



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL
<http://bookofmormoncentral.com/>



Religious Studies Center
<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

Covenant Teachings in the Book of Mormon

Author(s): Victor L. Ludlow

Source: *The Fulness of the Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon*

Editor(s): Camille Fronk Olson, Brian M. Hauglid, Patty Smith, and Thomas A. Wayment

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 2003

Page(s): 225-245



The Religious Studies Center is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Religious Studies Center.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

COVENANT TEACHINGS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Victor L. Ludlow

THE BOOK OF MORMON CONTAINS important covenant teachings of the Savior and His prophets. These teachings fulfill its first stated purpose, “which is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and *that they may know the covenants of the Lord*, that they are not cast off forever” (title page; emphasis added). The Book of Mormon is first intended to teach God’s chosen people about their history and covenants and, second, building on that foundation, it is to testify to Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ. In the Book of Mormon, various prophets and the Savior Himself teach about different covenant relationships, and they highlight special covenant promises to be fulfilled in the last days. Indeed, in His post-resurrection ministry, Jesus prophesies a key sign and other events that demonstrate when the Father’s promised covenant with Israel is finally being fulfilled in the latter days.

Victor L. Ludlow is a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

THE MEANING OF “COVENANT” AND “COVENANT MAKING”

Starting on the title page and continuing to the next-to-the-last verse in Moroni 10, the word *covenant* appears 154 times in the Book of Mormon, an average of once every three pages. Two common definitions of *covenant* are appropriate to its context within the Book of Mormon. First, the word *covenant* is often defined as a binding or solemn agreement by two or more persons or parties. Covenants in the Book of Mormon are always sincere compacts, whether they represent a *horizontal* person-to-person commitment through a solemn oath between people or a *vertical* God-to-person relationship, binding together Heavenly Father and individuals. Thirty-three of the 154 covenant citations deal with a covenant-binding relationship on a horizontal dimension between mortals, such as political, military, or secret oaths (as recorded primarily in Alma, Helaman, and 3 Nephi).¹ But the great majority of covenant references, at least 118 of them (and potentially 3 others²), are in the vertical dimension since they highlight sacred bonds between God and men. As will be discussed, these religious covenants are clustered within key visions and sermons throughout the Book of Mormon.

A second definition of *covenant* amplifies the vertical aspect and relates even more to the Book of Mormon spiritual context. *Covenants* can also be defined as God's promises to man, usually carrying with them conditions to be fulfilled by man, as recorded in the scriptures. From this definition, we learn that God's covenants include conditional promises dependent upon man's individual and collective behavior. Indeed, a major purpose of the scriptures is to serve as the repository for God's covenants. This is true not only for the Book of Mormon, which is to help Israel “know the covenants of the Lord,” but also for the Bible and other scriptures. For example, in some early English translations of the Bible, the two major divisions of the text were referred to as the “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant” instead of “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” as we know them today. The integral role of covenants is also

recognized in the scriptures from this dispensation in the very title of the Doctrine and Covenants. A major purpose of all scriptures, then, is to teach us about God's covenant expectations and conditional promises.

Moving from common English definitions to the Semitic language roots of the Old Testament, we learn that *covenant* as a noun derives from the Hebrew word *b'rith*, which probably comes from the prime root *bara*, meaning "to select" or "to choose." The agency of choice is essential in God's covenants. God does not arbitrarily enter into a covenant relationship with His children. He prepares the conditions of a covenant agreement and then invites those with faith and commitment to enter into a covenant relationship with Him. Each individual then chooses whether or not to come unto God and obey Him. Thus, a covenant is a selective choice, carefully entered into by both parties.

The most frequently used technical phrase in the Old Testament for "making a covenant" is *karat b'rith*, meaning literally to "cut a bond" or "cut a choice," similar to the idioms heard today, to "cut a contract" or to "cut a deal." The origin of this expression may lie in the ancient Near Eastern covenant ceremony of sacrificing animals by *cutting* their throats, which symbolized a point of finalization and personal commitment in the contractual process. In other words, when two parties came to an agreement, they would indicate it through an unusual act, such as cutting the throat of an animal to be used as a sacrificial offering or the main dish for their feast of celebration. Cutting or sharing bread or salt were also symbolic acts of covenant celebration.

Ironically, a second possible meaning of *b'rith* seems to be the opposite of "choice." Some scholars suggest *b'rith* is derived from the Akkadian root *biritu*, which means to "fetter" or "chain," as in a binding. We may feel uncomfortable with such strong language of being bound or joined together because, for us, a covenant is not an obligatory or forceful type of binding; it is a voluntary relationship. However, when two covenant parties are free to choose and they have joined in a mutual commitment, it is assumed they will remain true to their vows. Once they have made their pact, they are linked

or “chained together” in a solemn bond. In this context, Latter-day Saints talk about a “new and everlasting covenant,” including a “sealing together,” as in the temple ordinances. This covenant sealing represents an absolute, binding compact between God and His children, stronger than any fetters or chains of earthly mortality.

Indeed, when one looks at covenant making and “cutting a *b’rith* (a “chain” or “bond”) in this second context, the symbolism of the cutting motion can represent both a negative penalty and also a positive deliverance. Within ancient Near Eastern treaties, a list of penalties is often included within the contract, warning of the consequences of broken promises. So to “cut a bond” can mean to commit yourself to dire consequences if you break your promise. However, when we think of “cutting a bond” there is also a positive dimension and the implication of a liberation if one maintains the vow. In a gospel context, as we cut ourselves from the chains of sin by entering into a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ, we free ourselves to achieve our ultimate, eternal destiny. This promise of freedom was also given in the Book of Mormon as King Benjamin spoke to his covenant Israelites (see Mosiah 5).

In review, a covenant is a binding, solemn agreement between God and man, conditional upon certain stipulations as recorded in the scriptures. To enter into a covenant implies a voluntary, binding process between the covenant parties, often symbolized by some special act, such as eating bread together. The process requires both parties to commit themselves to adhere to the terms of the contract.

COVENANT PROMISES, PATTERNS, AND PROPHECIES IN THE BRASS PLATES OF LABAN

To appreciate the covenant teachings in the Book of Mormon, we need to highlight the covenant background the Nephite prophets and people would have had as they left Jerusalem. The three main sources of covenant teachings available to the Nephites were the books of Genesis, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah, all of which were contained in the brass plates of Laban.

Genesis. Beginning in Genesis 12, God enters into a covenant

relationship with Abraham. Chapters 12, 13, 15, and 17 highlight three great promises to Abraham. The first promise is of infinite lineage—a numberless posterity. Second, he is promised a chosen land—the territory between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Most significantly, however, is the third covenant promise which the Lord makes, declaring that Abraham’s lineage will be a blessing for all nations—a consecrated people of God. In sum, Abraham is told, “In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). The climactic covenant teachings in Genesis are found in chapter 17, where the word *covenant* appears thirteen times, more times than in any other single chapter in the scriptures. Later in Genesis, Moses highlights how this covenant relationship was repeated and renewed on various occasions, first with Abraham, then with his son Isaac, and finally with Isaac’s son Jacob, who became the recipient of the birthright and the covenant promises.

Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is another important book that explains God’s covenant relationship with the house of Israel. It contains the capstone message that Moses delivered at the end of his noble, prophetic ministry and provides an important theological foundation for later prophets and Apostles of the Lord. One special value of Deuteronomy is the pattern of covenant making evidenced throughout the book. This process is divided into six elements, which parallel the same steps that a sovereign ruler would use to establish a horizontal covenant or treaty relationship with his vassals in the ancient Near East. These six steps exemplify the covenant process between the Sovereign of this earth and His children, particularly as demonstrated in baptism, temple, and sacrament ordinances. Also, these six elements are woven into the great covenant sermon of King Benjamin, which will be discussed later. The following list reviews these six elements of the covenant pattern and highlights their application in key ordinances of the gospel:

Preamble. The first element in a covenant-making process is called the preamble or introduction (see Deuteronomy 1:1–5). The preamble establishes a link between the major parties, and it is usually recorded as an introduction, prologue, greeting, or other means of connection. We find this element today when gospel investigators

are invited to be baptized, when temple patrons are welcomed to the house of the Lord, and when Latter-day Saints attend sacrament meeting.

Historical Context. The second step provides a historical context for the covenant commitment (see Deuteronomy 1:6–4:49). This historical background shows earlier interest and involvement of the sovereign for his subjects. Today, missionary discussions and various teaching situations present the events of the Restoration to prospective Church members, and the endowment session reviews God’s creative and instructive acts prior to Adam and Eve establishing their covenants with God. We renew our baptismal and temple covenants through the sacrament service with a special sacrament hymn providing a historical context for this ordinance.

Stipulations. The most important part of covenant making is the third step, where the stipulations and obligations are defined (see Deuteronomy 5–26). The covenant parties enter into particular laws, covenants, commitments, and promises with each other. The expectations of our covenants with God are found in the teachings and commandments of the scriptures. Sometimes these commitments are general and broad, such as in the ordinances of baptism and the sacrament, while at other times they are very specific and narrow, such as in the temple endowment. In all cases, these covenants are expressed in precise, word-for-word terminology as we enter into them.

Blessings or Curses. Closely attached to the stipulations is the fourth step, where certain blessings and curses in conjunction with the covenant relationship are expressed (see Deuteronomy 27–33). Today, this is what we would call the “fine print” of the contract, where incentives for adherence or penalties for disregard of the agreement are spelled out. The blessings of spiritual companionship follow after baptism and the sacrament, and promises of rewards and punishments are part of the temple covenants as detailed in the scriptures.

Witnesses. The fifth step necessary for any covenant to be complete is validation by witnesses (see Deuteronomy 27:1–8; 30:19; 31:26; 32:1–43). These witnesses, usually both heavenly and

earthly, testify that the parties have made their proper, complete vows. All saving ordinances of the gospel, and especially baptism and the temple covenants, must be witnessed by at least two individuals. Our sacrament vows are also witnessed in a communal setting as we each participate in an external act to witness our internal commitment.

Perpetuation. The last step is for the covenant to be perpetuated through acts of recording and renewal (see Deuteronomy 27–28; 31:9–13, 24–27). The saving ordinances of baptism and the temple are recorded in Church and personal membership records. We have the gospel covenant teachings available in the scriptures, and weekly we are asked to renew our covenants. Covenants are meant to be preserved so that current and future generations can enter into and regularly renew their covenant relationships with God.

Isaiah. The third major Old Testament book forming the covenant foundation for the Book of Mormon prophets is the book of Isaiah. This profound prophet taught valuable covenant concepts and delivered important prophecies of God's covenant promises which must eventually be fulfilled. In early chapters, Isaiah pronounces judgments upon ancient wicked Israel and provides messianic prophecies and latter-day promises for the house of Jacob (see Isaiah 1–12). The words of the scriptures are also an important part of the Lord's covenant with latter-day Israel (see Isaiah 29). In later chapters, Isaiah foretells the redemption of the righteous in Zion in the context of the Lord's promises with Israel, highlighting that His Spirit would be upon them, and His words (the scriptures) would never depart from them (see Isaiah 48–59). Isaiah also reviews the Lord's perpetual covenant with Israel, including promises to be fulfilled as the Lord's victory is made known before all nations as the world welcomes His millennial reign (see Isaiah 45, 60–63).

Nephi and the other writers of the Book of Mormon quoted Isaiah in their writings because the Old Testament prophet had important things to say about the Nephites' covenant relationship with God. As Nephi explained, he quoted Isaiah because Isaiah taught how God would deal with Israel (see 1 Nephi 19:19–24).

Jacob similarly indicated that he read from Isaiah so that his listeners could know the Lord's covenants with all the house of Israel (see 2 Nephi 9:1). Jesus said that Isaiah's writings contained the full covenant relationship between God and the house of Israel. Christ significantly indicated that when the prophecies of Isaiah were fulfilled, God's covenant promises with Israel would be completed (see 3 Nephi 20:12, 46; 23:2).

These covenant teachings from the brass plates were a vital part of the scriptural heritage enjoyed by Lehi and the Book of Mormon community. With them, Lehi's descendants could find:

- The covenant *promises* given to the patriarchs, as written in Genesis.
- The *patterns* of covenant making, as recorded in Deuteronomy.
- The inspired covenantal *prophecies* of Isaiah for the latter days.

From these scriptural records, the Book of Mormon prophets found valuable teachings about covenant promises, patterns, and prophecies which they shared with their followers and latter-day readers.

BOOK OF MORMON INSIGHTS

The Book of Mormon contains many important insights about covenants between the Lord and His people. Although at least 118 references to these religious covenants can be found throughout the book, these citations are not scattered evenly. They are concentrated most heavily at the beginning, in 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi, and toward the end, in 3 Nephi. An easy way to remember which books contain the key covenant teachings is to remember that they all share the same name with different numerical prefixes—1, 2, and 3 Nephi.³ As we determine the people who speak most about covenants in the Book of Mormon, we see a similar trend, with 70 percent of the covenant references coming from just three people—Nephi, Mormon, and Jesus. Nephi, at the beginning of the Book of Mormon history, and Mormon, in his editorial comments and writings, refer to covenants twenty-one times each. Although Lehi, Jacob, King Benjamin, and Moroni also give us some important

teachings about covenants, by far the greatest concentration is found in the words of the Savior, as He specifically mentions covenants thirty-seven times in His teachings, especially as recorded in 3 Nephi. Valuable insights about covenant promises are found throughout the Book of Mormon writings of Nephi and Mormon. The teachings of King Benjamin illustrate all the major elements of a covenant pattern. And Jesus' revelations and discourses record God's covenant prophecies with the house of Israel.

NEPHI'S COVENANTAL PROMISES

Nephi's teachings about covenants set the stage for later covenant insights in the Book of Mormon. A cluster of eleven covenant citations is in 1 Nephi 13–15. This passage at the beginning of the Book of Mormon provides important insights into some early covenant teachings given in vision by an angel to Nephi. The angel tells Nephi about the covenant teachings of the Bible (see 1 Nephi 13:23, 26), the Lord's covenant promise with Lehi that his seed would receive a choice land of inheritance (see 1 Nephi 13:30; see also 2 Nephi 1:5), and God's covenants with the house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 14:5, 8, 14, 17; see also 1 Nephi 17:40; 19:15). Then, Nephi teaches his brothers about covenant Israel (see 1 Nephi 15:14) and God's covenants with Abraham (see 1 Nephi 15:18).

In 1 Nephi 22, Nephi is teaching his brothers after he had just quoted chapters 48 and 49 of Isaiah. The brothers pose some hard questions to Nephi, essentially asking, "What is the meaning of these Isaiah scriptures which you just read to us from the brass plates?" Nephi tells them how these passages contain promises for their descendants. Starting in verse 7, Nephi tries to help his brothers appreciate that some latter-day Gentiles would bless their descendants and the whole house of Israel, "unto the making known of the covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed" (1 Nephi 22:9). He continues in verses 10 and 11, saying that the "Lord God will proceed to make bare his arm in the eyes of all the nations, in bringing about his covenants and his gospel unto those who are of

the house of Israel.” This promise of the Lord making bare His arm alludes to Isaiah 52:10, one of the most quoted verses from Isaiah in the Book of Mormon (see also Mosiah 12:24; 15:31; 3 Nephi 16:20; 20:35). Nephi promises that the Gentiles, as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, will assist his seed in bringing forth covenants to the house of Israel, through which all the families of the earth will be blessed as the Lord reveals His power and glory. The Savior amplifies these and other covenant teachings in 2 Nephi.

JEHOVAH’S EARLY PROPHECIES ABOUT COVENANTS

The Lord, as a premortal spirit being, revealed important covenant teachings to the ancient prophets that are recorded only in the Book of Mormon. Most of these divine pronouncements are quoted in 2 Nephi 3, 10, and 29. In chapter 3, as Lehi blesses his son Joseph, he cites some prophecies given to ancient Joseph, who was sold into Egypt. These prophecies speak of a seer and prophet of the last days (Joseph Smith) who would bring forth scriptures from the seed of Joseph. These scriptures, along with the Bible, would teach and comfort the descendants of Joseph, “bringing them to the knowledge of their fathers in the latter days, and also to the knowledge of my covenants, saith the Lord” (2 Nephi 3:12). The Lord continues with further instruction about this prophet and the restoration, promising that the words of the Book of Mormon would strengthen the faith of Joseph’s descendants unto the remembering of His covenant that He had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see 2 Nephi 3:21).

In 2 Nephi 10, Jacob also quotes some unique covenant pronouncements of the Lord. After quoting Isaiah 50 and 51, he foretells what will happen to the Jews after the crucifixion of Christ, stating: “But behold, thus saith the Lord God: When the day cometh that they [the Jews] shall believe in me, that I am Christ, then have I covenanted with their fathers that they shall be restored in the flesh, upon the earth, unto the lands of their inheritance” (2 Nephi 10:7). Passages from Isaiah 49 are then quoted, and the Lord promises that America will be a land of inheritance for Jacob’s

descendants and a land of liberty for the Gentiles “for this cause, that my covenants may be fulfilled which I have made unto the children of men” (2 Nephi 10:15). Thus, the coming of the Gentiles to America is an important precondition for the fulfilling of God’s covenants to the house of Israel.

This promise is repeated and elaborated upon by the Lord in a revelation given to Nephi as recorded in 2 Nephi 29. After highlighting the roles of the different scriptures which will come forth from the scattered segments of Israel in the last days, the Lord concludes: “And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered in one. And I will show unto them that fight against my word and against my people, who are of the house of Israel, that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever” (2 Nephi 29:14). This verse illustrates that the scriptures contain key elements of God’s covenant promises to Israel. Christ would continue His covenant teachings over five centuries later when He appeared to the Nephites as a resurrected being.⁴

THE COVENANT PATTERN IN KING BENJAMIN’S SPEECH

Almost 150 years prior to the Savior’s postresurrection ministry, a righteous king and prophet named Benjamin delivered some powerful covenant teachings. As the first caretaker of all the prophetic and royal records which had accumulated from the time of Nephi, King Benjamin was familiar with the earlier writings of Nephi, Jacob, and others (see Omni 1:25; Words of Mormon 1:10, 17). He was also familiar with the Old Testament covenant writings of Moses and Isaiah because he taught his sons directly from the brass plates (see Mosiah 1:3)⁵. At the end of his ministry, he invited all the people to hear his final words (see Mosiah 1:10, 18). His speech and the people’s response comprise Mosiah 2–5. All six elements of a covenant pattern, as discussed earlier, are found in these chapters.

Indeed, as seen in the chart below, some of these elements intertwine in the same verses:

KING BENJAMIN'S COVENANT TEACHINGS
MOSIAH 2:1-6:3

Covenant Element	Ch. 2	Ch. 3	Ch. 4	Ch. 5	Ch. 6
Preamble	1-9, esp. 9	1-4	1, 4	1	
Historical Context	9-17, 23, 25-30, 34-35	5-17	2-4	2-4	
Stipulations	18-22, 24, 31	18-19	2, 5-11, 14-22, 26-29	5, 7-8, 11-15	
Blessings or Curses	22, 24, 31-33, 36-41	24-27	3, 12-13, 20, 23-25, 30	5, 9-10, 15	
Witnesses	14-15, 27, 41	23-24	30	2-8, esp. 6	
Perpetuation	8	20-22	4	7, 9, 11-12	1-3

Speaking to the hearts and souls of his subjects, King Benjamin followed Moses' ancient covenant pattern as he brought the people into a covenant bond with God. One century and a half later, the resurrected Savior would establish His followers as a covenant society.

CHRIST'S COVENANT PROPHECIES IN 3 NEPHI

Most of Christ's covenant teachings in the Book of Mormon are found in 3 Nephi, starting with chapter 11. As a resurrected being,

Jesus teaches three major sermons or discourses, each one dealing with covenants. The first is the American version of the Sermon on the Mount (see 3 Nephi 12–14), which is essentially the same discourse as recorded in Matthew, with a few major changes. One significant addition in the 3 Nephi version places the sermon into a covenant context as it is specifically directed to those who have already entered into a baptismal covenant relationship with the Lord (see 3 Nephi 12:1–2). Thus, the Sermon on the Mount is not a universal declaration to anyone listening to Jesus preach; it is the “Christian Constitution” for all who take upon themselves Christ’s name through the covenant ordinance of baptism.

The second discourse contains teachings to Israel on the law and the covenant (see 3 Nephi 15–16). This sermon includes material also found in the Old and New Testaments, but with greater detail. The capstone of the three sermons is His “Covenant People Discourse,” which constitutes 3 Nephi 20:10 to 23:5. This discourse is particularly valuable because it is unique to the Book of Mormon. Here we read teachings that were not recorded in the Bible but were partially mentioned earlier in 2 Nephi. It may be that Jesus taught them elsewhere, but they have not been recorded and passed down, at least not yet.

THE LAW AND THE COVENANT DISCOURSE

In the second discourse, starting in 3 Nephi 15, Jesus first clarifies some misunderstandings which the Nephites held about the law of Moses. Earlier, when the signs were given of Jesus’ birth, some Nephites thought they no longer needed to live the Mosaic law since the Son of God was now living on earth. However, their prophets persuaded them that the law was not yet fulfilled (3 Nephi 1:24–25). The resurrected Christ now appears and says to the multitude at Bountiful, “Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses” (3 Nephi 15:4). As the premortal Jehovah, He gave the law to Moses and made the covenant with Israel (3 Nephi 15:5). Then, as the mortal Savior, He fulfilled the law at Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the Garden Tomb. He continues: “For

behold, the *covenant* which I have made with my people is not all fulfilled; but the *law* which was given unto Moses hath an end in me” (3 Nephi 15:8). He tells them that the *law* was fulfilled but that the *covenant* was not yet fulfilled. The Mosaic law and the Abrahamic covenant are not the same thing. As discussed earlier, the Abrahamic covenant, with its three major promises was established six centuries before the Mosaic law, with its demands of justice, was delivered by the Lord.

In essence, the *covenant* was given first (about 1900 B.C.) as God made special promises with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but it would not be fulfilled until the last days. Elements of the three promises were fulfilled in earlier times, others during the time of Christ’s earthly ministry, and still others were not accomplished until after this gospel dispensation was begun by Joseph Smith. Indeed, the last of these covenant promises will not be completed until Christ’s millennial reign is ushered in. The *law* was given later (about 1300 B.C.) to Moses, and it refers particularly to the elaborate set of preparatory legislation, statutes, and sacrifices which constituted the Mosaic dispensation in anticipation of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. The demands of the law of justice and expectations of the law of mercy were fulfilled in Christ’s great sacrifice at Gethsemane and Golgotha. Thus, the *law*, which was given later, was fulfilled first, but the *covenant*, which was given earlier, would be fulfilled last. This follows the well-known principle, the “first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30; see also Jacob 5:63; D&C 29:30). Although the law was satisfied about two thousand years ago, we still await the completion of the covenant.

Jesus continues in 3 Nephi 15 by admonishing His listeners to keep His commandments and by discussing some of the remaining covenant promises—particularly those which must be fulfilled by the house of Israel. He teaches what has to be done to fulfill these promises. He mentions, for example, that He has other sheep in his Israelite fold who need to hear His voice. In fact, He indicates that He had mentioned this promise to His disciples in the Old World. This is recorded in John 10, where He said “Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold . . . they shall hear my voice; and there

shall be one fold, and one shepherd” (John 10:16). Jesus was to visit all the different segments of Israel. Ideally, all of Israel as a people would some day gather in their lands of inheritance and live the covenant of God. This has always been the intention of the Lord and His prophets. However, the ancient Israelites failed their destiny as a people. Instead of the world coming up to Israel’s standards, the Israelites fell into worldly behavior, and the Lord scattered them among the nations.

But, as Jesus tells us in 3 Nephi 16, in order for the covenant to be fulfilled, all Israel must unite under the Messiah’s leadership in their lands of inheritance and live as a Zion people. Before Israel can be gathered, the gospel truths must first be given to the faithful among the Gentiles, who will then be numbered among His people. He is particularly talking about the remnants of Israel scattered among the Gentiles who have joined His Church and become a covenant people. Jesus also warns the Gentiles that they could forfeit their presence in this land through their wickedness, allowing the house of Israel to have power over them. Then in 3 Nephi 16:17 He prophesies what will happen when Israel’s hope and promise is finally realized, for “then the words of the prophet Isaiah shall be fulfilled.” He concludes His teaching on this day by quoting three verses from Isaiah 52, which foretell watchmen singing and the Lord’s people rejoicing because Zion has been established, and Israel has been gathered as the Lord made bare His arm.

JESUS’ COVENANT PEOPLE DISCOURSE

In 3 Nephi 20:10, we continue with the Savior teaching the multitudes the following day. This is the beginning of what may be called His Covenant People Discourse.⁶ After referring to the words of Isaiah, He says, “And verily, verily, I say unto you, that when they [the words of Isaiah] shall be fulfilled then is the fulfilling of the covenant which the Father hath made unto his people, O house of Israel” (3 Nephi 20:12). In this significant passage, Jesus tells us where we can find a checklist of key prophecies which will mark the

fulfillment of the covenant. The list is in Isaiah, and when the words of Isaiah are fulfilled then the covenant is finally fulfilled (compare 3 Nephi 20:46; 23:1–3).

Jesus continues his Covenant People Discourse by describing some of these prophesied signs. He promises that the remnants of Israel will be gathered and given power over the unrepentant Gentiles as the Lord establishes his chosen people (3 Nephi 20:13–20). He promises to establish the house of Israel in this land “unto the fulfilling of the covenant. . . . And the powers of heaven shall be in the midst of this people” as He establishes His millennial reign (3 Nephi 20:21–22). Jesus then reviews key messianic prophecies given to Moses and covenant promises given to Abraham which He will fulfill (see 3 Nephi 20:21–28). He promises He will remember the covenant He made with His people, promising He will gather them together into the land of their inheritance with the fullness of His gospel to be preached unto them (see 3 Nephi 20:29–31). Finally, the three promises of the Abrahamic covenant (people, land, and blessing) will come together. Then, Jesus begins quoting Isaiah 52.⁷ After quoting most of the chapter, He concludes with a very important promise that “then shall this covenant which the Father hath covenanted with his people be fulfilled”! (3 Nephi 20:46).

A KEY SIGN IN THE FULFILLMENT OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

The Savior then promises a key sign so we can know when these things “shall be about to take place”—that He will gather the house of Israel and establish His Zion among them (3 Nephi 21:1). The promised sign is actually within one long, very complex sentence comprising seven verses. First, the Lord promises a sign so we will know when the promised covenant is about to be fulfilled, then He reveals the sign in verses 3 through 5, and finally He testifies that after the sign is given we will know the Father’s covenant promises are nearing fulfillment.

To clarify what Jesus is saying, one needs to identify the central

core of the sentence—the essential message which is shown: “And verily I say unto you, I give unto you [the people at Bountiful] a sign. . . . And behold, this is the thing which I will give unto you for a sign—for verily I say unto you that when these things [the Book of Mormon] . . . shall be made known unto the Gentiles . . . ; verily, verily, I say unto you, when these things shall be made known unto them of the Father, and shall come forth of the Father, from them unto you; . . . that these things might come forth from them unto a remnant of your seed [the Lamanites], that the covenant of the Father may be fulfilled which he hath covenanted with his people, O house of Israel; therefore, when these works . . . shall come forth from the Gentiles, unto your seed . . . and when these things come to pass that thy seed shall begin to know these things—it shall be a sign unto them, that they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the people who are of the house of Israel” (3 Nephi 21:1–5, 7). Though the central core of this sentence is quite long, it is profound. When the Lamanites receive and begin to know the Book of Mormon, it will be a sign that the work of the Father has already started to finally fulfill the covenant which He has made with the house of Israel.

Although many attempts to convert the Lamanites were made in the first 140 years of Church history, major success among the American Lamanites was not experienced until the administration of Spencer W. Kimball. Finally in the 1970s, Church growth in Mexico and in Central and South America demonstrated that this promised sign was being fulfilled. For example, the cities of Lima, Peru, and Mexico City, Mexico, have recorded barometers of Church growth far more dynamic than ever witnessed in Salt Lake City, Provo, or other historical centers of the Church. Lima had seven new stakes (not wards or branches, but *stakes* of Zion) established on a single weekend early in 1988. Mexico City’s record was even greater with nine new stakes being established in one weekend in November 1975. Indeed, 1975 seems to be the pivotal year in the deliverance of the sign that the Lamanites were receiving the gospel in large enough numbers that the marvelous missionary work

among the house of Israel was reaching new levels of success. Since then, the magnitude of success among the Lamanites and peoples of Central and South America has truly blossomed.

After stating the sign and its surrounding conditions in a singular sentence, Jesus continues His Covenant People Discourse and promises marvelous blessings to the covenant Israelites and obedient Gentiles of the last days after this sign is given. As a parallel to the detailed covenant teachings in chapter 20, the Lord summarizes Heavenly Father's great work of the gospel restoration among the Gentiles and His covenant people (see 3 Nephi 21:8–11; compare 3 Nephi 20:21–46). He then repeats some promises from Micah and highlights the gathering of Israel and the establishment of New Jerusalem by the Lamanites and other Israelite groups, such as Ephraim and the Ten Tribes, with the assistance of the Gentiles (see 3 Nephi 21:12–25; compare 20:13–20). Jesus continues with a summation of the Father's work in gathering the dispersed of Israel in the last days (see 3 Nephi 21:26–29; compare 20:10–12). He then places a capstone upon his Covenant People Discourse and reviews the blessings of Zion and her stakes in the last days by quoting all of Isaiah 54 (see 3 Nephi 22). When the covenant is finally fulfilled, Christ's kingdom and peace will be established as stakes of Zion are found throughout the world, Israel's people will settle in their promised lands, and righteousness will fill the whole earth. Jesus concludes His discourse in the first five verses of chapter 23 of 3 Nephi the same way He had begun it three chapters earlier, by admonishing us to search the words of Isaiah, since they contain the key covenant promises given to Israel.

In 3 Nephi 12–20, we have witnessed an evolution from the simple, terse statements of the Sermon on the Mount, through the slightly elaborated declarations in the Law and the Covenant Discourse, into the complex but structurally eloquent Covenant People Discourse with one pivotal, profound sentence containing the Lord's key latter-day sign of the fulfillment of God's covenant with the house of Israel.

MORMON'S WITNESS OF THE COVENANT PROMISES

Later in 3 Nephi, Mormon adds his own testimony to the covenant teachings of the Savior that he has recorded. One selection from Mormon's teachings provides literary consistency along with a clear capstone to Christ's covenant teachings. In chapter 29, Mormon promises that after the Book of Mormon comes forth, the people will no longer need to say that the Lord delays His coming to the children of Israel. The prophet then pronounces judgments both upon those who would deny the doings of the Lord, or the gifts of the Spirit, and also upon those who would persecute any remnant of Israel (see 3 Nephi 19:6–9). Mormon testifies that no one can turn aside or hinder the Lord from fulfilling the covenant which He has made with the house of Israel (see 3 Nephi 29:9).⁸

OUR COVENANT RESPONSIBILITIES

Our personal responsibility towards covenants is twofold: first, we need to prepare ourselves to enter into all of the covenants that the Lord has made available to us; second, we need to remember and keep the covenants we have already made. To assist in our preparation, we can review the meaning of the term "covenant," the six-step pattern of covenant making, and the key Book of Mormon passages about covenants as discussed in this article.

To assist us in our keeping of covenants, we should remember the seriousness of an oath with the Lord. The solemnity of our vows is evident in the third of the Ten Commandments, which tells us not to take the name of God in vain. We usually think of this in a negative language context—"Do not swear." But it originally had a positive covenantal context—"Do not enter into a vow with God or a promise in his name without the sincere intent to fulfill it." For example, the New Revised English Bible translates this commandment as, "You must not make wrong use of the name of the Lord your God; the Lord will not leave unpunished anyone who misuses his name." We need to solemnly keep our vows. We need to remember the consequences for not keeping a covenant we have made with God. We should also remember that God always rewards

faithful adherence to a covenant, especially if our obedience is predicated upon noble motivations, such as love, faith, and unity, rather than upon more common incentives, such as fear, logic, or peer pressure.

As we strengthen our own covenant relationship with God, we become better prepared to assist others in their covenant making. As more people join Christ's Church through the covenant waters of baptism and as more Latter-day Saints enjoy the covenant blessings of the temple, important prophecies and signs of the last days move closer to fulfillment. The key sign of the Book of Mormon message going to the Lamanites and being received by them marks the start of the final fulfillment of God's covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when their descendants will share the gospel blessings with all people. As we study the scriptures and become aware of what the Lord has promised for these latter days, we can do our share in bringing to pass what has been promised. God's work is rolling forth to effect the promises given to the patriarchs. Their descendants are preparing to gather together to the lands of their inheritance as they share gospel truths and blessings with others. Increasingly, converts from the Gentile Christian and non-Christian nations are assisting the house of Israel in building Christ's kingdom on earth and in sharing His gospel.

It is a marvelous time to be on the earth, a period foreseen and yearned for by the ancient prophets. Rather than resisting or ignoring God's expanding kingdom, and more than just witnessing prophetic promises, we share the responsibility of actually bringing to reality that which the prophets promised so long ago. As they prophesied about our age, prophets foretold of servants in the vineyards and workers in the fields of God's great harvest scenes. We can fulfill part of their dreams and vision as we build Christ's Church here and abroad. The Savior invites our assistance in fulfilling His covenant promises in the end of time so we can help usher in His millennial reign. His covenant teachings in the Book of Mormon help us catch the vision and recognize the signs of His covenant promises which were recorded so long ago but are only

now finding complete fulfillment. May we do our part to bring these covenant promises into reality!

NOTES

1. For more insight on some of these horizontal covenants made between various individuals, see Victor L. Ludlow, "Secret Covenant Teachings of Men and the Devil in Helaman through 3 Nephi 8," in *The Book of Mormon: Helaman and 3 Nephi 1–8, According to Thy Word* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 265–82.

2. With the three citations mentioning the covenants made by Helaman's stripling warriors, it is not specifically stated whether these covenants were made with God (in a vertical dimension) or with Helaman (in a horizontal relationship); see Alma 53:17–18.

3. The following list shows the books where these 118 religious covenant citations are found: title page—1, 1 Nephi—18, 2 Nephi—23, Enos—2, Mosiah—14, Alma—13 (+3? see note 2 above), 3 Nephi—32, Mormon—9, Ether—2, and Moroni—4.

4. Other key chapters in the early history of the Book of Mormon which contain valuable covenant teachings are 2 Nephi 6, 9, 30; Alma 46; and 3 Nephi 5.

5. See also Stephen D. Ricks, "Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6," in *King Benjamin's Speech* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 254–60.

6. In 3 Nephi 20, the word *covenant* appears ten times, more often than in any other chapter in the Book of Mormon.

7. Toward the end of His discourse, Jesus will also quote all of chapter 54 of Isaiah (see 3 Nephi 22). Thus, we find almost two full chapters of Isaiah within the three chapters of Christ's Covenant People Discourse.

8. Later, important Book of Mormon teachings about covenants and promises to Israel in the last days are found in Mormon 5, 8; Ether 4, 13; and Moroni 7, 10.