
Helaman 8 — Look and Live — The Cloud of Witnesses and the Murdered Judge

Helaman 8: the corrupt judges of the Gadianton band, enraged by Nephi's tower sermon, try to stir the people to seize him — but they dare not touch him themselves for fear of the crowd, some of whom defend Nephi as a true prophet. Gaining a hearing, Nephi presses on, and turns from denunciation to a great chain of witnesses for Christ. He reminds them that God gave Moses power to part the Red Sea, and that the same Moses lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness as a type — 'as he lifted up the brazen serpent... even so shall he be lifted up who should come,' so that as many as look upon the Son of God with faith might live. He calls the whole prophetic line to witness: Abraham, who saw Christ's day and rejoiced; the many before Abraham called after the order of the Son; Zenos, slain for his bold testimony; Zenock, Ezias, Isaiah, and Jeremiah (who foretold Jerusalem's destruction — proven true by Mulek's presence among them); and their own fathers Lehi and Nephi. All testified of the coming of Christ. Therefore, Nephi says, in rejecting these things against so many evidences they have sinned and are heaping up wrath against the day of judgment, ripening for destruction. Then the chapter's turn: 'go ye in unto the judgment-seat, and search; and behold, your judge is murdered, and he lieth in his blood; and he hath been murdered by his brother, who seeketh to sit in the judgment-seat.' The prophet who claimed to speak by revelation now stakes that claim on a fact no one yet knows.

This chapter does two things that look unrelated but are deeply connected: it gathers the greatest chain of prophetic witnesses for Christ in the Book of Mormon, and it ends by revealing a murder that no one yet knows about. And the connection between those two things is the whole point. Nephi's argument to the hostile crowd is, in essence, *the evidence for Christ is overwhelming — every prophet from Moses to your own fathers testified of him, and you have rejected all of it.* And then, to prove that he himself is one more reliable witness in that long line, he stakes his entire credibility on a single verifiable fact: go to the judgment-seat, and you'll find the chief judge murdered, killed by his own brother. The cloud of witnesses and the murdered judge are the same argument made two ways — once from the long testimony of the past, and once from a fact about the present that only God could have shown him. If Nephi is right about the body in the judgment-seat, then maybe he's right about everything else, too.

Hebrew Word Studies

ne■ash ne■oshet (נֶאֱשַׁח נֶאֱשֶׁת) — "serpent of bronze" — **ne■ash**, serpent; **ne■oshet**, bronze or copper; the two words a deliberate Hebrew wordplay (they share consonants). The bronze serpent Moses lifted on a pole in the wilderness, at which the snake-bitten could look and live — read throughout scripture as a type of the lifted-up Christ vv. 14–15 (as he lifted up the brazen serpent in the wilderness, even so shall he be lifted up who should come... as many as should look... might live). The image at the heart of Nephi's sermon — the *brazen serpent* — comes from one of the strangest and most beautiful episodes in the Torah, and the Hebrew even contains a hidden pun. In Numbers 21, when *fiery serpents* (**ne■ashim**) bit the murmuring Israelites, the Lord told Moses to make a **ne■ash ne■oshet**, a "serpent of bronze" — the two words a near rhyme, serpent and bronze sharing the same root-sounds — and to set it on a pole, *and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live* (Num. 21:8–9). The remedy was almost scandalously simple: not a cure to drink, not a ritual to perform, not a journey to make — just a *look*. The dying Israelite had only to turn his eyes toward the thing God had lifted up, and the venom lost its power. And the strangeness is the point: the very image of the thing that was killing them — a serpent — became, lifted up by God's command, the means of their healing. Now, the Old Testament itself is wary of this object: centuries later, when Israel began to *worship* the bronze serpent as an idol, good king Hezekiah destroyed it and called it *Nehushtan*, "a piece of bronze" (2 Kgs. 18:4) — a warning that the symbol is nothing in itself; all its power was in God's word attached to it and the faith of the one who looked. But the *type* endures, and Jesus himself unlocks it. To Nicodemus he says: *as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life* (John 3:14–15). And Nephi, centuries before Christ, reads it exactly the same way — *as he lifted up the brazen serpent... even so shall he be lifted up who should come* (v. 14). The parallel is precise and rich. Christ was *lifted up* on the cross as the serpent was lifted on the pole. The dying need only *look* — turn to him *with faith, having a contrite spirit* (v. 15) — and live. The cure is not earned but received; not climbed toward but simply *looked* upon. And there is even a depth in the image of the *serpent*: on the cross, Christ who knew no sin was *made sin for us* (2 Cor. 5:21), lifted up bearing the very likeness of the thing that poisons us, so that looking on him we might be healed of it — exactly as the bronze serpent, the image of the killer, became the means of life. The whole gospel hangs in the simplicity of *look and live*. And that simplicity is precisely what makes the Nephites' refusal so tragic. Nephi's whole grief is that the cure is *right there*, lifted up, asking nothing but a turn of the eyes in faith — and they will not look. Some bitten Israelites, the tradition holds, were too proud or too faithless to look at a piece of bronze, and died with the remedy in plain sight. The Nephites are doing the same: refusing the easiest salvation ever offered, dying of a venom whose cure is one glance away. *Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth* (Isa. 45:22) — the serpent on the pole says it, the Christ on the cross says it, and Nephi on the tower says it: only look, and live.

From the Chapter's Architecture

“cross-references Num. 21:8–9 (*the serpent of bronze — ne■ash ne■oshet — lifted on a pole, when he looketh upon it, shall live — the type Nephi expounds, v. 14*); John 3:14–15 (*as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up — Jesus' own reading of the type, matching Nephi's exactly*); Isa. 45:22 (*look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth — the look and live gospel of v. 15*); 2 Kgs. 18:4 (*Hezekiah destroying the bronze serpent become idol, Nehushtan — the symbol is nothing; the power is God's word and the looker's faith*); 2 Cor. 5:21 (*he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin — Christ lifted up in the likeness of the poison, as the serpent-image healed the serpent-bite*); 1 Ne. 17:41 (*Nephi the elder on the serpent: the Lord sent fiery flying serpents... and after they were bitten he prepared a way that they might be healed; and the labor which they had to perform was to look — the same type in the small plates*); John 8:56 (*Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad — Christ's words, placed here by Nephi, Abraham saw of his coming, and... did rejoice, v. 17*); Jacob 5 (*the allegory of Zenos — the martyred prophet who did testify boldly, v. 19, whose great prophecy survives in the Book of Mormon*); Alma 33:3–17 (*Zenos and Zenock cited by Alma — the lost prophets Nephi names among the witnesses, vv. 19–20*); Omni 1:15–16; Mosiah 25:2 (*Mulek and the seed of Zedekiah among the Nephites — the living proof of Jeremiah's prophecy, v. 21*); Heb. 11–12:1 (*the great cloud of witnesses of faith — the roll call Nephi assembles, vv. 16–22*); Hel. 9:1–38 (*the running to the judgment-seat and the finding of the body — the verification of the sign of v. 27*); Hel. 6:26–30 (*the author of the secret band, Satan — the evil one who seeketh to destroy the souls of men, v. 28*). ”