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Covenant Language in Biblical Religions and the Book of Mormon

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As twenty-first-century public discourse in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seems to feature the language of *covenant* more and more often, it may be helpful to step back and re-examine the scriptural and historical backgrounds for covenant theology and terminology. When the Restoration took shape in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was dependent primarily on the language of the King James Version of the Bible and contemporary Protestant teachings for a context in which to interpret the language of Joseph Smith's revelations and the Book of Mormon. After two centuries of modern linguistic and historical investigation, we now know that both of these were limited and even problematic as guides to the ancient cultures that produced the earliest scriptural references to biblical covenants that would have shaped the understandings of the first authors of the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith's original translation of the Book of Mormon into English uses some form of the word *covenant* 153 times, and his revelations as collected in the Doctrine and Covenants include 94 instances. This compares with a meager 26

occurrences in the KJV New Testament. The Hebrew Bible features 270

occurrences of *berit*, the Hebrew word usually translated as "covenant."

Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary of American usage leads off in its offering

on *covenant* with the legal concept of "a mutual consent or agreement of two or

more persons, to do or to forbear some act or thing; a *contract*; stipulation"[1]—a

definition once echoed by Joseph Smith himself.[2] Noah Webster's dictionary then

goes on to distinguish three contemporary Protestant theological conceptions—the

covenants of works, of redemption, and of grace—none of which show up in the

phrasing of Joseph Smith's revelations or the Book of Mormon. In its opening

pages, Book of Mormon prophecies warn its readers that the modern Gentiles

would be hampered in their faith because of apostate Christian churches which

"have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and

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[1] "Covenant," in *American Dictionary of the English Language*, facsimile edition published in 1967 by the Foundation for American Christian Education, San Francisco. Emphasis added.

[2] "It requires two parties to make a covenant, and those two parties must be agreed, or no covenant can be made." Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith, Deseret Book, 1959, 14.

most precious; and also many *covenants* of the Lord have they taken away" (1 Nephi 13:26).[3]

 In this paper I will briefly review the ups and downs in the career of the covenant concept in key Christian traditions before turning to a more in-depth review of theological and scholarly efforts to understand the Israelite concept of divine covenant before the Babylonian exile as it could have been understood and appreciated by Lehi and Nephi during their lives and education in ancient Jerusalem. Over the last two centuries, scholarly efforts in history, linguistics, theology, the Hebrew Bible, and even anthropology have contributed to a sometimes contentious, but continually enlightening expansion of our understanding of the divine covenant in the religion and culture of ancient Israel. I will review these developments and point out their most promising contributions. In the end I will explain why the 1998 approach of Bible scholar Frank Moore Cross seems to explicate the pre-exilic Israelite conception of covenant better than other alternatives by pointing to its origins in the kinship associations that provided moral and legal structure for the desert tribes of the ancient Near East (hereafter

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[3] Quotations from the Book of Mormon follow the Yale critical text. In this paper, italics are sometimes added to draw the reader's attention to key words in a quoted passage. See Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Yale University Press, 2009.

ANE). I will then test that conception against the teachings of the Nephite prophets and demonstrate the ways in which those teachings can be clarified and enriched for a modern reader.

Covenant theology evolution in the Christian tradition

Students of the New Testament and the history of Christianity generally recognize that the concept of divine covenants seems to play a larger role in Christian thinking than its relatively limited appearances in the New Testament would portend. The Greek word *diatheke* lies behind almost every occurrence of *covenant* in English translations of the New Testament. This reflects the pattern of the Septuagint which provided New Testament writers with a Greek terminology for Old Testament concepts. The Hebrew term *berit* is usually translated as *covenant* in modern English editions and is translated as *diatheke* 270 times in the Septuagint. Scholarly agreement and confidence about the origins and meaning of the Greek term far exceed that of the Hebrew predecessor. That debate will be reviewed later.

In his authoritative article on *diatheke* in the Greek Bible, Johannes Behm concluded that this Greek legal term meaning *testament* was infused with added religious meaning in its biblical usage, making *covenant* an ordinance or statute of God designed to implement his saving purposes for man.

Neither "covenant" nor "testament" reproduces the true religious sense of the religious term [*diatheke*] in the Greek Bible. [*diatheke*]is from first to last the "disposition" of God, the mighty declaration of the sovereign will of God in history, by which He orders the relation between Himself and men according to His own saving purpose, and which carries with it the authoritative divine ordering, the one order of things which is in accordance with it.[4]

Because of the reference to Jeremiah's "new covenant" in the only quotation in which Jesus uses the word *diatheke*, Christian interpreters have often -portrayed this "new covenant" as something different than the recognized covenants of Abraham, Moses, and others in the Old Testament. When Jesus told his disciples "This cup is the *new covenant* in my blood, which is poured out for you" (NIV, Luke 22:20), he reminds them of Jeremiah's prophecy of a coming time when the Lord would "make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel," saying "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people" (NIV, Jeremiah 31:31, 33).

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[4] See Johannes Behm, "The Greek Term *διαθηκη*," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translator and editor Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Eerdmans, 1964, II:124–134, at 134.

Tiberius Rata argues persuasively that this is "not a brand new covenant, but it is in many respects the renewal of the old Mosaic covenant," and that it "inherits the promises of the Abrahamic and the Davidic covenants . . . [It] does not make null the other covenants, but it reaffirms them." Because covenant is the Lord's chosen means to relate himself to his people and because they have "failed to obey the first one," a new one is needed. It is the same covenant in the sense that it comes again from the Lord because of his "love, grace, and mercy." The difference is that this new covenant is not written on parchment or stone, but on the hearts of his people through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.[5] In his analysis, Rata echoes Clement of Alexandria who preached the harmony of the two testaments, referring to them as one "eternal covenant."[6]

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[5] Tiberius Rata, *The Covenant Motif in Jeremiah's Book of Comfort: Textual and Intertextual Studies of Jeremiah 30–33*, Peter Lang, 2007, 123. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31–34," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15 (1972), pp. 11–23, reviews the academic literature for and against this linking of the old and new covenants and provides another strong support for Rata's position.

[6] See Clement of Alexandria, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, pg. 552-3, and the discussion in Douglas Andrew Stoute, *The Origins and Early Development of the Reformed Idea of the Covenant,* Dissertation submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, King's College, Cambridge, 31 December 1979, Ph.D. 11407, pg. 22.

Like Rata, Johannes Behm focused on the continuity of the new covenant

with the old. The principal difference he finds between the two "is to be found in

the step from prophecy to fulfillment." Even though the New Testament attributes

only this one mention of *diatheke* to Jesus, he argues that it provides the

connection and perspective that undergirds the various interpretations of the new

covenant promoted by both Paul and the author of Hebrews, both of whom

assigned "to the concept of the $\delta\iota\alpha\theta\eta\kappa\eta$ a central position in their theological

understanding of history" because the covenant expressed "the mighty declaration

of the sovereign will of God in history."[7]

From the time of Jesus, Christian converts were taught to engage this new

covenant with the Lord through repentance and baptism. I have summarized this

relatively new understanding among scholars in a previous essay:[8]

> Ben Witherington . . . follows Augustine and sees in baptism as understood
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> in the New Testament church what is essentially a symbol, "a sign of a
>
> covenant," or a pledge to live the Christian life, combined with an appeal to

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[7] Behm, 134. For the full development of his interpretations of covenant arguments in Paul's

letters, in Hebrews, and in the gospels, see the entire dictionary article in pages 124–134.

[8] See Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding Christian Baptism Through the Book of Mormon,"

BYU Studies Quarterly 51, no. 2 (2012), 21.

God to bless one to be able to keep that pledge.[9] This conclusion, reached

after his exhaustive review of previous scholarly literature on the topic, . .

echoes earlier conclusions reached by François Bovon that, for the earliest

Christians, baptism was a sign of the covenant.[10] This understanding of

baptism reaches back into the New Testament. Ferguson includes 1 Peter

3:20–21 in his survey of New Testament texts and explains why he

interprets this difficult passage to say that "baptism is a pledge of loyalty to

God; it proceeds from a motive of inner purity and is not an act of external

cleansing."[11] Ferguson relies on John H. Elliott's recent translation:

"Baptism now saves you too—not [as] a removal of filth from the body, but

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[9] Ben Witherington III, *Troubled Waters: The Real New Testament Theology of Baptism* (Waco,
Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 110.

[10] François Bovon, "Baptism in the Ancient Church," *Sewanee Theological Review* 42 (1999):
429–38, an English translation of his 1973 French original. This fits easily with a long line of
pious Bible commentaries, for example, Joseph Benson, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 5
vols. (London: n.p., 1811–18), who understood John to be enjoining penitent persons to be
baptized "as a testimony, on their part, of the sincerity of their repentance" or to be witnessing
that they had received the forgiveness of sins, and so forth.

[11] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First
Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 192.

[as] a *pledge* to God of a sound mindfulness of God's will" (emphasis

added).[12]

This single New Testament passage has been identified by one prominent

commentator as "the nearest approach to a definition [of baptism] that the New

Testament affords."[13] It would not be long before baptism and the other recognized

rituals or ordinances of the Christian church would be re-labeled as "sacraments,"

and their basic connection to the covenant would be transformed.[14]

    In an earlier paper I have documented the transformation that occurred in the

first and second Christian centuries as covenant-based rituals and ordinances

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[12] Ferguson, Bovon, and Witherington all agree with the careful philological analysis of 1 Peter

3:18–22 published in John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and

Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 637, 678–81.

[13] J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London, SCM Press, 1970), 219.

[14] The rapid evolution of Christian views on the connection between covenant and sacraments

was of central interest to Richard L. Anderson in his early examination of the covenant idea in

the Bible and the Book of Mormon. See his "Religious Validity: The Sacrament Covenant in

Third Nephi," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, Deseret Book, Vol. II, 1990, pp. 1–22.

became "sacraments."[15] The term *sacramentum* was most likely borrowed from the Roman army's practice of extracting a loyalty oath from conscripts.

> That the early Church recognized the covenantal context of the Lord's Supper and regarded it as a sort of "pledge renewal" or swearing ceremony instead of as a cultic sacrifice is supported by its designation of the Lord's Supper as a *sacramentum*.[16]

While one can see a connection between covenants and such loyalty oaths, the doctrine of sacraments that grew up soon distanced itself from the requirement of a public commitment from the recipient of the sacrament. This allowed the development of practices such as the baptism of infants. The mature doctrine of sacraments proposed by Peter Lombard and embraced officially in the Council of Trent (1545–1563) finally eliminated any requirement of worthiness of the priest administering the sacrament or of faithfulness on the part of the recipient. Rather, the sacrament was understood to be a means by which God's grace could flow

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[15] Noel B. Reynolds, "The Decline of Covenant in Early Christian Thought," in *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds, BYU Press, 2005, 295–324.

[16] Gary A. Herion, "Sacrament as 'Covenantal Remembrance': Re-examining the Theology of the Lord's Supper," in *Church Divinity 1982*, edited by John H. Morgan, Notre Dame, p. 109.

through the priest administrator directly to the recipient without any requirement of covenantal engagement or compliance.[17]

Modern scholars focused on biblical covenant ideas have noted the relative de-emphasis on covenant theology in both the New Testament and the early Christian movement. George Mendenhall pointed to possible political reasons: "The covenant for Judaism meant the Mosaic law, and for the Roman Empire a covenant meant an illegal secret society. This two-sided conflict made it nearly impossible for early Christianity to use the term meaningfully."[18]

> Christians obviously had good reason to avoid association with either the Jews or with illegal secret societies. Emphasis on Christ's gospel as a testament or as a unilateral gift was one manner in which Christians could distinguish themselves from law-bound Jews and avoid the appearance of a community based on clandestine pacts.[19]

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[17] For a detailed account and documentation of these developments see Bachman and Reynolds, 24–39.

[18] George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, New York, Abingdon Press, 1962, pg. 722.

[19] Bryson L. Bachman and Noel B. Reynolds, "Traditional Christian Sacraments and Covenants," in *Prelude to the Restoration*, Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, Deseret Book, 2004, 30–31.

Daniel Elazar argued that the concept of covenant may have presented "practical and theological problems" in the early Christian era when the focus was on establishing orthodoxy and unity. According to Elazar the church subsequently

> de-emphasized covenant, especially after it believed that it had successfully superseded the Mosaic covenant and transferred the authority of the Davidic covenant to Jesus. After Augustine (354-430), the Church paid little attention to covenant and, even though the Eucharist remained central to the Christian liturgy, it ceased to be a truly common meal and its covenantal dimension was overshadowed by other features and meanings attributed to the Last Supper.[20]

> Some elements of the Reformation did react against these developments as Zwingli followed by Bullinger attempted to resurrect a covenant theology for Christianity. While their efforts were not successful overall, they did produce a measurable increase in covenant discourse among Protestant theologians which continues to this day and continues to express early divergences of approach:

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[20] Daniel Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth: From Christian Separation Through the Protestant Reformation,* volume 2 of the series *The Covenant Tradition in Politics,* Transaction Publishers, 1996, chapter 1, "Covenant Traditions in the West,"

When Luther called the sacrament a covenantal seal, he meant that baptism visibly ratified and guaranteed God's promises, as a royal seal authenticated a government document on which it was inscribed. Only secondarily was baptism a pledge of obedience by men. For Zwingli, however, the sacrament was primarily "a covenant sign which indicates that all those who receive it are willing to amend their lives and to follow Christ."[21]

Heinrich Bullinger became the leading architect of the Protestant covenant theology emerging from the 16th century and was noted for his unique emphasis on the bilateral or mutual character of covenants. For him, "baptism is nothing other than an initial sign of the people of God, which binds us to Christ and to an irreproachable life. Secondly, its effect is to keep us for Christ in the covenant or in life pleasing to God."[22] Like Clement of Alexandria, Bullinger sought to establish the harmony of the two testaments by developing a Christian theology of covenants that would match the more obvious covenantal approach of ancient

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[21] E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England*, 1570-1720, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1974, 6.

[22] J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition*, Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1980, pg. 6-7. For a brief summary of Bullinger's covenant theology written with an eye to Book of Mormon teachings, see Bachman and Reynolds, 32–35.

Israelite religion. The Book of Mormon prophets also arose from an Old

Testament background to which this paper now turns.

The Concept of Divine Covenant in the Hebrew Bible

Studies of covenant theology in Christian times have one significant

advantage—we have direct access to the texts produced by participants in the

development of those theologies. But the situation is very different for studies of

the development of covenant theology in Old Testament times. Since the mid-

nineteenth century, scholars have worked their ways through a succession of

theories and methodologies, several of which are still current, but we have no

ancient writings dedicated openly to the exploration or defense of covenant

theologies on which we can draw. Rather, scholars have the Hebrew Bible and

other texts from the same historical period which include covenant references, but

without explanations that would answer all our questions about ancient practices

and beliefs.

A huge literature has grown up as scholars have attempted to understand

ancient covenant concepts, to relate them to their historical and cultural times, and

even to relate them to modern theological understandings.[23] Fortunately, the last

few decades have produced a number of excellent summaries and evaluations of

this growing literature—which can facilitate the task of this paper. For the benefit

of readers who may not be familiar with these scholarly debates, I will offer first a

summary of the most important treatments of ancient covenant understandings,

indicate their respective strengths and weaknesses, and then use the best of these to

launch a parallel investigation of covenant concepts portrayed in the Book of

Mormon.

The Evolution of Old Testament Studies of *Covenant*

Traditional Jewish and Christian approaches to interpretation of the Old

Testament, shaped by highly educated rabbis and pastors, were disrupted almost

violently by Julius Wellhausen beginning in 1878 with the publication of his first

German works leading to the 1885 English translation, *Prolegomena to the History*

of Ancient Israel.[24] Wellhausen's work has had enormous influence on the

assumptions, methodology, and interpretations of generations of Old Testament

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[23] For a more complete account of the history of theological and scholarly studies of covenant

from the perspective of the Reformed tradition, see Roger T. Beckwith, "The Unity and

Diversity of God's Covenants," *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987), pp. 93–118.

[24] This first English edition was published in Edinburgh by A. & C. Black and is now available

in various reprint editions.

scholars ever since. Of particular relevance to the present paper, he effectively

established as basic premises for most subsequent efforts the ideas that the book of

Deuteronomy and the Mosaic covenant it presents was written about 621 BCE and

that the Hebrew word for covenant (*berit)* has no older origins.[25] The result of

these claims was to portray the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and other covenants

underlying Israelite religion as late inventions, fashioned to support changing

theologies and ideological objectives. Further, the biblical texts were re-analyzed

as amalgamations of multiple hypothesized earlier texts that often contributed

competing versions of historical events and theologies.[26] It is a testimony to the

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[25] Lothar Perlitt dramatically reinforced the view that biblical *berit* was a late invention of the

Deuteronomists and went even further by restricting its meaning to the obligations Yahweh held

toward Israel and the obligations the Israelites held toward their god in L. Perlitt,

Bundestheologie im Alten Testament. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969. A

powerful summary and critique of Perlitt was provided in McCarthy's review essay: Dennis J.

McCarthy, "*berit* in Old Testament History and Theology," *Biblica* 53 (1972), pp. 110–121.

[26] The claim that a handful of earlier mentions of *berit* in the 8th century prophets were added by

later editors is challenged by scholars like Duane Andre Smith who has pointed out how well-

developed notions of covenant relating to adoption and marriage also occur in Hosea, but

without mention of the word *berit*. See "Kinship and Covenant in Hosea 11:1–4," in *Horizons in

Biblical Theology* 16:1 (online publication 1 January 1994). doi.org/10.1163/187122094X00033

persuasiveness of his arguments and evidence that many of his key theses are still assumed in the work of a majority of Bible scholars today.[27]

But there has also been a significant series of efforts to counter that approach and its undermining of the history of covenant-based religion that the Bible we read today claims for itself. While there are a number of useful summaries of this scholarly controversy available, I will only be able to mention a few of the highlights in this essay.[28] The persistence of the etymological question about the original meanings of *berit* in the Hebrew Bible may be the best place to start.[29]

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[27] For a quite readable explanation and defense of Wellhausen's hypothesis on the late origins of the idea of covenant in ancient Israel, see John Barton, "Covenant in Old Testament Theology," in A. D. H. Mayes and R. B. Salters (editors), *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E. W. Nicholson*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 23–38. A recent effort to promote that perspective to LDS readers can be found in David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy*, Greg Kofford Books, 2014. An excellent and readable summary of the scholarly debate after Wellhausen can be found in Robert Davidson, "Covenant Ideology in Ancient Israel," in *The World of Ancient Israel*, R. E. Clements (editor), University of Cambridge, 1989, pp. 323–347.

[28] Oxford's Professor Ernest W. Nicholson produced an in-depth and widely recognized review of the debate in his *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament*, Oxford, 1986, in which he argued against the alternative theories produced by several twentieth century scholars and for a return to Wellhausen's basic position. See his summary on pp.191–193.

Etymological studies

Following Wellhausen, the covenant concept itself was already becoming

controversial and was understood quite differently in the competing interpretive

Kenneth A. Kitchen's review of Nicholson's book also provides a helpful history of the

argument along with a scathing critique of Nicholson's failure to consider the facts provided in

primary sources. See his "The Fall and Rise of Covenant, Law and Treaty," in *Tyndale Bulletin*

40 (1989), 118–135. Kitchen included an updated and expanded version of his

counterarguments and evidence in his *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Eerdmans, 2003,

pp. 283–307. His comprehensive study of over 80 ancient law codes, treaties, and covenants as

they may relate to biblical examples was published with co-author Paul Lawrence in *Treaty, Law*

and Covenant in the Ancient Near East, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012, in which he

covers the same scholarly disputes in comprehensive detail. Other useful summaries of the

scholarly efforts to understand ancient Israelite covenant thinking can be found in Scott W.

Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises*,

2009, Yale University Press, 1–21, in Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in*

God's Unfolding Purpose, InterVarsity Press, 2007, 19–29, in R. A. Oden, "The Place of

Covenant in the Religion of Israel," in *Ancient Israelite Religion* (edited by P. D. Miller, P. D.

Hanson, and S. D. McBride), Fortress, 1987, pp. 429–247, and in Brevard S. Childs, *Old*

Testament Theology in a Canonical Context, Fortress Press, 1985, 2–6.

[29] A systematic review of the most significant scholarly efforts to identify the meaning of *berit*

can be found in Daniel C. Lane, "The Meaning and Use of *berith* in the Old Testament,"

dissertation, Indiana University, 1974.

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 of linguists and biblical theologians to ascertain

its original meaning in the times of Abraham and his successors.[30] At the root of

their difficulties was the etymological challenge. In spite of the best efforts of

numerous able scholars to find the origins of the word in ancient Hebrew or other

contemporary languages, none of the leading proposals were convincing to modern

linguists. Oxford's biblical semanticist, James Barr, provided a helpful critical

review of the strongest proposals in which he showed why none of them is

plausible.[31] He concluded that *berit* is an unusual word (it has no Hebrew

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[30] For a convenient summary of these linguistic studies and the continuing uncertainty of their

proposed solutions see Davidson, "Covenant Ideology in Ancient Israel," 324–325. Davidson's

paper provides a useful and even-handed summary of the most significant approaches to biblical

covenant that were proposed by scholars during the course of the twentieth century, while

identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each. The transliteration *berit* is based on the

Hebrew original בְּרִית (covenant), which can also be transliterated as *bərit*, *b'rit*, *b'rith*, *bərith,* or

berith.

[31] See James Barr, "Some Semantic Notes on the Covenant," *Beitrage zur Alttestamentlichen

Theologie: Festschrift Fur Walther Zimmerli Zum 70*, edited by H. Donner, R. Hanhart, and R.

Smend, Gottingen: Vandenboeck & Ruprecht, 1977. 23–38.

synonyms and no plural forms) that has successfully resisted all the analytical

strategies of modern linguistics, and should be regarded as a Hebrew root from

antiquity. It had no known historical derivation and "to the Hebrew speaker *berit*

was a word fully opaque, a *brutum factum* of his language, a simply arbitrary

sign."[32]

Kenneth Kitchen took up Barr's challenge and within two years had

published his findings of multiple early appearances of *berit* in relevant ANE

contexts.[33] His later annoyance at Nicholson's 1986 failure to take account of

those findings is evident in his 1989 review of Nicholson's book. Summarizing his

1979 findings, Kitchen listed his three main discoveries: "West-Semitic *brt*

occurring as a loanword in Egypt in the thirteenth/twelfth centuries BC, in Ugaritic

in the thirteenth century BC, and in peripheral Akkadian (as a West-Semiticism) in

Central Syria c. 1400 BC."[34] After documenting each of these, he concluded that

> this group of first-hand data exhibits the robust and well-established use of
>
> *berit* in all spheres (religion/theology; social contexts; political realm)
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> already, during the period c. 1400–1170 BC, the end-part of this period

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[32] Barr, 26.

[33] K. A. Kitchen, "Egypt, Ugarit, Qatna and Covenant," *Ugarit Forschungen* 11 (1979), 453–

464.

overlapping with the presence of Israel itself in Canaan from before 1207

BC onwards. This inescapable situation constitutes clear *disproof* that *berit*

must wait until the eighth/seventh centuries BC to be used thus in West

Semitic, Hebrew included . . . Furthermore, the religious concept of

covenant (linking man and deity) goes far back beyond even 1400 BC into

the third millennium BC, being attested between king Uru'inimga

('Urukagina') of Lagash and his deity Ningirsu.[35]

Kitchen's earlier paper had also demonstrated the continuity between biblical

Hebrew usage of related terms in the contemporary Levant. In West-Semitic *berit*

ultimately meant "bond." As in the Old Testament, words for bonds or oaths are

regularly linked to verbs meaning to cut, enter, give, or establish a covenant or

treaty and "are solidly attested for Phoenician, Aramaic, and Greek, besides

Hebrew."[36]

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[34] Kitchen, "The Fall and Rise of Covenant," 122.

[35] Kitchen, "The Fall and Rise of Covenant," 122–123.

[36] "Egypt, Ugarit, Qatna, and Covenant," 461. While never formally published, Moshe

Weinfeld's centenary paper refuting Wellhausen's claims that "the main legal sections of the

Pentateuch . . . and . . . the Priestly Code are in fact a reflection of post exilic Judaism and must

therefore be considered a turning away from the prophetic religion" is available in a 47 page

mimeographed form in some academic libraries as "Report No. 14/79: Getting at the Roots of

Covenants are not contracts.

While some modern interpreters—including some LDS writers[37]—have designated biblical covenants as contracts, that seems to be clearly inappropriate. "While a covenant certainly has an important legal aspect, the English term 'contract' conveys *only* the legal aspect to the exclusion of its social, familial,

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Wellhausen's Understanding of the Law of Israel on the 100th Anniversary of the Prolegomena" distributed in 1979 by the Institute for Advanced Studies of The Hebrew University, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem, Israel. This quotation is from page 1. For a brief response to Weinfeld's critique, see the review by E. W. Nicholson in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 34:2 (1983), 560–561. Yehezkel Kaufmann's seven-volume effort to restate what the scholarly world could say positively after 40 years of effective critique of Wellhausen and his followers in the historical criticism movement was published originally in Hebrew and then in an English translation and abridgment. See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg, University of Chicago Press, 1960.

[37] See, *e.g.*, Brent L. Top, "Covenant," in *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference*, edited by Robert L. Millet, Camille Fronk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top, Deseret Book, 2011, 136-7, which opens with the statement that "a covenant is a binding agreement—a contract between at least two parties," echoing Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, Bookcraft: Salt Lake City, 1966, 166. The LDS *Bible Dictionary* and the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* both take approaches that reflect substantial awareness of biblical studies of the topic.

liturgical, and other dimensions."[38] The disastrous divisions of the 17th century

Scottish church are now explained as a failure to keep the biblical idea of covenant

separate from the legal institution of contracts.[39] In his 1933 essay on *hesed*,

Lofthouse explained why that covenant relationship is so hard for moderns to

grasp:

> We live in a world of contract, and not (to use the convenient distinction
>
> made by Sir Henry Maine) of status. With us, the cash nexus is supreme.
>
> And we do not associate the cash nexus with any feelings which we could
>
> express by "leal love". But the Hebrews, like most of the ancients, lived in a
>
> world of covenant, not of contract. It is true that they had only one word,
>
> *b'rith,* for the two English expressions. But it is still truer that they did not
>
> understand the idea of contract at all.[40]

As Dennis J. McCarthy points out more recently, "covenant is not a contract."

Rather, "it is a pledged, personal commitment."[41] In this second writing of his

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[38] Hahn, 8.

[39] James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of
Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970), 51–76.

[40] W. F. Lofthouse, "*Hen* and *Hesed* in the Old Testament," *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche
Wissenschaft* 51 (1933), 33.

[41] Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978, 17.

widely acclaimed 1963 book, he had retracted his previous use of the analogy

between contract and covenant, even though he had already cautioned in that book

that

> The Sinai covenant . . . is an affair of ritual more than contract . . . More
>
> than a matter of agreement it is a question of kinship. Israel is not so much
>
> the vassal of Yahwe, as the analogy with the treaties would have it, but His
>
> family. And so the laws are not the terms of a contract but the conditions
>
> covering continued union in the family.[42]

McCarthy cited Gene Tucker's 1965 paper on covenant and contract verbal forms

as the reason for his new conclusion that covenants were not contracts.[43] In his

comprehensive study of these two recurring forms in ancient Israelite and related

texts, Tucker reached several important conclusions and insights:

> The formal differences between covenants and contracts emphasize the
>
> difference in *Sitz im Leben* between the two. The contract is an economic,
>
> legal agreement, a witnessed transaction which would either be committed to
>
> writing or solemnized before the assembled court. Covenants, being sworn

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[42] Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1963, 173. The

1978 version of this book was expanded and updated considerably.

[43] McCarthy, 1978, 17.

agreements, did not require the apparatus of the court for their

solemnization. Covenant forms then support what would have been

suspected from their contents: The covenants in the OT do not stem from

the sphere of commercial life.

One may conclude then that the covenant between Yahweh and Israel,

like the treaties and the other covenants between human partners, was

formulated on the analogy of the oath form rather than on the analogy of

economic agreements. The covenant, based on a mutual promissory oath

between Yahweh and Israel, is then the pledge of the parties to loyalty. This

pledge as the heart of the ideal covenant is expressed by Jeremiah. Yahweh

says: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. xxxi 33).[44]

Tucker's position was strongly supported by an independent line of inquiry

published in a series of articles culminating in a 1973 book by Ernst Kutsch. In his

richly documented review of Kutsch's monograph, Moshe Weinfeld endorsed and

reinforced Kutsch's "demonstration that the proper meaning of *berit* is not

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[44] Gene M. Tucker, "Covenant Forms and Contract Forms," *Vetus Testamentum* 15, Fasc. 4

(October 1965), 503.

agreement but obligation or pledge."[45] Weinfeld cites several equivalent idioms in

related languages that "express the notion of *bond* by pledge or oath" and points

out that Numbers 30 begins with a statement of the same principle. "When a man

vows a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not

break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth"

(Numbers 30:1-2, *RSV*). This understanding also fits perfectly with Weinfeld's

own previous discovery that biblical terms for covenant concentrate around two

semantic fields, one of which is "oath and commitment."[46] But, as Weinfeld goes

on to demonstrate in this same review, Kutsch's commitments to Wellhausen's late

dating for Deuteronomy and *berit* "cannot be accepted."[47]

Twentieth century interpretations

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[45] Ernst Kutsch*, Verheissung und Gesetz: Untersuchungen zum sogenannten "Bund" im Alten

Testament*, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1973. In his review, Moshe Weinfeld acknowledged

and reinforced Kutsch's basic point while demonstrating the weakness of his position on dating

of the text and other side issues. Moshe Weinfeld, "*Berit*—Covenant vs. Obligation," *Biblica* 56

(1975), pp. 120–128.

[46] Weinfeld, *Berit*, 124, citing his own "Covenant Terminology in the Ancient Near East and Its

Influence on the West," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973), pp. 190–199.

[47] Weinfeld, *Berit*, 128.

Once scholars had adjusted to the shock of Wellhausen's arguments for locating the authorship of Deuteronomy in the late seventh century BCE, they turned increasingly to canonical approaches to interpreting the Old Testament, *i.e.,* to interpretations that take the final text as it is as a formulation of its final authors and editors, without invoking hypothesized prior source materials as a guide to interpretation. One consequence of this gradual development was that 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.[48] Referring to the work of Eichrodt and others who followed, David Noel Freedman affirmed that "the covenant principle is intrinsic to the biblical material and . . . it defines the relationship of God to his people. Further, the term 'covenant' itself was consciously applied by the Israelites to their relationship with

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[48] See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by J. A. Baker, Westminster Press, 1961 and 1967, which made the fifth edition of his 2-volume 1933 work available to the English-speaking world generally.

Yahweh, from the earliest times."[49] Many scholars were also turning to the

covenant concept to explain the early unity of the tribes of Israel:

> It is inconceivable . . . that there could have been, at that time, any other
>
> basis of solidarity than a covenant relationship. If so, then it follows
>
> inevitably that the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh which
>
> is inseparable from the historical solidarity of the tribes, is not merely a
>
> stage in the history of religious concepts, but was an event which had a
>
> definite historical setting and the most surprising historical consequences.
>
> The difficulty in the past has been in arriving at any concept of a covenant
>
> which would bind together the tribes and also adequately form a foundation
>
> for the normative conception that in this event Yahweh became the God of
>
> Israel.[50]

Hittite treaties and biblical covenants.

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[49] David Noel Freedman, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman*, John R. Huddlestun, editor, Eerdmans, 1997, I:168, originally published as "Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: The Covenant Theme," *Interpretation* 18 (1964): 419–31.

[50] George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17:3 (September, 195-4), p. 51.

The 1931 publication of a large collection of ancient Hittite treaties that would have been contemporary with Moses sparked one of the biggest discussions of biblical covenant.[51] George Mendenhall was one of the first to comment on the similarities between these ANE treaties and the covenant establishment and renewal rituals described in Deuteronomy and Joshua.[52] As Mendenhall enthusiastically demonstrated, viewing the Deuteronomic texts as take-offs on a standard fourteenth-century ANE formula would refute Wellhausen's claim of a seventh-century date for the content and language of Deuteronomy and its focus on covenant in Israelite religion.

An explosion of studies followed in the 1960s and 1970s as scholars explored previously unconsidered features of ANE texts and the Hebrew Bible, and these had enormous impact on the scholarly views regarding the authenticity, dating, and theology of the biblical text. With the continuing assistance of Gary Herion, Mendenhall was able to summarize much of what had been learned as well

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[51] V. Korošec in his *Hethitische Staatsverträge* (Leipzig: Weicher, 1931).

[52] George E. Mendenhall, "Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (No. 2, May, 1954), 49–76. This paper was made universally available as a pamphlet when the Presbyterian Board of Colportage of Western Pennsylvania re-published it the following year.

as the continuing issues in his 1992 article in the Anchor Bible Dictionary.[53] But

the battles were far from over. Dennis McCarthy responded with a powerful

critique of Mendenhall and his associates,[54] and by 1986, Nicholson was able to

publish what many thought was an effective defense of Wellhausen's original

conclusions.[55]

Another important contribution to this debate had come from Moshe

Weinfeld when he demonstrated that the biblical covenants at issue were of a

different genre than the international treaties of the ancient Hittites and others:

> While the "treaty" constitutes an obligation of the vassal to his master, the
>
> suzerain, the "grant" constitutes an obligation of the master to his servant. In
>
> the "grant" the curse is directed towards the one who will violate the rights
>
> of the king's vassal, while in the treaty the curse is directed towards the

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[53] See George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*,

vol. 1, (1992), pp. 1179–1202.

[54] See Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 1963 and 1978. McCarthy occupied a middle

ground by denying that the covenants in Deuteronomy copied the form of Hittite treaties and

arguing that in composing Deuteronomy, unnamed theologians in Israel borrowed some of the

language of the ubiquitous treaties as they reflected creatively on an ancient covenant tradition

that went back at least to earlier prophets and even to the monarchy.

[55] Nicholson, *God and His People.*

vassal who will violate the rights of his king. In other words, the "grant"

serves mainly to protect the rights of the servant, while the treaty comes to

protect the rights of the master. What is more, while the grant is a reward for

loyalty and good deeds already performed, the treaty is an inducement for

future loyalty. The covenant with Abraham, and so the covenant with David,

indeed belong to the grant type and not to the vassal type. Like the royal

grants in the Ancient Near East so also the covenants with Abraham and

David are gifts bestowed upon individuals who excelled in loyally serving

their masters. Abraham is promised the land because he obeyed God and

followed his mandate (Gen. XXVI, 5; cf. XXII, 16, 18) and similarly David

was given the grace of dynasty because he served God with truth,

righteousness and loyalty (I Kings III, 6; cf. IX, 4, XI, 4, 6, XIV, 8, XV, 3).[56]

At this point in the debate, it would seem that Kenneth Kitchen and his co-

author Paul Lawrence have had the last word once again. The preliminary studies

he had been citing for decades were finally published in the exhaustive study of a

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[56] Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near

East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, No. 2 (April-June, 1970), pp. 184–203, on

page 185.

comprehensive collection of ANE law codes, treaties, and covenants in 2012.[57] In

their detailed analysis of over 80 ancient texts, they were able to demonstrate

powerfully that the Old Testament covenant texts fit much better with both the

form and the content of ANE texts of the fourteenth/twelfth centuries BCE than

with the later eighth/seventh-century texts as had been claimed by Wellhausen,

Nicholson, and others.

The debate about the origins and dating of biblical covenant texts lasted over

a century and could resurface as other scholars take the time to digest and possibly

challenge the findings of Kitchen and Lawrence. In the meantime, the

conversation seems to have moved on aided by a different set of historical and

anthropological insights. In an article published after his formal retirement,

Harvard's distinguished Hebrew Bible scholar, Frank Moore Cross, drew heavily

on anthropological kinship studies to refocus the question on what covenants

would have meant to the ancient Hebrews and their contemporaries. Cross

concluded that both the ANE treaty covenants and the biblical language of

covenant are derived from the moral structure of the ancient desert tribes that were

organized and managed as kinship associations before the urban developments of

formal law and contracts. By adapting the pre-legal kinship language of covenant,

both the Hittite kings and the Hebrew tribes (and the Davidic monarch they would

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[57] Kitchen and Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*, volumes 1-3.

spawn) were able to connect to the ethos of their times while developing

significant innovation in their social/political and religious worlds.

Covenants establish and manage kinship relationships.

Over the last few decades a growing 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. Scott W.

Hahn provides one of the most comprehensive and accessible of these recent

overviews and will be followed in much of what is offered below.[58] Like Hahn, I

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[58] Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, which is based on his 1995 Marquette University Ph.D.

dissertation "Kinship by Covenant: A Biblical Theological Study of Covenant Types and Texts

in the Old and New Testaments" as supplemented by his subsequent research. 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 ברית [*berit*] in Biblical Hebrew, with Particular Reference to

the Book of Genesis," D. Phil diss., Oxford University, 1980.

will take the definition of Old Testament covenant proposed in 1994 by Gordon P. Hugenberger and the 1998 perspective of Frank Moore Cross as starting points.[59]

The critical insight that distinguishes Cross's and Hugenberger's approaches from the bulk of twentieth-century 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.[60] The

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[59] 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 review of this widely unnoticed study see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Status of Women in Old Testament Marriage," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 28 (2018): 233–236. See also Frank Moore Cross, "Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel," a new study used to preface the collection of his earlier publications entitled *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, 3–21. An earlier dissertation had also assembled the relevant evidence indicating that the Hebrews may have considered marriage to be based in a covenant. See Elaine June Adler, "The background for the metaphor of covenant as marriage in the Hebrew Bible," dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1989, pp. 296–307.

[60] The wholesale identification of Israelite covenanting with the legalistic treaty covenants of the ANE seen as contracts was questioned early on by scholars like Dennis J. McCarthy who could see even in the biblical account of the Sinai covenant echoes of Bedouin culture and the nomad

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 or rituals

(covenants) for incorporating outsiders into the group. In this pre-legal world,

covenant was the principal device used to manage the flow of non-kin into a tribal

association and to bestow the rights and duties of kin on outsiders brought into the

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life. He saw Sinai as "an authentic gesture of covenant making," but "not in the character of the

treaties. The ratification of alliance by rite rather than a contract based on an oath, and the

gesture of superior to inferior rather than vice versa, these things are strangers to the treaty

tradition." See his *Treaty and Covenant*, Rome, Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963, p. 162. Cf.,

pages 4–5. Even more to the point, following subsequent detailed studies of the ANE treaties,

Hayim Tadmor has demonstrated that the Esarhaddon *adê* (oath) document, which scholars had

assumed to be the treaty prototype for the covenant formulation in Deuteronomy, was most

likely not available in Jerusalem in the relevant time frame. See his "Treaty and Oath in the

Ancient Near East: A Historian's Approach," *Humanizing America's Iconic Book*, edited by

Gene M. Tucker and Douglas A. Knight, Chico, CA, Scholars Press, 1982, 151. Meredith G.

Kline proposed somewhat different reasons for distinguishing covenant law from "mere legal

codes" and contracts by emphasizing the element of personal consecration in covenants. See his

"Law Covenant," *Westminster Theological Journal* 27:1 (1964), p. 19.

family through marriage, adoption, servitude, or alliance. "A covenant implies an adoption into the household, an extension of kinship, the making of a brother."[61]

From his ground-breaking study of marriage in the Hebrew Bible, 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.*"[62] By entering voluntarily 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 kinship studies four years later in the classic essay of Frank Moore Cross in which he traced this biblical covenanting practice to the family-based West Semitic tribal groups in the ANE.

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[61] See the full discussion in Paul Kalluveettil, *Declaration and Covenant*, Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1982, pp. 204–205.

[62] Hugenberger, 171. Later studies independently take a similar position. For example, see Seock-Tae Sohn, "'I will be your God and You Will Be My People': The Origin and Background of the Covenant Formula," *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine,* edited by Robert Chazan, Eisenbrauns, 1998, 357: "I propose that the formula of marriage and adoption used both in ancient Israel and in Mesopotamia provides the origin and background of covenant formulas."

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.[63]

Anthropologists have also paid close attention to what happens when local kinship systems of social organization overlap with larger cities and states which require law and courts to support and discipline the interactions of strangers. Kinship norms and expectations such as the *hesed* of the Israelites cannot be legally enforced or adjudicated by these overarching jurisdictions. In such situations accommodations must be made for both systems to be able to do their jobs. Fortes 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:

> 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

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[63] Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," 3.

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.[64]

Hesed

Like the monarchies and empires of the ANE, ancient Israel's growth as a people created similar jurisdictional overlaps. As the league of tribes based on kinship became larger, urbanized, and more complex and evolved into monarchies, the Israelites continued to think and act in terms of *hesed* (covenant love, loyalty), the moral system of expectations derived from their older kinship associations and the only language they had available for dealing with the personal and local dimensions of their lives. Cross applied the anthropological findings regarding kinship associations to the ancient Hebrews and their distinctive moral system of *hesed*. But, he explains, as kinship structures began to break down and to be replaced with a different set of social and political institutions, "the extended meaning of *hesed* became increasingly prominent. But its rootage in kinship obligations is primary. Strictly speaking, *hesed* is a kinship term."[65]

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[64] Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order: The Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan*, Aldine Publishing, 1969, 237, citing Max Gluckman, *The Judicial Process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia*, Yale University Press, 1955, pp. 46–48.

[65] Cross, 5–6.

In Old Testament usage, *hesed* could be used in secular contexts structured by relationships of kinship, servitude, friendship, or alliance. But the *hesed* created by the Abrahamic covenant included all the virtues that Yahweh promised to display to his people, the moral expectations of how he expected his people to conduct themselves toward him, and the same set of expectations that the covenant community had of their mutual conduct toward one another. The best studies of biblical *hesed* have concluded that the *hesed* of the Lord is always defined by the context of his covenant with his people. As Glueck concluded in his classic study on the topic, "God's *hesed* can only be understood as Yahweh's covenantal relationship toward his followers."[66]

This logic of "kinship by covenant" became a central component of the theology of ancient Israel and, as will be argued below, was adapted again by the Nephites to accommodate the revelation of Jesus Christ that they received in the visions of Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, and others. In its secular functions, covenant could be used to form voluntary associations between unrelated persons as evidenced most simply in marriage.

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[66] 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 for its 1967 publication entitled *Hesed in the Bible.* This volume is now available in a 2011 paperback edition from Wipf & Stock. See p. 102.

Hugenberger has demonstrated convincingly that the Israelite concept of marriage was based on covenant with the inclusion of "divine sanction." But kinship groups could also use covenant as a device to incorporate adopted children, servants and slaves, friends and allies, into the kinship group as equals with all the same rights and duties as the original family members. While role status might change across the normal course of a lifetime in the kinship association, the basic rights and duties of kinsmen persisted throughout their lives. This means that in a kinship association, everyone was either born into the covenant or had been adopted into the association by covenant. Because the covenant was a voluntary arrangement, people could also leave the kinship association by mutual agreement.

The case of Ruth and Naomi

The voluntary nature of these covenants may be illustrated at the beginning of the story of Naomi and her two widowed daughters-in-law.[67] Ruth and Orpah had been connected by the covenant of marriage to Naomi and her Israelite husband and sons. But after all three men died, the material reasons for the covenantal union were permanently dissolved, and Naomi, having no resources or sons to offer either of the young widows, encouraged them, "Go back, each of you

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[67] Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. used the story in *Ruth* to demonstrate how the actions of God in the Hebrew Bible enable, but do not determine the actions of humans in accomplishing his designs. See his "Theological Reflections on Naomi's Shrewdness," *Tyndale Bulletin* 40:2 (1989) 283–

to her mother's house." Naomi recognized that the young women had each dealt

properly with her according to the covenantal *hesed* entailed in their connection by

marriage, and prayed that the Lord would act out of his divine *hesed* to bless them

in the next stage of their lives. Orpah accepted the advice of Naomi, but Ruth

wanted to maintain the covenant relationship: "Your people is my people, and your

god is my god . . . So may the Lord do to me."[68] The fact that the choices facing

the two young widows—to leave or to reaffirm their covenant relationships at this

critical juncture in their lives—were equally appropriate would seem to emphasize

the voluntary nature of the covenant connection itself. As Nelson Glueck explains:

> Ruth was by no means obliged to go with Naomi. She was as free as
>
> Naomi's other daughter-in-law to return to her own people. Yet, in faithful
>
> love she followed her mother-in-law. In true religiosity she complied with
>
> Jewish custom. Ruth took it upon herself to practice *hesed* in order to fulfill
>
> the obligations of a Jewish widow.[69]

Not only does Ruth's statement feature the three dimensions of Israel's

covenant relationship with Yahweh, it ends with the "solemn oath formulary"—

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292. On Hubbard's reading, this story portrays faith as "the seizure of opportunities as God-given, the application of human ingenuity to reach divinely-honoured goals" (p. 292).

[68] Quoting Robert Alter's translation of Ruth 1:8–9, 16–17. *The Hebrew Bible*, vol. 3 *The Writings, Ketuvim*, translation and commentary by Robert Alter, W. W. Norton, 2019, pp. 626–627.

[69] Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, p. 41.

"Thus may Yahweh do to me" (1:17), probably accompanied by a symbolic gesture—which would most easily be interpreted as a determined reaffirmation of her covenant connection to Israel or "the people of the Lord."[70] By her marriage, Ruth left her Moabite family and homeland and bound herself first in a covenant relationship not only to her Jewish husband,[71] but also to his family and a community—to Judah as a kinship association (tribe), and to Yahweh as Israel's god—with all the rights and duties entailed in each of those three dimensions.

While many commentators have tended to read Ruth as a story of conversion or bond formation, others have invoked one or another understanding of Israelite covenant to illuminate this passage. Glueck uses Ruth 3:10 to show "that *hesed* is that mode of conduct which is in accordance with familial obligations."[72] Mark Smith has summarized these and has then used Ruth to defend his view that the

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[70] See the detailed explanation in volume 7 of the Anchor Bible Commentary. Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, Doubleday, 1975, p. 74. Also, see Hugenberger, 159–165, on the primarily covenantal implications of cleaving and leaving or forsaking.

[71] "The normal form of marriage in the Ancient Near East was patriarchal type in which the woman left her own family to enter the house of her husband." I. Mendelsohn, "The Family in the Ancient Near East," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 11:2 (May, 1948), p. 25.

[72] Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, p. 40.

story does not so much reflect the application of ANE notions of treaty and covenant to "the narrow compass of village life," but rather suggests how these practices may be derived from everyday realities of family life in the ANE.[73]

> It is not covenant that is the lofty concept brought down to routine village life in the book of Ruth . . ; instead, family relations are being expressed by Ruth, and it is the model of family extended across family lines that is being expressed in treaty and covenant language.[74]

The divine element in kinship associations

While the god of ancient Israel and his way of relating to his people was much different from those of the other desert tribes of the ANE, many of the patterns observable in Israelite religion can look like adaptations of those prevalent in other tribal societies. Cross explains 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

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[73] Mark S. Smith, "'Your People Shall Be My People': Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16–17," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69 (2, April 2007), 245–247.

the privileges of kinship. He leads in battle, redeems from slavery, loves his

family, shares the land of his heritage (*nahălāh*), 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.[75]

Finally, Cross explains how the Israelite league of tribes becomes known as

the people of the Lord (*'am Yahweh*), or, as Cross prefers to translate it, the

kindred of Yahweh.[76] Because the league was multi-functional, it could be referred

to as a militia, as a kinship organization, or as a religious organization.[77]

> The league was also a kinship organization, a covenant of families and tribes
>
> organized by the creation or identification of a common ancestor and related
>
> by segmented genealogies . . . The league in ideal form was conceived as
>
> twelve tribes, related at once by covenant and kinship.[78]

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[74] Smith, 247.

[75] Cross, 6–7.

[76] The transliteration *'am Yahweh* is based on the Hebrew original עֶם יְהֹוָה (people of Yahweh, people of Jehovah, people of the Lord), which can also be transliterated as *am Yahweh* or *am YHWH*.

[77] Cross, 11-12.

[78] Cross, 12.

Because the organizing covenant was established with the clan patriarch Abraham, Yahweh is the Divine Kinsman and the "god of the father."[79] "Israel is the kindred of Yahweh; Yahweh is the God of Israel. This is an old formula. But this formula must be understood as legal language, the language of kinship-in-law, or in other words, the language of covenant."[80] Like the other confederations of tribes that flourished in southeastern Palestine and northern Arabia, the Israelites' league was known by the name of its god. As explained below, this becomes an important consideration in the Book of Mormon requirement that the Lord's covenant people take upon them his name.[81]

Taking the name of God as a covenant act

In Numbers 6:27 we find the only comparable phrasing of the Hebrew Bible. The instructions for Aaron and his sons on how to bless the Israelites emphasize features of Yahweh's *hesed* toward his people and includes the requirement that his name be put on them:

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[79] Cross, 20.

[80] Cross, 13.

[81] See the discussion in Jennifer Clark Lane, "The Lord Will Redeem His People: Adoptive Covenant and Redemption in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2:2 (1993), pp. 53–54 and the discussion below.

The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to

bless the Israelites. Say to them:

"The Lord bless you and keep you;

the Lord make his face shine upon you

and be gracious to you;

The Lord turn his face toward you

and give you peace."

"So *they will put my name* on the Israelites,

and I will bless them." (*NIV,* Numbers 6: 22–27)

This unique phrasing has been traditionally interpreted to imply that Israelites

should wear amulets bearing the name of the Lord, or even that the priest should

literally write that name on their bodies.[82] In other biblical contexts, the language

of putting the name of the Lord somewhere means to locate his presence in that

place—such as in the tabernacle or the future temple.[83]

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[82] See the English abstract for Meir Bar-Ilan, "'They Shall Put My Name Upon the People of

Israel' (Num. 6:27)," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 60 (1989), ט׳.

[83] See "Name," in Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (editors),

Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, Intervarsity Press, 1998, 585. Also, see the discussion in W.

Eichrodt, *Theology,* I:208: "The divine Name constituted a guarantee of Yahweh's presence."

The Nephite prophets obviously take the view that taking the name of the Lord upon one's self at the time of covenanting with the Lord is a metaphor for an internal commitment that is signaled externally through the ordinances of baptism in the first instance and of subsequent partaking of the bread and wine as ritual renewals of the same covenant. Nephi also clearly links a promise of the divine presence to those who "take upon [themselves] the name of Christ by baptism," for unto them "will the Father give the Holy Ghost" (2 Nephi 31:12–13). This may suggest an alternative or additional interpretation for the blessing described in Numbers 6:27.

While there is no settled interpretation of the language of putting or taking the name of the Lord upon one's self among Bible scholars, Professor Cross does report that it was usual that the south-desert leagues he used as a model for Israelite kinship culture were "named after a deity."[84] Israel is referred to repeatedly as the people (*'am*) of the Lord, which can signal either their genealogical connection to Abraham or their covenant relationship with Yahweh or both. "The Covenant people of the Lord will be one united people. That does not mean only biological

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[84] Cross, 19.

descendants of Abraham are the *'am*."[85] He further identifies a few

"sociomorphisms" in Israel's religious language that arise from the ideology of

kinship: "The God of Israel adopts Israel as a 'son' and is called 'father,' enters a

marriage contract with Israel and is designated 'husband,' swears fealty oaths

together with Israel and enters into covenant, assuming the mutual obligations of

kinship."[86] This terminology is quite natural for a kinship system that brings

outsiders into the family artificially through covenants of marriage and adoption,

and links itself to its god as a father by a similar covenant. "When Israel was a

child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1, *NIV*). Cross

notes similar language in Canaanite sources and cites other salient examples from

the Old Testament, including Ezekiel 16:8, Malachi 2:14, and Hosea 2:4–25. His

favorite example is the proclaimed divine sonship of King David in Psalms 89:29–

30 and 132:1–12. [87]

The third commandment viewed from a covenant perspective

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[85] "*'am*," R. Laird Harris, et. al., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Moody

Publishers, Chicago, 1980, 676.

[86] Cross, 13.

[87] Cross, 14. For a detailed reflection on the covenant love presumed in biblical references to

the sonship of Israel see John L. McKenzie, "The Divine Sonship of Israel and the Covenant,"

Catholic Biblical Quarterly 8 (1946), pp. 326–339.

This usage also suggests a possible novel interpretation of the third commandment: "Thou shalt not take (lift up) the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Exodus 20:7). The Hebrew term translated here as "in vain" is the adverbial form of the noun *shav'* which can have a variety of meanings that indicate deceitfulness or emptiness given in reward for trust.[88] Shepherd notes that the 53 occurrences of this word in the Old Testament draw on one or the other of its

> two basic and interrelated senses, ineffectiveness and falseness, the latter probably being derived from the idea that hopes and expectations prove false when placed in persons or things that are ineffective and therefore untrustworthy.[89]

Traditional Jewish and Christian interpretations of the third commandment have focused on misuse of the Lord's name in magical exercises or in thoughtless or

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[88] See 7723, "שוא," *Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary,* p. 273, in *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Thomas Nelson, 2010. The transliteration *shav'* is based on the Hebrew original שָׁוְא (emptiness, vanity), which can also be transliterated as *šāv'*, *šāw'*, *shaw'*, *shav*, or *shaw*.

[89] Jerry Shepherd, "שוא [shav]," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* 4:53.

even formal situations of swearing.[90] But interpreted in the context of the covenant

culture of *hesed* that features trustworthiness as described above, the third

commandment could also be understood as an injunction against failing to take

seriously one's covenant obligations to obey the Lord and display *hesed* in one's

conduct.[91] Harman seems to endorse this insight when he translates *shav'* as

"hypocritically:"

> Central to the thought of this commandment is the position of Israel in
>
> relation to God. Earlier in Egypt God had declared Israel to be his first-born
>
> son (Exod. 4:22f.) and had adopted Israel as his own people (Exod. 19:6).
>
> Bearing the name or character of God was intrinsic to that role, and any false
>
> profession would mean a repudiation of the covenant relationship itself. The

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[90] These traditional interpretations were reviewed and summarized effectively in W. E. Staples,

"The Third Commandment," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (No. 4, December, 1939), pp.

326–327 and more recently in Allan M. Harman, "The Interpretation of the Third

Commandment," *Reformed Theological Review* 47 (1988), p. 2. Staples and Harman recognized

that the basic problem in translating and understanding the third commandment derives from the

meaning of *shav'* in this passage, recognizing that it has a wide range of meanings in its various

occurrences including "idol." Staples proposed that Exodus 20:7 should be translated "Thou

shalt not give the name of Yahweh (thy God) to an idol." See p. 329.

[91] A different, but parallel interpretation is offered by Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan. See note 77.

Third Commandment, with its associated curse, was to be the constant

reminder to Israel of the need to fulfill her election and to demonstrate the

character of God to a watching world.[92]

Holistic v. individualistic interpretations of the covenant

An obvious difference between Old Testament and Book of Mormon

discourse arises from the radical individualism of the latter. The Nephite means of

subscribing to the covenant through repentance and baptism as a witness of the

covenant that includes taking the Lord's name upon one's self can only be

understood as a sequence of actions in the life of each individual who becomes part

of God's people or church through covenant. On the other hand, most parallel

references in the Old Testament refer holistically to the people of God who have

inherited the covenant from their fathers.[93]

That holistic interpretation is certainly tempered to some extent by accounts

of covenant renewal rituals in which all the people participated. And one passage

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[92] Harman, p. 7.

[93] In his important series of papers on temples in the ANE, John M. Lundquist has focused on

covenants as the mechanisms by which new states were legitimated by being linked to the gods.

See J. M. Lundquist, "Temple, Covenant, and Law in the Ancient Near East," in Avraham

Gileadi (editor), *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*,

Baker Book House, 1988, pp. 293–305.

in Isaiah 56 may betray a standard assumption that the Israelite covenant was understood to be an individual matter as well, just as Sabbath observance could be measured by the actions of individuals. Isaiah here quotes the Lord's explicit listing of a variety of individual types who are very likely non-Israelite by birth as being joined to him by the covenant and their obedience to his commandments. "The son of the stranger, that hath joined himself to the Lord," the "eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant," and "the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants . . . and taketh hold of my covenant," are all among those the Lord says he will "bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; for mine house shall be called an house of prayer for all people" (Isaiah 56:1–7).

Covenant Language and Concepts in the Book of Mormon

One must be impressed with the many decades of investigation that have enabled Bible scholars to bring our understanding of biblical covenant concepts to its present level. It is never easy to penetrate a foreign culture, and the Old Testament contains almost nothing reflective that would explain itself to us on this topic. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, is replete with sermons that spell

out the concepts and expectations of the Nephite covenant culture. And the structure and language of those discussions make it easy to believe that they shared fully in the same covenant culture that Cross and others have now shown to be featured in the Old Testament.

Despite some rather obvious differences between Old Testament and Book of Mormon covenant discourse, there are multiple strains in the Nephite record that strongly suggest continuity and adaptation of the covenant language and concepts of ancient Israel. This essay will conclude with several examples of prominent features of Hebrew covenant culture that characterize the record written by the Nephite prophets. These examples will include (1) the Nephite adaptation of the Abrahamic covenant to their own promised land tradition and to the revelation of Christ's gospel to the their first generation of prophets, (2) the apparent Nephite dependence on the same moral structure of a covenant society that is referred to as both divine and human *hesed* in the Bible, and (3) the kinship character of the covenant society that the Nephites promoted as they adapted the revelation of Christ to their Abrahamic religion.

The Nephite adaptation of the Abrahamic covenant

The language of covenant is prominent in the teachings of the earliest Nephite prophets, in the teachings of Benjamin and Alma, in the teachings of

Christ when he visits the Nephites, and in the closing words of Mormon and Moroni. The word covenant appears 103 times in the text in reference to the covenants between men and the Lord. But the concept appears even more frequently under other names (such as "promises of the Lord") or even unnamed. In an attempt to sort these references into categories, I have interpreted 59 of these 103 references to refer to God's covenant with Abraham, or as it may have been re-articulated with Jacob, Joseph, or even Moses. Three of these mentions refer to the special covenant God made with Lehi and Nephi for their people in this new promised land; 26 appearances of the word refer explicitly to the gospel covenant made through repentance and baptism by individual converts entering into Christ's church; and another fifteen are more general or inclusive—speaking of the covenants of the Lord to the children of men. But the implicit references to God's covenants are far more numerous. For example, the covenant with Lehi and Nephi is only so labeled three times but is repeated or cited 80 times somewhere in the text—without the word *covenant* being used.

In a previous essay I have identified and traced the development of three integrated streams of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon which can be summarized as follows:

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.[94]

Biblical hesed in Nephite covenant culture

The 1927 dissertation of Nelson Glueck and the waves of analysis it stimulated throughout the twentieth century revolutionized scholarly understanding of the relationship of Yahweh to his people and ideally of his people to each other under the Abrahamic covenant. Because of his goodness, the Lord had established his people by covenant with the assurance that because of his great power and his love toward them, he would protect and deliver them from all evils if they would remain faithful to him. The Hebrew term for this love and faithfulness was *hesed*, and as explained above, its complexity has led scholars to admit the impossibility of translating it accurately with a single English word. But the *hesed* that the Lord continually displays for his people and that he expects them to return both to him and to each other in their covenant association, distinguishes Israelite religion from all its ancient contemporaries.

Another Crossian insight that corresponds closely to the Nephite understandings of these covenants with the Lord is that "there are no 'unilateral'

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[94] Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57 (3, 2018), 44.

covenants in a kinship-based society." Rather, "kinship obligations are necessarily

mutual."[95] And this applies to the obligations between the Lord and his people as

well. As discussed above, these obligations include the requirement that the

Lord's people obey his commandments and observe the same *hesed* that

characterizes their god in their interactions with one another.

In a separate paper, I have described in detail the scholarly efforts to

understand biblical *hesed* and have examined several examples in the Book of

Mormon text that seem to describe and promote that same *hesed* among the

Nephite believers. All the basic terminology that Bible translators have advanced

as translations for *hesed* in various contexts shows up even more clearly in the

Nephite text.[96] From its opening sentence, the Book of Mormon identifies *the*

goodness of God as the basic fact that has led him to provide a plan of salvation for

his creation, a plan that includes the sacrifice of his own divine son as the means

through which he can deliver all men and women who will accept the covenant

path taught in his gospel from both death and hell, enabling them through faithful

obedience to his commandments to become like him and to be prepared to enter

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[95] Cross, 14.

[96] See Noel B. Reynolds, "Biblical Hesed and Nephite Covenant Culture," working paper, July
9, 2019.

into his presence and receive eternal life.[97] While fully congruent with Old

Testament *hesed*, the Book of Mormon characterizations are more explicit and

developed than are the Old Testament mentions.

Taking the name of Christ in the Book of Mormon

Just as the covenant Yahweh established with Abraham and his descendants

made them kin by covenant, so also the Nephites who accepted the gospel

covenant offered by Christ referred to themselves as "the people of the Lord."

From the time of his first vision, Nephi had taught that all those who chose to make

this covenant must "take upon [themselves] the name of Christ by baptism" (2

Nephi 31:13).[98] The farewell sermon given by Benjamin at the center of the

Nephite dispensation exemplifies the clear understanding of the Nephite prophets

that the Christian's covenant with the Lord entailed taking upon oneself the name

of Jesus Christ: "I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you

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[97] In a separate paper, I have explored how the Nephites use *the goodness of God* to explain the

origins of both the plan of salvation and the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that both echoes and

significantly expands on Old Testament usage. See Noel B. Reynolds, "*The Goodness of God*

and his Children as a Fundamental Theological Concept in the Book of Mormon," working

paper, August 21, 2019.

[98] This image is echoed clearly in Mosiah 5:8, 25:23, Alma 34:38, and in the sacrament prayers

as recorded by Moroni in Moroni 4:3.

that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives" (Mosiah 5:8). Every person that will be found finally at the right hand of Christ "shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ" (Mosiah 5:9). As the name could only be blotted out through transgression, Benjamin urged his people to "remember to retain the name written always in your hearts" that they might "hear and know the voice by which ye shall be called, and also the name by which he shall call you" (Mosiah 5:11–12).

As Mormon abridged the Nephite records at the end of that dispensation, he described how the people who were "desirous to *take upon them the name of Christ*" and to be baptized in Alma's day did "join the churches of God," and "were called *the people of God*."[99] Jesus himself reminded the Nephites of the scripture that says "Ye must *take upon you the name of Christ,* which is my name," before summarizing his gospel when he promised them that "whoso *taketh upon him my name* and endureth to the end, the same shall be saved at the last day" (3 Nephi 27:6). Not only did he require repentant individuals to take upon themselves his name, but he went on to explain that these same people, when

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[99] Mosiah 25:23–24. Cf. Alma 34:38 where Amulek teaches the people to repent and "take upon you the name of Christ."

organized as a church, should be called by his name.[100] Earlier, Captain Moroni had rallied the besieged Nephites to a covenant that they would not "forsake the Lord their God," or "be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ" (Alma 46:18, 21). And as Benjamin warned his audience, "whosoever shall not take upon them the name of Christ must be called by some other name; therefore he findeth himself on the left hand of God" (Mosiah 5:10).

The kinship-by-covenant established between the Lord and his people is explicit in Nephite discourse. Benjamin provides the clearest example in his sermon describing the covenant his people have made to follow Jesus Christ when he tells them that by taking the name of Christ upon themselves, they have become "the children of Christ, his sons and his daughters" (Mosiah 5:7). Centuries later, Mormon assures the few faithful Nephites that "are true followers of his Son Jesus Christ," that the Father will fill them with "the pure love of Christ," that they "may become the sons of God, that when he shall appear, [they] shall be like him" (Moroni 7: 47–48). The Old Testament concept that the covenant provides the mechanism by which the people of the Lord can imitate and become like him, is stated clearly and explicitly in the Book of Mormon. R. W. L. Moberly stated it this way: "A fundamental principle of OT (indeed biblical) ethics is the imitation

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[100] 3 Nephi 27:7–9.

of God: as Yahweh, likewise Israel is to be. This is most famously expressed in Lev 19:2, 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy'."101

Conclusions

In this essay I have tried to provide a broad survey of the concept of covenant for Latter-day Saint students of the Bible and the Book of Mormon. I began with a sketch of the history of covenant theology in the Christian tradition showing how the early New Testament idea of a baptismal covenant was soon replaced by the Christian institution of sacraments. Although the covenant idea played little role in the historical developments of Christian theology, it did resurge in the Reformation, but without widespread theological impact.

In contrast, over the last century, the role of the covenant idea in the Hebrew Bible has occupied center stage for many scholars as competing schools of thought rise and fall. New stability has come to that discussion from the realizations (1) that the covenant texts in the Old Testament are genuinely ancient and (2) that the concept and language of covenant in the Bible tradition fits easily with the ancient desert tribes understood as kinship associations. While the Israelite adaptation of that covenant culture has its own distinctive features, especially in the

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[101] See R. W. L. Moberly, "586 אמו," s.v., *NDOTTE*, 1:429–430. See also, Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Harper, 1958, pp. 173–177. C f. Eichrodt, 1:245–246.

characterization of its god Yahweh and his love for his people, it fits comfortably in that cultural context and persists in the language and ideology of kinship-by-covenant long after Israel became a settled, urbanized monarchy.

Finally, in comparing that pre-exilic covenant culture of ancient Israel with the language and teachings of the Book of Mormon, it becomes evident that the Nephites are even more clear-mindedly committed to a world structured by their covenants with God. Not only were they continually mindful of their ancient covenant connection as descendants of Joseph to Abraham, but they also had their own parallel covenant promises and promised land as given by the Lord to their ancestors Lehi and Nephi. Even more impressively, the Nephites accommodated their covenant culture to the revelation of Jesus Christ and his gospel as given to their founding fathers. And in the process, they successfully propounded an even more powerful and explicitly developed version of Biblical *hesed* and its covenant culture.