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The Covenant Concept in the Book of Mormon

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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, and, 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. 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 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 *covenant* in Restoration scripture. It will also reverse that process to
see what light the Restoration scriptures might provide to sharpen or expand our
understanding of the Biblical accounts and the interpretations of these that have
been promoted by Jewish and Christian readers over the centuries.

Over the last few decades a scholarly consensus has emerged as to which of
the vast number of contributions to the study of covenant have the most lasting
value. And helpfully, 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.² Like
Hahn, I will take the definition of covenant proposed in 1994 by Gordon P.
Hugenberger as a starting point.³ But I will not attempt a review of the long
history of scholarly efforts to define or analyze the many forms of covenant that

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Westminster Press, 1961, which made the fifth edition of his 2-volume 1933 work available to
the English-speaking world generally.
² Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of
³ Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as
Developed from Malachi*, Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994, and now available in a paperback
reprint from Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon, 2014. For a much delayed review of this widely
are evident in the Bible and its associated literature, and that is reported effectively in Hahn’s volume. 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 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 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

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4 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.
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 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

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6 Hugenberger, 171.
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. 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 his line.” The classic kinsman redeemer is Boaz, who accepts the responsibility to step in to help Naomi and Ruth in their extremity. As will be discussed later, Isaiah chose ga’al/go’el exclusively as the word he used 23 times for redeem/redeemer.

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 (‘ahābāh) 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

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9 Cross, 4–5.
predicates the axiom of amity, the prescriptive altruism exhibited in the ethic of generosity.”

He illustrates this with a summary of Max Gluckman’s classic studies of the Lozi judges who used kinship approaches for local disputes, but invoked the legal system of the kingdom for inter-village issues:

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.

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.”

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12 Fortes, 238.
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 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 notion of hesed, which provided a 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

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13 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.
prominent. But its rootage in kinship obligations is primary. Strictly speaking, *hesed* is a kinship term.\(^{14}\)

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.\(^{15}\)

Scholarly investigations of *hesed* almost always build on the classic study by Nelson Glueck.\(^{16}\) Glueck identified God’s *hesed* with Yahweh’s covenantal

\(^{14}\) Cross, 5–6.

\(^{15}\) Cross, 6–7.

\(^{16}\) 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
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.¹⁷

Larue’s essay helpfully reviews the refinements and extensions of Glueck’s conclusions about hesed as developed in subsequent studies, some of which are especially relevant for a study of this topic from the perspective of the Book of Mormon. “As a human quality, hesed represents reciprocal kindness,” and the divine hesed of Yahweh is likewise conditional in that his covenant responsibilities are expected only as Israel obeys and loves him. Hesed is often linked to emet (truth), which in its Hebrew sense denotes strength or endurance and reliability. 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 sinners.

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¹⁷ Glueck, 102.
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 for all human participants.

The twentieth-century studies of Old Testament hesed have proven to be critical for an understanding of the notion of berit or covenant in ancient Israel. While it is not possible in this kind of article to provide a systematic review of all the important contributions to that study, the following list provides a distillation of key findings as grounding for an analysis and comparison of the Nephite prophets’ understanding of covenant and the complex of obligations and duties it entailed.

1. Covenant provided kinship societies with a means of integrating biological outsiders as full members with all the rights and obligations of naturally born members.

2. Ancient covenants required divine participation as a long-term guarantee of enforcement of the reciprocal expectations.

   a. For Israel, this included the concept that God was a party to the covenant with similar obligations as the human members.
   b. But God was also understood to be the creator of humans and as the one who had instituted the covenant.
      i. He was free to forgive violations of covenant expectations for those who wished to return.
      ii. His perfect love and faithfulness guaranteed the promises of the covenant forever.
c. This understanding of covenant distinguished the Hebrews from other ANE tribes as it implied:
   i. That there was only one true God.
   ii. That God’s plan was to enable the salvation of all mankind.

3. The complex notion of *hesed* comprehends a number of characteristics expected of human and divine conduct under the covenant, including:

a. Reciprocal love defined in terms of doing what one has power to do for others, including mutual aid, mutual defense, recognizing that such reciprocity cannot be quid pro quo as the strong must help the weak, the rich the poor, etc.

b. Acts of mercy such as forgiveness of misconduct, and appropriate redemptions to repair misfortunes.

c. Righteousness and justice.

d. Truthfulness, especially in the sense of conducting oneself in accord with righteousness and one’s personal commitments to God and to one’s fellows.

e. Long term faithfulness to the terms and parties of the covenant and full effort to help the covenant people prosper.

4. Recognizing that all humans are God’s children and conducting oneself towards non-members of the covenant society as if they were members.

**Covenant language in the Book of Mormon**
Scholars have also noted that the *hesed* that Israelites owe to one another “rests on a common religious affiliation, belief in the same God.” It has also been argued that this religious view is necessarily monotheistic because of its basis in specific personal characteristics of Yahweh, characteristics that are not widely shared with the gods worshiped in other ANE cultures.

The staying power of Glueck’s study of *hesed* in ancient Hebrew culture is due to the comprehensiveness and objectivity of his review of all occurrences of *hesed* and related concepts in the Old Testament. And it continues to provide an unequaled access to ancient Hebrew thinking about the covenant that provided moral structure and guidance to ancient Israel. In this study, I will begin with a summary of Glueck’s findings about Hebrew *hesed* and the family of terms linked to it in Old Testament usage—as these have been refined and extended in subsequent scholarly studies. I will then assess the extent to which the Book of Mormon understanding of covenant may have been informed or shaped by those same concepts and terms. Finally, I will offer conclusions about the nature of covenants as understood by the Nephite prophets and explore the extent to which those understandings may provide useful insights for interpretations of the Bible.

**Nelson Glueck and the language of *hesed***

In order to make more clear the distinctive religious character of Hebrew *hesed*, Glueck begins his study with a focus on the term’s secular meanings. While he will eventually argue that “God’s *hesed* can only be understood as Yahweh’s covenantal relationship toward his followers,” he recognizes that the term has a much wider linguistic context and history which will help us understand the term in its religious context. His most basic finding is “that *hesed* is received or shown only by those among whom a definite relationship exists.” Examples of such relationships include relatives, allies, friends, hosts and guests, rulers and subjects, and givers and recipients of aid. And just as with blood relatives, *hesed* was “the only possible mode of conduct” between persons in these other relationships.” The different shades of meaning that arise in different concrete situations must all be grounded in the understanding of *hesed* “as conduct in accordance with a mutual relationship of rights and duties.” *Hesed* can only be practiced “between persons who share an ethically binding relationship.”

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18 Larue, 2–5. In light of the limited objectives of this essay, I will avoid comprehensive documentation of the original sources of these contributions by simply citing the discussions in Larue’s essay.
19 Glueck, 102.
20 Glueck, 46, 50, and 37.
borrows from earlier pioneers of this approach to covenant who recognized that
classically in both Israel and Arabia, “a mutual relationship of rights and duties
existed among the members of a family or among those who believed themselves
to be of a similar tribal ancestry. . . . Such members enjoyed common rights and
they had to fulfill mutual obligations. Their whole existence was governed by this
concept of reciprocity.”

He goes on to quote H. R. Smith directly:

In primitive society, where every stranger is an enemy, the whole conception
of the duties of humanity is framed with the narrow circle of the family or
the tribe relations of love are either identical with those of kinship or are
conceived as resting on a covenant.

Human conduct based on such kinship relationships involving rights and duties
was referred to as *hesed* in ancient Israel, and “*hesed* constitutes the essence of
covenant,” the artifice by which biologically unrelated people are brought into
these same kinship-based complexes of rights and duties.

Glueck uses the story of Jonathan and David as told in 1 Samuel 20 as one
of many that illustrate the creation of such covenant relationships—in this case
between allies.

Between David and Jonathan, who were already united by the bonds of
friendship . . ., there existed a sacred covenant concluded in the name of
Yahweh (Cf. 1 Sam 18:3 and II Sam 21:7). Through this covenant their
friendship was transformed into brotherhood and *hesed* was the mode of
conduct each had to assume toward the other. The *berith* (covenant) they
entered put both under the solemn obligation to take care of the welfare and
safety of his friend. David, therefore appeals to this obligation when asking
for Jonathan’s protection. . . . David implored Jonathan to protect him
against Saul, the latter’s father, since he feared for his life. In so doing, he
pointed to the covenant between them. . . . It was Jonathan’s duty, required
by *hesed* to come to David’s assistance and if necessary, to sacrifice his own
life for that of his friend. David said: ‘You should show your servant
brotherliness, for you have brought your servant into a Yahweh-Covenant
with you.’

It could hardly be stated more explicitly that *hesed* is the conduct
required in the mutual relationship between allies. The obligations and

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21 Glueck, 38, summarizing W. R. Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*,
Cambridge, 1885, pp. 222–26, 35, 56, 57, 160, 161. As Cross has pointed out, Smith’s theses on
totemism and matrilineal descent are now seen as “badly flawed,” but he is still given credit for
his early grasp of the connection between ancient kinship and covenant. See Cross, p. 4, n. 1.


23 Glueck, 38, 55.
rights acquired through a covenant are translated into corresponding actions through *hesed*. *Hesed* is the real essence of *berith*, and it can almost be said that it is its very content. The possibility of the origin and existence of a covenant was based on the existence of *hesed*. Where *hesed* and *berith* occur side by side in the Bible, they are not to be understood as being entirely synonymous but as being mutually contingent upon one another. In those passages where [they] seem parallel to each other, everyday usage may not have made a sharp distinction. . . .

David, who had implored Jonathan to grant him *hesed* as he had promised, was in turn entreated by Jonathan never to withhold from him and his house the *hesed* of the covenant sworn to him in the name of Yahweh. Jonathan asked David to keep faith with him and never to reject him . . . not to have him and family slain as a possible threat to the throne, according to Oriental practice, when he was king and no longer had anything to fear from his enemies. . . . David was obligated to show Jonathan and his family, during Jonathan’s lifetime and beyond, the brotherliness he had sworn to him.24

Having demonstrated prevalent role of *hesed* in the wide variety of relationships that men create for themselves, Glueck moves on to a discussion of the ways the same *hesed* functions in the religious context of the ancient Hebrews. Once God is part of the picture, his expectations for human conduct take priority for all those who would qualify as his faithful people (*hasidim*). Taking up a covenant relationship with Yahweh, the only god and the god of the whole earth, may require one to extend *hesed* to all his creations. Glueck finds just this kind of universalism implied in the writings of the 8th century prophet Hosea.

In Hosea, Micah, and Job *hesed* is a lofty concept, highly refined in the heart of the prophet. It is no longer conduct corresponding to a reciprocal relationship within a narrow circle, but the proper conduct of all men toward one another. On the one hand, mankind is regarded as one large family, and on the other, as children of one heavenly father. The word *hesed* signifies man’s readiness for mutual aid, stemming from a pure love of humanity; it is the realization of ‘the generally valid divine commandment of humaneness.’ *Hesed* does not reside in the punctilious offering of sacrifices or in external religiosity, but in ethical and religious behavior and the devoted fulfillment of the divinely ordained ethical commandments. In this

24 Glueck, 46–48. Here and throughout this paper I have substituted italicized transliterations of the Hebrew words that may occur in quoted text.
respect *hesed* as humane conduct is not different from the *hesed* of men toward God. True religious motivation is discernible from ethical deeds.25 Because Israelites, like their tribal neighbors, recognized true communality as “both a necessity for life and an ideal,” they understood *hesed* as necessary for its fulfillment. “This concept was then transferred to the relationship with Yahweh with the sure intuitive knowledge that the holy and the profane constitute one inseparable whole. Through *hesed*, communion with Yahweh was sought and made possible.”26 This linking of the holy and the profane was also an essential step in the universalization of the norms of *hesed*. Glueck cites Micah as evidence “that genuine religiosity does not consist of cultic behavior.” “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8, NIV).” Glueck reads this to mean that “faithfulness toward God” is equated with “love of one’s fellow man:”

*Hesed*, which formerly existed only between those who stood in a fundamentally close relationship toward one another, undergoes considerable expansion in meaning. Every man becomes every other man’s brother, *hesed* becomes the mutual or reciprocal relationship of all men toward each other and toward God.”27

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26 Glueck, 60–61.
27 Glueck, 61.
Loyal, loyalty.

This loan word from French first appears in 16th century English as applied to the loyalty of citizens toward the monarch. Only in the 17th century in Shakespeare, Hobbes, and later others do we get *loyal* as a description of people or relationships that are “true to obligations of duty, love, etc.; faithful to plighted troth.” OED online, April 16, 2018