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"Cutting a Covenant": Making Covenants and Oaths in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon

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The Lord has always made covenants with his people to bless them and help them return to him. This restoration to the presence of God is the end goal of the Plan of Happiness that Christ made possible through his Atonement. A covenant is "an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath to perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance" (Mendenhall and Herion 1:1179). In the Hebrew Old Testament, the word *bryt* ("covenant") is almost always associated with the verb *krt* ("to cut"). These together mean "to make a covenant," but the literal meaning of the idiom *krt bryt* suggests that some aspect of cutting is involved in making a covenant. This creates an interesting paradox, since a covenant is a binding agreement between two groups but the phrase has an underlying etymology of division. Though *bryt* in time came to refer to many kinds of oaths and covenants, certain covenants under the law of Moses reveal this connection with cutting as the rituals accompanying the covenants are performed: animal sacrifice, circumcision, and the rending of cloth. These ordinances and their corresponding

covenants made after Christ's condescension allow the believer to better see, in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, how covenants relate to the ultimate goal of returning to the Father.

Animal Sacrifice

Moses 5:5–8 states that the Lord instituted the practice of animal sacrifices primarily to represent Christ; the animal was slain to remind the people of that sacrifice which Christ, the Lamb of God, would undergo. Christ was, in essence, cut for the sins of the world. Amulek testified that the ultimate sacrifice would not be an animal sacrifice nor even a human sacrifice, but an "infinite and eternal sacrifice" (Alma 34:10). To remind his people of this, however, God instituted the law of animal sacrifice before Christ's mortal birth. Animal sacrifice was the veritable sign or token of the covenant; it was the ritual that cemented the covenant made between God and man.

Though there were differences among the rituals of animal sacrifices, whether sin offerings, burnt offerings, or peace offerings, the procedure for executing them was basically the same for each (see Bible Dictionary, "Sacrifice"). At one point in the procedure, the sacrificer, who slew his own offering, would lay his hand on the head of the animal and then cut its throat. This separation symbolized cutting away sin away from a man, of isolating and disposing of those wrongdoings that would keep him out of heaven. Since "no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom" (3 Ne. 27:19), this separation was and is necessary to return to the presence of the Father.

In Genesis one finds a particular sacrificial ritual in which the animal was cut in two and the sacrificer walked up the aisle flanked by the halves of the sacrificed animal: "And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another. . . . And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces" (Gen. 15:10, 17). This act was the ritual associated with making a covenant with

God;[1] the presence of the burning lamp (or "blazing torch" as it is translated in the NIV) signified the presence of the Lord.[2] It is this light passing between the pieces of the sacrifice that shows that God is personally involved in making covenants with his people. A commentary on this passage from *The Anchor Bible* suggests that *bryt* may have come from the Akkadian word *birīt*, meaning "between" (114). This would emphasize the two-way pact which binds the two parties, God and man, together.

A fourth significance of slaying animals was not only to represent Christ's sacrifice, man's symbolic yielding up his sins, and the personal interest God takes in making covenants with us, but it was also a prediction of the punishment for breaking the two-way covenant bond. "And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant," says the Lord through Jeremiah, "which have not performed the words of the covenant which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof . . . I will give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life" (Jer. 34:19–20). The punishment or consequence for breaking the covenant was the withdrawal of the Lord's protection from Israel's enemies. In the performance of cutting the calf in two and walking between the pieces, the ritual of cutting the sacrifice symbolizes the punishment that occurs when the oath is broken. The transgressors are cut off from the Lord's protection and are at the mercy of their enemies.

The *New International Version Study Bible* designates the practice of slaughtering animals as a "self-maledictory oath" in which the

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1. Gen. 15:18: "In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram," giving him certain lands. The phrase "made a covenant" within the verse is *krt bryt* in Hebrew.

2. We see this same symbol when Moses saw the burning bush (Ex. 3:2), when the "Lord looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire" (Ex. 14:24), when the Lord "descended upon [Sinai] in fire" to make covenants with Moses (Ex. 19:18), when "the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice" of Elijah before the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18: 38), when "there came a pillar of fire" to Lehi as he prayed to the Lord (1 Ne. 1:6), and when Nephi and Lehi, Helaman's sons, were "encircled about with a pillar of fire" (Hel. 5:24).

sacrificer essentially proclaims, "May it be so done to me if I do not keep my oath and pledge" (Gen. 15:17 fn). Just as the animal is slaughtered, the sacrificer will be destroyed—left to the mercy of his enemies—if he breaks his covenant with the Lord. However, there is an even more serious punishment than being slain: it is to be cut off from the presence of the Lord forever, the more self-maledictory thought. This theme of being cut off from the presence of God is inherent in the act of slaying a sacrificial animal; in addition, the symbolism of the act is a warning that is repeated constantly throughout the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon.

Circumcision

In Hebrew, *hml bryt* is the form used to signify circumcision, the token of the Lord's covenant with Abraham and his seed. Through this ritual of cutting, both parties are reminded of their covenants. Genesis 17:10–11 expounds on this principle of loyalty and remembrance: "This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee. . . . And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you." In addition to the commandment given to Abraham to initiate the ritual of circumcision (from the Latin *circumcido*, to cut off or around), this verse reiterates the idea of the 'between-ness' that comes with a binding agreement. Those faithful Israelites who were circumcised came to symbolize those who are consecrated to the Lord—those who are bound to him. Thus, by cutting, a binding has again been wrought.

In addition, because cutting a male's foreskin increases his fertility, circumcision represented the seed that was promised to Abraham. God covenanted with Abraham that Abraham's posterity would be blessed, be numbered with him, and call Abraham their father (see Abr. 2:10–11 and Bible Dictionary, "Abraham, Covenant of"). Paul explicates the connection between circumcision and eternal posterity in Romans 4:11: "And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith . . . that he might

be the father of all them that believe." Thus, the idea of being the sire of nations arose from the ritual of circumcision and was a reminder of the eternal increase for those who kept the Abrahamic Covenant.

The Bible Dictionary says that circumcision "symbolizes some aspects of separation or dedication (1) to God, to whom Israel belonged; (2) from the world, the uncircumcised with whom Israel might not mix; (3) from sin" (Bible Dictionary, "Circumcision"). If God's people were to be part of Abraham's seed and hence united with God, it was essential that they disassociate themselves from the carnal man. If not, they would be punished. Just as slaying an animal for a sacrifice was a self-maledictory oath, the ritual of circumcision also has a self-maledictory element associated with it. The *New International Version Study Bible* sums up the meaning of the act in saying, "If I am not loyal in faith and obedience to the Lord, may the sword of the Lord cut off me and my offspring as I have cut off my foreskin" (Gen. 17:10 fn.). In Genesis 17:14, the Lord spells out the consequences for the man who rejects the covenant of circumcision: "that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant." Though the act of cutting the foreskin lost its significance in many cultures and was corrupted by God's covenant people (see Gen. 34), the ritual of *hml bryt* among God's covenant people had a vital significance. A breach in the contract meant the retraction of blessings for posterity and separation from God.

The Rending of Cloth

Clothes and garments are traditionally a symbol of power. It is this fact that gives such force to the oaths made by Moroni and his people to defend their liberty. When Moroni rent his coat and read his declaration upon it,

> The people came running together with their armor girded about their loins, rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God; or, in other words, if they should transgress the commandments

> of God, or fall into transgression, and be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ, the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments. Now this was the covenant which they made, and they cast their garments at the feet of Moroni, saying: We covenant with our God, that we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression. (Alma 46:21–22)

Here again this ritual is seen as being, like circumcision, a sign of the covenant of loyalty and obedience that God's people made with the Lord. The oath is similarly self-maledictory, and it has the same breaking, cutting, tearing connotations as sacrifices and circumcision. If the people reject the Lord, they shall be cut off from him; the interwoven strands of the garment, representative of the binding between the Lord and the people through this covenant, will be destroyed and the people separated from God and his protection.

It is important here to note the difference between making a covenant and certain types of simile curses.[3] There are many instances in the Bible and a few in the Book of Mormon where someone makes an oath to someone or over something in order to curse the person, people, or place. Isaiah 29:7–8 says,

> And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel, even all that fight against her and her munition, and that distress her, shall be as a dream of a night vision. It shall even be as when an hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty . . . so shall the multitude of all the nations be, that fight against mount Zion.

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3. For more information on simile curses and a breakdown of the types of simile curses, see "Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament, and the Book of Mormon," by Mark J. Morrise (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993).

This and other examples serve as warnings or prophecies concerning the future of a person or people if an action is or is not performed.[4] Though simile curses have some implication of harm done to the person who does not perform as he has committed, the curses are not the type of self-maledictory covenants that God makes with men. The difference between them is perhaps that the people themselves are specifically covenanting with God to do or not do a particular act instead of proclaiming a curse on others for committing or not committing a particular act (i.e., obeying the commandments, entering into a peace treaty). In cutting a covenant, the individual takes full responsibility for the fulfillment of the covenant, and he or she seals this covenant, so to speak, with a physical outward ritual—sacrificing, circumcising, or rending cloth, to name a few.

With the condescension of Christ, however, elaborate outward rituals become obsolete, and the focus is turned inward to the heart. In Christ, the law of Moses is fulfilled. He personally told the Nephites how the law of Moses "hath an end in me" (3 Ne. 15:8). He was to bring with him the new law and the new covenant, which would be available to all people who keep his commandments.

> Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers. . . . After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law

4. Another prime example of the simile curse is found over and over in Deuteronomy 28, with verse 45 giving a explication for the curses: "Moreover all these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which he commanded thee." In the Book of Mormon, Abinadi tells King Noah that his life "shall be valued even as a garment in a hot furnace; for he shall know that I am the Lord" (Mosiah 12:3). When one of Moroni's soldiers scalps Zarahemnah, he lays a curse over the scalp, saying, "Even as this scalp has fallen to the earth, which is he scalp of your chief, so shall ye fall to the earth except ye will deliver up your weapons of war and depart with a covenant of peace" (Alma 44:14).

> in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer. 31:31–33)

Thus remembering God and his covenants shifted from outward rituals to inward responsibility. As Mendenhall and Herion say of this new covenant, "It is a description of the complete internalization of the divine will that makes unnecessary the entire machinery of external enforcement" (1:1192). This modification from the Mosaic Law to Christ's Higher Law contains interesting parallels with "cutting" covenants like animal sacrifice, circumcision, and the rending of cloth.

The New Sacrifice

After Christ came, sacrifices were unnecessary because the ultimate sacrifice had already been paid by the One who would bring an eternal Atonement for mankind. "And ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood . . . for I will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings" (3 Ne. 9:19). The new form of remembering Christ's sacrifice would be the sacrament. The word *sacrament* originated from the Latin phrase *se sacramento obstringere*, meaning "to bind themselves with an oath" ("Covenants," 1198). The word has since degenerated into merely having a sacred or mystic nature, but believers are really renewing a covenant every Sabbath by partaking of the sacrament. In taking the sacrament, partakers claim that they are willing to act as Christ and as a witness of him, to constantly remember him, and to keep his commandments (see Moroni 4:3; 5:2). This is the covenant that they renew every week, the oath with which they bind themselves. The *Anchor Bible* also states that "the Latin *sacramentum* at the time of the early Church referred to a soldier's oath of loyalty to the Roman emperor" ("Covenants," 1198), which holds interesting parallels for the emperor, the king that the subjects, in a sense, swear loyalty to each week.

The sacrament also has intrinsic implications of cutting. It is evident from 1 Corinthians 11:24–25 that the bread and water have these innate connotations of cutting:

> And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance

> of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament [covenant] in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.

In promising to remember him, covenant makers bind themselves to him through that remembrance. In acting like him, they therefore symbolically cut themselves off from the world, since they cannot act like both the Savior and Satan or the natural man. This is the only way that the covenant man or woman can obtain a remission of sins (see JST Matt. 26:26, 28). Partaking of the sacrament is the new way they remember Christ's sacrifice; as the Lord says through Hosea, "For I desired mercy [Heb. charity, or loving-kindness], and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6, JST footnote included). Covenant people now have the privilege every week to demonstrate their willingness to remember how Christ was symbolically cut and to act like Christ in cutting themselves off from the world.

The New Circumcision

As Christ has come and the old way of remembering God through sacrifices has been replaced with taking the sacrament, other rituals and signs have been replaced with more inward signs of commitment. He has fulfilled this part of the law of Moses as well; he told the Nephites when he visited them that "The law of circumcision is done away in me" (Moroni 8:8). Instead of being circumcised (though today when male babies are born it is simply an accepted procedure as a matter of cleanliness and tradition), his covenant people, under the Higher Law, are commanded to have their hearts circumcised. How much harder is this commandment! Jeremiah urges, "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart" (Jer. 4:4). From what has been discussed about *krt bryt*, this scripture might even be read, "Bind yourselves to the Lord, and take away the evils or worldly tendencies of your heart." God's people are to cut away the evil that is in their hearts so that they may not be cut off from the Lord.

The new token of circumcision, a new *hml bryt*, is what the Lord requires of his people—to have the covenants and the law

internalized. Paul in Romans 2:29 and the JST of Romans 3:1 says, "Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter. . . . What advantage then hath the Jew over the Gentile? Or what profit of circumcision, who is not a Jew from the heart?" The Lord's people today participate in the sacrament in honor of his sacrifice; thus they must be willing to make sacrifices themselves as he did so that they can return to the presence of God the Father. The Lord actually commands his people to sacrifice themselves: "And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire[5] and with the Holy Ghost" (3 Ne. 9:20). The following emblem poem by George Herbert illustrates beautifully how the broken heart is the sacrifice that is to be proffered to God:

The Altar

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as they hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touched the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy power doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name:
That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
Oh let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine. (Norton 1575)

5. It is possible to surmise that this fire relates back to the "blazing torch" or "burning lamp" symbol, representing the presence and the protection of God for his covenant people who have broken hearts and contrite spirits. As Psalm 34:18 states, he will be "nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit."

As the poem states, it is the individual heart that should be placed on the altar, just as Christ offered himself to the Father to make restitution for all mankind. In giving up the heart to God, the penitent and humble man or woman also gives up all sin and cuts out all that is not of God. As followers today participate in this new *hml bryt* and offer up humble and soft hearts, having had the evil cut from them, they will not be destroyed and cut off from the presence of the Father. Lehi, just before he died, gave a caveat to his children concerning the state of their hearts:

> My heart hath been weighed down with sorrow from time to time, for I have feared, lest for the hardness of your hearts the Lord your God should come out in the fulness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed forever. . . . And he hath said that: Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence. (2 Ne. 1:17, 20)

God's covenant people are saved by Christ's sacrifice, but it is only after they make the effort to separate themselves from the world and to be more like Christ that they will be sanctified through Christ's Atonement and be worthy to return.

The New Rending

It is no longer cloth that needs to be rent to make a covenant with God. From Joel it is clear that the Lord prefers his people to "rend your heart, and not your garments, and repent, and turn unto the Lord your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and he will turn away the evil from you" (JST Joel 2:13). From the phrase "for the remission of sins," the word 'remission' comes from the Latin *remittere*—to send back, give up, or reject. When people confess and forsake their sins, they give up their sins, cutting such ungodly acts out of their lives; Christ, in turn, is able to take away the judgments that would come to mortals because of those sins. This echoes all that has been discussed about broken hearts and a contrite spirits; hearts are broken so that those who have covenanted with God

may have access to the Atonement and hence be able to return to the presence of the Father.

The ultimate rending, however, is that of Christ himself as symbolized by a veil. Hebrews 10:19–20 says that the veil represents Christ's flesh; thus, in a very symbolic, very beautiful way, Christ was rent, cut, torn, broken for us that the covenanted might return to God the Father. This was powerfully shown when "the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom" (Matt. 27:51). In visualizing the ancient temple of Solomon, when the veil was rent those in the Holy Place, the chamber connected to the outer court, then had access to the Holy of Holies. They could then pass through the rent veil into the presence of God. The covenants now cut with God are effectual because Christ was cut, and it is through his sacrifice that the binding power of covenants is effectual, thus enabling his people to return to his presence and the presence of God the Father. Additionally, like the one who passes down the aisle flanked by the sacrificial animal, Christ is the go-between—the Mediator for those he seeks to join with the Father. "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

As the Mediator, he is the uniting force, the power that binds God to men. The very paradox that surrounds *kert bryt* is the same paradox that surrounds Christ as being both the one who is cut and the one who binds. The seemingly contradictory idea is settled in realizing that it is Christ's sacrifice that allows mankind to be bound to him and to the Father in covenant relationships that will help them return to that God who gave them life.

Oaths Today

Paul, in 1 and 2 Timothy, speaks of those in the latter days who will be "speaking lies in hypocrisy," and who will have "their conscience seared with a hot iron" as well as those who are trucebreakers, false accusers, and traitors. Promises, oaths, and covenants are broken far too often. It is hard for many today to imagine that the spoken or written agreement could be so binding and unbreakable—relationships "built upon little more than

promises reliably made and honorably kept" ("Covenants," 1179). Even wicked men and women of the past kept their oaths; when negotiations for surrender were being arranged, Zarahemnah said to Moroni,

> Behold, here are our weapons of war; we will deliver them up unto you, but we will not suffer ourselves to take an oath unto you, which we know that we shall break, and also our children; but take our weapons of war, and suffer that we may depart into the wilderness; otherwise we will retain our swords, and we will perish or conquer. (Alma 44:8)

In spite of his depraved state, Zarahemnah had respect for the binding word and was willing to die rather than make an oath to his enemy that he knew he would break.

In this dispensation, mankind has been giving a warning from the Lord concerning how they are to treat oaths and covenants:

> And the arm of the Lord shall be revealed; and the day cometh that they who will not hear the voice of the Lord, neither the voice of his servants, neither give heed to the words of the prophets and apostles, shall be cut off from among the people; For they have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant. (D&C 1:14–15)

The *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, making a sobering statement concerning current attitudes toward covenants, says, "Covenant-based relationships in the West have become almost obsolete, the fragile institution of marriage remaining the most noteworthy vestige of such relationships" ("Covenants," 1179). The binding power of the priesthood can have no effect on marriages, families, and lives if no one is willing to commit to those binding relationships completely.

In the parable of the vineyard, the wild branches of the olive trees are those which will be cut down, cut off, severed from the roots of the tree. The roots in the allegory are representative of the covenants man makes with God; the roots are what allow the branches, his people, to survive. If people are not willing to stay connected to the roots and become feral, then they will be cut off.

As Romans 11:2–22 says, "For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off."

Numbers 30:2 says, "If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth." As people today cut sacred and binding covenants with the Lord and with others, let them remember to not only symbolically cut covenants but to literally break themselves off from the world and tear the inhibiting sin from their lives. Let them remember he who was symbolically cut so that they might honorably keep their covenants and return to live with God the Father.

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