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The Covenant Concept in the Book of Mormon
Noel B. Reynolds
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By the middle of the twentieth century the biblical notion of covenant had taken center stage for many leading students of the Bible. Following such scholars as Walther Eichrodt, many of these increasingly recognized God’s covenant with Abraham as the principal unifying thread for the entire Bible.¹ But the covenant concept itself became controversial and was understood quite differently in the competing interpretive traditions. No small part of the difficulty stemmed from the fact that for a variety of reasons the Hebrew term berit, which is usually translated as covenant, firmly resisted the most competent efforts to ascertain its original meaning in the times of Abraham and his successors. LDS discourse has generally invoked the modern legal concept of contract as a suitable synonym—as a casual review of LDS reference works makes clear. But this approach may not adequately recognize that the covenant concept permeating Old Testament and Book of Mormon discourse derives from pre-legal societies, and that our modern notions of contract have evolved significantly over the last three millennia.

This paper is the second installment in a pair of papers focused on the meaning and role of covenant in the Book of Mormon. The first paper identified and traced three streams of covenant discourse found in the Book of Mormon text.\(^2\) The first of these three streams followed the establishment and development of God’s covenant with Lehi—that he would be led to a land of promise and that his descendants would be prospered there forever—as long as they kept the commandments. The second featured the ancient covenant the Lord gave to Abraham, the understanding that in the last days the people and the lands of Israel would be restored—with a focus on the third piece of the Abrahamic covenant, the promise that through his seed all nations of the earth would be blessed. Contrary to traditional Jewish and Christian interpretations, the Nephite prophets understood that the Book of Mormon would come forth in the last days as a record of the teachings and prophecies of their particular branch of Israel descended from Joseph to serve as the principal means by which the nations would be brought to the Lord and by which Israel would be gathered in as they would come to a restored knowledge of their god. The third stream of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon features the gospel of Jesus Christ as given first to Nephi and Lehi, and as

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promulgated subsequently by their successors and by Jesus Christ himself in his post-resurrection visit to the Nephites. They understood the gospel covenant to be offered to men and women of all nations as an invitation to repent and follow Jesus Christ’s commandments, and to endure faithfully in that way, becoming like him in that process, and thereby preparing themselves for the salvation he has prepared for all those who will repent, without regard to Israelite lineage.

This second paper will review and explore the relevant efforts of Bible scholars and evaluate the ways in which these may illuminate the large number of references to divine covenant in Restoration scripture. It will also point to selected texts within the Book of Mormon that suggest that Nephite gospel culture may reflect the same moral culture that characterized ancient covenant Israel. This will be accomplished through an exploration of the terminology of Old Testament hesed as it occurs in the Book of Mormon.

Over the last few decades a scholarly consensus has emerged as to which of the vast number of contributions to the study of biblical covenant have the most lasting value as these have been thoroughly and fairly reviewed over the last decade. Scott W. Hahn provides one of the most comprehensive and accessible of
these recent studies and will be followed in much of what is offered below. Like Hahn, I will take the definition of covenant proposed in 1994 by Gordon P. Hugenberger as a starting point. But I will not attempt a review of the long history of scholarly efforts to define or analyze the many forms of covenant that are evident in the Bible and its associated literature, and that is reported effectively in Hahn’s volume.

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5 T. Benjamin Spackman has also used Hahn’s work in explaining the atonement terminology of the scriptures for LDS readers. See his “The Israelite Roots of Atonement Terminology,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2016): 39–64. Hugenberger acknowledges the inspiration he received from his mentor Meredith G. Kline, and his volume reflects his ability to build on other earlier and equally exhaustive and meticulous linguistic studies of the relevant texts, including especially the unpublished Oxford dissertation of John Peter Naylor, “The Language of Covenant. A Structural Analysis of the Semantic Field of [berit] in Biblical Hebrew, with Particular Reference to the Book of Genesis,” D. Phil diss., Oxford University, 1980.
Covenant in the Old Testament

The critical insight that distinguishes Hugenberger’s approach from the bulk of previous studies that had concluded that the biblical idea of covenant was derived from ANE treaty formulae is that the widely studied occurrences of covenant in legal, ritual, and treaty contexts derive their meanings and validity in turn from an even earlier, pre-legal, and familial context. The non-urban world of the earliest Bible people was organized tribally, and social order within these groups was maintained by adherence to accepted norms of kinship association, as supplemented by necessary procedures for incorporating outsiders into the group. Covenant was the principal device used to bestow the rights and duties of kin on outsiders brought into the family through marriage, adoption, servitude, or alliance. From his study of marriage, Hugenberger concluded that “the predominant sense of [berit] in biblical Hebrew is an elected, as opposed to natural relationship of obligation established under divine sanction.”6 By entering into covenants, unrelated men and women could enjoy the same set of mutual rights and obligations they would have shared had they been born into the same family. This point was expanded from the perspective of anthropological studies four years later.

6 Hugenberger, 171.
in the classic essay of Frank Moore Cross in which he traced this covenanting practice to the family-based West Semitic tribal groups in the ANE.

The social organization of West Semitic tribal groups was grounded in kinship. Kinship relations defined the rights and obligations, the duties, status, and privileges of tribal members, and kinship terminology provided the only language for expressing legal, political, and religious institutions.\(^7\)

Cross explains how the benefits of belonging to a kinship group were based on the obligations that the members of the family or tribe owed to each other. Mutual protection was widely recognized as a primary obligation and could lead to blood feuds between kinship groups. More important to the present study was the obligation to seek the welfare of one’s kin—even to love one’s kinsman as oneself, as one’s own soul.\(^8\) Also of particular interest was the duty of redemption. One principal verb *ga’al*, “to redeem,” is frequently translated “to act as a kinsman.” The *go’el* is a “kinsman redeemer” who acts on his duty to avenge a kinsman’s murder, “to redeem property sold by a poor kinsman, to redeem the kinsman sold into debt slavery, [or] to marry the widow of a brother or near kinsman to secure


\(^8\) Cross, 4. Cf. 1 Samuel 18:1–3.
his line.” The classic kinsman redeemer is Boaz, who accepts the responsibility to step in to help Naomi and Ruth in their extremity. Isaiah chose ga‘al/go‘el exclusively as the word he used 23 times for redeem/redeemer.10

**The moral culture of the Israelite covenant society (hesed)**

“Covenant love” (hesed) deserves special attention. Cross found the work of anthropologists on small kinship groups to be both informative and fully consistent with the language of love (‘ahāḇāh) and loyalty (hesed) that the early Hebrews used to hold the intimate relationships of family and kindred together. He draws from anthropologist Meyer Fortes who concluded generally that “kinship predicates the axiom of amity, the prescriptive altruism exhibited in the ethic of generosity.”11 He illustrates this with a summary of Max Gluckman’s classic studies of Lozi judges who applied kinship norms in local disputes, but invoked the legal system of the kingdom for inter-village issues:

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9 Cross, 4–5.


Lozi judges explicitly recognize the distinction between legal right enforceable by the courts, and moral right, the implementation of which is left to the pressure of public opinion, individual conscience, and social reciprocity. Lozi judges invoke these where a dispute is between persons in their capacity as kinsmen and affines. When they litigate as fellow villagers or citizens of the kingdom, the legal sanctions of the politico-jural relations often clash with the ethic of generosity prescribed for the familial domain.¹²

As Fortes goes on to explain, “kinsfolk must ideally share” because they “have irresistible claims on one another’s support and consideration,” and they “must do so without putting a price on what they give. Reciprocal giving between kinsfolk is supposed to be done freely and not in submission to coercive sanctions or in response to contractual obligations.”¹³ Reflecting on Johannes Pedersen’s analysis of the pact between Jonathan and David made because each loved the other “as he loved himself” and could expect “unfailing kindness like that of the Lord as long as I live,” (1 Samuel 20:1–18, NIV), Fortes asserts that “artificially created ties of kinship” such as this “pact of amity implies an artificial relationship. It connotes a


¹³ Fortes, 238.
relationship deliberately created by the mutual agreement of the parties, not one imposed by the chance of birth,” and describes the institution of “blood-brotherhood.”

Cross applied these basic anthropological findings to the ancient Hebrews and the moral system of hesed, which provided a pre-legal moral structure for their society. As he explains, the Hebrew term hesed, as used in the context of early Israel as “a society structured by kinship bonds, covers precisely this semantic field.” Further,

with the breakdown of kinship structures in society, and in social metaphors in theological language, the extended meaning of hesed became increasingly prominent. But its rootage in kinship obligations is primary. Strictly speaking, hesed is a kinship term.

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14 Fortes, 241. The early application of these ideas to biblical institutions and ideas was laid out in classic form by Johannes Pedersen whose 1920 German treatise was published in English as Israel, Its Life and Culture, Oxford University Press, 1926. An updated edition was released in 1959. While the discovery and analysis of a much richer array of kinship systems in later decades precipitated a crisis of confidence among anthropologists as to the nature of kinship itself, the characteristics of the kinship system of ancient Israel as described by Pedersen, Fortes, Cross, and others have not been questioned.

15 Cross, 5–6.
Finally, Cross goes on to explain how the tribal gods were integrated into the kinship world view:

In the religious sphere, the intimate relationship with the family god, the “God of the Fathers,” was expressed in the only language available to members of a tribal society. Their god was the Divine Kinsman. . . . The Divine Kinsman, it is assumed, fulfills the mutual obligations and receives the privileges of kinship. He leads in battle, redeems from slavery, loves his family, shares the land of his heritage (*nahālāh*), provides and protects. He blesses those who bless his kindred, curses those who curse his kindred (cf. Gen. 12:3). The family of the deity rallies to his call to holy war, “the wars of Yahweh,” keeps his cultus, obeys his patriarchal commands, maintains family loyalty (*hesed*), loves him with all their soul, calls on his name.16

Scholarly investigations of *hesed* almost always build on the classic study by Nelson Glueck.17 Glueck identified God’s *hesed* with Yahweh’s covenantal

16 Cross, 6–7.

17 American archaeologist Nelson Glueck first published his University of Jena doctoral dissertation in 1927. As it gained classic status among Bible scholars, Hebrew Union College sponsored an English translation by Alfred Gottschalk and an introductory essay, “Recent Studies in *Hesed,*” pp. 1–32, by Gerald A. Larue under the editorial direction of Elias L. Epstein
relationship with his followers in terms of loyalty, mutual aid, or reciprocal love. But these are not just relative to the participants in the covenant but are understood to represent an ethical and religious relationship of reciprocity based in justice and righteousness, as well as loyalty. God’s hesed is gracious in that it derives from his oath, promise, or covenant, and can be manifest in his strength and power on behalf of his faithful, as he brings them aid and salvation.  

Many of the refinements and extensions of Glueck’s conclusions about hesed developed in subsequent studies are relevant for a study of this topic from the perspective of the Book of Mormon. Some of these emphasized the idea that for humankind hesed represents reciprocal kindness. But the divine hesed of Yahweh is likewise conditional in that his covenant responsibilities are expected only as Israel obeys and loves him. Norman Snaith added the important qualification that hesed “denotes attitudes of loyalty and faithfulness which should

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for its 1967 publication entitled Hesed in the Bible. This volume is now available in a 2011 paperback edition from Wipf & Stock.  

18 Glueck, 102.  

19 The principal contributions published during the first forty years after Glueck have been helpfully reviewed in Gerald A. Larue, “Recent Studies in Hesed,” now included as the opening chapter of the 2011 printing of Glueck’s book.
be observed by both parties in a covenant.” Snaith argued persuasively that “faithfulness” was a more accurate one-word translation of *hesed* than “kindness,” and suggested “sure-love” or “covenant love” as even better terms to use.\(^{20}\)

In that same vein, *hesed* is often linked to *emet* (truth), which in its Hebrew sense denotes strength or endurance and reliability.\(^{21}\) God’s love is portrayed as contractual or reciprocal in one sense, but literary readings have demonstrated that it also includes a deeper commitment, going beyond covenant, in which God’s love explains his willingness to forgive covenant breakers. His mercy and his love for his people and his righteousness are fully in place prior to the establishment of the covenant and make the covenant strong and reliable over time for all human participants.

**Covenant language in the Book of Mormon**


\(^{21}\) Various interpreters have observed that this linkage should be read rhetorically as a hendiadys in which *emet* should be understood as an essential element of *hesed*. See, e.g. Lester J. Kuyper, “Grace and Truth,” *Reformed Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1962, p. 4, where he explains that “the second term intends to confirm and enrich the concept of the first.”
The prescribed limits of this paper will not allow for a systematic assessment of the full Book of Mormon text. In this paper I will focus on the teachings about God and man presented by a selection of prominent Nephite prophets to show how the vocabulary and concepts they introduce fit well with the language and assumptions of Old Testament hesed as preliminary evidence for the compatibility of Israelite and Nephite covenant culture. While the word covenant occurs frequently in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon (274 and 154 times respectively), an examination of the moral culture of covenant in each text will go a long way toward ensuring that the covenant concepts in each are comparable.

The Character of the Nephites’ Covenant Deity:

One of the simplest and most direct ways of unraveling the complexities of biblical hesed as applied to Yahweh is to review the struggle of Hebrew Bible translators to find suitable English synonyms. Following Glueck, scholarly work on this problem peaked in the mid-twentieth century as exemplified in writings of Nathan Snaith, Lester Kuyper, and T. F. Torrance. Contrary to the widespread popular understanding of the god of the Old Testament as a stern, demanding, impatient, and punishing deity, this principal term describing his character and attitude toward his covenant people has been translated into English as loving
kindness, mercy, loyalty, faithfulness, truth, righteousness, goodness, and grace. While it is not difficult to find Book of Mormon descriptions of the Lord as one who loves, nurtures, redeems, and defends his people—exhibiting the same *hesed* that characterizes Yahweh in the Old Testament—it also becomes immediately obvious that the Nephites’ early reception of the Christian gospel infuses a powerful extra dimension into their understanding of the Lord and what he does for his people. The Book of Mormon prophets explicitly recognized a divinely prepared “plan of salvation” for all mankind—made known unto them by “the great God” in his mercy (Alma 24:14), a plan “which was prepared from the foundation of the world” (Alma 22:13).\(^2\) While the plan was universal in its application to all his creations, the special covenant given to Abraham established Israel as “his people,” through whom the world could observe how God deals truly, lovingly, and faithfully, with his people through all their cycles of obedience and waywardness.

The Book of Mormon is even more emphatic and consistent than the Old Testament in reminding Lehi’s descendants of their covenant relationship with the Lord. While we do not have the underlying language of the text, it is striking that the English of the Book of Mormon features the same terms that Bible translators

have used in their attempts to capture the complex meanings of *hesed* as it applies to Yahweh. It is important to note first that this Hebrew term is only used in the Old Testament to describe relationships and conduct within a covenant context, where there is a pre-existing tie between the characters of a story, and is not used for general examples of kindness, loyalty, or mercy between people not so related.

The assumed background of all specific applications of the term includes a recognition of the fact that God is man’s creator, that he is passionately committed to help fallen men become *righteous* like him, to the extent that they will choose, that there will be both successes and failures in the process, and that God will be faithful forever in his promise to help those who choose this path to return to him. God’s *mercy* is apparent firstly in the creation of the world and humankind, secondly in the preparation of this plan of salvation, and thirdly in his willingness to forgive those who repent. He is *faithful* and *true* in that his promises are reliable, despite all opposition. He is *loving, kind, and loyal* in that he understands human weakness and provides men with the strength and knowledge to succeed when they seek it, and always forgives their failings when they repent. And again, it is his covenants with men that establish this mutual relationship and enables this process. In all of this, it is the *condescension* of the perfect god reaching out to bless imperfect men that is evident.
Once this package of descriptors has been recognized in the Old Testament, it is repeatedly seen in the Nephite teachings about God and his relationships with that covenant people. In the 62 passages I have identified that exhibit some conscious focus on the character of God and of his conduct toward his covenant people, it is these same qualities of biblical *hesed* that recur again and again—and against the same assumed background. In the final section of this paper I will show how the first generation of Nephite prophets established this same Hebrew covenant discourse as a model that would be followed by their successors.

**Divine *hesed* in the teachings of Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob**

The opening chapter of Nephi’s writings establishes the basic Nephite concept of God. Responding to a dramatic vision of God in his heaven and the prophecies of his coming punishment of wicked Israel, Lehi exclaims:

> Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty. Thy throne is high in the heavens, and *thy power and goodness and mercy* is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And *because thou art merciful*, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish. 1 Nephi 1:14

Drawing on his life-long experience as a prophet and leader of the Nephite people, Nephi introduced his own first great vision with an even more explicit
statement of this context than can be found in the Bible—emphasizing God’s constancy or truth over time:

for he is the same yesterday and today and forever. And the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world if it so be that they repent and come unto him. For he that diligently seeketh shall find, and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded to them by the power of the Holy Ghost as well in this time as in times of old and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore the course of the Lord is one eternal round. (1 Nephi 10:18-19)

Nephi then immediately reminds his readers of the coming judgment and the high standard against which they will be judged: “No unclean thing can dwell with God” (1 Nephi 10:21). He clearly sees the covenant relationship as the key to men’s relationship to God:

And also my soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers. Yea, my soul delighteth in his grace and his justice and power and mercy, in the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death. (2 Nephi 11:5)

And further,

He 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. (2 Nephi 26:24)

Nephi clearly understood the power of covenant to transcend the limits of blood relationships in the establishment of both rights and duties. By offering the gospel covenant to all his creations, the Lord opened the path to salvation to all mankind. With this universalistic and Christianized understanding of God’s covenants, Nephi warns future Israelites:

As many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel. (2 Nephi 20:2)

By inserting the teachings of his younger brother Jacob into his own writings, Nephi expanded his own account of the character of God and provided for all subsequent discussions a vocabulary that would be repeated and refined throughout the course of the Nephite record. Jacob’s account of the plan of salvation features most of the descriptive terms used by English translators of the Old Testament for hesed. In a long series of exclamations, Jacob emphasizes “the wisdom of God, his mercy and grace (2 Nephi 9:8). “O how great the goodness of our God who prepareth a way . . . the way of deliverance of our God” (2 Nephi
9:10–11). He points to the high standards of the final judgment, exclaiming “O how great the plan of our God,” according to which all men must “be judged according to the holy judgment of God,” at which occasion “they which are righteous shall be righteous still and they which are filthy shall be filthy still” (2 Nephi 9:13, 15–16). Continuing the same rhetorical praising pattern, Jacob exclaims on “the greatness and the justice of our God,” and that because he executes all his words, “the righteous, the saints of the Holy One of Israel . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God, which was prepared for them from the foundation of the world” (2 Nephi 9:17–18). He goes on to praise the great mercy of God who delivers his saints and the holiness of God who knows all things (2 Nephi 9:19–20). Further, “the greatness of the Holy One of Israel” is demonstrated by his firm linkage to the truth. But just as his “words of truth are hard against all uncleanness, . . . the righteous fear it not, for they love the truth and are not shaken . . . for his paths are righteousness” (2 Nephi 9:40–1). Turning from the Lord’s high expectations, Jacob then goes on to recognize the divine willingness to work with men in their imperfect state as he exclaims again:

How great the covenants of the Lord! And how great his condescensions unto the children of men! And because of his greatness and
his grace and mercy, he hath promised unto us that our seed . . . shall become a righteous branch unto the house of Israel. 2 Nephi 9:52–53

Jacob explains the unique way in which God is using the insider/outsider logic of covenant societies universalistically.

Wherefore he that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish. For . . . they which are not for me are against me, saith our God. For I will fulfill my promises which I have made unto the children of men. 2 Nephi 10:16–17

He then concludes this foundational sermon with the reminder that “ye are free to act for yourselves, to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life,” with the additional caveat “that it is only in and through the grace of God that ye are saved” (2 Nephi 10:23–24).

In his own brief extension of Nephi’s record, Jacob returns forcibly to these same things, rehearsing the same covenantal vocabulary.

Nevertheless the Lord God sheweth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his grace and his great condescensions unto the children of men that we have power to do these things. . . . For behold, by the power of his word man came upon the face of the earth, which earth was created by the power of his word. . . . Wherefore, brethren, seek not to counsel the
Lord, but to take counsel from his hand. For behold, ye yourselves know that he counselleth in wisdom and in justice and in great mercy over all his works.

Jacob 4:7–10

Reflections of Biblical h*ased* in Nephite Preaching

The covenant culture of the Hebrew Bible portrays the people of God at their best when they exemplify the same virtues or h*ased* that always characterize Yahweh in his treatment of them. Unlike the heroes of ancient Greek literature or of modern American and European literature, outstanding Hebrews were noted for their kindness and loyalty, their merciful treatment of the poor and the weak, and their faithfulness to their fellows and to God. There are several key reports of Nephite prophets teaching the people how to conduct themselves that present us with the opportunity to compare their expectations with those of biblical h*ased*.

While Lehi and Nephi tended to reduce those expectations to the simple instruction that their people should “observe the statutes and the judgments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 1:16, 20), more detailed descriptions are provided in the preaching of later prophets. Three of these seem to address the need for a Christian version of h*ased*. These all occur during the period of cultural change and assimilation resulting from the merger of the Nephites and Mulekites and then the return of the
Nephite group that had lived 2-3 generations among the Lamanites back in the city of Nephi. All three explicitly invoke the context of their shared covenants with the Lord as background for the articulation of a set of expectations for appropriate conduct.

The results seem to follow the same model and point toward a Christian version of classical *hesed*. There is really nothing in the Old Testament that compares with these open and direct teachings from the Nephite prophets. In each case, the prophet reviews the contributions of their god, his continuing obligations, and his expectations for his covenant people if they will receive the salvation he as prepared for and offered to them. Because King Benjamin’s presentation is the most extensive and focused of the three, I will treat it last—out of its chronological order. Because of the detailed nature of these analyses, they can only be presented in this paper as supporting examples, leaving analysis of numerous other lesser examples to another occasion. But I should state that I do not foresee any contradictions to these findings coming from such additional studies.

**Alma**

Mosiah 18 tells the dramatic story of Alma, the repentant former priest of King Noah—and now follower of the martyred prophet Abinadi—preaching the
gospel to his people in secrecy and assembling with them at the Waters of Mormon. Alma’s followers had progressed to the point that he invited them to enter into a covenant with the Lord “to serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon [them]” (Mosiah 18:10). But as it turns out, this was not just a bilateral covenant between the individuals and the Lord as baptism can easily be interpreted to be. Rather, Alma also saw the covenant entailing a range of commitments to the other members of a covenant community. He characterized this step as entering “into the fold of God,” and being “called his people.” This covenant would only work for people who are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light, yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn, yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things and all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God and be numbered with those of the first resurrection,
that ye may have eternal life. (Mosiah 18:8–9)

This compact covenant invitation articulates all three levels of obligation that characterized the ancient covenant tradition of Israel. Each person accepts the obligation to obey the Lord and his commandments. They also each accept responsibility to stand as witnesses of God at all times to encourage the faith of others, while also supporting their fellow community members in their burdens, their mourning, and their needs for comfort. Finally, Alma also clearly articulated the Lord’s promises back to his people that he would pour out his Spirit upon them in this life and grant them “eternal life through the redemption of Christ” in the life to come (Mosiah 18:13). Alma clearly saw Christ taking the role of a divine kinsman redeemer. While there is obviously no quid-pro-quo contract concept here, we do see the divinely sanctioned covenant forming a community that expects each to help others as their means and abilities would allow, including the redemption of captives—in this case, the redemption of fallen people from the devil, as clearly articulated—earlier by Jacob and later by his own son Alma—the only one who did have power to accomplish this.23 In every respect, Alma’s description of the moral implications of the covenant reflect the classical notion of

*hesed* that was expected of Israelites under the covenant of Abraham, but with an additional focus on the dynamic introduced by the atonement of Jesus Christ.

**Alma**

Alma’s son Alma was chosen to lead the church in the next generation of the Nephite people and invoked these same basic covenant concepts in his preaching. As he undertook to reorganize and establish the church throughout the land, his first two recorded sermons in Zarahemla and then in Gideon make clear the continuity of teaching with that of his father, with King Benjamin’s address, and with the classic *hesed* of the ancient Hebrews.

Alma begins by reminding the people of the Lord’s power and mercy in twice delivering their fathers from bondage under the wicked and of his “mercy and long-suffering” in delivering “their souls from hell” (Alma 5:4–6).

Alma is even more explicit than his father in labeling the alternative to belonging to the fold or the kingdom of God as the kingdom of the devil. Those who reject the gospel belong to the devil’s fold or his kingdom as his sheep or his children, and he

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24 As in the Old Testament, the language of *deliverance* is largely interchangeable with the language of *redemption*.  

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is their shepherd, and they “are not the sheep of the good shepherd.” But those who hearken “unto the voice of the good shepherd,” following him and bringing forth good works (hesed?) will have their sins taken away by Jesus Christ, “the Son, the Only begotten of the Father,” who is “full of grace and mercy and truth.”

These verses vividly articulate the ancient covenant language of hesed in describing the Lord, his people, and his relationship to them as a father and a king—and even as their shepherd.

Having established that covenant society framework, Alma proceeds to tell the people what is expected of them—again using language that resonates with biblical hesed. He asks the people about the grounds for their “hope for salvation.” Have they experienced “a might change” being wrought in their hearts by which they have “spiritually been born of God”—“having the image of God engraven upon [their] countenances.” Alma’s first description of those expectation are simply the requirements of the gospel message as it has been taught by Nephi, Jacob, and now Alma. Have the people followed the righteous example of their fathers who “humbled themselves” (repentance), “put their trust in the true and


26 Alma 5:41 and 48.

27 Cf. Alma 5:10, 14, and 19.
living God” (faith in Jesus Christ)? Their fathers “were faithful until the end (enduring to the end); therefore they were saved” (Alma 5:13).

Alma then provides a list of questions by which his hearers can evaluate how well they are enduring or persevering to the end as required by the covenant. Have they “experienced a change of heart?” Are they walking “keeping [themselves] blameless before God?” Have they been “sufficiently humble?” Are they “stripped of pride” and “of envy?” Or are they guilty of mocking their brothers or of heaping persecutions upon them? Are they “puffed up in the vain things of the world” after having professed to know “the ways of righteousness?”

After an extended call to repentance for those who are straying from this path, Alma then reformulates his list of questions:

Yea, can ye lay aside these things and trample the Holy One under your feet?

Yea, can ye be puffed up in the pride of your hearts?

Yea, will ye still persist in the wearing of costly apparel and setting your hearts upon the vain things of the world, upon your riches?

Yea, will ye persist in supposing that ye are better than one another?

Yea, will ye persist in the persecutions of your brethren who humble

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28 Alma 5:26–30, 37.
themselves and do walk after the holy order of God wherewith
they have been brought into this church, having been sanctified by the
Holy Spirit . . . .

Yea, and will you persist in turning your backs upon the poor and the needy
and in withholding your substance from them? Alma 5:53–55

For all who will persist in such wickedness, Alma has a stern warning:

“These are they which shall be hewn down and cast into the fire except they
speedily repent” (Alma 5:56). The common thread in the conduct expected of “the
children of God,” is that they humble themselves in repentance and not be like
those “which were lifted up in the pride of their hearts.” Just as biblical hesed
requires the kinship group to love and help one another, those who have entered
the fold of God by covenant must not think themselves “better one than another,”
but reach out as brothers, sharing their substance with “the poor and the needy.”29

Alma carried the same message to the people in Gideon, but with some
additional emphases and content that further illuminates the Nephite version of the
hesed expected of those living in God’s covenant community. He begins by
announcing that the Spirit has told him to “Cry unto this people, saying: Repent ye,
repent ye, and prepare the way of the Lord and walk in his paths, which are

29 Cf. Alma 5:54, 60, 6:3, and 6.
straight” (Alma 5:9). Alma renews and expands the metaphor of the converted coming to Christ by walking “blameless before God” in “the ways of righteousness” or walking “after the holy order of God” as he praises the people of Gideon for their obedience.31

For I perceive that ye are in the paths of righteousness.

I perceive that ye are in the path which leads to the kingdom of God.

Yea, I perceive that ye are making his paths straight.

I perceive that it hath been made known unto you by the testimony of his word that he cannot walk in crooked paths,

neither doth he vary from that which he hath said,

neither hath he a shadow of turning from the right to the left,

or from that which is right to that which is wrong.

Therefore, his course is one eternal round. Alma 7:19–20


31 Cf. Alma 5:27, 37, and 54.
Alma’s explanation of how people can get into the straight path follows the gospel formula laid out by Nephi centuries before. Having “faith on the Lamb of God,” they “must repent and be born again.” For it is only after being “baptized unto repentance,” that they can be “washed from [their] sins.” Nephi had taught that the remission of sins comes by fire and by the Holy Ghost after baptism, which teaching seems to be implicit here in Alma’s doctrine of being “born of again.” He also follows Nephi in characterizing baptism as a witness to God of the covenant the convert has made “to lay aside every sin,” and “to keep his commandments.” And finally, as Nephi had also taught before him, Alma makes clear that the convert must keep “the commandments of God from thenceforth,” if he will “have eternal life.”

Because Alma is teaching people who are already observant members of the church for the most part, his emphasis is on this last gospel requirement that the

converts must keep “the commandments of God from thenceforth,” or as it was taught to Nephi, they must “endure to the end.” Nephi had quoted the Father as teaching him that “he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved” (2 Nephi 31:15). Hence Alma’s emphasis on the concept of the straight path that must be followed. He expands Nephi’s path metaphor to “awaken [the people] to a sense of [their] duty to God.” And he repeats the injunction given in Zarahemla that they “walk blameless before [God]” or that they “walk after the holy order of God” (Alma 7:22). This “duty to God” would appear to play the same role as biblical hesed did for ancient Israel and to articulate expectations for the conduct of God’s covenant people both toward God and toward one another. Alma teaches them that they

- should be humble and be submissive and gentle, easy to be entreated, full of patience and long-suffering, being temperate in all things, being diligent in keeping the commandments of God at all times, asking for whatsoever

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things ye stand in need, both spiritual and temporal, always returning thanks
unto God for whatsoever things ye do receive. Alma 7:23

He further instructs them to “have faith, hope, and charity,” which will lead them
to “abound in good works”—two phrases that are used here and elsewhere to
describe the process of enduring to the end. As they do this, Alma prays, repeating
positively the question he had asked accusingly in Zarahemla,

may the Lord bless you and keep your garments spotless, that ye may at last
be brought to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the holy
prophets which have been ever since the world began, having your garments
spotless—even as their garments are spotless—in the kingdom of heaven, to
go no more out. Alma 7:25, cf. 5:24

Centuries later, Mormon will elaborate on the path metaphor while quoting
from this statement of Alma’s:

Yea, we see that whosoever will lay hold upon the word of God, which . . .
[will] lead the man of Christ in a straight and narrow course across that
everlasting gulf of misery . . . and land their souls . . . at the right hand of
God in the kingdom of heaven to sit down with Abraham and Isaac and with
Jacob and with all our holy fathers, to go no more out. Helaman 3:29–30
As in his preaching at Zarahemla, Alma begins by reminding the people in Gideon of God’s power to deliver his people both temporally and spiritually. But then he goes on to remind them of the ministry and sufferings of Christ as these had been reported to the Nephites by earlier prophets such as Nephi, Benjamin, and Abinadi. He suffered and died for his people that “his bowels may be filled with mercy,” and “that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.” He suffered all things for them for their spiritual deliverance as well. He had taken “upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance” (Alma 7:12–13). Alma portrays Christ as the kinsman redeemer par excellence.

Alma’s review of the moral expectations of the people of the covenant was also enriched in Gideon. As in Zarahemla, he warned against being “lifted up in the pride of your hearts” by setting “your hearts upon the riches and vain things of the world.” But here he went on to add a warning against the worship of idols for those who should “worship the true and living God” (Alma 7:6).

**King Benjamin**

Benjamin’s farewell address is one of the most elaborated descriptions of the moral expectations Nephites held of one another and of their king that we have.
He first acknowledges how God had supported him as “a ruler and a king over this people.” And unlike the kings of other nations, he had served them with all his “might, mind, and strength.” He had not sought any “manner of riches.”

Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons nor that ye should make slaves one of another or that ye should murder or plunder or steal or commit adultery, or even I have not suffered that ye should commit any manner of wickedness, and have taught you that ye should keep the commandments of the Lord in all things which he hath commanded you—and even I myself have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you and that ye should not be laden with taxes and that there should nothing come upon you which was grievous to be borne. Mosiah 2:12–14

Benjamin reminds his followers of God’s great goodness toward them as their creator three times and describes the reciprocal relationship in which God blesses and prospers them immediately for all their acts of obedience to his commandments, while warning them of the “damnation” to their souls and the “everlasting punishment” that those who transgress God’s laws will receive “for their wages.”35 For they have all been given “the Spirit of the Lord” to guide them “in wisdom’s paths, that [they] may be blessed, prospered and preserved” (Mosiah

2:36). But those who choose to transgress the commandments of the Lord openly rebel against God by their obedience to “the evil spirit,” and become enemies “to all righteousness” and to God so that his mercy “hath no claim on that man” (Mosiah 2:37–39). But those who will “keep the commandments of God” are sustained in a “blessed and happy state,” being “blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual,” holding the expectation that they will be “received into heaven” to “dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness”—on the condition that “they hold out faithful to the end” (Mosiah 2:41). But “the natural man is an enemy to God and . . . will be forever” unless he yields “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit,” putting off the natural man and becoming “a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord”—“as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19).

In this single passage we have seen clear endorsement of the biblical covenant concept of God as both king and father of his people. And the faithful people of the covenant are described as submissive, meek, humble, patient, and full of love as they keep his commandments and refuse to rebel against him, enduring faithfully in this obedient mode to the end. After the people respond in a unanimously repentant voice to Benjamin’s account of the ministry and atonement
of Christ, he goes on to explain the reciprocal relationship of the Lord and his covenant people—using again the language of biblical *hesed* in describing the conduct of both:

I say unto you that if ye have come to a knowledge of the goodness of God and his matchless power and his wisdom and his patience and his long-suffering towards the children of men, and also the atonement which hath been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord and should be diligent in keeping his commandments and continue in the faith, even unto the end of his life—I mean the life of the mortal body—I say that this is the man that receiveth salvation through the atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world for all mankind which ever was, ever since the fall of Adam, or which is or which ever shall be, even unto the end of the world. And this is the means whereby salvation cometh. And there is none other salvation save this which hath been spoken of; neither is there any conditions whereby man can be saved except the conditions which I have told you. Mosiah 4:6–8

Benjamin then goes on to leverage this spectacular group spiritual event in which their merciful god has forgiven them their prior transgressions and they have
“tasted of his love,” having received “a remission of [their] sins” that caused
“exceeding great joy in [their] souls,” to teach them how they must conduct
themselves in the future if they would retain these great blessings and “grow . . . in
the knowledge of that which is just and true” (Mosiah 4:11–12):

1. Live peaceably and not injure one another.
2. Render to each man his due.
3. Not suffer their children to go hungry or naked.
4. Not suffer children to transgress God’s laws.
5. Not suffer children to fight and quarrel or serve the devil.
6. Teach children “to walk in the ways of truth and soberness.”
7. Teach children to love and serve one another.
8. Succor those who stand in need.
9. Not ignore the petitions of beggars but impart your substance to the poor.
10. Visit the sick and administer spiritual and temporal relief as needed.
11. Do all things in wisdom and order.
12. Return borrowed items.
13. Watch yourselves—your thoughts, words, and deeds.
14. Keep the commandments of God.
14. Continue in the faith concerning the coming of the Lord.\textsuperscript{36}

When the people responded that they were “willing to enter into a covenant with [their] God to do his will and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us all the remainder of our days” (Mosiah 5:5), Benjamin responded:

The covenant which ye have made is a righteous covenant. And now because of the covenant which ye have made, ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons and his daughters, for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you, for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters.

And under this head ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free; there is no other name given whereby salvation cometh. Therefore I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives. And . . . whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God. Mosiah 5:6–9

\textbf{Conclusions}

\textsuperscript{36} This list was extracted from Mosiah 4:13–30.
This paper explores the meaning of *covenant* in the Book of Mormon, first by summarizing the most recent findings of Bible scholars, and then by exploring the writings of the Nephite prophets to assess the likelihood that they shared the same Old Testament concept. It recognizes the importance of approaching this question through an analysis of the moral culture of covenant societies termed *hesed* in the Old Testament. It is impressive that the variety of terms that Bible translators have proposed as English equivalents for Hebrew *hesed* also predominate in the language of the Nephites in their descriptions of God’s character and relationship with his people—as well as his expectations of their conduct toward him and toward one another. The Lord is the loving father and the merciful king of his covenant people. They are his sons and daughters. And if they continue faithful, he will deliver them from death and hell, and they will be seated eternally in heaven, pure and spotless, with the ancient covenant fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This paper follows the insights of Gordon P. Hugenberger and Frank Moore Cross that the language of covenant in the Hebrew Bible is borrowed from the pre-legal cultures of desert tribes in the ancient Near East that incorporated their own deities into their kinship-based social structures. The Israelites had adapted that language to the religion of Yahweh and his covenant with Abraham. While this
paper does not deal with the additional adaptations scholars find in the Mosaic
covenant, the Davidic covenant, or in the New Testament, it does explore the text
of the Book of Mormon, which explains its own pre-exilic origins, and finds that it
strongly reflects the cultural values of ancient Israelite *hesed*—while further
adapting the Israelite language of covenant to the revelation of Jesus Christ as
given to the earliest Nephite prophets and preached by their successors over the
next thousand years.

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