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## And the One Pointed the Way: Issues of Interpretation and Translation Involving the Liahona

Author(s): Loren Spendlove

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Loren Spendlove

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# AND THE ONE POINTED THE WAY: ISSUES OF INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION INVOLVING THE LIAHONA

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Loren Spendlove

**Abstract:** *In describing the operation of the spindles in the Liahona, Nephi's statement that "the one pointed the way" in 1 Nephi 16:10 is frequently taken to mean that one of the two spindles indicated the direction to travel. However, Nephi's apparent use of the Hebrew word חַדָּחַד (ha'echad)<sup>1</sup> may imply a different mechanism in which the direction was being shown when both operated as one. If so, there may be added symbolism of unity and oneness inherent in Nephi's and Alma's descriptions of the Liahona. Additionally, I provide a detailed analysis of words and phrases used by Nephi and Alma to describe the Liahona which potentially reveal intriguing Hebrew wordplay in the text.*

After being instructed of the Lord to leave his camp in the valley of Lemuel and travel into the wilderness, Lehi "arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, and to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass." Nephi explained that "within the ball were two spindles, *and the one pointed the way* whither we should go into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 16:10). In this article I argue that readers of the Book of Mormon, and those responsible for translating it into languages other than English, have largely misconstrued a key phrase in this verse: *and the one pointed the way*.

In the eighth Article of Faith, Joseph Smith wrote: "We believe the Bible to be the word of God *as far as it is translated correctly*; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God." However,

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1. In this paper I use a phonetic style for the transliteration of Hebrew words into roman script.

contemporary issues arising from the process of translation and interpretation can also influence our understanding of doctrines and principles taught in the Book of Mormon. This is especially true for those who rely on foreign language translations of the Book of Mormon. Additionally, some Latter-day Saint authors have expressed the idea that the phrase “and *the one* pointed the way” in 1 Nephi 16:10 should be interpreted as “*one of them* pointed the way.”<sup>2</sup> For example, in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* we read:

Lehi found the Liahona, provided by the Lord (Alma 37:38), outside of his tent door while camping in the wilderness after leaving Jerusalem (1 Nephi 16:10). As his party traveled through the Arabian desert and across the ocean to the promised land, *one of the spindles* pointed the direction to travel.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, I checked four different foreign language translations of the Book of Mormon published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and all of them carried this same interpretation.<sup>4</sup> However, it is my opinion that the English text of the Book of Mormon and comparable biblical Hebrew grammar do not allow this interpretation.

It is important to emphasize that the language of Lehi’s and Nephi’s culture was Hebrew; it was the language of their daily lives, as it was for most living in and around Jerusalem before the Babylonian captivity. We learn from Nephi that the record which he kept consisted “of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2). While his record may have been written in an Egyptian script — if that is how we should interpret the phrase “language of the Egyptians” — it was definitely a “Jewish” record, since it represented the “the learning of the Jews.” My understanding of the phrase “language of the Egyptians” allows the outward form of the record to be written in an Egyptian

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2. Cleon Skousen wrote: “In a depression within this device [the Liahona] were two SPINDLES. *One* of them pointed the WAY they should go as they proceeded on their journey.” W. Cleon Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon*, vol. 1, *1 Nephi 1 to Jacob 7*, (Pleasant Grove, UT: Verity Publishing, Inc, 2016), 94, emphasis added.

3. *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), s.v. “Liahona,” 829–30, emphasis added.

4. Spanish: “una de las cuales marcaba el camino” (*one of which* marked the way); Portuguese: “e uma delas indicava-nos o caminho” (*and one of them* showed us the way); Italian: “e una indicava la direzione” (*and one* indicated the direction); French: “et l’une d’elles montrait la direction” (*and one of them* showed the direction).

script, but I believe the core of the record was still Jewish (Hebrew).<sup>5</sup> A book of literature, especially prophetic literature, should continue to bear the marks and linguistic characteristics of its source language. For example, Nephi’s long citations from Isaiah — even though he may have used an Egyptian script to record them — would most likely still have carried many if not most of the original Hebrew characteristics.

We know the Hebrew language was preserved among the Nephites down to the very end of their civilization (see Mormon 9:33). Mormon and Moroni knew Hebrew, and Moroni told us they would have preferred Hebrew over “reformed Egyptian” were it not for the extra space it required (see Mormon 9:32–33). In addition, Moroni told us that if they could have written their abridged record in Hebrew, there would have been “no imperfection in our record” (Mormon 9:33). I propose that this is either because many of their source documents were written in Hebrew rather than “reformed Egyptian” or because Mormon’s and Moroni’s primary language was Hebrew, and they would have found it easier to express their thoughts and ideas in Hebrew.

## Two Spindles

The Book of Mormon’s usage of “the one” in 1 Nephi 16:10 is unique in several ways. In this verse, we are told that “within the ball were two spindles, and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness.” In other words, Nephi informed us that there were two spindles inside the Liahona, but he seems to give us further information about only one of the two spindles: “the one pointed the way.” If *only one* pointed the way, what was the function of the other spindle?

In an attempt to resolve this question, I performed a thorough analysis of the Hebrew Bible for every instance where two elements (things or people) are mentioned together *and* where further details are

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5. “At least portions of this record [brass plates] were written in Egyptian, since knowledge of ‘the language of the Egyptians’ enabled Lehi, father of Nephi, to ‘read these engravings’ (Mosiah 1:2-4). But whether it was the Egyptian language or Hebrew written in Egyptian script is again not clear. Egyptian was widely used in Lehi’s day, but because poetic writings are skewed in translation, because prophetic writings were generally esteemed as sacred, and because Hebrew was the language of the Israelites in the seventh century BC, it would have been unusual for the writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah — substantially preserved on the brass plates (1 Ne. 5:13; 19:23) — to have been translated from Hebrew into a foreign tongue at this early date. Thus, Hebrew portions written in Hebrew script, Egyptian portions in Egyptian script, and Hebrew portions in Egyptian script are all possibilities.” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* s.v. “Book of Mormon Language,” 180.

provided for at least one of the two elements. Of the 79 occurrences I was able to identify, whenever additional details were given about one of the two elements, the second was also further elaborated. This observation held true in every case that I was able to identify. Below are some examples that demonstrate this discovery:

And of every living thing of all flesh you shall bring *two of every sort* into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be *male and female* (Genesis 6:19, KJV).

And the LORD sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were *two men* in one city; *the one rich*, and *the other poor* (2 Samuel 12:1 KJV).

And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between *two opinions? if the LORD be God* [opinion 1], follow him: but *if Baal* [opinion 2], then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. . . . Let them therefore give us *two bullocks*; and let them choose *one bullock for themselves*, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and *I will dress the other bullock*, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under (1 Kings 18:21, 23 KJV).

And I will feed the flock of slaughter, even you, O poor of the flock. And I took unto me *two staves; the one I called Beauty*, and *the other I called Bands*; and I fed the flock (Zechariah 11:7 KJV).

The same observation holds true for the Book of Mormon as well, except for our passage in 1 Nephi 16:10. Below are examples of the 14 occurrences that fit these criteria in the Book of Mormon:

And he said unto me: Behold there are save *two churches* only; *the one is the church of the Lamb of God*, and *the other is the church of the devil*; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to *the church of the Lamb of God* belongeth to that *great church*, which is *the mother of abominations*; and she is the whore of all the earth (1 Nephi 14:10).

And now, my father had begat *two sons* in the wilderness; *the elder was called Jacob* and *the younger Joseph* (1 Nephi 18:7).

No man can serve *two masters*; for either he will *hate the one* and *love the other*, or else *he will hold to the one* and *despise the other*. Ye cannot serve *God and Mammon* (3 Nephi 13:24).

And the country was divided; and there were *two kingdoms, the kingdom of Shule, and the kingdom of Cohor*, the son of Noah (Ether 7:20).

This is a significant detail. A plain reading of 1 Nephi 16:10 seems to describe the function of only one of the spindles without giving us any information about the function of the second spindle. However, of the 93 combined occurrences that I identified in the Bible and the Book of Mormon which mention two elements, and where additional details were given about *one* of the two, we are also given additional information about the *second* — except in 1 Nephi 16:10. As such, it seems unlikely that Nephi was giving us details about only one spindle while omitting details about the second. If this were the case, this verse would stand out as anomalous in the Hebrew Bible and in the Book of Mormon.

### **Both Spindles Pointed the Way**

Nephi told us that *both* spindles, or pointers, in the Liahona served a useful purpose, although he did not clarify what that purpose may have been: “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” (1 Nephi 16:28). On the other hand, Alma was much more clear about the purpose of the two spindles:

And it [the Liahona] did work for them according to their faith in God. Therefore if they had faith to believe that God could cause that *those spindles should point the way they should go*, behold, it was done. Therefore they had this miracle — and also many other miracles — wrought by the power of God day by day.” (Alma 37:40)

So while Nephi hinted at the operation of the two spindles, Alma appears to clarify that *both spindles* served to “point the way.” Alma’s choice of verbs in this verse, *point*, matches Nephi’s verb choice. Alma did not state that both pointers helped them discover the way or that both pointers gave them information about their path. Rather he added the detail that “those spindles” *pointed* the way. I propose that when Nephi wrote that “the one pointed the way” he was not trying to tell us that *only one* of the spindles functioned as a directional indicator. Rather, I believe that both spindles working in union — as one — pointed the way that



Lehi's party should travel in the wilderness. I will demonstrate below that Hebrew grammatical usage can also support this conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

### The One, or One of Them?

*Mother Hulda* is one of the lesser-known fairy tales written by the brothers Grimm. The story begins with the line “A widow had two daughters; *one* was pretty and industrious, *the other* was ugly and lazy.”<sup>7</sup> The sentence structure used to discuss these two daughters in the story — one was X, the other was Y — is standard English syntax. In Hebrew, however, the syntax for this type of comparison is very different. In Exodus 18 we are told of Moses' and Zipporah's two sons:

And her *two sons*; of which the name of *the one* was Gershom; for he said, I have been an alien in a strange land: And the name of *the other* was Eliezer; for the God of my father,

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6. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not publish a Book of Mormon in Hebrew. The most widely available translation of the Book of Mormon in Hebrew was published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ) in 1988. However, this translation contains serious flaws. For example, below I show the following: 1) the Latter-day Saint wording for a portion of Alma 37:40; 2) the equivalent RLDS Hebrew passage (Alma 17:74, the RLDS Book of Mormon uses a different system of chapters and verses); and, 3) my English translation of the RLDS Hebrew text:

1) “If they *had faith to believe that God could cause* that those spindles should point the way they should go.”

2) אם האמינו כי מחוגים אלה יורו להם את הדרך, שבה עליהם ללכת

3) “If they *believed* that those hands/spindles would teach/lead them the way they should go.”

Two issues arise with the RLDS Hebrew translation. First, the translators replaced the *italicized* phrase “had faith to believe that God could cause” with only one word — “believed.” Why did the Hebrew translators of the RLDS Book of Mormon edit this passage so drastically? The only reason I can imagine is that they wanted to remove God from the guiding process of the Liahona. Second, the RLDS Hebrew text seems to be a modern Hebrew, rather than biblical Hebrew, translation. For example, while the word מחוגים (*mechogim*) can mean “hands” or spindles in modern Hebrew, the word is unattested in the Hebrew Bible. A related word מחוגה (*mechugah*, both words are derived from the root ח-ו-ג) appears once in Isaiah 44:13, where it carries the meaning of “circle” or “compass,” but not “pointer.” In 1 Nephi 16:10 the RLDS Hebrew text used a different word for pointers: צירים (*tsirim*). This word principally means “hinges” in modern Hebrew, but can also mean “pointers.” The word is attested 12 times in the Bible (ambassador 4x; pang 3x; messenger 2x; pains 1x; hinge 1x; and sorrow 1x), but never as anything resembling a pointer.

7. J. L. C. and W. C. Grimm, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, (Hertsfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1993), 129, emphasis added.

said he, was mine help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh (Exodus 18:3–4 KJV).

The syntax of this verse differs from that of *Mother Hulda*. In the fairy tale the two daughters were enumerated as *one* and *the other*, while in this English translation of Exodus, the two sons are listed as *the one* and *the other*. The verse from Exodus demonstrates a slight but noticeable difference from standard English syntax.<sup>8</sup> I believe this difference is most likely due to syntactic borrowing from Hebrew. The Hebrew text and a word-for-word translation of Exodus 18:3–4 follow:

ואת שני בניה אשר שם האחד גרשם כי אמר גר הייתי בארץ נכריה.  
ושם האחד אליעזר כי־אלהי אבי בעזרי ויצלני מחרב פרעה.

And two sons of her that name *the one* Gershom because he said stranger I was in land foreign, and name *the one* Eliezer because God [of] my father in my help and rescuing me from sword [of] Pharaoh.

Although one can get a sense of the original meaning from the word-for-word translation into English, it is clumsy and awkward. Also, as shown in the word-for-word translation, rather than agreeing with the English syntax of *one* and *the other*, the Hebrew syntax in this verse uses *the one* and *the one*. In fact, the word *the one* (האחד *ha'echad*, or האחת *ha'achat*)<sup>9</sup> is frequently used in the Hebrew Bible, occurring more than 120 times. So Nephi's phrase "and *the one* pointed the way" is a reasonable replication of proper Hebrew syntax, but not good English grammar.<sup>10</sup> Our received

8. The grammatical departure from standard English syntax is that the verse in Exodus refers to the first son as *the one* rather than simply *one*.

9. In Hebrew grammar, the definite article ה (*hey*) can never exist on its own; it must be prefixed to a noun. For example, the English phrase "the man" would be expressed as only one word in Hebrew: האיִשׁ (*ha'ish*).

10. A cursory examination indicated that the phrase "the one" could bear the meaning "one of them" in Early Modern English (EmodE), which Royal Skousen and Stanford Carmack have proposed is present in much of the English of the Book of Mormon. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), xx, xxxvii–xxxix and Stanford Carmack, "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar, *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 11 (2014): 209–62; <https://interpreterfoundation.org/a-look-at-some-nonstandard-book-of-mormon-grammar/>. When asked about the use of phrases such as "and the one," Stanford Carmack wrote: "In the following passage, we first read 'the one' where it quite clearly means one of the two, but without any later reference to the other: '... they found meanes to refresh themfelues, and the one returned, neere fraught with

English translation has led many to misunderstand “the one” to mean “one of them,” especially in translations into other languages.

Nearly every occurrence of the phrase “one of them” in English Bible translations — with only a few exceptions<sup>11</sup> — derives from the Hebrew phrase “one from them” (אחד/אחת מהם/מהנה) *echad/achat mehem/mehenah*.<sup>12</sup> The same can be said for “one of us” or “one of you (plural).” Hebrew syntax in these cases would be “one from X,” where X is a plural pronoun. Below are some examples in the Bible of the phrase “one of us/you/them”:

And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become *as one of us*, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever. (Genesis 3:22 KJV)

ויאמר יהוה אלהים הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע ועתה פן־ישלח ידו ולקח גם מעץ החיים ואכל וחי לעלם.

Send *one of you*, and let him fetch your brother, and ye shall be kept in prison, that your words may be proved, whether there be any truth in you: or else by the life of Pharaoh surely ye are spies. (Genesis 42:16 KJV)

שלחו מכם אחד ויקח את־אחיכם ואתם האסרו ויבחנו דבריכם האמת אתכם ואם־לא חי פרעה כי מרגלים אתם.

He keepeth all his bones: not *one of them* is broken. (Psalm 34:20 KJV)

שמר כל־עצמותיו אחת מהנה לא נשברה

Go and tell David, saying, Thus saith the LORD, I offer thee three things: choose thee *one of them*, that I may do it unto thee. (1 Chronicles 21:10 KJV)

לך ודברת אל־דויד לאמר כה אמר יהוה שלוש אני נטה עליך בחר־לך אחת מהנה ואעשה־לך.

As Table 1 shows, the phrase “one of us/you/them” is most commonly expressed in Hebrew as “one from X” (where X is a personal pronoun),” rather than “the one.”

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fish and traine, within two moneths after.” Stanford Carmack, personal email communication to author, October 1, 2020.

11. For example, see Genesis 42:27.

12. As with the definite article ה (*hey*), the word *from* (מן or מ) must be prefixed to a noun. The masculine form of “one of them” is אחד מהם/מהנה (*echad mehem/mehenah*), while the feminine is אחת מהם/מהנה (*achat mehem/mehenah*).

Table 1

Verse	English Translation	Hebrew	English Transliteration
Genesis 3:22	as one of us	כֶּאֶחָד מִמֶּנּוּ	as one from us
Genesis 42:16	one of you	מִכֶּם אֶחָד	from you (plural) one <sup>13</sup>
Psalms 34:20	one of them	אֶחָד מֵהֵנָּה	one from them
1 Chronicles 21:10	one of them	אֶחָד מֵהֵנָּה	one from them

### The Definite Article ה (hey)

So “the one” (הָאֶחָד *ha’echad*) is a common biblical Hebrew expression, but it is not a common way of communicating the idea “one of them.” So what can “the one” (הָאֶחָד *ha’echad*) mean in 1 Nephi 16:10? Before this can be answered we need a short discussion about Hebrew grammar as it relates to the definite article, ה (hey):

Hebrew has a definite article (various forms of *ha*), but its use is not the same as the use of the English direct article, so translators cannot simply rely on a word-for-word translation of Hebrew articles into English. For example, where Hebrew would say “he put the hand in the pocket,” English would say “he put his hand in his pocket.”<sup>14</sup>

The example above is fairly straightforward. In this case “the hand” would be simply הַיָּד (*ha’yad*) in Hebrew. However, a unique dimension of Hebrew grammar occurs when a noun + adjective combination is used, and the noun is definite.<sup>15</sup> In this situation, both the noun and the adjective are preceded by the definite article. For example, in describing the palace that Solomon built for himself we read:

And there were four undersetters to the four corners of *one base*: and the undersetters were of the very base itself.  
(1 Kings 7:34 KJV)

וְאַרְבַּע כְּתֻפּוֹת אֶל אַרְבַּע פְּנוֹת הַמִּכְנָה הָאֶחָד מִן־הַמִּכְנָה כְּתֻפֵּיהָ

13. In Genesis 42:16 the phrase מִכֶּם אֶחָד (*michem echad*) is literally “from you (plural) one,” but it carries the same meaning as מִכֶּם אֶחָד (*echad michem*), or “one from you (plural).” The word order does not alter the meaning.

14. John F. Brug, *Biblical Grammar: Mechanics or Meaning?* (The Wartburg Project, 2019), 18.

15. Nouns can be classified as either *definite* or *indefinite*. In English, definite nouns are preceded by the article “the,” while indefinite nouns are preceded by the article “a.” Hebrew has the definite article ה (hey), but no indefinite article. So “the man” would be translated as הָאִישׁ (*ha’ish*, or *the man*), but “a man” would be simply אִישׁ (*ish*, or *man*).

In this verse, the phrase “one base” is המכנה האחת (*ha'mekhonah ha'echat*), or literally “the base the one.” The word *one* functions as an adjective here, so it follows the noun. And since the noun is definite, both the noun (base) and the adjective (one) are preceded by the definite article ה (*hey*). A large percentage of the occurrences of “the one” in the Bible match this noun + adjective pattern. However, this does not fit the usage in 1 Nephi 16:10 where the word *one* operates as a definite noun rather than as an adjective.

Another significant way that the word *one* is joined with the definite article in the Bible occurs when it is used in the construct state, or סמיכות (*smichut*), a morphological form specific to Semitic and Egyptian languages. The construct state is formed when two nouns are joined together to form a new noun chain, of sorts. For example, the nouns *name* (שם *shem*) and *one* (אחד *echad*) are unrelated, independent words. However, when connected to each other they can form a new noun: שם אחד (*shem echad*), or literally, “name one.” In English we would insert the word *of* between these two nouns to read “name of one.” If we make this phrase definite — “the name of one” — the Hebrew would be שם האחד (*shem ha'echad*), or שם האחת (*shem ha'achat*) if the person or thing being referenced were feminine. A literal translation to English would be “name the one,” but proper English syntax would render it “the name of one.” In the construct state the definite article is appended to the second noun rather than to the first. In Genesis 4:19 we learn that Lamech, a descendant of Cain, had two wives:

And Lamech took unto him two wives: *the name of the one* was Adah, *and the name of the other* Zillah. (KJV)

ויקח־לו למך שתי נשים שם האחת עדה ושם השנית צלה:

A word-for-word translation of this verse could be rendered “And took to him Lemek two women *name the one* Adah *and name the second* Tsilah.” The KJV translation in the first part of this verse — “the name of *the one* was Adah” — reveals a spillover effect from Hebrew syntax. The phrase would be better translated into English as “the name of one,” or “the name of the first.” Since our phrase from the Book of Mormon — “*the one* pointed the way” — does not contain two connected nouns, “the one” in 1 Nephi 16:10 is not a result of the construct state. Because “the one” in this verse does not conform to the Hebrew construct state, or the noun + adjective pattern — which together account for the great majority of occurrences of “the one” in the Bible — we find ourselves in a rare grammatical situation.

## הַיְחָד (ha'yachad) — The United, or The One

Members of the ancient Jewish community at Qumran referred to themselves as הַיְחָד (*ha'yachad*),<sup>16</sup> a term that means *the united, the together, or the collective*,<sup>17</sup> but generally translated as *the community* when referring to Qumran. One of the most significant sectarian documents to emerge from Qumran was the סֵרֶךְ הַיְחָד (*serekh ha'yachad*) — also known as 1QS<sup>18</sup> — or Rule of the Community. The idea of community, or *oneness*, at Qumran was so prevalent that the word הַיְחָד (*ha'yachad*) appears 58 times in the *Rule of the Community*. In fact, in the English translation of the document, other than prepositions (*of, and, for, etc.*) and personal pronouns (*his, he, they, etc.*), הַיְחָד (*ha'yachad*) — *the united* — is the most widely attested word, even appearing more than the words *God* (55 times), *spirit* (36 times), or *covenant* (33 times).

Many scholars have theorized that biblical triconsonantal (three-letter) Hebrew roots were originally biconsonantal (two-letter) roots.<sup>19</sup> Benner describes these biconsonantal, or two-letter roots as *parent* roots, and the triconsonantal, or three-letter roots as *child* roots.<sup>20</sup>

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16. Nibley wrote that the Qumran “candidates take on themselves by covenant the law of God to keep all his commandments even at the peril of their lives. With this goes a law of consecration. The society calls itself a *yahad*, meaning oneness or unity, thereby identifying itself with the model church, the Zion of Enoch (the oldest known fragments of any book of Enoch have been discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls), who were ‘of *one* heart and *one* mind’ in both spiritual and temporal things.” Hugh Nibley, “From the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS),” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 2, no. 5 (2010): 87.

17. הַיְחָד (*ha'yachad*) literally means *the united, the together, or the collective*.

18. 1QS stands for Cave 1, Qumran, Serekh (Rule). סֵרֶךְ הַיְחָד (*serekh ha'yachad*) could also be rendered as *Rule of the United*.

19. “In Semitic languages, a hypothetical transition from biconsonantal (2c) to triconsonantal (3c) language morphology was debated for quite some time. Semitic lexemes derive from roots consisting of predominantly three radicals (i.e., root consonants), termed 3c. However, there is a small corpus of 2c roots ... responsible for most of the irregular Semitic verbs. Are these remnants from a more archaic linguistic phase? One observation favoring this is the relative abundance of 2c body parts and particularly facial features (“eye,” “tooth,” etc.). If this semantic field originated early in language development, then so did the 2c morphology.” Noam Agmon and Yigal Bloch, “Statistics of Language Morphology Change: From Biconsonantal Hunters to Triconsonantal Farmers,” *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 12: e83780, 1. Retrieved from: <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0083780>.

20. Jeff A. Benner, *The Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible: Hebrew Letters, Words and Roots Defined Within Their Ancient Cultural Context*, (College Station, TX: Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., 2005), 34.

According to Benner, the Hebrew words  $\text{אחד}$  (*echad*) meaning “one,” and  $\text{אחד}$  (*yachad*)<sup>21</sup> meaning “united,”<sup>22</sup> are both derived from the same parent root  $\text{אחד}$  (*chad*), meaning *unity* or *oneness*.<sup>23</sup> A similar comparison can be made with English words that originate from Latin. For example, the English word *united* is derived from the Latin word *unus*, meaning *one*. Additional English words derived from *unus* include *unit*, *unique*, *union*, and *unity*. While some of these words imply singleness of number (*unit* and *unique*), others (*union* and *unity*) signify togetherness and harmony.

As demonstrated previously, Nephi’s use of  $\text{אחד}$  (*ha’echad*) — “the one” — is most likely not a reference to *only one* of the spindles. Rather, I propose that Alma’s description of the Liahona and biblical Hebrew usage indicate that it was Nephi’s intent to describe the two spindles as working in unison with each other —  $\text{אחד}$  (*ha’yachad*) — for that is the most likely way that “*those spindles should point the way they should go*” (Alma 37:40). With the understanding that  $\text{אחד}$  (*echad*) and  $\text{אחד}$  (*yachad*) derive from the same etymological root it seems probable that Nephi’s use of “the one” was simply his way of expressing that the two spindles “together” pointed the way. Perhaps Nephi’s words could be rendered better as “within the ball were two spindles, *and together they pointed the way* whither we should go into the wilderness.” This interpretation removes the Hebrew grammatical obstacles that face us, and it also harmonizes better with Alma’s explanation that “those spindles” pointed the way.

### The Purpose of the Second Spindle

In his article titled *The Design of the Liahona and the Purpose of the Second Spindle*, Robert Bunker begins with the traditional assumption that the Liahona “contained two pointers, only one of which was necessary to provide directional information.”<sup>24</sup> However, Bunker also asserts that a single pointer or spindle would be an unreliable way of indicating direction, since it always pointed somewhere:

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21. In Genesis 22:2 Abraham was told to take his  $\text{אחד}$  (*yachid*), or “only son” to “the land of Moriah,” where he was to make a burnt offering. Rather than implying *togetherness* or *community*,  $\text{אחד}$  (*yachid*) — derived from  $\text{אחד}$  (*yachad*) — means “only one.”

22. In Modern Hebrew, the infinitive  $\text{לאחד}$  (*leachad*) means to “unite, consolidate,” or “join.”

23. Benner, *Ancient Hebrew Lexicon*, 118-19.

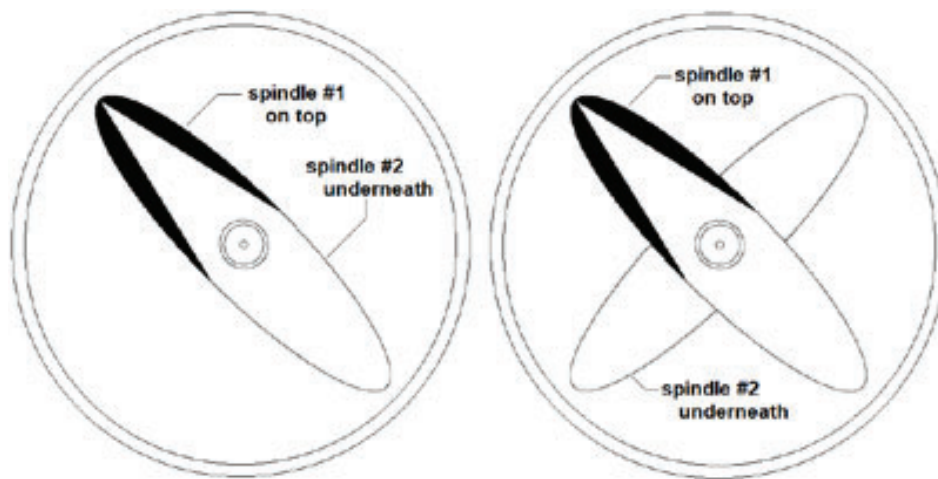
24. Robert L. Bunker, “The Design of the Liahona and the Purpose of the Second Spindle,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 2 (July 1994): 1.

Since a single pointer is always pointing a direction, it was likely the role of the second pointer to provide the necessary additional information about whether the Liahona was “operational,” meaning that the pointing information from the first pointer was reliable.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, without a second spindle to confirm that the first spindle was pointing in the correct direction, how would Lehi’s party know if the Liahona was functioning properly? Bunker postulated that the only way for them to know where they should travel would be if the second spindle pointed in unison with the first, confirming the correct direction. Bunker continued:

There is but one engineering approach that provides the necessary functionality and meets all of the above requirements both efficiently and simply. This is how it would have worked: if an observer viewed the pointers and saw only a single pointer, as seen in Figure 1, then they were both aligned in the same direction, one on top of the other, and the director was providing correct information. Lehi’s party could then follow the indicated direction with confidence that it was the Lord’s instruction. If, on the other hand, the two pointers were cross-ways to each other — forming an “x” as shown in Figure 2 — then the device was not functioning, and the pointing information was not reliable.<sup>26</sup>

Figures 1 (left). “Proceed as indicated.” Figure 2 (right). “Not in service.”<sup>27</sup>



25. Bunker, “Design of the Liahona,” 6.

26. Bunker, “Design of the Liahona,” 6-7.

27. Ibid., 7. Used with permission.



## The Symbolism of Oneness

Unity, or oneness, is a prevalent theme in the Book of Mormon and the Bible.<sup>28</sup> The aging Lehi exhorted his sons to “be *determined*<sup>29</sup> in *one mind* and in *one heart*, united in *all things*” (2 Nephi 1:21). We also read that “when king Benjamin had made an end of speaking the words which had been delivered unto him by the angel of the Lord,” the people “all cried aloud with *one voice*” (Mosiah 4:1–2). Likewise, when Jesus visited the remnant of the Nephites, he prayed, “And now Father, I pray unto thee for them, and also for all they which shall believe on their words, that they may believe in me, that I may be in them as thou Father art in me, *that we may be one*” (3 Nephi 19:23). As with Lehi’s exhortation for unity among his sons, and the people of King Benjamin crying aloud in unison, Jesus’s prayer was for a spiritual rather than physical oneness. Unity is a construct that transcends physical boundaries and limitations.

The Liahona, with its two spindles, presents us with an excellent *type* of this oneness and unity. If we are willing to unite, or reconcile, our will with that of God, he can lead and guide us through our spiritual wilderness (cf. 2 Nephi 10:24; 2 Nephi 33:9). Alma told us that the members of Lehi’s party “were slothful and forgot to *exercise their faith and diligence*.”<sup>30</sup> And then those *marvelous works* ceased, and *they did not progress* in their journey. Therefore they tarried in the wilderness, or did not travel a direct course” (Alma 37:41–42). He continued:

I would that ye should understand that these things are not without a shadow. For as our fathers were slothful to give heed to this compass — now these things were temporal — they did not prosper; even so it is with things which are spiritual. For behold, it is as easy to give heed to the word of Christ,

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28. “I am going to take the stick of Joseph — which is in Ephraim’s hand — and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah’s stick. I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand” (Ezekiel 37:19 NIV).

29. In Hebrew, this verse could be rendered: להיות נחוש בנפש אחד ובלב אחד מאוחדים בכל הדברים. The word *determined* in this verse can be translated as נחוש (*nachush*), meaning “brass” or “bronze,” with a connotation of being *strong* or *firm* (cf. Job 6:12). If Lehi used this word it would reveal probable wordplay on the design of the Liahona. The possibility is intriguing, since his admonition was for his sons to be *firm* and *strong* like the brass of the Liahona, and to be *one* like its spindles.

30. By way of speculation, Alma may have been referring to the two spindles — which he may have appropriately named *faith* and *diligence* — when he accused Lehi’s family of being slothful in the wilderness.

which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss, as it was for our fathers to give heed to this compass, which would point unto them a straight course to the promised land. And now I say: Is there not a type in this thing? For just assuredly as this director did bring our fathers by following its course to the promised land, shall the word of Christ, if we follow its course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise. 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. (Alma 37:43–46)<sup>31</sup>

Alma’s counsel to Helaman was delivered in rich parallelistic patterns (see Table 2). In essence, Alma taught that what is required of us is no different from what was required of Lehi’s family; just as they were required to “give heed to this compass” by exercising “faith and diligence,” we must *exercise* our *faith* and *diligence* by *giving heed*<sup>32</sup> to the *word of Christ*. If we will not *forget* to unite our will with God’s we can also be directed in a straight course to “a far better land of promise.” The spindles in Lehi’s Liahona united through faith and diligence. Eventually, Lehi’s party was successfully led to the promised land by the proper operation of the Liahona. Likewise, we must unite our will with God’s to obtain our land of promise (cf. 1 Nephi 5:5).

Table 2

Verse	Lehi’s Family	Verse	Alma’s Counsel to Helaman
43	these things are not without a shadow.	45	is there not a type in this thing?
43	our fathers were slothful	46	do not let us be slothful
43	to give heed to this <i>compass</i>	44	to give heed to the <i>word of Christ</i>
43	now these things were temporal	43	even so it is with things which are spiritual
44	would point unto them a straight course	44	will point to you a straight course
44	to the promised land	44	to eternal bliss
45	this <i>director</i> did bring our fathers	45	shall the <i>word of Christ</i> , ... carry us
45	by following its course	45	if we follow its course

31. Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*.

32. To *give heed* is represented by the Hebrew root ק-ש-ך (*qashav*), meaning to “pay attention, to hearken,” or to “listen.”

Verse	Lehi's Family	Verse	Alma's Counsel to Helaman
45	to the promised land	45	into a far better land of promise
46	for so was it prepared for them	46	even so it is with us: the way is prepared.
46	if they would look, they might live	46	and if we will look, we may live forever

### Alternative Theories — Fayette Lapham and Gladden Bishop

In his book *The Lost 116 Pages*, Don Bradley recounts portions of stories told by Fayette Lapham and Gladden Bishop that relate to the Book of Mormon and other restoration events. Among these stories are narratives that mention the Liahona, which make them relevant for this article. While Bishop was excommunicated from the Church in 1842 for heresy, Lapham was a local resident of Palmyra, New York, who never became a member of the Church, and who purportedly gained the information for his story from an interview with Joseph Smith, Sr.

Concerning the Liahona, Lapham recounted that it was “a gold ball” and that it “went before them”<sup>33</sup> [Lehi’s family], having two pointers, one pointing steadily the way they should go, the other the way to where they could get provisions and other necessities.”<sup>34</sup> While Lapham’s account appears to provide us with valuable information regarding the functioning of the Liahona, a few observations may argue against this conclusion:

While Bradley admits that “it becomes clear that Lapham *garbled some of what he heard*,”<sup>35</sup> a reading of Lapham’s full account<sup>36</sup> reveals a story that only tangentially resembles the restoration accounts related by Joseph Smith, Jr. For example, although not identifying him by name, Lapham described how Moroni appeared to Joseph in a “dream” as “a very large and tall man ... dressed in an ancient suit of clothes, and the clothes were bloody”; and that “in order to prevent his making

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33. Lapham’s wording — “a gold ball went before them” — most likely reveals confusion between the story of the Liahona in the Book of Mormon and the pillar that “went before” the Israelites in the wilderness: “And the LORD *went before them* by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way” (Exodus 13:21).

34. Fayette Lapham, “Interview with the Father of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet, Forty Years Ago. His Account of the Finding of the Sacred Plates,” *The Historical Magazine and Notes and Queries concerning the Antiquities, History, and Biography of America*, 7, Second Series, May 1870, 309.

35. Don Bradley, *The Lost 166 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon’s Missing Stories*, (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 146, emphasis added.

36. Lapham’s original account is available for download at [https://www.google.com/books/edition/The\\_Historical\\_Magazine\\_and\\_Notes\\_and\\_Qu/x7MTAAAYAAJ?hl=engbpv=0](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Historical_Magazine_and_Notes_and_Qu/x7MTAAAYAAJ?hl=engbpv=0)

an improper disclosure, he [Moroni] was murdered or slain on the spot, and the treasure had been under his charge ever since.”<sup>37</sup> None of these elements resembles the story recounted by Joseph Smith Jr. (see *Joseph Smith History* 1:30–35).

The alleged interview with Joseph Smith Sr. was recorded when Lapham was 75 years old, two years before his death, and 40 years after he claimed that the interview had occurred. Of Lapham’s interview, Bradley wrote: “Despite the lapse of years and the account’s *occasional garbling of fact*, Lapham’s narration is filled with *firsthand information* that demonstrates his reliance on a *primary source with knowledge of the actual information and events*.”<sup>38</sup> Contrary to Bradley’s statement, Lapham’s narration at best could be considered third-hand information, since he allegedly heard it from Joseph Smith Sr., who possibly heard it from his son, Joseph Smith Jr. Additionally, Lapham’s alleged source cannot be considered “primary.” Bradley consistently tries to minimize Lapham’s errors and omissions by stating that he “garbled *some* of what he heard,” or referring to his “*occasional garbling of fact*.” However, while someone acquainted with the restoration would most likely recognize a familiar echo running through Lapham’s story, most of what he retold does not correlate with “the actual information and events” as we know them.<sup>39</sup>

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37. Lapham, “Interview with the Father,” 306.

38. Bradley, *The Lost 166 Pages*, 122, emphasis added.

39. Lapham related the following regarding one of the introductory stories in the Book of Mormon: The Book of Mormon “was the record of a certain number of Jews, who, at the time of crossing the Red Sea, left the main body and went away by themselves; finally became a rich and prosperous nation; and, in the course of time, became so wicked that the Lord determined to destroy them from off the face of the earth. But there was one virtuous man among them, whom the Lord warned in a dream to take his family and depart, which he accordingly did; and, after traveling three days, he remembered that he had left some papers, in the office where he had been an officer, which he thought would be of use to him in his journeyings. He sent his son back to the city to get them; and when his son arrived in the city, it was night, and he found the citizens had been having a great feast, and were all drunk. When he went to the office to get his father’s papers he was told that the chief clerk was not in, and he must find him before he could have the papers. He then went into the street in search of him; but every body being drunk, he could get but little information of his whereabouts, but, after searching a long time, he found him lying in the street, dead drunk, clothed in his official habiliments, his sword having a gold hilt and chain, lying by his side — and this is the same that was found with the gold plates. Finding that he could do nothing with him in that situation, he drew the sword, cut off the officer’s head, cast off his own outer garments, and, assuming those of the officer, returned to the office where

Given the many inaccuracies and “garbling” spread throughout Lapham’s record it would be unwise for us to accept as factual his brief description of the “gold ball” that “went before” Lehi’s family in the wilderness.

The information provided by Gladden Bishop is more complicated, and even less reliable. In a booklet that he produced, Bishop described in detail the Liahona, which he called *Directors*:

The last of the sacred things to be named, is a curious *Ball*, spoken of in the Book of Mormon, and called *Directors*,<sup>40</sup> from the circumstance, of there being in it *two* steel points, (called spindles, in the Book of Mormon,) which points directed the enquirer by faith the proper course to take. This instrument is composed of a small brass ball, about three inches in diameter, having *two* steel points coming out of it, in opposite directions. Around each of these points, are 12 squares, and between these 24 squares on the ball, are figures of various descriptions, representing various things on the earth, as vegetation, animals, running streams of water, &c. This ball represents the earth, and the two steel points represent the power of God, as exhibited in the two priesthoods; the twelve squares on one side, represent the twelve tribes of Israel; the other twelve represent the twelve Apostles. In a word, this instrument represents the earth as the Kingdom of God, and this the seventh sacred article, is put into the hand of every one, both male and female, who is found worthy to receive the crown of Life. And this explains the words of Jesus — “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit [or possess] the earth;” for this ball, as before remarked, represents the earth as the Kingdom of God; therefore in the figure of the ball in the hand, is represented the saints possessing the kingdom of God, which is so commonly spoken of in the scriptures, that a quotation on this point is unnecessary.<sup>41</sup>

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the papers were readily obtained, with which he returned to where his father was waiting for him.” (Lapham, “Interview with the Father,” 308)

40. The Liahona is referred to three times in the Book of Mormon as “director,” but never in the plural as “directors” (cf. Mosiah 1:16, Alma 37:38, and Alma 37:45). DC 17:1 does mention “the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness.” While one can assume that this reference relates to the Liahona, it is not specifically mentioned.

41. Francis Gladden Bishop, *An Address to the Sons and Daughters of Zion, Scattered Abroad, through all the Earth*, (Kirtland, Ohio, 13 May 1851), 13. In this

In his book, Bradley consistently claimed that Bishop received his information about the Liahona, the sword of Laban, the gold plates,<sup>42</sup> and other sacred artifacts from Martin Harris.<sup>43</sup> What Bradley does not tell his readers is that Bishop never claimed to learn details of these

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same booklet Bishop described each of the “Sacred Things” in great detail, including the two crowns. Concerning these two crowns, Bishop wrote: “I said the first crown was called the crown of Israel, and it is so called, because it represents the twelve tribes of Israel, as it is composed of silver and gold and curiously wrought into stars, and adorned with twelve precious stones of the same kind as those in Aaron’s breastplate. See Ex. 32: 10 to 13; and also the two stones of a *Urim and Thummim*. All of which are curiously set in the border of the crown. The second is called the crown of Glory, as it represents the glory of God, which shines through all worlds forever. Therefore this crown is composed of fine gold, curiously wrought into stars and half moons, and adorned with thirteen luminous diamonds, of a very large size, twelve being set in the border, and one on the center of the top of the crown. The diamonds represent Jesus Christ as the Father, with his twelve Apostles as equal with him, or like him, who represent the Church of the First Born. Therefore these two crowns, used as one, represent the fullness of the power and glory of God, and when set upon the head of those who are to be endued with power from God, make them *equal* and *one* with the *Father*, and thus they receive his *fullness*, and become one with him *forever* and *ever*.” (Bishop, *Address to Zion*, 12)

42. Regarding the sealed portion of the gold plates, Bishop wrote: “On the front plate of the sealed part, is the Title Page, upon which is engraved in large reformed Egyptian characters the title of this division, and also a caution engraved in Hebrew to the finder of the Record, not to break the seals thereof. The translation of the title page as seen through the Interpreters, or Urim and Thummim, (as rendered in the English language,) is as follows: The Book of Life. Being a revaluation [sic] from the beginning of the world, and containing the knowledge of Sacred things, which are not to be made known until the days, when God will set up his Kingdom on the Earth. The following is in the pure Hebrew: Whoever finds this Record is forbidden to break the seals thereof, for behold they contain Sacred things which are not to be revealed until the last days, when God will set up his Kingdom on the Earth.” (Bishop, *Address to Zion*, 48)

43. Bradley wrote: “Martin’s Kirtland, Ohio, neighbor and confidant Francis Gladden Bishop, who acquired considerable information from Martin, gave this description in 1850” (Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 23); “Additional details from Martin on the physical appearance of the lost manuscript come to us by way of his longtime associate Francis Gladden Bishop, who published extensive descriptions of Book of Mormon artifacts, drawing much of his information from Martin” (Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 83). “In his *An Address to the Sons and Daughters of Zion*, Bishop offered further information for which Martin Harris is the likely source” (Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 141). “Bishop, likely being given information from Martin Harris, provides even more details” (Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 149). “It is thus significant that Francis Gladden Bishop, while in Martin Harris’s confidence, identified Nephi’s sword as not only the sword of Joseph, forged in

artifacts from Martin Harris. Rather, Bishop wrote that he received physical possession of them from the “Ancient of Days” himself:

At length I was wrapt in vision, and stood before a Glorious Throne, and he that sat thereon reached forth the crowns, now two in one, and set them on my head, and he also placed the Sword in my right hand and the Golden Plates (with the Interpreters in the same) in my bosom, which was covered by the Breastplate which was put upon my breast, after which he placed in my left hand the Directors [Liahona]. Now the character upon the Throne, from whom I received the Sacred Things, as before stated was the “Ancient of Days.”<sup>44</sup>

Bishop alleged that he received seven “Sacred Things” from the “Ancient of Days,” whom he declared to be John the Revelator. Bishop also informed us that Nephi, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, “who was the same Holy Angel who first appeared to Joseph,”<sup>45</sup> had showed these “Sacred Things” to Bishop before he received them from the “Ancient of Days,” and that Nephi, not Martin Harris, gave him a history of each item.<sup>46</sup> In addition to the seven “Sacred Things,” Bishop also wrote that he was given the lost 116 pages by the “Ancient of Days.” In a separate vision, Bishop claimed that in the summer of 1832 he was ordained a “High Priest” by a heavenly visitor:

Suddenly there appeared between me and the window ... a person of God-like majesty, yet he seemed as perfect meekness itself. He was of the middle stature, and somewhat thick set in his person, with auburn hair, which hung in graceful curls upon his shoulders; his complexion was ruddy, and his features somewhat round and full, and his eye piercing; his appearance indicated a person of near the middle age. He was dressed in a *white*, loose flowing *robe* of fine texture, which reached to his feet, and which appeared to be plain and without seam; the sleeves reached to the hand and the bosom was open. He had nothing else upon his person, and his presence inspired me with the deepest awe. He approached

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Egypt, but also as the sword of Joshua, by which he led the work of the conquest” (Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages*, 177)

44. Bishop, *Address to Zion*, 29.

45. *Ibid.*, 27.

46. “The history of each of the sacred things was also given by the Angel, as they were severally presented.” Bishop, *Address to Zion*, 28.

to the bedside, and making a solemn pause, regarded me for a moment with a look seemingly of the deepest intensity. I was alone in the room, the door of which was closed, and as it was about the hour of midnight, a solemn silence reigned around me. He then raised his hands and placed them on my head, at which I experienced the same sensation as when the Ancient of Days smiled upon me, for I was filled with the Holy Spirit in a manner that tongue cannot express, when he said “I ordain you a High Priest,” and in a moment was again invisible.<sup>47</sup>

As a “High Priest,” and being in possession of the seven “Sacred Things,” Bishop claimed to be the rightful successor of Joseph Smith, even claiming that Smith was a fallen prophet. For much of the time after his baptism, Bishop engaged in missionary work for the church, but he consistently ran afoul of church doctrines and authority, having his license to preach revoked multiple times. Finally, in 1842, after causing a decade of grief for the leadership of the church, Bishop was excommunicated.<sup>48</sup> At Bishop’s trial, Joseph Smith commented that Bishop “was a fool and had not sens [sic] sufficient for the Holy Ghost to enlighten him.”<sup>49</sup> Curiously, Bradley does not mention any of these details in his book. He appears to accept uncritically the parts of Bishop’s account that seem to fit his theory of the 116 lost pages while ignoring the rest of the sordid story.<sup>50</sup>

Bradley concluded by trying to harmonize the description of the Liahona given by Nephi (the son of Lehi), Lapham, and Bishop:

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47. Bishop, *Address to Zion*, 29-30.

48. Benjamin Ferris, not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, wrote the following: “Brigham managed to slide more easily into the superstition and idiosyncracies [sic] of the Saints, and led the mass to Great Salt Lake; but he, too, has his troubles from this source, and is now more especially plagued with *Gladdenism*, so called from Gladden Bishop, who profanely claims to be as much superior to Joseph Smith as our Lord was to John the Baptist. This Gladden gave Joseph much trouble; was cut off from the Church, and taken back, and rebaptized *nine* times; but, proving obstinate in heresy, was finally given over to the buffetings of Satan for a thousand years.” Benjamin G. Ferris, *Utah and the Mormons: The History, Government, Doctrines, Customs, and Prospects of the Latter-Day Saints, from Personal Observation During a Six Months’ Residence at Great Salt Lake City* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1854), 326.

49. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, vol. 2, *Journal, 1832-1842* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 369 n. 1.

50. The full version of Bishop’s booklet can be accessed here: <https://archive.org/details/addressstosonsdau01bish/mode/2up>.



While it is difficult to visualize the device precisely as Bishop intended, it is clear that on his model there were pictures around the spindles. So while one spindle pointed a *direction*, the other spindle could point to a *picture*. This detail, if correct, could help fill a gap in the published Book of Mormon's description of the Liahona. Nephi says that "within the ball were *two* spindles; and the *one* pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness" (1 Nephi 16:10), but he leaves the function of the second spindle unaccounted for. Lapham's report corrected this deficiency, indicating that the second spindle pointed "the way to where they could get provisions and other necessaries." Bishop's account also indicates that the second spindle may have aided in the finding of provisions, but his description implies that the Liahona did so by pointing to a picture rather than by pointing a direction. A composite of all three descriptions suggests a possible model for how the Liahona worked: the first spindle mandated the *direction* of travel; the second spindle, by pointing to one of the picture symbols around it, identified the *purpose* of travel. Together, the two spindles could show the Liahona's users where to go and what they would find when they got there.<sup>51</sup>

Although Bradley proposed a design for the Liahona that was "a composite of all three descriptions" (Nephi, Lapham, and Bishop), I believe his proposal falls short. Bradley posits that one spindle — as in Lapham's description — pointed in "the direction of travel" while the second spindle — possibly following Bishop's description — pointed "to one of the picture symbols around it." The most obvious problem with this solution is that Bishop's and Lapham's models are mutually exclusive; there is no practical way to harmonize the two accounts. I cannot conceive of any way that Bishop's and Lapham's descriptions can be unified into a cohesive theoretical construct.

Lapham's model described two spindles, each pointing to a location external to the ball. On the other hand, Bishop visualized two steel points, and "around each of these points, are 12 squares, and between these 24 squares on the ball, are figures of various descriptions, representing various things on the earth, as vegetation, animals, running streams of water, c."<sup>52</sup> To complicate matters, Bishop became so wrapped up in the

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51. Bradley, *The Lost 166 Pages*, 149-50.

52. Bishop, *Address to Zion*, 13.

symbolism of the Liahona that he never got around to explaining how these “points” and “figures” related to each other. One can assume that his spindles pointed to the figures surrounding them, but how would that signal the direction of travel? There is no indication from Bishop’s description that either spindle pointed to a location external to the ball itself. The best I can theorize from Bishop’s description is the following example: if Lehi’s party needed to hunt for food, one spindle may have pointed to the figure of a gazelle while the other could have pointed to the figure of a tree, indicating that a gazelle was standing next to a tree. However, this information would be of little practical value, since the hunter would still not know in which direction to travel to find the tree, or for that matter, under which tree the gazelle might be standing.

In summary, Lapham’s account reflects such grave confusion and errors as to render his story of little use for serious scholarship. On the other hand, Bishop, in my opinion, was either a religious con man or he was troubled by delusions brought on by serious mental illness. Either way, Bishop’s words cannot be trusted to have originated with either Martin Harris, Joseph Smith Jr., or any other trusted primary source.

### **Moses’s Serpent, Brass Plates, and Liahona**

While preaching to the Zoramites, Alma cited the prophecies of several ancient prophets to prove the future coming of the Son of God. Among the prophecies mentioned by Alma was the raising up of the serpent of brass [נחש נחשׁת *nechash nechoshet*] by Moses:

Behold, he [Christ] was spoken of by Moses; yea, and behold *a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live. But few understood the meaning of those things, and this because of the hardness of their hearts. 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 33:19–20)

In these verses Alma taught the Zoramites that “whosoever would look upon [the serpent of brass] might live.” In his instructions to his son Helaman in chapter 37, Alma used nearly identical wording:

And now I say: Is there not *a type in this thing?* For just assuredly as this *director* did bring *our fathers* by following its course to

the promised land, shall the *word of Christ*<sup>53</sup>, if we follow its course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise. 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*. (Alma 37:45–47)

In this passage, Alma told Helaman that the Liahona (director) brought “our fathers” (Lehi’s family) to the promised land. In like manner, the word of Christ (our Liahona) can bring us “into a far better land of promise.” Just as the ancient Israelites needed to look at the serpent to live, Lehi’s family was required to look at the Liahona, and we need to look to the word of Christ. By using the same language — look and live — Alma linked these three seemingly unrelated narratives into one cohesive whole. According to Kristian Heal,

Alma’s 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

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53. Although the current LDS edition of the Book of Mormon contains the phrase “words of Christ,” *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* indicates that the original wording was most likely “word of Christ.” Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*.

brazen serpent and the Liahona and points to Jesus as the true type adumbrated in each.<sup>54</sup>

Another important element also joins these three narratives. The serpent, the Liahona, and the word of Christ (recorded on the plates of Laban) were all made of the same material: brass. Alma identifies each of three objects — the brass serpent (נחש נחשת *nechash nechoshet*), the brass ball (דור נחשת *dur nechoshet*),<sup>55</sup> and the brass plates (לוחות נחשת *luchot nechoshet*) — as symbols of Christ. However, symbols cannot replace the real object of adoration. As such, Alma’s final injunction to Helaman was to “look to God and live” (Alma 37:47), which parallels Christ’s injunction “look unto me and endure to the end, and ye shall live” (3 Nephi 15:9).

### A Hebrew Interpretation of Liahona

Jonathan Curci proposed an etymology for the word *Liahona* which can be understood as meaning “to Yahweh is the whither’ or, by interpretation, ‘direction of-to the Lord.’”<sup>56</sup> His interpretation is based on the following arrangement of three Hebrew words: ל-יהו-(א)נה, or *le-yaho-(o)nah*.<sup>57</sup> ל (*le*) means “to” or “toward,” יהו (*yaho*) is an abbreviation for Yahweh, and אנה (*ona*) can be translated as “where or wither.” Curci also outlined earlier efforts by Hugh Nibley, Reynolds and Sjodahl, and Sidney Sperry to derive an etymology for *Liahona*. Recently, Matthew Bowen presented a new explanation for the derivation of *Liahona* by

54. Kristian S. Heal, “Look to God and Live,” *Insights* 26, no. 2 (2006), 3, 6.

55. Two additional examples of wordplay perhaps exist: 1) Alma used the word *generation* four times in Alma 37 (verses 4, 14, 18 and 19). The word for ball (דור *dur*, see Alma 37:38) is the same spelling, and derives from the same root, as generation (דור *dor*); 2) according to *HALOT*, דור (*dur*) principally means a “round,” or “rotation,” and only “by context ball.” Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. “דור.” This creates another possible connection to God’s course as “one eternal round” (Alma 37:12); see Matthew L. Bowen “Look to the Lord! The Meaning of Liahona and the Doctrine of Christ in Alma 37-38” in *Give Ear to My Words: Text and Context of Alma 36-42: The 48th Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Kerry Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2019), 275-95.

56. Jonathan Curci, “Liahona: ‘The Direction of the Lord’: An Etymological Explanation,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2, 60.

57. On a minor note, if Curci’s proposal is correct, one would expect the word *Liahona* to end with the letter *h* in English (*liahonah*), since the final letter in his proposed Hebrew etymology is ה (the letter *h* in the Latin alphabet). However, since *Liahona* ends in the letter *a* in English, it is more plausible for the Hebrew source word to end in the letters א (aleph) or ע (ayin).

relying only on Egyptian as its source. In essence, his proposed meaning parallels Curci's: "To Yahweh, whither?" but perhaps more particularly an imperative, 'To Yahweh, look!' — that is, 'Look to the Lord!' or 'Look to God!'"<sup>58</sup> Bowen added:

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 *le*, 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."<sup>59</sup>

I would like to offer yet another possible explanation for *Liahona* with its derivation based on the Hebrew language. As many Latter-day Saint scholars have speculated, I also believe that the initial part of the word derives from the Hebrew לִיָּהוּ (*le'yaho*, meaning "to or toward Jehovah"). Generally speaking, the various explanations often vary from each other only in the final syllable of the word *Liahona*, *-na*. I propose that that final syllable in *Liahona* comes from the Hebrew particle נָ (*na*), described by Koehler and Baumgartner as a "particle giving emphasis,"<sup>60</sup> and by Brown, Driver and Briggs as a particle of "entreaty or exhortation."<sup>61</sup> It has also been described as a "pleading for what is desired."<sup>62</sup> In the Hebrew Bible this word is translated most often as *now, please, oh!, I beseech thee, or I pray thee*.<sup>63</sup> However, none of these translations really do service to this Hebrew word. I would describe נָ (*na*) as an exclamation without any translatable meaning in English.

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58. Bowen, "Look to the Lord!"

59. *Ibid.*

60. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, s.v. "נָ."

61. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), s.v. "נָ." Hereafter cited as *BDB*.

62. Jeff A. Benner, *The Ancient Hebrew Lexicon of the Bible: Hebrew Letters, Words and Roots Defined Within Their Ancient Cultural Context*, 179.

63. "The particle נָ (*na*) is the common Hebrew particle of entreaty: please! At times it's also used admonishingly or even exhortatory. This particle shows up tied to all kinds of verbs: אָמַרְיִנָּה (*amari-na*), literally meaning speak please, or simply: *say!* (Genesis 12:13). שֶׂאֵינָה (*sa'na*), meaning lift please (your eyes; *look!* — Genesis 13:14)." "Abarim Publications' Biblical Dictionary: The Old Testament Hebrew word: נָ," Abarim Publications, updated February 9, 2021, <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Dictionary/n/n-a.html>.

Perhaps it could be best rendered as simply ! (exclamation point).<sup>64</sup> If we join the particle נָא (*na*) to the initial part of *Liahona* (ליהו *le'yaho*) we arrive at ליהו-נָא (*le'yaho-na*), *to Jehovah!*, or *toward Jehovah!*

This rendering of *Liahona* as ליהו-נָא (*le'yaho-na*) allows the name of the ball discovered by Lehi to be derived solely from his native tongue, Hebrew. In addition, it also supplies the emphatic phrase that Bowen and others have proffered. However, this etymology also creates a linguistic problem that arises from biblical Hebrew usage. The particle נָא (*na*) most often follows a verb in the Hebrew Bible (see Genesis 12:13, Numbers 20:10, and Ruth 2:2). It is also used following another particle, as in הנה-נָא (*hinneh-na*, or *behold!*, see Genesis 12:11), or אל-נָא (*al-na*, or *not!*, see Genesis 13:8) to provide emphasis. With only one exception נָא (*na*) is never used to give emphasis to a noun, but that exception is noteworthy!

In Numbers 12 we are told that “Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married” (12:1). As a result, “the anger of the LORD was kindled against them; ... and, behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow” (12:9–10). Moses then intervened on her behalf: “So Moses cried out to the LORD, “Please, God, heal her!” (12:13, NIV). The Hebrew for this verse is: ויצעק משה אל-יהוה לאמר אל נא רפא נא לה.

The italicized section in this verse — אל נא רפא נא (*el na refa na*) — can be rendered *God! Heal!* The addition of the final word לה (*lah*, “to her”) would render the phrase “God! Heal her!” My translation of the full verse is as follows: And Moses cried out to Jehovah saying: “God! Heal her!” In what *BDB* describe as an anomaly in biblical Hebrew usage, the imperative particle נָא (*na*) in this verse follows both the substantive,

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64. Another Hebrew interjection similar to נָא (*na*), but perhaps even more emphatic, is אָנָּא (*anna*, also spelled אָנָּה *annah*). Psalm 118:25 is organized into two connected, imperative phrases: אָנָּא יְהוָה הַצְלִיחָה נָא and אָנָּא יְהוָה הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא. The KJV translation for this verse is “Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, send now prosperity.” The New International Version (NIV) translation provides an improved reading from the Hebrew: “LORD, save us! LORD, grant us success!” A literal translation of the verse could be tentatively rendered “Oh! Yahweh save! Oh! Yahweh grant success!” The word אָנָּא (*anna*) at the beginning of each phrase reinforces this imperative exclamation. Each of the two phrases begins with the interjection אָנָּא יְהוָה (*anna Yahweh*) and ends with the interjection נָא (*na*), which is rendered simply by an exclamation point in the NIV translation. אָנָּא יְהוָה (*anna Yahweh*) is a difficult clause to translate accurately into English, which is why the NIV omitted the word אָנָּא (*anna*) from its translation.

God, and the verb, *heal*.<sup>65</sup> This unique occurrence is relevant because my proposed etymology for Liahona — לִיהוֹנָא (*le'yaho-na*, *to Jehovah!* or *toward Jehovah!*) — relies on a similar grammatical arrangement. In both instances the particle נָא (*na*) follows a title or name of the deity, and acts as an emphatic exclamation or interjection.<sup>66</sup> The symbolism embedded in my proposed word for *Liahona* (לִיהוֹנָא *le'yaho-na*) also harmonizes with Alma's admonition to Helaman to "look to God and live" (Alma 37:47).

## Conclusion

Gaining a correct understanding of how the Liahona functioned, and of Nephi's use of "the one" (הָאֶחָד *ha'echad*) in the phrase "and the one pointed the way" (1 Nephi 16:10) helps us appreciate his message of unity and oneness in the design of the "round ball of curious workmanship." Based on Alma's words that both spindles pointed the way, and because common biblical Hebrew does not support the use of "the one" as "one of them," readers and translators of the Book of Mormon would be well-served to reevaluate long-held interpretations of this verse.

The two pointers, or spindles, of the Liahona were not designed to function independently. Rather, when Lehi's family members properly exercised their faith and diligence — uniting their will with God's — the spindles united (הַיָּחָד *ha'yachad*) to point the way they should travel in the wilderness and over the "many waters" to the promised land. Alma

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65. "The connection of the particle נָא [*na*] with אֵל [*el*] is certainly unusual, yet it is analogous to the construction with such exclamations as אוי [*oy*] (Jeremiah 4:31; Jeremiah 45:3) and הִנֵּה [*hinneh*] (Genesis 12:11; Genesis 16:2, etc.); since אֵל [*el*] in the vocative is to be regarded as equivalent to an exclamation; whereas the alteration into אֵל [*al*], as proposed by *J. D. Michaelis* and *Knobel*, does not even give a fitting sense, apart altogether from the fact that the repetition of נָא [*na*] after the verb, with אֵל [*al*] נָא [*na*] before it, would be altogether unexampled." "Commentary on Numbers 12," Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Study Light*, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/kdo/numbers-12.html>.

66. While most sentences require a verb to make sense, many exclamatory phrases do not. For example, when Thomas saw the resurrected Christ he is recorded as simply responding: "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). Moses' prayer for Miriam's healing in Numbers 12:13 can be separated into an interjection and a verb clause: "God!" is the interjection and "Heal her!" is the verb clause. The interjection "God!" lacks a verb, but so do most interjections (*Behold! No! Wow! Oy!*). Together, the interjection and the verb clause form an exclamatory phrase. So the interjection stands apart from the verb clause, which is why in Hebrew the particle נָא (*na*) is used twice, once after אֵל *el* (a theophoric name) and again after רפא *refa* (the verb clause). I propose that the interjection אֵל נָא (*el na*, God!) anticipates a subsequent verb clause, but does not rely on one.

told us that “by *small* and *simple things* are *great things* brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). Two small spindles uniting to point a single direction is a simple thing, but this simplicity resulted in a great thing: Lehi and his family were successfully led to the promised land. The same holds true for us: if we are willing to exercise our faith and diligence by uniting our will with God’s, we will be led to, and will prosper in, our promised land.

**Loren Spendlove** (MA, *Jewish Studies*, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; PhD, *Education*, University of Wyoming; MBA, California State University, Fullerton; and BS, *Finance*, Brigham Young University) has worked in many fields, including academics and corporate financial management. A student of languages, he centers his research interests on linguistics and etymology.

### Appendix — Possibilities for Additional Wordplay Related to the Liahona<sup>67</sup>

#### His Paths are Straight, and His Course is One Eternal Round

While preaching in Gideon, Alma affirmed that the members of the church were walking in the correct path. He also taught that God could not walk in crooked paths, and that his course was one eternal round:

For *I perceive* that ye are in the *paths of righteousness*. *I perceive* that ye are in the *path which leads to the kingdom of God*. Yea, *I perceive* that ye are *making his paths straight*. *I perceive* that it has been made known<sup>68</sup> unto you by the testimony of his word that he cannot walk in *crooked paths*, neither doth he vary from that which he hath said, neither hath he a shadow of *turning from the right to the left*, or from that which is right to that which is wrong. Therefore *his course is one eternal round* (Alma 7:19–20).

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67. Potential wordplay presented in this appendix is admittedly speculative and is offered here to show some possibilities for consideration.

68. Wordplay is apparent in Alma’s discourse to the church in Gideon. Four times Alma repeated the phrase “I perceive” — ידעתי (*yadati*, or *I know*, cf. 2 Samuel 19:6). This repetition of ידעתי (*yadati*), or *I know* in Hebrew is followed by the phrase “it has been made known unto you” (הודיע *hodiya*, cf. Psalm 98:2). הודיע (*hodiya*, the infinitive is להודיע *lehodiya*) derives from the same root — י-ד-ע — as ידעתי (*yadeti*, the infinitive is לדעת *ladaat*).



Later, in his counsel to Helaman — in the same chapter where he described the functionality of the Liahona — Alma succinctly taught that God’s “*paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round*” (Alma 37:12, cf. DC 3:2). Alma is the only speaker in the Book of Mormon who links these two concepts: that God’s paths are straight and that his course is one eternal round. I propose that these teachings involve literary wordplay and symbolic allusions to the operation of the Liahona.

The Hebrew word פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*) means “spindle” or “stick.” Another biblical Hebrew word meaning “spindle” is כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*). Both of these words are used in Proverbs 31:19, and different translations of the Hebrew text render the words as either *distaff* or *spindle*:<sup>69</sup>

She layeth her hands to the *spindle* (פֶּלֶךְ *pelekh*), and her hands hold the *distaff* (כִּישׁוֹר *kishor*). (KJV)

She stretches out her hands to the *distaff* (פֶּלֶךְ *pelekh*), and her hand holds the *spindle* (כִּישׁוֹר *kishor*) (NKJV).

Additionally, Koehler and Baumgartner (hereafter HALOT) identify both of these words with the whorl of the spindle.<sup>70</sup> These three elements — distaff, spindle and whorl — were the essential tools of ancient hand spinning techniques. Perhaps the least important of the three, the distaff was a stick that held the raw material (wool or cotton). Sometimes spinners merely held the raw material in their hands rather than on a distaff. The spindle was a straight, narrow stick where the spun yarn was gathered. Its purpose, along with providing a place for the yarn to be collected, was to keep the yarn traveling in a straight and continuous path. The whorl was a heavy object, typically a round stone with a hole in the center, that was placed over the spindle, typically at the bottom, to keep the spindle turning during the spinning process. Essentially, the whorl functioned as a flywheel to store and release kinetic energy.

As spinners rotated the spindle, they would slowly release the raw material between their fingers, which action would cause the material to stretch and become yarn. A skilled spinner knew how to release the raw material at the correct rate to produce a yarn of consistent and proper thickness. Once enough yarn had been made, the spinner would wind the finished yarn onto the spindle and then continue the process.<sup>71</sup>

69. In Proverbs 31:19 Koehler and Baumgartner identify the use of כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*) as parallel with פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*). Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, s.v. “כִּישׁוֹר.”

70. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, s.v. “כִּישׁוֹר” and “פֶּלֶךְ.”

71. An excellent video of this process can be found on YouTube. Lori Swales, “Spinning Techniques for Hand Spindles and Whorls,” June 10, 2014, video, <https://>

Alma’s teaching that God’s “paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round” is a perfect metaphor for this spinning process. Hand spinning, as with soul-making, is a creative process that requires skill, a keen knowledge of the raw materials, and patient diligence. The etymology of the words פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*) and כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*) reinforce this connection with spinning. HALOT identifies פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*) with the Arabic word *falaka*, meaning “to be round.”<sup>72</sup> BDB agree with the connection to *falaka*, and state that the word means to “be round (esp. hemispherical).”<sup>73</sup> BDB associate the word כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*) with the root כ-ש-ר (*k-sh-r*), meaning to “be straight.”<sup>74</sup> כ-ש-ר (*k-sh-r*) is also the root for the word כָּשֶׁר (*kasher*, or *kosher* in English), meaning to “be advantageous, proper, suitable, succeed.”<sup>75</sup> Two other words closely related to כָּשֶׁר (*kasher*), and derived from the same root, are כּוֹשְׂרָה (*koshrah*) meaning “prosperity,”<sup>76</sup> and כִּשְׂרוֹן (*kishron*) meaning “skill, success, profit,” or “advantage.”<sup>77</sup>

In my opinion, these potential etymological connections are significant.<sup>78</sup> Not only do the biblical words translated as *spindle* and *whorl* connect with the concepts of *straight* and *round* — tying us into the idea of God’s paths being straight and his course one eternal round, but the connection to prosperity and skill — are also intriguing. Alma told Helaman that the people would “prosper in the land” if they would keep God’s commandments (Alma 37:13). He also explained that Lehi’s family “were slothful and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence. And then those marvelous works ceased, and they did not progress in their journey” (Alma 37:41). Alma then reframed this idea by saying: “for as our fathers were slothful to give heed to this compass — now these things were temporal — they did not prosper” (Alma 37:43). I propose

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[www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUuDVPYtGQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUuDVPYtGQ)

72. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, 1941, s.v. “פֶּלֶךְ.”

73. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “פֶּלֶךְ.” Also included are the terms *circle* and *circuit*.

74. *Ibid.*, “כִּישׁוֹר.”

75. *Ibid.*, “כָּשֶׁר.”

76. *Ibid.*, “כּוֹשְׂרָה.”

77. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, s.v. “כִּשְׂרוֹן.”

78. The words כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*) and פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*) are rarely attested in the Hebrew Bible (*kishor* is used only once and *pelekh* is used nine times). פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*) can be translated as *spindle* or *stick*, while כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*) is limited to its function as a spindle/distaff. Only two passages in the Hebrew Bible can be understood as referencing a spindle: 2 Samuel 3:29 and Proverb 31:19. Likewise, the Book of Mormon is thrifty in its use of the word *spindle*, with only two attestations, in 1 Nephi 16:10 and Alma 37:40. Additionally, the word *pointer* is used only once by Nephi (see 1 Nephi 16:28).

that Alma's use of *prosper* and *progress* represent wordplay on the words כושרה (*koshrah, prosperity*)<sup>79</sup> and כישור (*kishor, spindle*), both derived from the Hebrew root כ-ש-ר (*k-sh-r*).

### Curious Workmanship

Regarding the construction of the Liahona, Alma told us that “there cannot any man work after the manner of so *curious a workmanship*” (Alma 37:39, cf. 1 Nephi 16:10). Many modern English speakers would probably interpret the phrase *curious workmanship* to mean that the Liahona was of strange or unusual construction. While those definitions fit the modern meaning of *curious*, they are not a good match for the word during the time of the translation of the Book of Mormon. The definition in Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* which fits the usage of *curious* in the Book of Mormon is “wrought with care and art; elegant; neat; finished; as a curious girdle; curious work.”<sup>80</sup> This definition correlates well with the word כשרון (*kishron*), meaning “skill.” As with כישור (*kishor, spindle*), it also derives from the root כ-ש-ר (*k-sh-r*). Various foreign language translations of the Book of Mormon properly translate the word *curious* from English: Portuguese, *esmeradamente trabalhada* (painstakingly crafted); Spanish, *esmeradamente labrada* (carefully worked); Italian, *accurata fattura* (careful workmanship); and French, *exécution habile* (skillful execution). Additionally, a Hebrew root word used to express this same idea in the Bible<sup>81</sup> is ח-ש-ב (*ch-sh-v*),<sup>82</sup> which in this application can be defined as “to devise, invent”; “artistic designs;” or “elaborately devised machines,”<sup>83</sup> meanings very closely aligned with Webster's 1828 definition.<sup>84</sup>

79. A more common root connoting prosperity in the Hebrew Bible is צ-ל-ח (*ts-l-ch*) from which the verbal infinitive לצלוח (*litsloach*) derives.

80. Noah Webster's *First Edition of An American Dictionary of the English Language* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 2010), s.v. “curious.”

81. See KJV: Exodus 28:8; and WEB: Exodus 31:4, Exodus 35:32-33, and 2 Chronicles 26:15. Note: The WEB (World English Bible) is a revision of the ASV (American Standard Version), and was first published in 2000.

82. From which the infinitive לחשוב, meaning “to think,” is derived.

83. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, s.v. “חשב.”

84. 2 Chronicles 26:15 offers a well-crafted wordplay based on the root ח-ש-ב (*ch-sh-v*): “In Jerusalem he made machines [חשבנות], invented [מחשבת] by skillful men [חושב], to be on the towers and the corners, to shoot arrows and great stones” (KJV). In Hebrew, the phrase “machines invented by skillful men” is a three-word phrase: חשבנות מחשבת חושב (*chishvonot machashevet choshev*), each derived from the root ח-ש-ב (*ch-sh-v*), and each implying skill and intelligent design.

## Spinning and Prosperity

Spinning is rarely mentioned in the Book of Mormon, but it is strongly implied in several passages.<sup>85</sup> The first reference to spinning is in Mosiah 10, in the Book of Zeniff, where we are told that King Zeniff “did cause that the women should *spin* and toil and *work all manner of fine linen*, yea, and *cloth of every kind*, that we might clothe our nakedness. And thus *we did prosper in the land*” (Mosiah 10:5). The practice of spinning and cloth-making in this verse is directly connected to prospering in the land. Similarly, following the conversion of the majority of the Lamanites to the gospel, the Nephites and the Lamanites became rich as they engaged in economic trade with each other:

And behold, there was all manner of gold in both these lands, and of silver and of precious ore of every kind. And there was also *curious [skilled] workmen* which did work all kinds of ore and did refine it. And thus they *did become rich*. They did raise grain in *abundance*, both in the north and in the south. And they *did flourish exceedingly*, both in the north and in the south. And they *did multiply and wax exceedingly strong* in the land; and they did *raise many flocks and herds*, yea, many fatlings. Behold, their women did toil and *spin* and did make *all manner of cloth*, of *fine-twined linen and cloth of every kind*, to clothe their nakedness. And thus the sixty and fourth year did pass away in peace. (Helaman 6:11–13)

As with the people of Zeniff, the prosperity enjoyed by the Nephites and Lamanites during this time is accompanied by *spinning* and the manufacture of cloth. In addition, we are told of the presence of *curious*, or “skilled,” workmen during this time of prosperity. In a similar fashion, during a period of righteousness among the Jaredites we are given the following account:

And they were *exceeding industrious*, and they did buy and sell and traffic one with another that they might get gain. And they did *work in all manner of ore*, and they did make gold and silver and iron and brass and *all manner of metals*. . . . And they did work *all manner of fine work*. And they did have *silks* and

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85. In Alma 1:29 we read: “And now, because of the *steadiness of the church* they began to be *exceedingly rich*, having *abundance of all things* whatsoever they stood in need — an abundance of flocks and herds, and fatlings of every kind, and also abundance of grain, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious things, and *abundance of silk and fine-twined linen, and all manner of good homely cloth.*”

*fine-twined linen;*<sup>86</sup> and they did *work all manner of cloth* that they might clothe themselves from their nakedness. And they did make all manner of tools to till the earth, both to plow and to sow, to reap and to hoe, and also to thrash. And they did make *all manner of tools*, in the which they did work their beasts. And they did make *all manner of weapons of war*. And they did work *all manner of work of exceeding curious workmanship*. *And never could be a people more blessed than were they and more prospered by the hand of the Lord.* (Ether 10:22–28)

The Jaredite nation, like the Nephites and Lamanites after them, were prospered by the Lord during their time of righteousness. Evidence of this prosperity included the production of silks, fine-twined linen, cloth of all types, and works of curious workmanship. While spinning is not specifically mentioned in these verses, it is necessarily implied because the process of making fine-twined linen and “all manner of cloth” requires the spinning process.

### Spindles and Pointers

Nephi and Alma both referred to the directional devices inside the Liahona as *spindles* (see 1 Nephi 16:10 and Alma 37:40). Additionally, Nephi also called them *pointers* (see 1 Ne 16:28). I propose that these two words, *spindles* and *pointers*, are derived from the biblical Hebrew words פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*) and כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*), respectively. The English word *spindle* has its roots in the verb *spin*, evincing a circular motion. This is closely associated with the sense of the Hebrew word פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*), meaning to be “round, circular,” or “hemispherical.” *Pointer* derives from the verb *point*, which means “to direct towards an object or place, to show its position, or excite attention to it.”<sup>87</sup> The act of pointing strongly implies a straight directional path toward a point of reference.<sup>88</sup> This idea is closely related to the Hebrew word כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*) and its connotation of being *straight*.

86. Although the biblical Hebrew word for *spin* — טָוָה (*tavah*) — is etymologically unrelated to either פֶּלֶךְ (*pelekh*) or כִּישׁוֹר (*kishor*), it is closely related to the concept of *fine-twined linen*. טָוָה (*tavah*) carries the idea of being *folded, wound, or twisted*. Webster defined the verb *twine* as: “To twist; to wind, as one thread or cord around another, or as any flexible substance around another, or as any flexible substance around another body; as fine twined linen.” *Noah Webster’s First Edition*, s.v. “twine.” Thus, *fine-twined linen* could be also understood as *fine-spun linen*. So any reference to fine-twined linen must also imply spinning.

87. *Webster’s First American Dictionary*, s.v. “point.”

88. Matthew Bowen discovered likely Book of Mormon wordplay involving the Hebrew root י-ר-ה (*y-r-h*), meaning to “teach, instruct,” or “direct,” and by

## Cunning Arts

Shortly after the appearance of the Liahona, Laman accused Nephi of trying to deceive the group “by his cunning arts”:

Now he saith that the Lord hath talked with him, and also that angels hath ministered unto him. But behold, we know that he lieth unto us. And he telleth us these things, and *he worketh many things by his cunning arts* that he may *deceive our eyes*, thinking perhaps that he may lead us away into some strange wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:38)

Laman’s accusation implies trickery by Nephi, with the possibility of some sort of magic. I propose that Laman used wordplay on the word *brass* in this passage. Nephi tells us that the Liahona was made “of fine brass” (1 Nephi 16:10). In Numbers 21:9 the serpent of brass that Moses raised up was called נחש נחשת (*nechash nechoshet*). The word for *serpent* נחש (*nachash*) and the word for *brass* נחשת (*nechoshet*)<sup>89</sup> in this verse both derive from a common root: נ-ח-ש (*n-ch-sh*). Another word derived from the same root is נחש (*nachash*, same spelling as *serpent*), meaning “to murmur an obscure incantation,” or “divination by using metal.”<sup>90</sup> The word can also mean to “practise divination, ... with implied power to learn secret things.”<sup>91</sup> It is very possible that Laman relied on this

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inference to “point.” י-ר-ה (*y-r-h*) is also the root of the word תורה (*torah*), most often translated as *law* in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon. Bowen astutely identified Jacob 4:5 and Alma 34:14 as examples of polyptotonic wordplay, with the mention of the law of Moses pointing to Christ. He then extended this observation as “relevant for Book of Mormon passages that describe how the Liahona ‘pointed’ the ‘way’ for the Lehtes in the wilderness.” Matthew L. Bowen, “Scripture Note: ‘Pointing Our Souls to Him,’” *Religious Educator* 20, no. 1 (2019), 166. While this is a possibility, 1 Nephi 16 and Alma 37 lack any mention of the law of Moses, which omission may limit any relationship to passages related to the Liahona. While Jacob preached that the law of Moses served to point us to Christ, Alma likened the Liahona to something better or higher than the law of Moses; Alma compared the Liahona to “the word of Christ which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss” (Alma 37:44). Although this does not negate the possibility that Alma used the root י-ר-ה (*y-r-h*) for *will point* in this passage, it does not support it either.

89. נחשת (*nechoshet*) in Numbers 21:9 is translated as both *brass* (see KJV) and *bronze* (see NKJV). More properly, it denotes bronze. While brass is an alloy of copper and zinc and bronze is an alloy of copper and tin, copper is the principal component in both metals.

90. Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, s.v. “נחש.”

91. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “נחש.”

meaning of נחש (*nachash*) to accuse Nephi of trickery involving the brass ball (דור נחשת *dur nechoshet*), or Liahona.