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Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon

Noel B. Reynolds

Latter-day Saint discourse concerning Abraham and the blessings and covenants given to him by the Lord is distinguished by its reliance on the restoration of ancient scriptures and other revelations given to Joseph Smith. The revival of scholarly interest in Abraham in recent decades provides a timely opportunity to explore the contemporary findings of biblical scholars from a Latter-day Saint perspective—which, in turn, invites an in-depth exploration of how the Lord’s covenants with Abraham were understood by the Nephite prophets in the Book of Mormon, how their perspectives compare with contemporary biblical scholarship, and how the Nephite perspective may modify or expand standard Latter-day Saint approaches to understanding the Abrahamic covenant. This essay identifies three interrelated streams of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon—each defined by its respective focus on the (1) Lehite covenant, (2) Abrahamic covenant, or (3) gospel covenant. Though these three streams of covenant discourse are closely related, each is distinct in purpose. Nephite prophets integrated these three in unique ways to develop one larger understanding of God’s use of covenants to bring salvation to the world.

While most scholars since Eichrodt¹ 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

1. Walther Eichrodt’s 1933 two-volume study of Old Testament theology was widely influential. After it evolved through six German editions, it was published in an English translation. See especially the opening chapters of

descendants of Jacob and the nations of the world continue to vary widely. Not only do Jewish and Christian interpretations of the covenant differ dramatically, but interpretations within each of those major frameworks also display wide ranges of both agreement and disagreement.

Interpretive Approaches of Bible Scholars

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 of Harvard University has published a monograph challenging the widely assumed characterizations of Jewish understandings of the Abrahamic covenant as commonly compared to those of Christian traditions.² Heidelberg University's Rolf Rendtorff published an interpretation of God's covenant with Israel—an interpretation based on a holistic analysis of the entire Pentateuch.³ Yale's Joel Baden has produced the most recent study, published in 2013, which acknowledges the preceding two centuries of historical criticism while recognizing the contributions of the more recent approaches.⁴ However, my own approach in this essay is influenced more by the work of Australian evangelical scholar Paul R. Williamson and the University of Durham's R. W. L. Moberly, who is one of the most widely respected interpreters of this Genesis material today, though I do not discuss them directly here.⁵

Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

2. In his book *Inheriting Abraham*, Levenson demonstrates effectively that Jewish interpretations have long seen Abraham's having universal influence for good in the world as a fulfillment of part of the promise to Abraham. Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

3. Rendtorff's original *Die "Bundesformel": Eine exegetisch-theologische Untersuchung* was published in Stuttgart in 1995 by Verlag Katholisches. It was translated into English and published three years later as Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

4. Joel Baden, *The Promise to the Patriarchs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

5. Paul R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 315 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic

In the twentieth century, most scholarly effort to understand the Abrahamic covenant accepted the late-nineteenth-century documentary hypothesis and interpreted the variations in the wording of biblical passages related to the covenant of Abraham as a natural outcome of the presumed process through which our current Genesis was formed—namely, through the merger of several earlier documents containing their own versions of related materials.⁶ This approach, however, tends to minimize the possible significance of differences in wording and to assume that ancient Israel understood all these passages as saying compatible things. Though most Latter-day Saint commentators have maintained some distance from the documentary hypothesis, they too have tended to gloss over differences in wording in these Genesis passages. But a growing number of scholars are looking ever more carefully for meaningful explanations of those differences that would enable a more precise understanding of God’s covenant(s) with Abraham.⁷ As a result, the documentary approach has lost much of its earlier influence.⁸

In contrast, Williamson, after a detailed analysis of the biblical texts and the leading scholarly attempts to interpret and reconcile these texts, proposes that the Abraham narrative

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

Press, 2000); R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

6. A well-informed explanation of this complex history of biblical interpretation can be found in Thomas Römer, “The Narrative Books of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. John Barton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 121–24.

7. I have discussed these various approaches and the points of scholarly disagreement in much greater detail in a working paper titled “All Kindreds Shall Be Blessed: Nephite, Jewish, and Christian Interpretations of the Abrahamic Covenant,” All Faculty Publications, BYU ScholarsArchive, June 26, 2017, <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1915/>.

8. An excellent review of the best scholarly work on biblical covenant can now be found in Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

Gen. 22) that will be perpetuated exclusively through the special “seed” who will descend from Abraham through Isaac.⁹

While the Old Testament writers mostly interpreted the blessings of the Abrahamic 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 geopolitical crossroads of Palestine), Christian writers followed the lead of the New Testament by seeing Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of these promises to Abraham. The Christianization of the world provided these writers an attractive way to explain how Israel blesses all the families of the earth. As one proponent of this view concluded, “It is apparent that all the references to Abraham in the NT epistles reflect a common, and distinctively Christian, interpretation of the Genesis narrative. Although the Genesis narrative does not identify this future king, the NT writers share the belief that he is Jesus Christ, the son of David. Clearly, these basic ideas influenced significantly the soteriology of the early church and its view of the nature of Jesus Christ’s mission to the world. The NT understanding of the Abraham narrative is derived from a careful exegesis of the Genesis text.”¹⁰ In another example, a Christian scholar produced a detailed study of the remnant prophecies (that is, prophecies related to the restoration or gathering of Israelite peoples who have been lost or scattered) of the Old Testament and argued that these prophecies would be fulfilled through the Christian Church.¹¹

In comparison to traditional Christian interpretations, the Book of Mormon perspective on the Abrahamic covenant is both clear and

9. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations*, 258–59.

10. T. Desmond Alexander, “The Abraham Narrative and the New Testament Understanding of Justification by Faith,” in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, ed. Richard S. Hess, Gordon J. Wenham, and Philip E. Satterthwaite, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Tyndale House, 1994), 28. The linguistic evidence for interpreting *seed* in Genesis as a unique male descendant is presented in T. Desmond Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 48, no. 2 (1997): 364–68. In contrast, Joel N. Lohr has argued that the Christian habit of reading Paul’s interpretation of these Genesis promises into scholarly treatments of Genesis is not grounded in the accepted best practices for Old Testament scholarship. Lohr, “Abraham the Missionary? The Call of Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 13 (Winter 2014): 67–71.

11. J. C. Campbell, “God’s People and the Remnant,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 3 (March 1950): 78–85.

unique. The Book of Mormon repeatedly anticipates the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in the last days, but traditional Christianity, rather than serving as the means for that fulfillment, becomes a significant part of the problem because it harbored influences through which many of the most “plain and precious parts” of Christ’s gospel were lost. The Nephite prophets in the Book of Mormon describe the last days as a time when all the branches of Jacob’s descendants will be scattered and lost from the true Abrahamic religion and, similarly, all the branches of original Christianity will be 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, which will come to the Gentiles first, and that will signal the onset of the last days. A new Gentile church will emerge that will enable the remnants of Joseph, Judah, and the lost tribes of Israel to recognize Jesus Christ as their promised Messiah and believe in him and his gospel. The lost prophetic writings from the branches of Jacob’s descendants will be rediscovered and convince both Gentiles and Jews that Jesus Christ was and is the Messiah. In other words, these prophetic writings from these branches of ancient Israel—especially the Book of Mormon, from the lineage of Joseph—will be the primary instruments through which Abraham’s seed will bless the nations, leading in turn to the restoration of the house of Israel to their god and to their promised lands.

Covenant Discourse in the Book of Mormon

The notion of binding covenants or promises permeates prophetic discourse in the Book of Mormon and surfaces in a variety of contexts.¹² Instances range from the covenants men make with each other in pursuit of different ends (good or evil) to the promises offered by God to his people for their security and prosperity on this earth and for their eternal blessings hereafter. Prominent among these covenants is the promise given to all who come to dwell in the promised land—if they keep the commandments of God, they will prosper in the land. Conversely, the prophets consistently warn the wicked that if they will not repent, they will be destroyed. The call

12. In his contribution to the 2003 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, Victor Ludlow surveyed the concept of covenant in the Book of Mormon generally and provided several helpful insights. See Victor L. Ludlow, “Covenant Teachings in the Book of Mormon,” in *The Fulness of the Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 225–45.

to repentance is simply an invitation to return and recommit to the original covenant of obedience. All Book of Mormon writers recognized that the full manifestation of the covenants God offered to his children on earth was only articulated in the gospel of Jesus Christ, by which all men and women are 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 this essay in the belief that there is even more to be learned from a detailed examination of the Book of Mormon references to the Abrahamic covenant in their various contexts.¹³

The Book of Mormon—from the writings of its first prophets to the very end—maintains three related but distinct streams of covenant discourse—each grounded in its own specific covenant. All three are embedded in prophecies that feature an *if/then* and *if not/then* structure. All three are intimately connected to the Book of Mormon itself and its long-term mission (as will be explained in detail below). 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 derives from the Lord's promise to Lehi and his successors that if they are obedient, the Lord will give them a chosen land of liberty in which they will prosper as a people. The second stream of covenant discourse features a version of the Abrahamic covenant, focused on Jacob's son Joseph as the ancestor of Lehi, that emphasizes (1) the promise to the house of Israel that it will ultimately be gathered in peace and righteousness to its promised homeland, and (2) the promise received originally by Abraham (which does not reappear much in the Bible) that all the kindreds of the earth would be blessed through his seed. The third stream of covenant discourse is grounded in the universal covenant the Father offers to all his children, regardless of Abrahamic descent, that if they accept his gospel and come unto him, they will receive eternal life.¹⁴

13. Two of the best summaries are in Ellis T. Rasmussen, "Abrahamic Covenant," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:9–10; and Stephen David Ricks, "Abrahamic Covenant," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 25–26.

14. This paper will not examine the ancient idea of covenant itself, which has been developed in a sequel effort by the author. See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Covenant Concept in the Book of Mormon," All Faculty Publications,

The Book of Mormon, produced by Lehi and his prophet successors, was destined to become the primary means in the last days by which the fullness of Christ's gospel would come first to the Gentiles and then to the lost and scattered tribes of Israel and would help gather them in—becoming in that process a blessing to all nations.¹⁵ The three covenants are thus interrelated and unified: the Lord's covenant to Lehi resulted in the remnant of Joseph, Lehi's descendants, who created the record that contains a complete account of gospel, the new covenant of Jesus Christ, which will in turn become the means of fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant, which promises that through Abraham all nations will be blessed. That unifying vision of the three covenants was given to Lehi and Nephi, was rearticulated by Jesus 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.

Covenant Discourse 1: The Lehite 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. This covenant is cited frequently throughout the writings of Nephite prophets, covering a period of a thousand years, and is alluded to even more often. It is the promise to Lehi and his descendants 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 to (1) call the wicked to repentance and (2) explain the blessings of peace that are given to the righteous at various points in Nephite/Lamanite history.

One first encounters the Lehite covenant, not as it was given to the prophet Lehi, but as it was given to his young son Nephi. Though Nephi tells the reader he will “not make a full account” of the “many things which he [Lehi] prophesied and spake unto his children” (1 Ne. 1:16), Nephi does soon after present the covenant in the form the Lord gave

BYU ScholarsArchive, August 20, 2018, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2176/>.

15. 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” that 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.

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 Ne. 2:20).¹⁶ 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 Ne. 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* 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 Ne. 17:12–14, emphasis added)

Later, Nephi incorporates a much longer version of this covenant into his text as part of his father’s final instructions and blessings to his family (see 2 Ne. 1:3–12).¹⁷ Lehi presents it both as a promise given to him personally and as a universal promise that applies to anyone “which the Lord God shall bring” (2 Ne. 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 Ne. 1:5, emphasis added).

In appending a brief account of the Jaredites (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 the New World. Moroni used that understanding to interpret and explain the ups and downs of the Jaredite experience. He quoted Jared himself anticipating the blessing of a

16. All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from Royal Skousen’s 2009 critical text—*The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University), which provides the most accurate version of Joseph Smith’s original translation.

17. Verse 9 reads, “I Lehi have obtained a promise.”

promised land when he sent his brother to “inquire of the Lord” where to 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 will I 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 this version of the Lord’s response. It does, however, become the focus in Moroni’s second version of the Lord’s answer: “And he [the Lord] 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).

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 eighty times in the Book of Mormon in either a positive (thirty-eight times) or a negative (forty-two times) construction.¹⁸ Many of these statements invoke the simplest version of this formula, while others expand to elaborate or make the meaning more specific. Lehi, for example, attached a promise of liberty to the explicit covenant language of blessing and cursing. The universal implication of this covenant was also clear to Lehi since it included no requirement of Abrahamic descent: “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 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 Ne. 1:7).

18. Positive versions include 1 Nephi 2:20; 4:14; 14:1–2; 17:13; 2 Nephi 1:7–8, 9, 20, 32; 3:2; 4:4; Jarom 1:9; Mosiah 1:7; 2:22, 31; Alma 9:13; 36:1, 30; 37:13; 38:1; 48:15, 25; 50:20; 62:51; Helaman 3:20; 4:15; 7:24; 12:1; 3 Nephi 5:22; 10:6; Ether 1:38, 42–43; 2:7, 9, 10, 12; 7:26; 9:16, 20; and 13:2. Negative versions occur in 2 Nephi 1:10, 20; 4:4; 5:20; Jacob 3:3; Jarom 1:10; Omni 1:6; Alma 9:13, 14, 18, 24; 36:30; 37:13, 22, 25, 26, 31; 38:1; 45:16; 50:20; Helaman 7:28; 13:7, 23; Mormon 1:17; 3:15; Ether 2:9, 10, 15; 7:23; 9:20, 28; 11:1, 6, 12; and 14:1.

Before moving on to a discussion of the second stream of covenant discourse, there are a few nuances regarding the Lehite/Jaredite covenants that deserve attention: (1) the recurring penalty for covenant breakers of being “cut off from the presence of the Lord,” (2) the use of term *promise* to refer to covenants, and (3) the concentration of references to these covenants in prophetic appeals to repentance.

Covenant Breakers Are “Cut Off from the Presence of the Lord.” Almost half of the negative formulations of this covenant in the Book of Mormon indicate that the wicked will be cursed or punished by being “cut off from the presence of the Lord.” When this phrase occurs in Leviticus, “the presence of the Lord” is usually understood to refer to “the tabernacle presence of the Lord” (Lev. 22:3).¹⁹ But in his teachings on the Atonement, Jacob of the Book of Mormon uses this phrase to describe the general consequence of the Fall or “the first judgment” of all humankind: “because man became fallen, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord,” which is to suffer spiritual death (2 Ne. 9:6–7; see also Alma 42:9; Hel. 14:15–18). Alma later explains 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). Later, Mormon saw the verification of “these promises” in the “wars and . . . destructions” that were “brought upon” the Nephites 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 uses the phrase “cut off from the presence of the Lord” with Jared’s brother, it may have referred to the Spirit of the Lord: “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 explains that the otherwise good Jaredite king Morianton was “cut off from the presence of the Lord” “because of his many whoredoms” (Ether 10:11).

Covenants and Promises. What I have been calling the Lehite or Jaredite “covenant” is usually referred to as a “promise” in the text, but there is a difference between the two terms: while promises are often thought of in unilateral terms, covenants are usually understood to have a reciprocal structure, with obligations held by both parties. In Lehi’s

19. R. E. Averbeck, “Tabernacle,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 820.

final instructions to his family, he specifically refers to a 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 Ne. 1:5, emphasis added). While this covenant bears obvious similarities to God’s covenant with Abraham and features a clearly reciprocal character, Lehi does call it a promise at times. However, as illustrated in the following quote, this promise is equivalent to a covenant: “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,” but “when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief,” the judgments of God “shall rest upon them” (2 Ne. 1:9–10). The covenant language of blessing and cursing is frequently used in connection with this promise; that, plus its reciprocal structure (both parties have obligations to uphold), indicates this promise is acting in essence as a covenant. Lehi goes on to appeal to his older sons and urge them to repent “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 Ne. 1:16–22).

In blessing his sons, Lehi ends with Joseph, the youngest, and explicitly connects the promises he, Lehi, received when being led out of Jerusalem to “*the covenants of the Lord* which he made unto Joseph,” who “truly saw our day” (2 Ne. 3:4–5, emphasis added). After declaring to his son that he is a descendant of their biblical ancestor Joseph, Lehi rehearses the covenants the Lord had made with Joseph; he 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 out of “darkness and out of captivity unto freedom” — “for great was the *covenants* of the Lord which he made unto Joseph” (2 Ne. 3:4–5, emphasis added).²⁰ In this passage, Lehi clearly equates the promises of the Lord to Joseph to the covenants the Lord made with Lehi. And just as clearly, Lehi understands that the promises he has received are a part of the fulfillment of the same promises or covenants received generations earlier

20. 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): 109–37.

by Joseph. Like covenants, all these promises are connected to blessings or cursings, which will be received depending on whether the people are obedient or disobedient to the commandments.

Equivalence between *promise* and *covenant* is also reflected in the references to the lands promised to Lehi, Jared, and Abraham in the covenants God made with them. Nephi quotes the reference to Abraham's promised lands in 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" (2 Ne. 24:1–2, emphasis added). Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob refer twenty-eight times to their own "lands of promise" or "promised land," which they also refer to as the "land of their inheritance," which replaced the land of Lehi's inheritance in Jerusalem.²¹

In the closing chapters of the Book of Mormon, it is clear that both Mormon and Moroni understand these long-standing promises as covenants. 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 their God hath given them, unto the fulfilling of his *covenant*" — at that time the Lord will "remember the *covenant* which he made unto Abraham and unto all the house of Israel" (Morm. 5:14, 20, emphasis added). Here, at the end of the Nephite record, Mormon echoes the same understanding stated at the beginning by Jacob: "And now my beloved brethren, I [Jacob] have read these things that ye might know concerning the covenants of the Lord, that he hath covenanted with all the house of Israel, that he hath spoken unto the Jews by the mouth of his holy prophets, even from the beginning down from generation to generation until the time cometh that they shall be restored to the true church and fold of God, when they shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance and shall be established in all their lands of promise" (2 Ne. 9:1–2). In his own late prophecies, Moroni calls the future descendants of Lehi 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, emphasis added).

Calls to Repentance and the Covenant. God's covenants with Lehi and Jared provide standard reference points for prophets who are sent to

21. Compare 1 Nephi 2:4, 11; 3:16, 22; and 5:2 with 1 Nephi 13:30: "the land which the Lord God hath covenanted with thy father that his seed should have for the land of their inheritance."

call a wicked people to repentance. A full quarter of the references to that covenant explicitly call the wicked to repent, to turn or return to the Lord, and to obey his commandments to avoid or get relief from the cursing that comes upon the wicked. The rest of the negative formulations of the covenant implicitly say the same thing.

Absent from these passages is any outline of a special repentance process or required penance. The wicked are simply required to give up their wicked practices and begin keeping the commandments. Turning from their “strange” or “forbidden” paths to the way of the righteous seems to fully define the concept of repentance the Lord and his prophets had in mind.²² Moroni tells how the Jaredite king Shule’s initiative to protect the prophets from persecution and reviling by the wicked 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” (Hel. 4:14–15).

Perhaps the most dramatic and authoritative of these calls to repentance occurred when the great destructions 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 declaring himself to be Jesus Christ, announcing his gospel, and inviting all to repent and come unto him: “Repent and come unto me, ye ends of the earth, and be saved” (3 Ne. 9:22). Then after “the space of many hours” (3 Ne. 10:1), the voice came again, repeating and expanding the call to repentance in terms of the covenants the Lord had given to their forebears: “O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart! But if not,

22. For a comprehensive examination of the Book of Mormon emphasis on this doctrine, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 49–78.

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 Ne. 10:6–7, emphasis added).

As many times as "the covenant to [their] fathers" is stated and restated to the Nephites, it is always cast in the same reciprocal formula: "for the promises of the Lord were, if they should keep his commandments they should prosper in the land" (Alma 48:25). The formulation is not always negative and focused on repentance. Editorializing on a time of Nephite prosperity, for example, Mormon cites the Nephites' blessings as a confirmation 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 50:2).

It is not accidental that the frequent citations or allusions to the Lehi covenant throughout the Book of Mormon seem to raise memories of the other two covenants — the Abrahamic covenant and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The promise of lands and posterity appears 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."²³

Covenant Discourse 2: The Abrahamic Covenant

The second stream of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon reaches back explicitly to God's covenant with Abraham. And the focus shifts beyond the prophets' immediate concerns of the blessing and cursing of Nephites or Jaredites to the covenant's long-term implications not only for the house of Israel but also for all humankind. The Nephite prophets understood the Abrahamic covenant to be related to all their prophecies and to such basic doctrinal concepts as the plan of salvation, the gospel

23. In another study, I have shown that the rhetorical form of many of the references to the Lehi covenant imitate the hundreds of abbreviated references to the gospel in the Book of Mormon, suggesting that there may be a deeper connection between these three streams of covenant discourse. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Biblical *Merismus* in Book of Mormon Gospel References," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 131–32.

of Jesus Christ, and the salvation history of all mankind (discussed later in this section).

This second stream of covenant discourse grows out of the visions of Lehi and Nephi and the teachings of Christ to the Nephites, and it includes repeated references to the last part of God's promise given individually to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18; 12:3; 26:4; 28:14). While biblical scholars have tended to ignore that last part of the Abrahamic covenant, and some Christian scholars, following Peter and Paul, have tended to see Christ and the worldwide expansion of traditional Christianity as the fulfillment of this promise,²⁴ Book of Mormon discourse consistently presents an interpretation that pushes the fulfillment of the promise forward to the end of times. The future expectations presented in the visions of Book of Mormon prophets and in the teachings of Jesus to the Nephites are inseparable from the Abrahamic covenant, which is used to connect the beginning of God's people with the end.

The twenty-nine mentions of Abraham in the Book of Mormon serve a variety of functions. Two occur incidentally in material quoted from Isaiah (2 Ne. 8:2; 27:33). Two more occur in an account of how Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek (Alma 13:15). Three appear in an account of Abraham with Isaac and Jacob, seated in the kingdom of heaven, with their garments "cleansed" and "spotless, pure and white," to inspire the people to repent so that they might qualify to be seated in the kingdom with their ancient forebears (Alma 5:24; 7:25; Hel. 3:30). In eight passages, Nephite prophets remind the people that their god is the same god who was claimed by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and who delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage and performed other great miracles to preserve their ancestors (1 Ne. 6:4; 17:40; Mosiah 7:19; 23:23; Alma 29:11; 36:2; 3 Ne. 4:30; Morm. 9:11). In these and other passages, the god of Abraham is identified six times with the prophesied Messiah that Abraham and other prophets saw in vision and prophesied of concerning his

24. For example, Williamson, in *Abraham, Israel, and the Nations*, concludes his exhaustive analysis of the Old Testament covenant passages with the statement that Jesus Christ "was the royal 'seed' of Abraham in whom all nations would be blessed" (267). Another example of detailed scriptural analysis being used to identify Christ and his people as the "true Israel" through whom the promise to Abraham will be fulfilled is found in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), 608. Such conclusions are typical in the biblical studies of Christian scholars.

coming and his Atonement, as recorded in scriptures not found in our modern Bible (1 Ne. 19:10; Jacob 4:5; Hel. 8:16–19; Ether 13:11).²⁵ Another four passages refer explicitly to the covenant God made to remember Abraham’s seed forever (1 Ne. 15:13–18; 22:9; 2 Ne. 29:14; 3 Ne. 20:25, 27).

Distinguishing the Plan of Salvation, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and Salvation History. It will be helpful to the following discussion to distinguish three key elements of salvation discourse so that readers can observe their interactions and roles in the Book of Mormon teachings and prophecies.

1. The *plan of salvation* is a name for God’s grand scheme to make salvation possible for all humankind. 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 final gathering of Israel, and the final judgment. These are the events the Father and the Son have brought or will bring about for humankind, creating the opportunity for God’s spirit children to become like them. The Nephite prophets employ a dozen variations of this phrase, which is unique to the Book of Mormon.
2. The *gospel* or *doctrine of Jesus Christ* teaches men and women individually the way they must go, what they must do, to be prepared at the judgment and to enter into the presence of the Lord.²⁶ This doctrine 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 the Holy Ghost, and (5) endurance in faith to the end (6) for all who would receive eternal life.
3. *Salvation history* is the overarching story told in the historical scriptures — namely, the prophecies of how God and his prophets have taught and will teach the gospel to men and women in different dispensations. Salvation history is also the story of how the

25. Jennifer C. Lane has shown why these passages describe the “heavenly enthronement” of the righteous. See “Sitting Enthroned: A Scriptural Perspective,” *Religious Educator* 19, no. 1 (2018): 103–17.

26. In a previous essay, I offered a brief clarification of the meanings and relationships of these and other connected scriptural terms. See Noel B. Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 3 (2013): 79–91. A more complete explication is provided in a working paper: Noel B. Reynolds, “The Great Plans of the Eternal God,” All Faculty Publications, BYU ScholarsArchive, August 20, 2018, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/2175/>.

Lord's people will be brought together in righteousness in a final dispensation through successive cycles of apostasy and repentance, destruction and restoration.

The Abrahamic covenant is the key thread of the salvation history presented in the Book of Mormon. The Abrahamic covenant reassures both the wicked and the righteous that the Father is in control, that he loves his children on the earth, that he makes covenants with them to help them become a holy nation, and that he will reward them at the last day according to the choices they have made, even giving eternal life to all who accept his gospel and endure to the end. Like the gospel, the Abrahamic covenant is a key part of salvation history. It would be a mistake, however, to think of the *Abrahamic covenant* as another name for the *gospel*. Each of these terms plays an important and clearly distinct role. The Abrahamic covenant entails prophecies describing the future working out of salvation of groups such as the Gentiles, the remnant of Joseph, the Jews, and all the tribes of Israel. At the same time, it also serves as a surrogate for the gospel of Jesus Christ, which conveys eternal promises to all men and women. The historical accounts of the ups and downs of covenant Israel in its relationship with the Lord are instructive for all individuals who consider the gospel invitation to come unto him. The gospel, on the other hand, entails the greatest prophecy, describing how the eternal salvation of every individual — no matter which of these groups he or she belongs to — 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. So the covenant given to Abraham and the gospel of Jesus Christ turn out to be different, but both are very important ways of talking about the Lord's relationship to his people. The former refers to Israel corporately, as a people with a history and a prophesied future. The latter is directed to individuals. Because they both come from God and deal with his offers to help them qualify for salvation in this world and in the next, it is easy to conflate the two terms, but each is prominent in its own important and distinct contexts.²⁷

The Abrahamic Covenant and the Remnant and Messianic Prophecies. This salvation history, the story of God's past and future dealings

27. Michael A. Goodman, "The Abrahamic Covenant: A Foundational Theme for the Old Testament," *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003): 43–53, provides a good representative of the Latter-day Saint attempts to articulate the relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and the gospel of Jesus Christ and produces a somewhat different conclusion than what is offered here.

with his children on this earth, is the constant theme of the great prophecies in the Book of Mormon and the principal framework used by its writers. In the opening page of his record, Nephi tells how his father, Lehi, prayed fervently to the Lord on behalf 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” because he had been shown the “power and goodness and mercy” of the Lord, who is merciful to “all the inhabitants of the earth” and will “not suffer that those who come” unto him should perish (1 Ne. 1:5–15).

If an explication of the past and future fulfillment of the covenant God made with Lehi and his descendants was not part of Lehi’s first visions, it is clear that it was a part of the great vision received separately by both Lehi and Nephi at the first camp in the wilderness. Book of Mormon discourse regarding the Abrahamic covenant tends to focus on (1) the prophesied scattering and gathering of Israel (the remnant prophecy) 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. In the last days, the fullness of the gospel will be established among the Gentiles, who will then take the gospel to scattered Israel, bringing them “to the knowledge of the true Messiah” — the means by which they will finally be “grafted in” or “gathered together” in the last days (1 Ne. 10:14).

Nephi’s own visions provided him with the same perspective on the long-term salvation history of all peoples. In the vision Nephi received at the first camp in the wilderness, for instance, he was shown the future coming of Christ, the apostasy and destruction of the descendants of Lehi, and the eventual restoration of the gospel to the Gentiles, who in the last days would, in turn, bring the gospel to the scattered remnants of the house of Israel, who would then finally believe in Jesus Christ, repent, and be gathered in — fulfilling the promises of the Abrahamic covenant (see 1 Ne. 11–15). The first prophets in the Book of Mormon also understood that the Lord’s promise to their branch of Israel was an extension of the part of the Abrahamic covenant that indicates Abraham’s descendants will 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: *In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed*” (1 Ne. 15:18, emphasis added).

Nephi's quick summary of Lehi's teachings taken from that vision states simply that Lehi "spake unto my brethren concerning the gospel" and "concerning the Gentiles and also concerning the house of Israel," that they "should be scattered" and "gathered together again" (1 Ne. 10:11–14). The more detailed version of these teachings is reserved for Nephi's own account of the great vision in the following four chapters and again in the concluding chapters of his second book. An angel tells Nephi that if the latter-day Gentiles accept the Messiah and his gospel, they will "be numbered among the house of Israel" and "be a blessed people upon the promised land forever" (1 Ne. 14:2). The angel goes on to remind Nephi twice of "the covenants of the Lord unto the house of Israel" (1 Ne. 14:5, 8). And when Nephi saw the forces of the devil mobilize to destroy the "church of the Lamb of God" in the last days, he also 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 Ne. 14:10–14). This is far more detail than can be found in any of the biblical versions of the remnant prophecy.

Later, when preaching to his brothers, Nephi draws even more deeply on what he learned in this vision to support an 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 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 Ne. 22:8–12)

The other major prophecies featured in the Book of Mormon also feature this remnant prophecy and salvation history, in combination with prophecies of Christ's future coming and explanations of his gospel. The remnant prophecy provides a corporate view of salvation history for all nations and the house of Israel. The messianic prophecy, on the other hand, explains how Christ will provide both the Atonement and the gospel teaching through which individuals can qualify for eternal life, whether they be Gentiles or of the house of Israel. The gospel provides the key mechanism through which individuals are saved, thereby making fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant at the corporate level possible.

Nephi begins his second book with Lehi's last blessings to his children. In the blessings, Lehi emphasizes again the Abrahamic covenant in the version that had come down to him through Joseph (2 Ne. 1–4). Nephi's second book then features the words of his younger brother Jacob, who reads two chapters of Isaiah that focus on these same covenants, followed by Jacob's own commentary on that same salvation history—a commentary that introduces the most developed account so far in the Book of Mormon of the prophesied Christ and his plan of salvation (2 Ne. 6–10). Following a brief central chapter that identifies the accumulating witnesses of the coming Christ (2 Ne. 11), Nephi inserts thirteen more chapters of Isaiah that were selected to serve as a second witness to support these remnant and messianic prophecies (2 Ne. 12–24). Nephi concludes his second book with his own prophecies (the requisite third witness) of Christ and of the future gathering of the remnants of Israel (2 Ne. 25–30),²⁸ followed by his own foundational account of the gospel of Christ as it had been taught to him by the Father and the Son in his first great vision (2 Ne. 31–32).²⁹ In his own book,

28. 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 Ne. 25:4, 7). The content derives principally from his earlier vision, as recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14.

29. In a forthcoming paper, I invoke the canons of Hebrew rhetoric of the seventh century BCE to show that 2 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 that emphasizes the importance of the multiple witnesses of Christ. See "Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study," *Proceedings of the Chiasmus Jubilee Conference*, forthcoming. The prepublished version is accessible online at All Faculty Publications, BYU ScholarsArchive, July 19, 2016, <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1679>.

Jacob shares the allegory of the olive tree from the prophet Zenos (who is not mentioned in our modern Bible but who was possibly a predecessor of Isaiah); the allegory offers a distinct but fully compatible account of the same salvation history that had been presented by Lehi and Nephi. Jacob had read Nephi's record, likely noticed the brief reference to this allegory in the report of Lehi's vision (1 Ne. 10:14), and may have recognized that Nephi's readers would benefit from having the full allegory available to them.

During Christ's post-Resurrection visit to the Nephites, he prophesied, expounding and reinforcing (more than is usually recognized) that same salvation history, with a focus on God's covenant with Abraham. In the final chapters of their record, Mormon and his son Moroni repeatedly return to that same salvation history presented by Lehi, Nephi, Isaiah, and Jesus in preaching and prophesying to the future Gentiles and the remnants of Israel who Mormon and Moroni expect will receive the record. Though they have failed to bring their own people to repentance, they are powerfully motivated by the knowledge that the Nephite record, which they have labored under seemingly impossible circumstances to abridge, compile, and preserve, will in the last days 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.

Over the course of his life, Nephi had clearly come to see in Isaiah a fellow traveler who had been shown the same remnant prophecy and whose writings confirmed his own revelations. In at least thirty-eight passages in the Book of Mormon, a prophet/writer restates or alludes directly to the remnant prophecy as a way of invoking the Abrahamic covenant.³⁰ In addition, Nephi, Jacob, Abinadi, and Jesus Christ, collectively, quote twenty-three complete chapters of Isaiah and Malachi to support their own remnant and messianic prophecies. In addition, there are another thirty-six shorter passages from these and other prophets. Nephi set this pattern of quoting previous prophets early in

30. These include 1 Nephi 10:12–14; 13:30–42; 15:12–20; 19:13–17; 22:3–28; 2 Nephi 6:11–17; 9:1–2, 53; 10:8–19; 25:12–29; 26:12, 24–28, 33; 27:1–35; 28:3–32; 29:10–30:18; Jacob 4:2–14; 5:1–77; 6:4; Mosiah 15:28–31; Alma 37:4–7, 16–18; Helaman 15:11–13; 3 Nephi 5:21–26; 10:4–7; 16:4–20; 20:10–21:29; 29:1–9; 30:1–2; Mormon 3:17–22; 5:9–24; 7:1–10; 8:21–23; 9:37–39; Ether 12:22; 13:4–12; Moroni 7:31–32; and 10:31.

both his first and second books; he inserted lengthy excerpts from Isaiah to validate his own visions and prophecies of the future mission and ministry of Jesus Christ and of the fulfillment of God's promises to the remnants of the biblical Joseph and Jacob — beginning with the descendants of his own father, Lehi.

The remnant and messianic prophecies were tightly linked and impressed upon Nephi when as a youth 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 (see 1 Ne. 11–14). Later, at the end of his writings, Nephi finally shares with his readers the gospel of Jesus Christ — the “plain and precious truths” that would be lost from the Bible and the Gentile churches — as it was taught to him by the Father and the Son in that same early vision.³¹ The last half of Nephi's account of his vision describes the decline of his own Christian descendants and of the Gentile Christians who eventually spread to Lehi's promised land in the Americas and destroy and scatter Lehi's descendants. Nephi goes on to report how he saw the Lord's work unfold as his gospel was restored — not to the Israelites but to the Gentiles — and how the Gentile believers would successfully take the gospel 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 (1 Ne. 13:34, 37–39).

In his final sermon (2 Ne. 25–30), Nephi rehearses and elaborates his own earlier account. Starting once more with a powerful witness of the crucified and resurrected Messiah, Nephi prophesies that though Christ's teachings would be accepted initially, apostasy and decline would eventually follow, necessitating the restoration of his gospel and Church to the Gentiles in the future, through the record already initiated by Nephi and yet to be completed by his successors. The outcome described by God in this revelation is explicitly described as the fulfillment of his ancient promise to Abraham:

And it shall come to pass that the Jew shall have the words of the Nephites; and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews; and the Nephites and the Jew shall have the words of the lost tribes of Israel; and the lost tribes

31. See 2 Nephi 31:2–21, and for an interpretation of that chapter, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Nephi,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 51–75.

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 Ne. 29:13–14)

A Blessing to All Nations. But how will Abraham's seed, scattered and smitten and lost for centuries, be instrumental in delivering this last great blessing to all nations? The solution to this puzzle comes from the same prophecies discussed thus far. Nephi's focus on the remnant prophecy, as laid out for him in his vision in far greater detail than in any other prophetic writing, is understandable because he had been told in his visions that the very record he was writing would emerge as a principal instrument in restoring the gospel in the last dispensation and convincing the remnant of his own people and (eventually) all the scattered remnants of Israel to believe in Jesus Christ, repent and come unto him, and accept him as the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because of the things Nephi saw in his first great vision, which 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 the lost tribes of Israel, that Jesus Christ is the god of the Old Testament and that, as individuals, they must accept and follow his gospel in order to be saved.

The teaching of Christ to the assembled Nephite survivors, with its focus on the remnant prophecy part of the Abrahamic covenant, provides by far the most complete explanation of that covenant and goes far beyond what most scholars have found in the Bible as it clearly foretells the key role the Nephite record will play in the future gathering of Israel.

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.³² (3 Ne. 21:1–3, 7)

In this passage, we see that Jesus Christ clearly taught the Nephites that the Book of Mormon would in the last days be the means by which the gospel would be restored first to the Gentiles and subsequently to the descendants of Lehi and then to the house of Israel generally, as a means of gathering them back to the Father, as promised to Abraham anciently.

The Prophecies of Jesus Christ to the Nephites. Mirroring Nephi's long exposition of the remnant prophecy at the beginning of the Nephite dispensation, Jesus Christ, almost six centuries later, devoted his second day of teaching the Nephites to the same topic. Having taught his gospel to the surviving righteous remnant of Nephites during his first day with 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 ancient prophets may have understood fully, Jesus refers to "the Father" as a being separate from himself thirty-eight times, making it clear that he was talking about "the covenant which the Father made with your fathers," "with your father Jacob," or "with Abraham" (see, for example, 3 Ne. 20:22, 25, 27). While the distinction between Jesus and his Father may have no clear precedent in our Hebrew Bible, other terminology of the Hebrew prophets is in evidence.

Historically, readers and scholars of the Old Testament have tended to ignore or de-emphasize the significance of the remnant prophecies associated with the Abrahamic covenant. In contrast, Jesus begins his second-day sermon by reminding the Nephites that they were "a remnant of the house of Israel"; he then repeats that connection eight more times in his discourse. Over the last few decades, Bible scholars have been influenced by the classic study of the remnant prophecy by Gerhard F. Hasel, who has shown that the idea that the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled through the restoration of a distant remnant of the house of Israel first shows up clearly in the writings of the eighth-century

32. See the discussion of this passage in Ludlow, "Covenant Teachings," 240–41.

prophets, particularly Amos and then Isaiah.³³ Amos's unique reference to "the remnant of Joseph" (Amos 5:15) is now generally believed by scholars to refer to an eschatological event.³⁴ It is the prophecies of Isaiah, though, that most clearly parallel the remnant prophecies of Nephi and Jesus, each of whom quote long sections from Isaiah and comment on the great value of his writings.

While some Nephite prophets repeatedly emphasize the Deuteronomic interpretation of the covenant (which focused on righteous descendants receiving promised lands) when they taught the people and called them to repentance, Jesus focuses almost exclusively on the oft-forgotten promise that in Abraham's seed would "all the kindreds of the earth be blessed" (3 Ne. 20:25). He even cites the Abrahamic covenant an astonishing twelve times, including one quotation from Isaiah that alludes to the covenant.³⁵ Nowhere else in scripture can be found such an intensive and extensive treatment of the Abrahamic covenant. As Christ continues to prophesy in his second-day sermon to the assembled Nephites, he uses the word *covenant* sixteen times, invoking the promise to Abraham—sometimes in paraphrase but usually with the same wording used in one or more of its Old Testament references.

The most developed of these references by Jesus Christ to the Abrahamic covenant follows the same two-part pattern used six centuries earlier by Nephi in reporting his great vision (1 Ne. 11–14) and in Nephi's own final prophecies (2 Ne. 25–30)—that is, Christ begins with a reference to the prophecies of his own coming and then transitions to 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

33. Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah*, Andrews University Monographs, vol. 5 (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1974).

34. Hasel writes, "In Amos we encounter for the first time a connection of the remnant motif with eschatology." Hasel, *Remnant*, 205. See also Hasel's treatment of the Amos reference in *Remnant*, 199–205. In calling the Nephites to an urgent battle in defense of their liberty, Captain Moroni quoted the prophecy given to Lehi and Nephi that identified Lehi's descendants as the "remnant of Joseph" that would be preserved. See Alma 46:23–24 and 1 Nephi 13:34.

35. 3 Nephi 20:10, 12–13, 22, 25, 27, 29, 34–35, 46; 21:4, 7, 22; 22:10.

iniquities—and this because ye are the children of the covenant. And after that ye were blessed, then fulfilleth 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 Ne. 20:25–27)

This passage demonstrates clearly (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. Rather, he teaches the Book of Mormon prophets that the record they are compiling, featuring “the fullness of the gospel,” will be what brings about the prophesied blessings in the latter days.

The Book of Mormon as the Prophesied Blessing to All Nations. This second-day sermon of Jesus Christ to the Nephites, with its detailed and scripturally documented salvation history, is the theological climax of the Book of Mormon. Jesus does return later to the assembled twelve disciples to ensure they clearly grasp the six-part definition of his gospel that he spelled out in his first visit and that he and the Father together had taught to Nephi in his earlier vision (see 3 Ne. 27:13–22).³⁶ 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 they are bringing to a close will be in fact the Lord’s principal instrument for fulfilling that covenant. As the Lord works his “marvelous work and a wonder,” the book will be brought 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 in God fulfilling 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. . . .

36. For a detailed analysis of these three presentations of the gospel in the Book of Mormon, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel according to Mormon,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (2015): 218–34.

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. (Morm. 5:12–14)

Mormon then states that this same purpose explains why the seed of Lehi would be scattered by the Gentiles — they had lost “the Spirit of the Lord” that strove with their fathers and were “without Christ and God in the world” (Morm. 5:15–19). But, Mormon continues, “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” (Morm. 5:20).

Mormon and Moroni interrupt their own closing narratives repeatedly to restate this particular salvation history — to call on the Gentiles of the future to repent, come to Christ, and believe this record.³⁷ Moroni, for example, concludes his original ending with a prayer, a prayer that 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” (Morm. 9:36–37).

Moroni did not expect to live another thirty-six 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, Moroni apparently overcame whatever obstacles might have prevented him from adding more to the record, and he produced a brief account of the Jaredite record and a collection of additional information and teachings he felt would be helpful to the Gentile believers in the future. In his writings, including in his account of the Jaredites, he also interspersed additional commentary on the salvation history and prophecies. He even finds room in his tightly compressed account of the Jaredites for a lengthy report of the revelation given to the last prophet of this pre-Abrahamic civilization—a revelation that contained a version of the same salvation history and remnant prophecy based on the Abrahamic covenant that was taught repeatedly to the Nephites (see Ether 13:4–11). Approaching

37. Compare 3 Nephi 29:1–4; 30:1–2; Mormon 3:17–22; 5:9–24; 7:1–10; and 9:37.

his conclusion, Moroni explains to the future Gentiles “the office of their ministry” as he and other prophets declare “the word of Christ” and “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” (Moro. 7:31–32). Moroni’s conclusion begins with one final appeal to Israel in the last days to respond and participate in the 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” (Moro. 10:31).

Covenant Discourse 3: 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; this gospel will unite the apostate Gentiles and remnants of Israel with God at the level of the individual.³⁸ The Book of Mormon uniquely merges Old and New Testament perspectives and language, as demonstrated in 3 Nephi when Jesus Christ incorporates his gospel into his account of how the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled. Immediately following his account of the Gentiles scourging Lehi’s descendants (“the remnant of the seed of Joseph”),³⁹ Christ confirms that this people will eventually receive “the fullness of my gospel” (3 Ne. 20:28), which will lead to their restoration as his people. He then moves on immediately to a long description of the restoration of Israel to its promised Jerusalem, “the land of their inheritance” (3 Ne. 20:29, 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 unto the Father in my name. Then will the Father gather them together again and give unto them Jerusalem for the land of their inheritance” (3 Ne. 20:30–33).

38. In a previous paper I have shown that the Nephite prophets understood repentance to include making a covenant to obey and remember Christ always and that baptism of water must follow as a witness of that covenant. Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 9.

39. Compare Alma 46:24, 25; 3 Nephi 5:23; 10:17; and Ether 13:6, 7, 10.

Jesus then incorporates several Old Testament descriptions into his prophecy.⁴⁰ As Jesus reviews and expands what he has already prophesied, he 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”⁴¹ (3 Ne. 21:6).

Again, using basic gospel terminology, as emphasized with added italics in the following quotation, Jesus quotes the Father, reiterating that the conversion of the Gentiles will provide the base for the conversion of the remnant of Lehi, which will then lead to the even larger conversion of all the house of Israel:

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 Ne. 21:20–26)

Based on these few excerpts, Jesus is clearly teaching the Nephites the same perspective that was taught to their ancestors six centuries earlier. The fulfillment of God’s covenants with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Lehi will be accomplished in the last days through the restoration of the gospel. This gospel outlines the way all men and women must follow to be saved (see 2 Ne. 31:21). God’s covenant with Abraham is the promise and prophecy that through his seed, this blessing of restoration will come to all the families of the earth.

40. See Deuteronomy 11:11; Leviticus 1:5; Isaiah 52:1–3, 7–9, 11–15; 18:7; 54:1; Ezekiel 36:25; Joel 2:18; and Nahum 1:15.

41. For a detailed analysis of this passage and the five other Book of Mormon quotations of Jesus Christ that share its message and its precise rhetorical form, see Noel B. Reynolds, “How ‘Come unto Me’ Fits into the Nephite Gospel,” *Religious Educator* 18, no. 2 (2017): 15–29.

A Chosen People. The Book of Mormon provides a unique understanding of the Abrahamic covenant in that it reframes what it means to be “the covenant people,” or the chosen people of the Lord. The issue of being a chosen people has obviously and most visibly been an issue historically for the Jewish people, but the Book of Mormon treats it as something that any prospective beneficiary could misinterpret. On the one hand, being the chosen people of the Lord could cause one to feel superior toward other peoples and as if he or she had an entitlement to salvation.⁴² But the far greater danger is that the covenant people, as the lineage designated by God to preach his teachings to the world, will neglect the covenant and the responsibilities it imposes on them. 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. This cycle appears in the Nephite explanations of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities of Israel, of the rise and demise of early Christianity, of the Jaredites’ vacillation between righteousness and wickedness, and of numerous other periods in Nephite and Lamanite history, ending in the final struggle of the wicked against the wicked that brought their civilization to its dismal ending.

From the beginning of the record, it was clear to the Nephite prophets that God’s salvation was intended for all humankind, 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 Ne. 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 humankind — and on exactly the same terms for each individual — terms that are spelled out in Christ’s gospel. The covenant people are offered no shortcuts to eternal life, and no people is restricted from access to it. As Nephi taught his own brothers, “all

42. A peculiarly Latter-day Saint version of this belief of entitlement, based on an interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant, is sometimes promoted in an unofficial doctrine of “believing blood,” which will not be discussed here because it does not figure in the Book of Mormon. A detailed explanation is provided in Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 33–42.

nations, kindreds, tongues, and people shall dwell safely in the Holy One of Israel if it so be that they will repent" (1 Ne. 22:28). Nephi concludes his own prophecies with another 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 Ne. 30:2). Mormon makes the same point in even fuller detail at the other end of Nephite history, as he addresses the future descendants of Lehi using a recognizably Hebrew rhetorical formulation:

Know ye that ye are of the house of Israel.
Know ye that ye must come unto repentance or ye cannot be saved. . . .
Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers
and repent of all your sins and iniquities
and believe in Jesus Christ,
that he is the Son of God . . .
And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, . . .
Therefore repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus
and lay hold upon the gospel of Christ. (Morm. 7:2–8)

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 the power by which he delivered Israel from their long Egyptian bondage and restored them to their promised lands. The return of the Jews from Babylonian exile provides the widely heralded second example. Nephi invokes the same type of example—that of deliverance—to show how the Lord brought Lehi and his people to their promised land in spite of impossible obstacles: "INephi 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 Ne. 1:20). But even in Nephi's first book, which focuses on God's powerful deliverances of his covenant people, the visions and revelations received along the way tell of a final deliverance, through the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham that "in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed" (1 Ne. 15:18). Nephi quotes Lehi's summary of the vision he received, concluding with the distinctively Nephite emphasis on a knowledge of the Messiah being a key to the prophesied gathering of Israel: "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" (1 Ne. 10:14, emphasis added).

Throughout the Book of Mormon, this final deliverance—or restoration or gathering or grafting in—of the remnants of Israel is described as a result of coming to a true knowledge of Christ and his gospel. 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 Ne. 15:14, emphasis added). In these three sentences, Nephi features the words *know* and *knowledge* six times, while referring first to the Lehite covenant, then to the Abrahamic covenant, and finally to their ultimate fulfillment through the gospel covenant. The gathering of Israel "in the latter times" will be accomplished by providing individuals 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 that 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 Ne. 6:11, emphasis added). Linking the final gathering of Israel with their reception of knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ occurs in twenty-four 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."⁴³ In this way, the Nephite prophets explain the integration of the three streams of covenant discourse in their writings.

These Book of Mormon prophets clearly saw that this future knowledge would come 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

43. 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.

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 Ne. 3:12).

The ability to receive this knowledge and to be gathered in as God's people is available to all. This universal application of God's plan of salvation is phrased — most frequently by Jesus Christ and sometimes by Book of Mormon prophets, who quote him — in this way: "the Gentiles shall be blessed and numbered among the house of Israel" (2 Ne. 10:18).⁴⁴ This principle is laid down clearly and emphatically in Nephi's final prophecies of Christ:

[The Lord] 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 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 Ne. 26:24–27)

After teaching his people of the Atonement and Resurrection of Christ, King 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). Alma similarly describes the universal nature of the plan of salvation when describing his conversion vision; 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).

44. Compare 1 Nephi 14:2; Helaman 15:12–14; 3 Nephi 16:13; 21:6, 22; 30:2; Mormon 7:10; Ether 13:10; and Moroni 6:4.

Why Israel? In spite of differences in content and emphasis, the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon share a basic approach to the Abrahamic covenant. Each contains a history of Abraham's descendants dominated by accounts of their blessings and cursings in accordance with the people's compliance with the commandments they received from the Lord through Abraham and later prophets. Each also features prophecies and reminders of prophecies that the Lord will make of Abraham's seed a great nation. These prophecies and historical sagas regarding Abraham's seed constitute sacred histories and take on much greater theological significance in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, each of which incorporates Christ and his gospel into the sacred history — though each in its own way.

What none of these ancient scriptures offers is an explanation of why the Lord wanted to have a chosen people in the first place, especially one that would repeatedly become such an embarrassment and disappointment to him. While the answer to that question will inevitably involve speculation, both the history and the consequences of God's choosing a people are observable as matters of fact. From the account of Jacob's original family, who wound up in Egyptian servitude after selling Joseph into slavery, to the apostasies that led to the captivity of Israel, and finally to the Roman dispersion of the Jews, the blessings and cursings of Israel — God's chosen people — have been on full display for all nations to observe. The biblical story of the rise and fall of God's people is only amplified by the Book of Mormon account of Lehi's descendants, who were spared the Babylonian captivity but went repeatedly through cycles of apostasy and repentance, accordingly receiving God's punishments or deliverances.

While each of these three scriptural traditions — the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon — has had some Israelite followers who wanted to see their election as an inside track to eventual salvation, each tradition also contains teachings that universalize God's promises and require all individuals of all nations to be righteous and embrace his gospel. It was clear to the Book of Mormon prophets from the beginning that God's covenants would bear fruit for Gentiles who would repent, but would be of no benefit to Jews who would not repent. The scriptural and other histories of Israel, Lehi's descendants, and the Jaredites provide evidence to all peoples, from whatever nation, that Israel's god offers divine deliverance to all his covenant people and demands righteous obedience from all who would be blessed by him. This example of God's chosen people has been visible across all

dispensations and, according to the Book of Mormon, in all parts of the world. To that extent, God's promises and expectations have been advertised to all peoples — constituting an invitation to all nations to come unto him and be blessed.

The promised blessings are not limited to land and posterity, as commonly thought by many interpreters of the Abrahamic covenant. In his exhaustive study of the covenant as renewed by God with Israel at Sinai, John Davies has shown convincingly that the Lord's true goal, even then, was to help the Israelites become "a royal priesthood and a holy nation." As Davies demonstrates through exhaustive analysis of Exodus 19–24 and related passages throughout the Bible and other literatures, the Lord means for all those who will covenant with him to be prepared to come into his presence as kings and priests, to dwell there eternally.⁴⁵

Conclusion

This essay identifies three distinct but fully integrated streams of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon. The first stream of covenant discourse revolves around the Lord's covenant with Lehi that he would be given a land of promise in which he and his descendants would prosper and be blessed to the extent that they obeyed the Lord's commandments. Lehi's covenant is revealed to be a particularization of the Abrahamic covenant, which made comparable conditional promises to the Israelites and which is the central feature of the second stream of covenant discourse. The numerous discussions of the Abrahamic covenant by Book of Mormon prophets and by Jesus himself focus on the prophecy that through Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed. But when the precise character of that blessing is revealed, we discover that the Book of Mormon, as compiled by prophets from the remnant of Joseph, will be the key element in that blessing. That book of sacred scripture fills that role because it contains the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ — the doctrine that teaches each man and woman the only way to eternal life. The repeated teaching of the gospel by Book of Mormon prophets and by Jesus Christ constitutes the third stream of covenant discourse. The gospel teaches all men and women how to begin their journey toward

45. See John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19:6*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 395 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), especially 238–42.

eternal life, with a covenant to repent and keep the commandments in all things.

The story of the Abrahamic covenant begins as a story of one man receiving promises of seemingly endless blessings from God through his posterity. The story grows throughout the Book of Mormon to include a promise that all these blessings and even eternal life with God will be given to every man and woman ever born in God's creation if they individually accept and embrace his gospel, which is 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 and 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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