Ancient World
Volume 26 | Number 2 | 2006

A Publication of the
Neal A. Maxwell
Institute for Religious Scholarship

Andrew C. Skinner *Executive Director*
M. Gerald Bradford *Associate Executive Director*
Alison V. P. Coultts *Assistant Executive Director*
S. Kent Brown *Director, FARMS*
Daniel C. Peterson *Director, METI*
Kristian Heal *Director, CPART*

Insights Staff

Don L. Bruggler, *Managing Editor*
Jacob D. Rawlins, *Production Coordinator*
Paula W. Hicken, *Layout Specialist*
Drew T. Robbins, *Editorial Intern*

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.

For more information

Brigham Young University, 200 WAIH, Provo, UT 84602
1-800-327-6715 (or 801-422-9229)
Web site: maxwellinstitute.byu.edu

To order publications

BYU Bookstore, Provo, UT 84602
1-800-253-2578
Web site: byubookstore.com
