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Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon

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Introduction

While most scholarly interpreters recognize God’s covenant given to Abraham as the central theme of the Hebrew Bible, their views on the meaning of that covenant and its long term implications for the descendants of Jacob and for the nations of the world continue to exhibit a wide range of conflicting possibilities. Not only do Jewish and Christian interpretations divide dramatically, interpretations within those major frameworks display wide ranges of both agreement and disagreement.

A major development in the methodologies used by Old Testament scholars in the last half century has inspired several fresh and helpful approaches to the ancient theme of the Abrahamic covenant. For example, Jon D. Levenson, Harvard University’s professor of Jewish studies has published a monograph challenging the widely assumed characterizations of Jewish understandings as commonly compared to Christian traditions regarding the Abrahamic covenant.¹

¹ Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism,*
Heidelberg University’s Old Testament professor Rolf Rendtorff published an interpretation of God’s covenant with Israel based on a holistic analysis of the entire Pentateuch.® Yale’s Joel Baden has produced the most recent study, trying to take advantage of the preceding two centuries of historical criticism, while recognizing the contributions of the more recent approaches.® However, in this essay I will interact mostly with the Australian evangelical scholar, Paul R. Williamson, because his approach lends itself most straightforwardly to a comparison with the Nephite interpretations of the Abrahamic covenant.®

Most scholarly effort to understand the Abrahamic covenant in the twentieth

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Christianity, and Islam, Princeton University Press, 2012, demonstrates effectively that Jewish interpretations have long seen Abraham having universal influence for good in the world as a fulfillment of part of the promise to Abraham.

2 Rendtorff’s original Die Bundesformel was published in 1995 by Verlag Katholisches. It was translated into English by Margaret Kohl and published by T&T Clark in 1998 as The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation.


century accepted the diachronic approach of Julius Wellhausen. Scholars usually interpreted the variations in the wording of the relevant passages as a natural outcome of a process through which our current Genesis was formed through the merger of several earlier documents containing their own versions of related materials. This approach tends to minimize the differences and to assume that all these passages were understood in ancient Israel to be saying the same thing. While most Latter-day Saint commentators have maintained some distance from Wellhausen’s documentary hypothesis, they have also tended to gloss over differences in wording in these texts. But those very differences have motivated a growing number of scholars generally to look ever more carefully for meaningful explanations of those differences that would enable a more precise understanding of God’s covenant(s) with Abraham.\(^5\)

After detailed analysis of both the texts and the leading scholarly attempts to interpret and reconcile all these texts, Williamson proposes that the Abraham narrative

\(^5\) I have discussed these various approaches in much greater detail in my working paper entitled “All Kindred shall be Blessed: Nephite, Jewish, and Christian Interpretations of the Abrahamic Covenant,” which is available online at the BYU Library’s ScholarsArchive.
is bound together by two major promissory themes: Abraham as the physical progenitor of a “great nation,” and Abraham as the spiritual benefactor of “all the nations of the earth.” The establishment of the “great nation” is the primary focus up to and including the covenant established in Genesis 15. From this point on, however, attention is chiefly paid to the “seed” through whom Abraham will mediate blessing to “many nations.” This emphasis culminates in the establishment of an eternal covenant (in Gen. 22) that will be perpetuated exclusively through the special “seed” who will descend from Abraham through Isaac.⁶

While the Old Testament writers mostly interpreted the covenant in terms of a promised land and God’s repeated deliverance or future glorious restoration of remnants of his chosen people—who lived in the highly problematic geo-political crossroads of Palestine—Christian writers readily followed the lead of the New Testament by seeing in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of these promises to Abraham. And the Christianization of the world offered them an attractive way to explain how Israel blesses all the families of the earth.

The Book of Mormon perspective on the Abrahamic covenant is both clear

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⁶ Williamson, pp. 258–9.
and unique. It clearly and repeatedly anticipates the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in the last days. But rather than constituting God’s solution, traditional Christianity becomes a significant part of the problem precisely because it has lost many of the most “plain and precious parts” of Christ’s gospel. The context for the last days described by the Nephite prophets is one in which all the branches of Jacob’s descendants are scattered and lost from the true Abrahamic religion and, in a similar way, all the branches of original Christianity are confused and divided in competition with one another. The “remnant prophecy” proclaimed throughout the Book of Mormon foretells a divine restoration of Christ’s gospel to the Gentiles first that will signal the onset of the last days. A new Gentile church will emerge as the human catalyst that will enable the remnants of Joseph, Judah, and the lost tribes of Israel to come to a knowledge of Jesus Christ as their promised Messiah and to a belief in him. The lost prophetic writings from these branches of Jacob’s descendants will be rediscovered and provide the means for convincing both Gentiles and Israel that Jesus Christ was and is the Messiah. In this way, the prophetic writings from these branches of ancient Israel—and especially the Book of Mormon, from the lineage of Joseph—will emerge as the primary instruments through which Abraham’s seed will become a blessing to the nations, leading in
turn to the restoration of the house of Israel as a people to their god and to their promised lands.

**Covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon.**

The notion of binding covenants or promises permeates Book of Mormon prophetic discourse and surfaces in a variety of contexts. These range from the covenants men made with each other in pursuit of different ends, good or evil, to the promises made by God to his people for their security and prosperity in their lives on this earth and for their eternal blessings hereafter. Prominent among these is the universal promise to all who would come to dwell in this promised land—that if they would keep the commandments of God, they would prosper in the land. The prophets’ message to the wicked was always that if they would not repent, they would be destroyed. The call to repentance was simply an invitation to resume and recommit to the original covenant of obedience. But from the beginning with Lehi and Nephi, all Book of Mormon writers recognized that the full manifestation of God’s covenants offered to his children on the earth was only articulated in the gospel of Jesus Christ by which all men and women everywhere were invited to come unto him and receive eternal life. While the Book of
Mormon understanding of God’s covenant with Abraham has been well and accurately summarized in various reference works, I have undertaken the following essay in the belief that there is even more to be learned from a detailed examination of the Book of Mormon references in their various contexts.⁷

The Book of Mormon maintains three related, but distinct streams of covenant discourse—from the writings of its first prophets to the very end. All three are embedded in prophecies that feature an if/then and if not/then structure. And all three are intimately connected to the Book of Mormon itself and its long-term mission. Furthermore, all three are featured in the teachings of multiple Nephite prophets and in the teachings of Jesus Christ himself to the Nephites. The first of these streams of covenant discourse is the Lord’s promise to Lehi and his successors that, depending on their obedience, he will give them a chosen land of liberty in which they will be prospered as a people. The second is a version of the Abrahamic covenant—focused on Jacob’s son Joseph as the ancestor of Lehi—which emphasizes (1) the promise to the house of Israel that they will ultimately be

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gathered home in peace and righteousness to their promised homeland and (2) the promise received originally by Abraham and not much repeated in the Bible that in his seed all the kindreds of the earth would be blessed. The third is the universal covenant the Father has offered to all his children as individuals, without respect to Abrahamic descent, that if they would accept his gospel and come unto him, they would receive eternal life.

The Book of Mormon, to be produced by Lehi and his successors, was destined to become the primary means in the last days by which the gospel would come first to the Gentiles, and subsequently to the lost and scattered tribes of Israel, to gather them in—becoming in that process a blessing to all nations. That unifying vision of the three covenants was given to Lehi and Nephi, was re-articulated by Jesus himself in his visit to the Nephites, and provided the overarching structure for the final teachings and prophecies of Mormon and Moroni at the end of the record.

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8 It is worth noting that the revelations of the Restoration do not contain any detailed exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Instead they state five times that the Book of Mormon contains the fullness of the everlasting gospel or “all those parts of my gospel” which the Nephite prophets had prayed would be preserved and given to the Gentile nation. See Doctrine and Covenants 20:9, 27:5, 42:12, 135:3 and 10:46.
The Lehitic and Jaredite Covenants

The most obvious covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon centers on the promise God made first to Lehi, then to Nephi, and subsequently to their successors. It was cited frequently throughout the writings of Nephite prophets for a thousand years and was alluded to even more often. It is the promise to Lehi and his successors that if they will keep the commandments of God, they will be led to and prosper in the promised land—a land of liberty. This promise is cited repeatedly (1) to call wicked Nephites and Lamanites to repentance and (2) to explain the blessings of peace that accrue to the righteous at various points in Nephite/Lamanite history.

One first encounters the Lehitic covenant, not as it was given to the prophet Lehi, but as it was given subsequently to his young son Nephi. Not many verses after Nephi tells the reader he would “not make a full account” of the “many things which [Lehi] prophesied and spake unto his children” (1 Nephi 1:16), he does present that covenant in the form the Lord gave it to him: “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper and shall be led to a land of promise, yea, even a land which I have prepared for you, a land which is choice
above all other lands” (1 Nephi 2:20). Only two chapters later, Nephi remembers this as a promise to his own descendants: “Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise” (1 Nephi 4:14). Nephi also quotes a later version of this covenant that was expanded by the Lord to focus on its role in establishing the faith of Lehi’s family in the Lord:

For he saith:

I will make that thy food shall become sweet, that ye cook it not.

And I will also be your light in the wilderness.

And I will prepare the way before you

if it so be that ye shall keep my commandments.

Wherefore inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments,

ye shall be led towards the promised land.

And ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led.

Yea, and the Lord said also that after ye have arriven to the promised land,

ye shall know

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9 All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from Royal Skousen’s 2010 critical edition published by Yale University Press—The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text.
that I the Lord am God and
that I the Lord did deliver you from destruction, yea,
that I did bring you out of the land of Jerusalem.

1 Nephi 17:13–14

Later, Nephi incorporates a much longer version of this covenant into his
text as part of Lehi’s final instructions and blessings to his family.¹⁰ He presents it
both as a promise given to him personally and as a universal promise that applies
to anyone “that the Lord God shall bring” (2 Nephi 1:9).

We have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other
lands, a land which the Lord God *hath covenanted with me* should be a land
for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath consecrated this land
unto me and to my children forever, and also all they which should be led
out of other countries by the hand of the Lord. (2 Nephi 1:5)

The universal version of the covenant was also clear for Lehi:

Wherefore this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring. And if it
so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he
hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore they shall never

¹⁰ 2 Nephi 1:3–12. In verse 9 we read, “I Lehi have obtained a promise.”
be brought down into captivity. If so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound, cursed shall be the land for their sakes. But unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever. (2 Nephi 1:7)

In appending a brief account of the Jaredite record, which was discovered and translated much later in Nephite history, to his father’s abridgment of the Nephite records, Moroni learned that the brother of Jared had received a similar promise from the Lord before he brought his people from the tower of Babel to this same land. Moroni then used that understanding to interpret and explain the ups and downs of the Jaredite experience. Moroni quotes Jared himself anticipating such a blessing when he sent his brother to “inquire of the Lord” where he would take their group: “And who knoweth but the Lord will carry us forth into a land which is choice above all the earth. And if it so be, let us be faithful unto the Lord, that we may receive it for our inheritance” (Ether 1:38). The Lord heard their prayers and said:

I will go before thee into a land which is choice above all the land of the earth. And there I will bless thee and thy seed and raise up unto me of thy seed, and the seed of thy brother . . . a great nation. And there shall be none greater . . . upon all the face of the earth. Ether 1:42–43
While the requirement of faithfulness to the commandments is recognized in Jared’s proposed prayer to the Lord, it is not explicitly included in the version of the Lord’s answer reported in Moroni’s first version of the Lord’s response. But it becomes the focus in the second version:

And he [the Lord God] had sworn in his wrath unto the brother of Jared that whoso should possess this land of promise, from that time henceforth and forever, should serve him, the true and only God, or they should be swept off when the fullness of his wrath should come upon them. Ether 2:8

This universalized version of the Lehitic/Jaredite covenant will be discussed in detail later.

By my count, the Nephite/Jaredite covenant formula of (1) keeping the commandments, (2) receiving a promised land, and (3) prospering in that land is repeated 80 times in the Book of Mormon in a positive (38 times) or a negative (42 times) formulation.11 Many of those statements invoke the simplest version stated

above. Others elaborate to expand or make the meaning more specific. Lehi himself attached a promise of liberty together with the explicit covenant language of blessing and cursing:

Wherefore this land is consecrated unto him whom [the Lord] shall bring. And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore they shall never be brought down into captivity. If so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound, cursed shall be the land for their sakes. But unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever. 2 Nephi 1:7

Almost half of the negative versions of this covenant characterize the curse or punishment upon the wicked as being “cut off from the presence of the Lord.” When this phrase occurs in Leviticus, it is usually understood to refer to “the tabernacle presence of the Lord.” But in his teachings on the atonement, Jacob uses this phrase to describe the general consequence of the fall or “the first


judgment” for all men—“because man became fallen, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord” and suffered spiritual death (2 Nephi 9:6; Alma 42:9; Helaman 14:15–18). Alma later explained that the Lamanites were “cut off from the presence of the Lord” because they had “not kept the commandments of God . . . from the beginning of their transgressions in the land” (Alma 9:14). Mormon saw the verification of “these promises” in the Nephite experience of “wars and destructions” which were “brought upon them” by “their quarrelings and their contentions, . . . their murderings and their plunderings, their idolatry and their whoredoms and their abominations” (Alma 50:21). When the Lord used this phrase with Jared’s brother, we see the suggestion that “the presence of the Lord” may refer to his Spirit: “For ye shall remember that my Spirit will not always strive with man. Wherefore if ye will sin until ye are fully ripe, ye shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord” (Ether 2:15). Moroni later explained that the otherwise good Jaredite king Morianton was “cut off from the presence of the Lord” “because of his many whoredoms” (Ether 10:11).

It could be objected that what I have been calling the Lehitic or Jaredite covenant is usually referred to as a “promise” in the text. But in Lehi’s final instructions to his family as quoted above, he did once specifically refer to the
promise as a covenant: “We have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands, a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed” (2 Nephi 1:5). While it bears obvious similarities to God’s covenant with Abraham, Lehi calls it a promise—which, as I will demonstrate below, amounts to the same thing:

I Lehi have obtained a promise that inasmuch as they which the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land. . . . And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments, they shall be blessed upon the face of this land . . . and they shall dwell safely forever, 2 Nephi 1:9

But “when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief,” the judgments of God “shall rest upon them” (2 Nephi 1:10). The covenant language of blessing and cursing is frequently used in connection with this promise. Lehi goes on to appeal to his older sons and urge them to repentance “that ye may not come down into captivity” or “be cursed with a sore cursing” incurring “the displeasure of a just God”—even “eternal destruction” (2 Nephi 1:16–22).

In the blessings of his sons, Lehi finally comes to Joseph the youngest and explicitly connects the promises he has received in being led out of Jerusalem to
“the covenants of the Lord which he made unto Joseph” who “truly saw our day.” Like his descendant Lehi, Joseph had also “obtained a promise of the Lord that out of the fruit of his loins the Lord God would raise up a righteous branch unto the house of Israel” that would “be remembered in the covenants of the Lord” and be brought of “darkness and out of captivity unto freedom”—“for great was the covenants of the Lord which he made unto Joseph” (2 Nephi 3:4–5).\(^\text{13}\) In this passage, Lehi clearly sees the promises of the Lord to Joseph as equivalent to the covenants the Lord made with him. And just as clearly, Lehi understands the promises he has received as part of the fulfillment of the same promises or covenants received generations earlier by his ancestor Joseph. All were conditional upon obedience to the commandments of God, and all were connected to promised blessings or cursings, according to that obedience or disobedience.

This same equivalence between promise and covenant is reflected in the references to the lands promised to Lehi, Jared, and Abraham in the covenants God made with them. Nephi quotes Isaiah’s reference to Abraham’s promised lands in

\(^{13}\) While the grammar of this quotation can offend the ear of a modern reader, it has been helpfully analyzed by Stanford Carmack in his essay, “The Case of Plural Was in the Earliest Text,” Interpreter 18 (2016), pp. 109–137.
Isaiah 14:1-2: “For the Lord will have mercy on Jacob and will yet choose Israel and set them in their own land. . . . And they shall return to their lands of promise, and the house of Israel shall possess them.” Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob refer 28 times to their own “lands of promise” or “the promised land,” which they also refer to as the land of their inheritance which replaced the land of Lehi’s inheritance in the land of Jerusalem. Much later, Mormon will tell his readers that the Jews “or all the house of Israel” will be eventually restored to the “land of their inheritance, which the Lord God hath given them, unto the fulfilling of the covenant”—when the Lord will “remember the covenant which he made unto Abraham and unto all the house of Israel” (Mormon 5:14, 20). In his own late prophecies, Moroni calls the descendants of Lehi in a future gentile world a “remnant of the seed of Joseph,” who are thereby also “of the house of Israel” and “partakers of the fulfilling of the covenant which God made with their father Abraham” (Ether 13:6–11).

As previously noted, God’s covenant with Lehi or with Jared is the usual

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14 Compare 1 Nephi 2:4, 11, and 3:16, 22 and 5:2 with 1 Nephi 13:30: “the land which the Lord hath covenanted with thy father that his seed should have for the land of their inheritance.”
reference point for prophets who are sent to call a wicked people to repentance. A full fourth of the references to that covenant frame explicit calls for the wicked to repent, to turn, or to return to the Lord and to obey his commandments as the only way to avoid or get relief from the cursing that comes upon the wicked. The rest of the negative occurrences implicitly say the same thing.

What should also be pointed out in these passages is the absence of any special repentance process or required penance. The wicked are simply required to give up their wicked practices and begin keeping the commandments. The language of turning from their own “strange” or “forbidden” paths to the way of the righteous seems to fully define the concept of repentance the Lord and his prophets have in mind. Moroni tells how the initiative taken by the Jaredite king Shule to protect the prophets from persecution and reviling by the wicked population successfully enabled the prophets to bring “the people . . . unto repentance. And because the people did repent of their iniquities and idolatries, the Lord did spare them; and they began to prosper again in the land” (Ether 7:25–26). Similarly, a trio of Nephite prophets were able to convince a wicked generation of Nephites who were losing their territory to their enemies to repent:

But behold, Moronihah did preach many things unto the people because of
their iniquity. And also Nephi and Lehi, which were the sons of Helaman, did preach many things unto the people, yea, and did prophesy many things unto them concerning their iniquities and what should come unto them if they did not repent of their sins. And it came to pass that they did repent; and inasmuch as they did repent, they did begin to prosper. Helaman 4:14–15

Perhaps the most dramatic and authoritative of these calls to repentance occurred at the time of the great destructions that came upon the wicked Nephites at the time of the crucifixion of Christ. The “lamenting and howling” of the survivors was reduced to silence when a voice from heaven was heard by all declaring himself to be Jesus Christ and announcing to them his gospel and his invitation to all that they repent and come unto him. “Repent and come unto me, ye ends of he earth, and be saved” (3 Nephi 9:22). Then after “the space of many hours” the voice came again repeating and expanding the call to repentance in terms of the covenants the Lord had given to their fathers:

O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under wings if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart! But if not, O house of Israel, the places of your
dwellings shall become desolate until the time of the fulfilling of the 

*covenant* to your fathers. 3 Nephi 10:6–7

As many times as “the covenant to [their] fathers” was stated and restated to the Nephites, it always reduced to the same simple formula: “for the promise of the Lord was, if they should keep his commandments they should prosper in the land” (Alma 48:25). Editorializing on his description of a time of Nephite prosperity, Mormon cites their blessings as a verification of the words which the Lord had spoken originally to their ancestor Lehi: “Blessed art thou and thy children, and they shall be blessed! And inasmuch as they shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land. But remember, inasmuch as they will not keep my commandments, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord” (Alma 50:20). It is not accidental that the frequent citings or allusions to the Lehitic covenant seem to raise memories of the Abrahamic covenant or even of the gospel of Jesus Christ as they recur throughout the Book of Mormon text. The promise of lands and posterity would appear to be a particularization of the broader promise to Abraham. And the Book of Mormon repeatedly frames the latter-day restoration of the gospel as a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that “in his seed all the kindreds of the earth shall be blessed.” In another study, I have also shown that the
rhetorical form of hundreds of abbreviated references to the gospel in the Book of Mormon is imitated in the way many of the references to the Lehitic covenant are formulated suggesting that we should see a deeper connection between these three streams of covenant discourse.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{The Abrahamic Covenant}

The second great stream of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon reached back explicitly to God’s covenant with Abraham, but shifted the focus beyond the current concern of prophets for the blessing and cursing of current generations of Nephites or Jaredites to its long term implications for the house of Israel and even for all mankind. It grew out of the great visions of Lehi and Nephi and the teachings of Christ to the Nephites. And it recurred repeatedly to the last part of God’s promise given individually to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that “\textit{in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”}\textsuperscript{16} While much of the attention given by biblical scholars to the Abrahamic covenant has tended to ignore

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\textsuperscript{16} Genesis 22:18. See Genesis 12:3 (Abram), 26:4 (Isaac), and 28:14 (Jacob).
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that last part of the promise, and Christian scholars, following Peter and Paul, have
tended to see Christ himself as the fulfillment of this promise, Book of Mormon
discourse consistently presents an interpretation that pushes that fulfillment all the
way forward to the end of times. The salvation history presented in the visions of
Book of Mormon prophets and in the teachings of Jesus to the Nephites is
inseparable from the Abrahamic covenant used as a device to connect the
beginning of God’s people with the end.

The 29 mentions of Abraham in the Book of Mormon serve a variety of
functions. Two occur incidentally in material quoted from Isaiah.\textsuperscript{17} Two more
occur in an expanded account of how Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek.\textsuperscript{18}
Three use an account of Abraham with Isaac and Jacob seated in the kingdom of
heaven (or of God), with their garments “cleansed “ and “spotless, pure and
white,” as an incentive to inspire the people to repent that they might qualify to be
seated there with their ancient fathers.\textsuperscript{19} In eight passages the Nephite prophets
remind the people that their god is the same god claimed by Abraham, Isaac, and

\textsuperscript{17} 2 Nephi 8:2 and 27:33.

\textsuperscript{18} Alma 13:15.

\textsuperscript{19} Alma 5:24, 7:25, and Helaman 3:30.
Jacob who delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage and performed other great miracles in the preservation of their fathers.\textsuperscript{20} In these and other passages, the god of Abraham is identified six times with the prophesied Messiah that Abraham and other prophets in his tradition saw in vision and prophesied of his coming and his atonement as recorded in scriptures not found in our modern Bible.\textsuperscript{21} Another eight passages refer explicitly to the covenant God made to remember Abraham’s seed forever.

It will be helpful in the following discussion to distinguish three key phrases in salvation terminology, so that we can observe their interactions and roles in the Book of Mormon teachings and prophecies.

1. The \textit{plan of salvation} is the grand scheme of God’s actions designed to make possible the salvation of all mankind—his spirit children. It includes the creation of the world, the fall of man, the atonement of Jesus Christ, the preaching of the gospel, the establishment of the kingdom of God, the work of the spirit world, the


\textsuperscript{21} 1 Nephi 19:10, Jacob 4:5, Helaman 8:16–19, Ether 13:11.
final gathering of Israel, and the final judgment of all mankind. These are the things the Father and the Son have done or will do for mankind, creating the opportunity for their spirit children to become like them in every way.

2. The gospel or doctrine of Jesus Christ teaches men and women individually the way they must go, what they must do, if they would be prepared at the judgment to enter into the presence of the Lord. 22 It is clearly taught in the Book of Mormon as a six-part formula requiring (1) faith in Jesus Christ, (2) repentance, (3) baptism in water, (4) baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, and (5) endurance in faith unto the end, for (6) all who would receive eternal life.

3. Salvation history is the story told in the historical scriptures and in the prophecies of how God and his prophets have taught and will teach the gospel to men and women in different dispensations and how through successive cycles of apostasy and repentance, 

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22 In a previous essay, I offered a clarification of the meanings and relationships of these and other connected scriptural terms. See, Noel B. Reynolds, “This is the Way,” Religious Educator, vol. 14, No. 3 (2013), pp. 71–83.
destruction and restoration, the means for bringing the Lord’s people together in righteousness in a final dispensation will occur.

The Abrahamic covenant is the key thread in that salvation history that reassures the wicked and the righteous that the Father is in control, that he loves his children in the earth, and that he will reward them appropriately at the last day, according to the choices they have made, even unto giving eternal life to all who will qualify by accepting his gospel and enduring to the end. But we make a category mistake when we think of the Abrahamic covenant as another version of the gospel. Like the gospel, it is a key part of salvation history. But each of these plays an important, but clearly distinct role. The Abrahamic covenant entails prophecies describing the future working out of salvation history for such named groups as the Gentiles, the remnant of Joseph, the Jews, and all the tribes of Israel. The gospel entails the greatest prophecy describing how the salvation of every individual—no matter with which of these groups he or she may be identified—will be determined at the judgment by his or her response to the Father’s commandment to repent and be baptized and endure in faith to the end.

Book of Mormon prophecy and the Abrahamic covenant.
This salvation history is the constant theme of the great prophecies of the Book of Mormon and the principal frame of reference used by the writers of the final text. In the opening page of his record, Nephi tells how his father Lehi went to the Lord in fervent prayer on behalf of his generation of disobedient Israel, was given great visions, and came out of that experience (1) knowing that his generation would be destroyed and carried captive into Babylon, and (2) unexpectedly praising God and rejoicing with his “whole heart” filled because he had been shown the “power and goodness and mercy” of the Lord God Almighty who is merciful to “all the inhabitants of the earth” and will “not suffer that those who come” unto him should perish. Nephi’s own great visions provided him with this same perspective in terms of the long-term salvation history. In the vision received at the first camp in the wilderness he was shown (1) the future coming of Christ, (2) the apostasy and destruction of the descendants of Lehi, (3) and the eventual restoration of the gospel to the Gentiles, who would bring it in turn to the scattered remnants of the house of Israel in the last days, who in their turn would finally believe in Jesus Christ, repent and be gathered in—fulfilling the

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23 See 1 Nephi 1:5–15.
promises of the Abrahamic covenant at the last day.\textsuperscript{24}

The first prophets in the Book of Mormon also understood the Lord’s promise to their branch of Israel to be an extension of the Lord’s covenant with Abraham that was focused on what Abraham’s descendants would do to bless all people:

Wherefore our father hath not spoken of our seed alone but also of all the house of Israel, pointing to the covenant which should be fulfilled in the latter days, which covenant the Lord made to our father Abraham, saying: \textit{In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.} (1 Nephi 15:18)

In a later preaching to his own brothers, Nephi draws even more deeply on what he learned in the great vision to support a much expanded explanation of this part of God’s covenant with Abraham:

And after that our seed is scattered, the Lord God will proceed to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles which shall be of great worth unto our seed. Wherefore it is likened unto the being nursed by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon their shoulders. And it shall also be of worth unto the Gentiles—and not only unto the Gentiles but unto all the

\textsuperscript{24} See 1 Nephi 11–15.
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.* And I would, my brethren that ye should know that all the kindreds of the earth cannot be blessed unless he shall make bare his arm in the eyes of the nations. Wherefore 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 they which are of the house of Israel. Wherefore he will bring them again out of captivity, and they shall be gathered together to the lands of their first inheritance. And they shall be brought out of obscurity and out of darkness, and they shall know that the Lord is their Savior and their Redeemer, the Mighty One of Israel. (1 Nephi 22:8–12)

The other major prophecies featured in the Book of Mormon focus on this same remnant prophecy and its salvation history in combination with prophecies of Christ’s future coming and explanations of his gospel and its attendant requirements for personal righteousness for all who would be prepared for the coming final judgment. The remnant prophecy provides the corporate view of salvation history for all nations and the house of Israel. The messianic prophecy explains how individuals can qualify for eternal life, whether they be Gentiles or of
the house of Israel. It provides the key mechanism on the individual level that makes fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant possible at the corporate level.

Nephi begins his second book with his father Lehi’s last blessings to his children, in which Lehi emphasizes again the Abrahamic covenant in the version that had come down to him through Joseph (2 Nephi 1–4). Nephi then presents his younger brother Jacob reading two chapters of Isaiah that focus on these same covenants followed by Jacob’s own commentary on that same salvation history—with the most developed account of the prophesied Christ and his gospel up to this point in the book (2 Nephi 6–10). Following a brief central chapter emphasizing the accumulating witness of the coming Christ (1 Nephi 11), Nephi inserts thirteen more chapters of Isaiah that were selected as a second witness in support of these remnant and messianic prophecies (2 Nephi 12–24). He concludes the second book with his own prophecies (the requisite third witness) of Christ and future gathering of the remnants of Israel (2 Nephi 25–30)25—followed by his own

Commentators commonly characterize these chapters as Nephi’s interpretation of the Isaiah chapters that precede them. But the text is clear. Nephi labels this first section of his final sermon “mine own prophecy,” or “a prophecy according to the Spirit which is in me” (2 Nephi 25:4, 7). And the content derives principally from his earlier vision as recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14.
foundational account of the gospel of Christ as it had been taught to him by the Father and the Son in that first great vision (2 Nephi 31–32). In his own book, Jacob shares the allegory of the olive tree from the prophet Zenos, possibly a precursor of Isaiah not included in our modern Bible, which offers a distinctive, but fully compatible account of the same salvation history. Jacob had read Nephi’s record and likely noticed the brief reference to this allegory in the report of Lehi’s great vision (1 Nephi 10:14) and may have recognized that Nephi’s readers would benefit from having the full allegory available to them.

More than is usually recognized, the prophecies of Jesus to the Nephites at the time of his post-resurrection visit also expound and reinforce that same salvation history with a focus on Abraham. And as they wrap up the final chapters of their record, Mormon and his son Moroni repeatedly return to that same salvation history for their perspective in preaching and prophesying to the future Gentiles and the remnants of Israel that they expect will receive their record.

26 In a forthcoming paper I invoke the canons of Hebrew rhetoric of the 7th century BCE to show how Second Nephi is organized as one large-scale chiasm based on thirteen inclusios that center on 2 Nephi 11:2–8, which is itself a chiasm. See “Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” Interpreter, Spring 2017. The pre-publication version is accessible online at http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1679/.
Though they have failed to bring their own people to repentance, they are powerfully motivated by the knowledge that the abridgment of the Nephite record, that they have labored under seemingly impossible circumstances to compile, will in the last days prove to be the key instrument through which the Lord will restore the fullness of his gospel to the Gentiles and to all Israel, thereby fulfilling his ancient covenant with Abraham, that in his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

If it was not part of Lehi’s first visions, it is clearly the case that the great vision received by him and Nephi separately at the first camp in the wilderness did impress them with the past and future career of the covenant God had made with Abraham and his descendants. Book of Mormon discourse regarding the Abrahamic covenant tends to focus on (1) the scattering and gathering of Israel and (2) on the ways in which the kindreds of the earth will be blessed through Abraham’s seed. A key element in this story is an account of the role the Gentile nations will play. For in the last days, the fullness of the gospel will be established among them, providing a means whereby it can come again to scattered Israel as it brings them “to the knowledge of the true Messiah” —the means by which they will finally be “grafted in” or “gathered together” at the end (1 Nephi 10:14).
The very quick summary of Lehi’s teachings that Nephi offers from that vision states simply that Lehi “spake unto my brethren concerning the gospel” and that he “spake much concerning the Gentiles and also concerning the house of House of Israel,” that they should be scattered and gathered together again” (1 Nephi 10:11–14). The more detailed version of all this is reserved for Nephi’s own account of the great vision in the following four chapters. The angel told Nephi that if the latter-day Gentiles would accept the Messiah and his gospel, they would “be numbered among the house of Israel” and “be a blessed people upon the promised land forever” (1 Nephi 14:2). He went on to remind Nephi twice of “the covenants of the Lord unto the house of Israel” (1 Nephi 14:5, 8). And when the “church of the Lamb of God” is threatened by the forces of the devil that will mobilize to destroy it in the last days, Nephi saw the power of the Lamb descending “upon the saints of the church of the Lamb and upon the covenant people of the Lord, which were scattered upon all the face of the earth. And they were armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory” (1 Nephi 14:10, 14).

There are at least 38 passages in the Book of Mormon where a prophet/writer restates, or alludes directly to the remnant prophecy as a way of
invoking the perspective of the Abrahamic covenant for his readers.\textsuperscript{27} In addition, Nephi, Jacob, Abinadi, and Jesus Christ between them quote 23 complete chapters of Isaiah and Malachi as prophetic support for their own remnant and messianic prophesying, in addition to another 36 quotations of shorter passages from these and other prophets. Nephi set the pattern early in both his first and second books by inserting lengthy excerpts from Isaiah to validate his own visions and prophecies of the future mission and ministry of Jesus Christ and of the even more distant future fulfillment of God’s promises to the remnants of Joseph and Jacob, beginning with the descendants of his own father Lehi.

These two great prophecies were tightly linked and impressed upon Nephi on the occasion, when as a youth at the first camp in the wilderness, he was shown the same great vision that his father Lehi had reported to the family. In four long chapters, Nephi summarizes what he saw of the life of Christ and how the

movement he launched was corrupted not long after his crucifixion. Later, at the end of his own writings, Nephi finally shares with his readers the gospel of Jesus Christ as it was taught to him in that same early vision by the Father and the Son—the “plain and precious truths” that had been lost from the Bible and the Gentile churches. The last half of Nephi’s account of that original vision describes the decline of his own Christian descendants and similarly of the Gentile Christians who eventually spread to Lehi’s promised land in the Americas, destroying and scattering his descendants. Nephi goes on to report how he saw the Lord’s work unfold as his gospel was restored—not to the Israelites, but first to the Gentiles—and how the Gentile believers would become the catalyst for taking the gospel successfully to the descendants of Lehi, to all the nations of the world, and finally to scattered Israel—before the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

In his own final sermon, Nephi rehearse and elaborates his own earlier account. Starting once more with a powerful witness of the crucified and

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28 See 1 Nephi 11–14.


30 2 Nephi 25–30
resurrected Messiah, Nephi prophesied that while Christ’s teachings would be accepted initially, apostasy and decline would follow, necessitating the distant restoration of his gospel and church to the Gentiles, through the instrumentality of the record already initiated by Nephi and yet to be completed by his successors. The outcome described by the Lord God to Nephi in this revelation was explicitly the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham:

And it shall come to pass that the Jews shall have the words of the Nephites; and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews; and the Nephites and the Jews shall have the words of the lost tribes of Israel; and the lost tribes of Israel shall have the words of the Nephites and the Jews. 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 which 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 29:13–14.

A blessing to all nations

But how will Abraham’s seed, scattered and smitten and lost for centuries,
be instrumental in this last great blessing to all nations? The solution to this puzzle comes from the same prophecies that have provided our theme to this point.

Nephi’s radical focus on the remnant prophecy, as laid out for him in that vision in far greater detail than in any other prophetic writing, is understandable once we realize that he had been told in these visions that the very record he was writing would be a principal instrument in the restoration of the gospel in the last dispensation and would thereby be the means of convincing the remnant of his own people and eventually all the scattered remnants of Israel to believe in Jesus Christ, to repent and come unto him, accepting him as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He clearly saw in Isaiah a fellow traveler who had been shown the same things, as he saw Isaiah’s writings confirming his own revelations. Because of the things Nephi saw in his first great vision and that he further expounded in his prophecies to his brethren, he and his successors understood that the record of the Nephites containing the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it was revealed to them, together with the lost records of other branches of scattered Israel, including the lost tribes, would be brought forth in the last days to convince Gentiles and Jews, Nephites and lost tribes of Israel, that Jesus Christ is the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that they must accept and follow his gospel as individuals in
order to be saved. As Jesus explained to the Nephites:

I give unto you a sign that ye may know the time when these things shall be about to take place, that I shall gather in from their long dispersion my people, O house of Israel, and shall establish again among them my Zion.

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 which I declare unto you—and which I shall declare unto you hereafter of myself and by the power of the Holy Ghost, which shall be given unto you of the Father—shall be made known unto the Gentiles, that they may know concerning this people which are a remnant of the house of Jacob and concerning this my people which shall be scattered by them—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 . . . 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 which are of the house of Israel. 3 Nephi 21:1–3, 7

This teaching of Christ to the assembled Nephite survivors with its focus on this part of the Abrahamic covenant provides by far the most complete explanation of
that covenant and goes far beyond what most interpreters have found in the Bible.

This second-day sermon of Jesus Christ to the Nephites, with its detailed and scripturally documented salvation history, turns out to be the theological climax of the Book of Mormon. Jesus does return once more time to the assembled twelve disciples to ensure their clear grasp of the six-part definition of his gospel that he had spelled out in his first visit and that he and the Father together had taught to Nephi in his first great vision. From this point on, Mormon and then Moroni wind down the story of the last three centuries of Nephite civilization. But the salvation history, taught to the Nephites by Jesus Christ and grounded in God’s covenant given to Abraham, retains center stage. The sacred record that they are bringing to a close will be in fact the Lord’s principal instrument for fulfilling that covenant as he works his “marvelous work and a wonder,” bringing their book forth first to the Gentiles, and then through them to the remnants of Israel.

Mormon understood that the record he had prepared would be a key instrument in God’s fulfilling of his covenant to Israel.

Now these things are written unto the remnant of the house of Jacob. And they are written after this manner because it is known of God that wickedness will not bring them forth unto them. And they are to be hid up unto the Lord, that they may come forth in his own due time. . . . And behold, they shall go unto the unbelieving of the Jews. And for this intent shall they go, that they may be persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, that the Father may bring about through his Most Beloved his great and eternal purpose in the restoring the Jews or all the house of Israel to the land of their inheritance, which the Lord their God hath given them, unto the fulfilling of his covenant. (Mormon 5:12–14)

Mormon then further explained that the same purposes would explain why the seed of Lehi would be scattered by the Gentiles because they had lost “the Spirit of the Lord” that strove with their fathers and were “without Christ and God in the world” (Mormon 5:15–19). But “after that they have been driven and scattered by the Gentiles, behold, then will the Lord remember the covenant which he made unto Abraham and unto all the house of Israel” (Mormon 5:20).

Mormon and Moroni each interrupt their own closing narratives repeatedly to restate that salvation history, to call on the Gentiles to repent and come to Christ,
and to believe this record.\textsuperscript{32} Moroni concludes his original ending with a prayer, which he adds

to the prayers of all the saints which have dwelt in the land. And may the Lord Jesus Christ grant that their prayers may be answered according to their faith; and may God the Father remember the covenant which he hath made with the house of Israel; and may he bless them forever through faith on the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Mormon 9:36–37.

Moroni did not expect to live another 36 years before the Lord would direct him to conceal the record where it could be found at the time of the Gentile restoration. At some point, he apparently overcame whatever obstacles might have prevented him initially from adding more, producing first a brief account of the Jaredite record and secondly a collection of additional information and teachings he felt would be helpful to the Gentiles in the future. He intersperses further commentary on the salvation history and prophecies even in his account of the Jaredites. And he finds room in his tightly compressed account of the Jaredites for a lengthy reportage of the revelation given to the last prophet of this pre-Abrahamic civilization—a revelation which contained a version of the same

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{32} Cf. 3 Nephi 29:1–4, 30:1–2, Mormon 3:17–22, 5:9–24, 7:1–10, and 9:37.}
salvation history and remnant prophecy based on Abraham that was given repeatedly to the Nephites.\textsuperscript{33} Approaching his conclusion, Moroni explains “the office of their ministry” as he and other prophets are sent to declare “the word of Christ” and to “bear testimony of him.” For by so doing the Lord God prepareth the way that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts according to the power thereof. And after this manner bringeth to pass the Father the covenants which he hath made unto the children of men. Moroni 7:31–32

The final conclusion itself begins with one final appeal to Israel in the last days to respond and participate in the final fulfillment of the covenant of Abraham: “Awake and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem . . . that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto thee, O house of Israel, may be fulfilled” (Moroni 10:31).

**The prophecies of Jesus Christ to the Nephites.**

Mirroring Nephi’s long exposition of the remnant prophecy at the beginning

\textsuperscript{33} See Ether 13:4–11.
of the Nephite dispensation, almost six centuries later, Jesus Christ devoted his second day of teaching the Nephites to the same topic. Having taught his gospel to the surviving righteous remnant of Nephites during the first day of his appearance to them, he proceeded on the second day to unfold a lengthy account of how he would fulfill the Father’s covenant with Abraham in the last days. Clarifying emphatically what none of the prophets may have been in a position to understand, Jesus referred to “the Father” 38 times in making it clear that he was talking about “the covenant which the Father made with your fathers,” “with your father Jacob,” or “with Abraham.”34 While that distinction may have no clear precedent in our Hebrew Bible, other terminology of the Hebrew prophets is in evidence.

Jesus began this second-day sermon by reminding the Nephites that they were “a remnant of the house of Israel,” and proceeded to repeat that connection eight more times in his discourse. In his classic study of the remnant idea, Gerhard F. Hasel has shown that the idea that God’s covenant made with Abraham and his seed would persist and be fulfilled through the restoration of a distant remnant of the house of Israel first shows up clearly in the 8th century prophets, and

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34 See, e.g., 3 Nephi 20:22, 25, 27.
particularly in Amos and then Isaiah.\textsuperscript{35} Amos’s unique reference to “the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15) is now generally believed by scholars to refer to an eschatological event. “In Amos we encounter for the first time a connection of the remnant motif with eschatology.”\textsuperscript{36} But it is the prophecies of Isaiah that most clearly parallel the prophecies of Nephi and Jesus. And each of these quoted long sections from Isaiah and commented on the great value of his writings in this context.

While many Nephite prophets emphasized the Deuteronomic interpretation of the covenant (focused on lands and descendants) repeatedly as they taught the people and called them to repentance, Jesus focused almost exclusively on the forgotten promise that in Abraham “all the kindreds of the earth would be blessed.” In his final day teaching the Nephites, he cited the Abrahamic covenant explicitly twelve times! That includes one quotation from Isaiah that we should read as an


allusion to the same covenant. Nowhere else in scripture do we have such an intensive and extensive treatment of the Abrahamic covenant. In his prophecies advanced in his second-day sermon to the assembled Nephites, Jesus uses the word *covenant* 16 times as he invokes the promise to Abraham—sometimes in paraphrase, but usually with the same wording used in one or more of its Old Testament occurrences. The fourth of these is the most developed and follows the same two-part pattern used by Nephi in reporting his great vision (1 Nephi 11–14) and in his own final prophecies (2 Nephi 25–30)—beginning with a reference to the prophecies of his own coming, and then transitioning into an expanded version of the remnant prophecy:

> And behold, ye are the children of the prophets, and ye are of the house of Israel, and ye are of the covenant which the Father made with your fathers, saying unto Abraham: *And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.* The Father having raised me up unto you first and sent me to bless you in turning away every one of you from his iniquities—and this because ye are the children of the covenant. And after that ye were blessed, then full filleth the Father the covenant which he made with Abraham, saying: *In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed*—unto the pouring out
of the Holy Ghost through me upon the Gentiles, which blessing upon the Gentiles shall make them mighty above all, unto the scattering of my people, O house of Israel. 3 Nephi 20:25–27

In these passages we see (1) that Christ himself is the primary promoter of the salvation history and prophecies featuring the Abrahamic covenant, and (2) that contrary to standard Christian interpretations, he does not point to himself as the instrument by which the seed of Abraham will become a blessing to the nations of the earth. But rather, he is the one who taught the Book of Mormon prophets that the record they were compiling, which featured “the fullness of the gospel,” would be the specific means by which that prophesied blessing would materialize in the latter days.

**The gospel covenant**

The third stream of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon identifies the covenant of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the true way of the repentant—that will unite the apostate Gentiles and remnants of Israel with their god at the level of the individual. The Book of Mormon’s unique merger of Old and New Testament

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37 In a previous paper I have shown that the Nephite prophets understood repentance to
perspectives and language is further demonstrated by Jesus Christ’s incorporation of his gospel into his account of how the covenant made to Abraham will be fulfilled. Immediately following the account of the Gentiles scourging Lehi’s descendants, “the remnant the seed of Joseph” just cited, he confirms that these will eventually receive “the fulness of my gospel” (3 Nephi 20:28), which in turn will lead to their restoration. But Jesus moves on immediately here to his long description of the restoration of Israel to its promised Jerusalem “for the land of their inheritance” (3 Nephi 20:33), which will occur as his covenant people accept his gospel: “And it shall come to pass that the time cometh when the fullness of my gospel shall be preached unto them. And they shall believe in me, that I am Jesus Christ the Son of God, and shall pray to the Father in my name” (3 Nephi 20:30–31).

Jesus then incorporates several Old Testament descriptions of that day into his prophecy. As Jesus reviews and expands what he has prophesied here, he include the making of a covenant to obey and remember Christ always, and that baptism of water must follow as a witness of that covenant. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding Christian Baptism Through the Book of Mormon,” BYU Studies Quarterly, 51, no. 2 (2012), p. 9.

returns to the last-days restoration of the gospel to the gentiles:

For thus it behooveth the Father that it should come forth from the Gentiles, that he may shew forth his power unto the Gentiles, for this cause that the Gentiles—if they will not harden their hearts—that they may repent and come unto me and be baptized in my name and know of the true points of my doctrine, that they may be numbered among my people, O house of Israel.\textsuperscript{39}

3 Nephi 21:6

He will later quote the Father reiterating how the conversion of the Gentiles will provide the base for the conversion of the remnant of Lehi, which will lead into the even larger conversion of all the house of Israel, again using the basic gospel terminology:

For it shall come to pass, saith the Father, that at that day whosoever will not repent and come unto my Beloved Son, them will I cut off from among my people, O house of Israel. . . . But if they will repent and hearken unto my

words and harden not their hearts, I will establish my church among them.
And they shall come in unto the covenant and be numbered among this the
remnant of Jacob, unto whom I have given this land for their inheritance.
And they shall assist my people, the remnant of Jacob, and also as many of
the house of Israel as shall come, that they may build a city which shall be
called the New Jerusalem. . . . And then shall the work of the Father
commence at that day, even when this gospel shall be preached among the
remnant of this people. 3 Nephi 21:20–26

From these few excerpts it can be seen that Jesus is teaching the Nephites
the same perspective shared with their ancestors almost six centuries earlier by
their eponymous prophet. The fulfillment of God’s covenants with Abraham,
Isaac, Jacob, and Lehi will be accomplished in the last days by the restoration and
then preaching of the gospel or doctrine of Jesus Christ, first to the Gentiles, and
then by them to the descendants of Lehi or “remnant of the seed of Joseph” and
subsequently to the rest of scattered Israel. This gospel outlines the way that all
men and women must follow to be saved. God’s covenant with Abraham is the
promise and prophecy that through his seed, this blessing would come to all the
families of the earth.
Another unique twist in the Book of Mormon understanding of the Abrahamic covenant reframes what it means to be “the covenant people” or the chosen people of the Lord. This has obviously and most visibly been a problematic issue for the Jewish people. But the Book of Mormon also treats it as something that the supposed beneficiaries could misunderstand—and in both directions. On the one hand, being the chosen people of the Lord can give rise to feelings of superiority towards other peoples. But, as it turns out, the far greater danger is that the covenant people will neglect the covenant and the responsibilities it imposes on them as the lineage designated by God to bring his teachings to all the world. The salvation history described in the Book of Mormon provides seemingly endless examples of a covenant people rising to great heights of righteousness with its attendant peace and prosperity, and then somehow almost inevitably disintegrating into apostasy, wickedness, war, and destruction. That cycle is found in the Nephite explanations for the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities of Israel, for the rise and demise of early Christianity, for repeated cycles in the Jaredite history, and for the numerous cycles in Nephite and Lamanite history ending in the final struggle of the wicked against the wicked that brought that civilization to its dismal ending.
From the beginning, it was clear to the Nephite prophets that God’s salvation was intended for all mankind, and not just for the chosen lineage. The Abrahamic covenant brings responsibilities for embracing and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it has no salvific force that can substitute for the gospel itself, which provides the only way “whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God” (2 Nephi 31:21). The Lord’s covenant with Lehi, like the covenant with Abraham, focuses on a relationship between God and a chosen lineage, on a role they will play while in this earthly life. But the blessings of eternal life are available to all mankind—and on exactly the same terms—terms which are spelled out in the gospel. The covenant people are offered no shortcuts to eternal life. And no people is restricted from access to it. Nephi concluded his own prophecies with a very succinct and clear formulation of the universal gospel covenant:

As many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel. (2 Nephi 30:2)

**Being “gathered” by knowledge of the true Messiah and his gospel**

The classic proof of God’s love for his covenant people in the Old
Testament is obviously the power by which he delivered Israel from their long Egyptian bondage restoring them to their own promised lands. The return from Babylonian exile provides the widely heralded second example. Nephi invokes that same logic in his construction of First Nephi to show how Lehi and his people were brought to their promised land in spite of impossible obstacles: “I Nephi will shew unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their faith to make them mighty, even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20). But even in this first book that is rhetorically focused on God’s powerful deliverances of his covenant people, the visions and revelations being received along the way tell of a final fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham that “In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 15:18). He quotes his father Lehi’s summary of the same vision:

And after that the house of Israel should be scattered, they should be gathered together again, or in fine, that after the Gentiles had received the fullness of the gospel, the natural branches of the olive tree or the remnants of the house of Israel should be grafted in or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer. I Nephi 10:14

Throughout the Book of Mormon, this final deliverance or restoration or
gathering or grafting in of the remnants of Israel is described as a function of the true knowledge of Christ that they will receive. Summarizing his own version of the same vision, Nephi explains:

And at that day shall the remnant of our seed know that they are of the house of Israel and that they are the covenant people of the Lord. And then shall they know and come to the knowledge of their forefathers, and also to the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him. Wherefore they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved. 1 Nephi 15:14.

In these three sentences Nephi features the words *know* and *knowledge* six times. The gathering of Israel “in the latter times” will be accomplished by providing men with saving knowledge—“knowledge of the gospel” or “the very points of his doctrine,” that will teach men “how to come unto him and be saved.” Interpreting Isaiah 49:22–23, Jacob tells his people how the Jews will reject Christ and subsequently be “scattered and smitten and hated,” but that “the Lord will be merciful unto them, that when they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer, they shall be gathered together again to the lands of their inheritance” (2 Nephi
6:11). This linkage of the eventual and final gathering of Israel with their reception of knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ occurs in 24 passages of the Book of Mormon. This promised knowledge is variously described as “true knowledge of their Redeemer,” “of Jesus Christ,” “of God,” “of a Savior,” “of the Lord their God,” “of the truth,” “of their great and true shepherd,” “of the covenant,” or “of the fullness of my gospel.”

Further, these Book of Mormon prophets clearly saw this future knowledge coming from the restored writings of Nephite and other prophets. As Lehi quotes from an ancient revelation to Joseph, son of Jacob,

Wherefore the fruit of thy loins shall write, and the fruit of the loins of Judah shall write. And that which shall be written by the fruit of thy loins, and also that which shall be written by the fruit of the loins of Judah, shall grow together unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions and establishing peace among the fruit of thy loins and 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

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40 Examples include 2 Nephi 30:5, Words of Mormon 1:8, Mosiah 3:20, Alma 23:15, 37:9, 19, Helaman 15:11, 13, 3 Nephi 5:23, 25, 26, 16:4, 12, Mormon 5:9, and 9:36.
This universal application of God’s plan of salvation is sometimes phrased by Book of Mormon prophets and most frequently by Jesus Christ, as quoted by those prophets, in this way: “the Gentiles shall be blessed and numbered among the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 10:18).\(^{41}\) This principle is laid down clearly and emphatically in Nephi’s final prophecies of Christ:

[The Lord God] doeth not any thing save it be for the benefit of the world, for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him; wherefore he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation. Behold, doth he cry unto any, saying: Depart from me! Behold, I say unto you: Nay. But he saith: Come unto me, all ye ends of the earth; buy milk and honey without money and without price. Behold, hath he commanded any that they should not partake of his salvation? Behold, I say unto you: Nay. But he hath given it free for all men. And he hath commanded his people that they should persuade all men unto repentance. 2 Nephi 26:24–27

After teaching his people of the atonement and resurrection of Christ,

Benjamin explains that “the Lord God hath sent his holy prophets among all the children of men to declare these things to every kindred, nation, and tongue, that thereby whosoever should believe that Christ should come, the same might receive remission of their sins and rejoice with exceeding great joy” (Mosiah 3:13).

Describing his own conversion vision, Alma quoted what the Lord had said to him:

Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women—all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people—must be born again, yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters. And thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in no wise inherit the kingdom of God. Mosiah 27:25–26

**Conclusion.**

The story of the Abrahamic covenant begins as a story of one man receiving a promise of seemingly endless blessings from God through his posterity. The story grows through its Book of Mormon version to promise all these blessings and even eternal life with God to every man and woman ever born in God’s creation depending on how they will individually respond to his gospel, an invitation to
follow the path he has designed to prepare them for that eventual reward. The original promise given to Abraham that “through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed,” will be fulfilled when the Book of Mormon and other prophetic writings of Abraham’s descendants are restored to provide all peoples with the knowledge of their redeemer and his gospel, the way by which they may attain eternal life with God.

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