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Introduction

The Christian world generally speaks of man's relationship to God in terms of faith as the "central term" defining that relationship and as "a basic source of hope and inspiration."[1] Yet, as prominent Christian theologian Brevard Childs goes on to explain,

> from the start the subject of faith has been the source of great controversy. It not only served to define Christianity over against Judaism, but also was a major factor in separating Protestant belief from Roman Catholic during the period of the Reformation. Indeed, much of the present confusion in today's church rests on a widespread uncertainty over the meaning and content of faith.[2]

Much of that confusion, as he notes, arises from problems in scriptural interpretation:

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[1] Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible*, Fortress Press, 1992, 595.

[2] Childs, 595.

How is one to explain the elements of both striking continuity and discontinuity between the two testaments, especially in terms of the Old Testament's peripheral use of the term faith in contrast to its centrality within the New Testament?[3]

Readers and interpreters of the Book of Mormon seem to agree that *faith in Jesus Christ* is a basic principle of the gospel or doctrine of Christ as taught in that volume of scripture. And to the extent those readers share a modern, westernized world view and a background in New Testament Christianity, it is easy for them to agree at least superficially on what is meant by the word *faith*. However, as I have engaged myself over these last several decades in an in-depth study of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the Nephites understood it, I have come more and more clearly to the realizations: (1) that our modern cultural understandings shield us from those of the Nephite prophets in many ways, (2) that the Nephite concept of faith is far

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[3] Childs, 595. It should be noted that new studies argue that the key terminology of the New Testament is closer to that of the Old than scholars have realized. See Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith:* Pistis *and* Fides *in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches*, Oxford, 2015. This paper will focus on pre-exilic Israel as the cultural and linguistic homeland of Lehi and his descendants and will not explore potential insights from the New Testament world.

from simple, and (3) that the Nephites' dependence on Old Testament covenantal

concepts constitutes an essential dimension of their approach to faith in Jesus

Christ. In this essay, I will begin with a reconstruction of the Old Testament

perspective as it may relate to Nephite understandings and then move on to an

examination of the full range of relevant Book of Mormon usage in an attempt to

document and discover the meanings of *faith* in Nephite discourse.

Biblical Hebrew and modern linguistics

The twentieth century produced important developments in linguistic and

textual studies of the Hebrew Bible that are particularly relevant for this inquiry.

The mid-century effort to apply the principles of scientific linguistics to studies in

biblical Hebrew produced significant challenges to traditional interpretations.

Semanticists found important deficiencies in standard approaches that gave too

much weight to etymologies and cognate language studies while paying too little

attention to the varieties of usage evident in the Hebrew text. Some of the most

effective critiques focused precisely on studies of *faith* and *faithfulness*, severely

criticizing the traditional methodologies used to produce them.[4] By the end of the

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[4] See, *e.g.*, Arthur Gabriel Hebert, "'Faithfulness' and 'Faith'," *The Reformed

Theological Review* 14 (June 1955): 33–40, and its extension in Thomas F. Torrance, "One

Aspect of the Biblical Conception of Faith," *The Expository Times* 68 (1957): 111–114. These

century, it was clear that the semanticists had won and that Hebrew Bible scholars had incorporated the insights of modern linguistics into their approaches to Bible dictionaries and textual studies.[5] In what follows I will spare readers any detail of these linguistic battles in biblical studies, but will rely on outcomes that appear to be agreeable to most Bible scholars today.

Two important caveats for contemporary readers emerge from these studies. First, the modern distinction between faith and knowledge has little parallel in the Hebrew Bible. And second, all the faith-related terminology in the Old Testament

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two articles provoked a full-throttle attack on the traditional linguistic methodologies used by Bible scholars. James Barr, in his *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford University Press, 1961, devoted his entire chapter seven, "'Faith' and 'Truth'—an Examination of some Linguistic Arguments," pp. 161–205, to this specific topic, and provided subsequent generations of Bible scholars therein the classic reference point for this transition in Bible studies.

[5] The theological dictionaries compiled for the Old Testament and the New Testament in the 1970s and later showed the impact of Barr's demand that semantics be given high priority. For example, see the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis,* second edition, Zondervan, 2014, edited by semanticist Moisés Silva, and the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis,* edited by Willem A. VanGemeren, also published by Zondervan, 1997, which actually provides an index of some two thousand semantic fields in its index—volume five, pp. 1–216.

should be understood in the context of a pre-existing covenant with the Lord.

Regarding the first point, the basic linguistic fact to recognize is that biblical

Hebrew has no noun for *faith*. Rather, this semantic field is filled with a group of

verbs focused on *trusting* or adjectives that derive from those verbs. According to

Childs, "Faith in the Old Testament is always trust which is grounded in past

events of salvation, but which awaits God's future intervention as creator and

redeemer."[6] And in only a couple of instances do these refer to beliefs about what

is true or false, as would most modern references to *faith*. Most importantly, the

modern understanding of faith as beliefs that cannot be adequately supported with

shared facts or reasons would be completely foreign to the ancient Israelite

understanding. Biblical faith was not an epistemological issue.

To go on to the second point, questions of faith raised issues of trust and free

choice. The question was always this: Did one's actions demonstrate trusting in

Yahweh or in something else? Tests of faith were moral tests and not tests of the

intellect. Acts of faith demonstrated commitment to the Lord, trust in his covenant

promises, love of him and his people, and acceptance of his superior knowledge of

what was best for his people. Choosing to trust instead in the wisdom of man, the

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[6] Childs, 598.

power of armies, personal wealth, political power, or one's own behavior preferences was to rebel against the Lord and his covenant and to become apostate.

Faith as a function of Israel's covenant with God

The modern confidence in the unlimited potential of humans to master and control their world stands in stark contrast to the world views of pre-modern societies, and to the understanding of ancient Israel as reflected in the writings of the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible describes Abraham as a pastoralist who had inherited from his ancestors the understanding that God had created this world and had placed men and women in it with the expectation that they should obey his commandments in the conduct of their lives. Further, because of his exceptional righteousness, Abraham received direct revelation from God confirming his inherited beliefs. But most critically for all future self- understanding in Israel, Abraham was given a covenant between him, his people, and God that would shape their world from that point on. As the all-powerful creator of the world, Yahweh would adopt Abraham and his posterity as "his people." They would be his family, and he would be their father *by covenant*. As such, he would love, protect, and prosper them with the requirement that they would take his name upon them, show their loyalty and reciprocal love for him by keeping his commandments, and love, protect, and help one another as his children. By doing

so, they would become the example that could show all nations how the one true god could and would adopt and bless any people, and they would become the means through which God would offer this same covenant and its blessings to all humankind.[7]

By offering this covenant relationship to Abraham, his posterity, and ultimately to all the human race, Yahweh presented them all with a fundamental choice. Would they choose to accept direction from the creator of the world based in his knowledge, values, and priorities for the conduct of their lives, or would they choose to rely on their own wisdom, wealth, or social/political power in pursuing their own self-chosen paths in life? Choosing Yahweh and his path would require trusting in his unfailing love and promises without knowing how or when his promised blessings would come. Perhaps even more critically, it would mean accepting his judgment about what would be best for them. Rejecting the invitation to his covenant would leave people vulnerable to all their own weaknesses and imperfections and without any promised aid from the Lord. And it would place them in a posture of rebellion against their creator. Perhaps the most

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[7] This understanding of the Abrahamic covenant is developed and presented in Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant Through the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018), 39–74.

striking feature of Yahweh's invitation was that it was open-ended. Anyone who

had previously rejected or not known of the invitation could decide at any point to

accept it. The concept of repentance in the Old Testament basically means to turn

or return to the correct path, to the covenant laid out by the Lord for all his

creations.[8]

The certainty that Yahweh offered to Abraham and his descendants was

based in his goodness and power as the creator of the universe and in his sure love

for his creation—his determination to bless all people to the extent that they would

allow through their own free actions.[9] God's faithful love for his children

combined with his comprehensive knowledge of all human possibilities justify

them in trusting in him in all their choices and conduct. Men and women can place

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[8] The idea that repentance was understood as turning or returning to the covenant path of Yahweh is developed in detail in Noel B. Reynolds, "The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56:3 (2017), pp. 49–78 and in Noel B. Reynolds, "The Language of Repentance in the Book of Mormon," *The Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (2020), forthcoming.

[9] For a discussion of how the Nephites saw *the goodness of God* as the foundation and source of his plan of salvation, the creation, the atonement of Jesus Christ, and his gospel, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Goodness of God," a working paper, August 11, 2019.

their trust in the Lord because he first loved them faithfully. God is the only reliable truth—the only certainty available to fallible humans. His promises are sure. And through his covenants, he provides the only path that righteous men and women can follow to reach their highest potentials.

The Old Testament concept of faith

The fall and rise of covenant in biblical studies

By the middle of the twentieth century, Bible scholars were recognizing the Abrahamic covenant presented in Genesis as the principal unifying thread and plot line in the Hebrew Bible. They were also beginning to understand that the concept of faith in God was different in the ancient covenantal context than in the biblical theologies that had developed since the last books of the Bible had been written. One natural outcome of the marriage of early Christian theology and Greek philosophy was the distinguishing of faith as something less or different from the "true, justified, belief" that Plato and later philosophers had defined as the appropriate standard for human knowledge. Christian theologians had committed themselves to philosophical doctrines and methodologies that inevitably led to the conclusion that faith was a form of belief that could not or need not be supported with adequate facts or reasons. While theological debates produced countless

versions of this westernized understanding, none retained the ancient covenantal

view that the only reliable certainties for mankind derive from a covenantal

relationship with the divine creator of the universe.

Bible scholars today will usually point to the 1933 publication of Walther

Eichrodt's theological interpretation of the Old Testament from a Christian

perspective and the 1961/1967 publication of the English translation of its sixth

edition as major turning points in recognizing the fundamental role of the

Abrahamic covenant in the Hebrew Bible and its influence in the New

Testament.[10]

The mid-century efforts of a few Christian theologians to understand basic

religious concepts such as *faith* in a covenantal context were largely overshadowed

by the dramatic discovery that ancient Hittite treaty covenants displayed clear

similarities to Old Testament covenant texts and thereby provided historians with

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[10] The two-volume *Theologie des Alten Testaments* published in Stuttgart in 1933 had

progressed to a sixth edition by 1959. J. A. Baker used this German edition and further revisions

by the author to produce an English translation, which created a much-expanded wave of

appreciation in the world of biblical studies. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old

Testament*, Volumes I and II, J. A. Baker (trans.), The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1961 and

1967.

obvious first and second millennium candidates for the sources of the Hebrew

texts.[11] The treaty-covenant paradigm dominated biblical studies almost to the end

of the twentieth century until Harvard professor Frank Moore Cross and other

scholars demonstrated impressively how the internal covenant language and ethos

of Israel as displayed throughout the Old Testament matched up even better with

the earlier kinship-based social and legal structures of the desert tribes of the

ancient Near East.[12] Cross showed how these kinship-based tribes were held

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[11] The explosion of studies in the 1960s and 1970s linking biblical covenants to the

international treaties of the ancient Near East was sparked by G. E. Mendenhall's 1954 articles,

which drew in turn on the 1931 study of the Hittite treaties by V. Korošec in his *Hethitische

Staatsverträge* (Leipzig: Weicher, 1931. See George E. Mendenhall, "Ancient Oriental and

Biblical Law" and "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition" in *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17

(1954), no. 2:25–46 and no. 3:49–76 respectively. Persistent efforts to link the Deuteronomic

covenants to seventh- and eighth-century ANE texts appear to have been effectively refuted by

Kenneth A. Kitchen in his *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Eerdmans, 2006 and the

comprehensive comparisons of over 80 first-, second-, and third-century BCE law codes, treaties,

and covenant texts reported by him and his co-author Paul N. Lawrence in their three-volume

Treaty, Law, and Covenant in the Ancient Near East, 2012, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

[12] See Frank Moore Cross, "Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel," the previously

unpublished lead paper in his *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel*,

together by covenant structures and expectations that incorporated unrelated outsiders into kinship groups through marriage and adoptions, or as servants, and allies—giving them equal rights and duties in the clan, and which incorporated the tribal deity as the father of his people. Further, he showed how this kinship-by-covenant language and ethos permeates the writings of the Old Testament. More recently, Scott W. Hahn has produced a satisfying and holistic integration of Cross's insights with the full range of biblical covenant studies.[13]

Faith in a covenant context

By the 1990s, most Bible scholars were recognizing that the covenantal basis of Israelite society required new interpretations of concepts like *faith* that would be fundamentally different from the philosophical and theological tradition

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1998, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 3–21, in which Cross draws effectively on anthropological studies of kinship associations to supplement the standard historical and textual resources of Bible scholars.

[13] Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises*, 2009, Yale University Press. Hahn has also demonstrated how key insights on the connection between kinship and covenant were provided by Gordon P. Hugenberger in his *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, Leiden: Brill, 1994.

that had produced modern Christianity. This is evident, for example, in the

massive compendium of Bible scholarship published in the six-volume *Anchor*

Bible Dictionary. This dictionary's article on *faith* explains that the "uniquely

Western view of faith" arose "in the context of the medieval attempts to codify and

integrate the Christian experience into the emerging philosophical language of the

scholastics," and quotes Thomas Aquinas as an example: "Faith is the act of the

intellect when it assents to divine truth under the influence of the will moved by

God through grace."[14] Martin Luther and other early reformers objected to his

Hellenized formulation, but did not find the strong support they needed in the Old

Testament. While the Greek term *pistis* usually translated *faith* in the New

Testament does "approximate the sense of faith as assent," the Hebrew Bible does

not have an equivalent term, but rather features a varied terminology which is

"much more elastic" in its range of meanings.[15]

　　The Hebrew root from which most faith-related terminology derives is

'aman.[16] In only two occurrences would translators see *'aman* referring to *faith* in

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[14] Joseph P. Healey, "Faith: Old Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2 (1992): 744.
The Aquinas excerpt comes from *Summa Theologica* II.II.q2.a.9.

[15] Healey, 744.

[16] The transliteration *'aman* is based on the Hebrew original אָמַן (to confirm, trust, have

the modern sense of belief, and even

> in these instances the sense of *trusting* and having confidence is most
>
> noticeable. . . But 'faith' in the primary sense (that it has in the
>
> communities of faith) is faith in God, 'not only in his *emet* [truth] but all his
>
> characteristics and attributes (truth, constancy, goodness, love, justice,
>
> holiness, his claims on humanity), in a word, everything that makes God
>
> God.'"[17]

Here Pfeiffer is referring directly to the Hebrew covenant idea of *ḥesed*, the

complex term that denotes God's invariable virtues and the virtues his covenant

people are expected to cultivate and display in their relationships to God and to all

his people.[18]

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faith), which can also be transliterated as *'âman* or *aman*. For an excellent treatment of the

linguistic issues that is both up to date and sensitive to later Christian connections, see R. W. L.

Moberly, "אמן," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Willem

A. VanGemeren (general editor), Zondervan, 1997, I:427–433.

[17] Healey, 745, quoting and translating E. Pfeiffer, "Glaube im Alten Testament,"

Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 71 (1959): 157.

[18] For an introduction to the Old Testament concept of *ḥesed*, from a Latter-day Saint

perspective, see Dan Belnap, "'How Excellent is thy Lovingkindness': The Gospel Principle of

This understanding of biblical faith had been formulated in contemporary scholarship as early as the 1950s as exemplified by Thomas Torrance: "In the biblical context truth is grounded upon the divine faithfulness and the covenant relationship which sets it up."[19] This same understanding prevails even more clearly in the 2012 *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*:

> Faith in the OT, and particularly in the prophetic literature, usually is portrayed in terms of fidelity to covenant obligations or to ethical expectations as communicated by the prophet. For this reason, faith (or faithfulness) serves as the basis for the relationship between God and the people.[20]

Two decades earlier Gordon Wenham had made the same point, but even more pointedly: "Wherever a covenant between God and man is involved one may say

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Hesed," in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, edited by D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein, BYU Religious Studies Center, 2009, 170–186. For a more complete discussion of *ḥesed* in the context of the Book of Mormon see my working paper, "Biblical *Hesed* and Nephite Covenant Culture," (July 1, 2019), available online at xxx.

[19] Torrance, 112.

[20] P. M. Cook, "Faith," s.v., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (editors), Intervarsity Press (2012): 236–239.

that faith in this full-blooded sense is the obligation placed on the human party. . ..

It is a total reliance on God as one who is completely truthful and dependable."[21]

In the Old Testament, faith or belief in God involves obedience to the divine

commands just as disobedience is linked to unbelief.[22]

Faith and *Faithfulness* in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon articulates this same biblical concept of divine *ḥesed*

even more explicitly and frequently than does the Hebrew Bible.[23] The pervasive

implications of the covenant relationship between God and his people changes the

primary meanings of all gospel terminology in that text from what modern readers

might expect when they come to the Book of Mormon already steeped in a western

mentality shaped largely by the Christian theological tradition. This may be

especially true for the concept of faith as understood by the Nephite prophets.

References to *faith* in the Book of Mormon are far too numerous to be

addressed individually in a single article. But these can be categorized into a few

characteristic usages. This paper will take up leading examples of these groupings

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[21] Gordon Wenham, "Faith in the Old Testament," typescript of three 1975/1976

lectures, copy in author's possession, Theological Student's Fellowship, p. 5.

[22] Wenham, 4.

[23] See, "Biblical *Hesed* and Nephite Covenant Culture."

and attempt to articulate the range of meanings they introduce to paint accurately

an overall sense of how *faith* was understood by the authors of this book.

Faith in Jesus Christ is a basic gospel principle.

The six-element formulation of the gospel of Jesus Christ as presented in the

Book of Mormon always includes faith in Jesus Christ as one of its principal

elements. This is clear in the three *inclusios* in which Jesus Christ himself defines

his gospel and in the hundreds of abbreviated (*meristic*) statements of that gospel

distributed throughout the larger text.[24] But as will be shown below, the Nephite

understanding of *faith* was hardly independent or separable from the understanding

of the other basic concepts in the gospel. Rather, the covenant context intertwines

the meanings of all these concepts so that they must be understood holistically

together. In his foundational presentation of the gospel, Nephi begins with

repentance and baptism and then introduces the redeeming and guiding role of the

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[24] See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel according to Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 29 (2018): 85–104, a revised and updated version of the article by the same name published previously in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (2:2015): 218–234 and "Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 106–134.

Holy Ghost as people endure to the end—all without mentioning faith explicitly.[25]

But then he restates everything in terms of the faith in Jesus Christ that precedes and supports each of the other elements:

> And now my beloved brethren, after that ye have got into this straight and narrow path, I would ask if all is done. Behold, I say unto you: Nay. For ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with *unshaken faith* in him, *relying wholly* upon the merits of him who is mighty to save. Wherefore ye must *press forward with a steadfastness in Christ*, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men; wherefore if ye shall *press forward*, feasting upon the word of Christ and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father, ye shall have eternal life. (2 Nephi 31:19–20)[26]

This interconnection of the basic gospel principles is already suggested in the first full statement of the gospel as Nephi arranged these materials. He quotes

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[25] See 2 Nephi 31:2–18.

[26] All quotations from the Book of Mormon, including spelling and punctuation, are taken from the critical text of Royal Skousen as published in *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Yale University Press, 2009. Throughout this paper, italics have been added to these quotations to signal key terminology to readers.

Jacob as follows:

> And he commandeth all men that they must *repent* and *be baptized* in his
> name, having *perfect faith* in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot *be saved*
> in the kingdom of God. And if they will not *repent* and *believe in his name*
> and *be baptized* in his name and *endure to the end*, they must *be damned*. (2
> Nephi 9:23–24)

That faith in Jesus Christ occupies a key role in the gospel is made clear in each of
the three definitional *inclusios* which together mention it 25 times.[27]

Faith *as* trust *in the Book of Mormon*

The insight of Childs and other scholars that the essence of faith in the Old
Testament is continual trusting in the Lord provides a perfect guide to Book of
Mormon usage, including its favoring of verbs and verb phrases over noun forms.
The Nephite pattern in this regard is dramatically emphasized in Nephi's poetic
prayer:

> O Lord, I have *trusted* in thee,
>
> > and I will *trust* in thee forever.
>
> I will not put my *trust* in the arm of flesh, for I know that cursed is he that

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[27] "The Gospel," 102.

putteth his *trust* in the arm of flesh.

Yea, cursed is he that putteth his *trust* in man

or maketh flesh his arm.[28] (2 Nephi 4:34)

Here Nephi is openly borrowing Isaiah's phrasing as is evident from three Isaianic selections inserted in his record not too many pages later:

1. "The isles shall wait upon me, and *on mine arm shall they trust*" (2 Nephi 8:5, cf. Isaiah 51:5).

2. "Behold, God is my salvation. I will *trust* and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation" (2 Nephi 22:2, cf. Isaiah 12:2).

3. "What shall then answer the messengers of the nations? That the Lord hath founded Zion, and the poor of his people shall *trust* in it" (2 Nephi 24:32, cf. Isaiah 14:32).

Following Isaiah, Nephi emphasizes the strength of the Lord's arm as a reason for trusting in him rather than relying on the weaknesses of the human arm of flesh.

Nephi then goes on to expand what he means by the arm of flesh, equating this with "the precepts of men."

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[28] Cf. 2 Nephi 4:19, 28:31 and Jacob 7:25.

1   Woe be unto him that shall say:

    a   We have received the word of God,

    b   and we need no more of the word of God,

    a'   for we have enough.

2   For behold, thus saith the Lord God:

    a   *I will give* unto the children of men line upon line and *precept upon precept*, here a little and there a little.

    b   And *blessed are they* that hearken unto *my precepts* and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom.

    c   For unto him that receiveth I will give more;

    c'   and them that shall say we have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have.

    b'   *Cursed is he* that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto *the precepts of men*,

    a'   save their precepts shall be *given by the power of the Holy Ghost*.

3   Woe be unto the Gentiles, saith the Lord God of Hosts;

    a   for notwithstanding I shall *lengthen out mine arm* unto them from day to day, they will deny me.

    b   Nevertheless I will be merciful unto them, saith the Lord God,

if they will *repent and come unto me.*

a'   For *mine arm is lengthened out all the day* long,

saith the Lord God of Hosts. (2 Nephi 28:29–32).

In these late passages, Nephi is using *trust* in very much the same way he used *faith* in his opening chapters.[29] Here, in Nephi's final prophecies, we cannot miss how central and fundamental he believes the need to trust in the Lord is for any person or any nation that will come unto him. By enclosing this six-line chiasm between parallel three-line chiasms—all of which develop the same point—he provides subsequent generations of Nephite prophets with a way to talk about faith and its opposite that will be invoked time and time again.[30]

The very next example in the text comes from Nephi's own brother Jacob who credits the military success of his people to their trust in the Lord: "Wherefore the people of Nephi did fortify against them with their arms and with all their might, trusting in the God and the rock of their salvation; wherefore they became as yet conquerors of their enemies" (Jacob 7:25). Benjamin later uses the

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[29] Cf. 1 Nephi 1:20, 2:1, 2:19, etc.

[30] See, e.g., 1 Nephi 22:10–11, 2 Nephi 8:5, Jacob 2:25, 6:5, Enos 1:13, Omni 1:13, Mosiah 1:14, 12:24, 14:1, 15:31, 16:12, 29:20, Alma 5:33, 29:20, 34:16, 3 Nephi 9:14, 16:20, 20:35, Mormon 5:11, and 6:17.

same language in describing how salvation comes to those individuals who have faith or trust in the Lord:

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

The teaching that God's physical and spiritual deliverance was promised to all who would "put their *trust* in the true and living God," and be "*faithful* until the end" (Alma 5:13) echoes down through the Nephite centuries. That trust derived

from a knowledge of the goodness of God who, as Limhi reminded his people, was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had delivered Israel from Egyptian captivity, and who had brought their own ancestors out of Jerusalem (Mosiah 7:19–20). Alma reminded his son Helaman of these same examples of deliverance and promised him and others repeatedly that "whomsoever shall put his *trust* in God shall be supported in their trials and their troubles and their afflictions and shall be lifted up at the last day" (Alma 36:3). In abridging all the Nephite records centuries later, Mormon reached this general observation: "Nevertheless the Lord seeth fit to chasten his people; yea, he trieth their patience and their *faith*. Nevertheless, whosoever putteth his *trust* in him, the same shall be lifted up at the last day" (Mosiah 23:21–22).[31]

Faithfulness measured by keeping the commandments.

The covenantal context for the Nephite concept of faith is most obvious in the recurring equation in the text between faithfulness and keeping the commandments of the Lord over time. The fundamental requirement of the Lord's covenant with his people is that they keep all his commandments and that they

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[31] Other passages that explicitly characterize faith as trust in the Lord include 2 Nephi 4:19, Mosiah 7:33, 10:19, 29:20, Alma 36:27, 38:5, 57:27, 58:37, 61:13, Helaman 12:1, and Mormon 9:20 and 22.

endure faithfully to the end of their lives in that obedience. As Lehi taught his

assembled descendants, "I would that ye should look to the great Mediator and

hearken unto his great commandments and be faithful unto his words" (2 Nephi

2:28). King Benjamin's expanded version of this made its meaning even more

clear:

> Consider on the blessed and happy state of those that *keep the*
>
> *commandments of God*; for behold, they are blessed in all things, both
>
> temporal and spiritual. And if they *hold out faithful to the end*, they are
>
> received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of
>
> never-ending happiness. (Mosiah 2:41)

This equation of faithfulness with keeping the commandments is repeated

endlessly throughout the text.[32] It is also reinforced repeatedly by warnings that at

the last day men will be "judged according to their works."[33]

Numerous passages sharpen the concept of obedience to the commandments.

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[32] Prominent examples include 1 Nephi 2:1, 3:15–16, 20–21, 4:1, 15:11, 17:15, 2 Nephi

1:10, Mosiah 4:6, 30, 10:13, 27:33, Alma 1:25, 8:15, 18:10, 38:2, 39:1, 48:15–16,50:22, 57:21,

58:40, 3 Nephi 6:14, and Moroni 8:24–25.

[33] See the discussion and documentation in Noel B. Reynolds, "The Plan of Salvation in

the Book of Mormon," *Religious Educator*, 2020, forthcoming.

For example, many of these insist on *diligence* in keeping he commandments for the faithful. In the book's opening, Nephi quotes the Lord telling him: "Blessed art thou Nephi because of thy *faith*, for thou hast sought me *diligently* with lowliness of heart. And inasmuch as ye shall *keep my commandments*, ye shall prosper and shall be led to a land of promise" (1 Nephi 2:19–20). He later invokes this to teach his brothers: "Do ye not remember the thing which the Lord hath said? —if ye will not harden your hearts and ask me in *faith*, believing that ye shall receive, with *diligence* in *keeping my commandments*, surely these things shall be made known unto you" (1 Ne. 15:11). This same linkage between faith and diligent keeping of the commandments occurs in many other passages and is often reinforced with further injunctions to obey with patience and long suffering—to be firm, steadfast, and immovable.[34] The eight-fold recurrence of conjunctions of *faith* and *diligence* with each noun in the exact same grammatical form and context suggests that this stock phrase may have been used by Book of Mormon writers as the biblical rhetorical figure *hendiadys*, which would provide an additional reason for seeing diligent keeping of the commandments as an inherent and necessary element in

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[34] See 1 Nephi 10:17–19, 16:28–29, Enos 1:12, 20, Mosiah 1:16–17, 4:6, Alma 726, 12:9, 21:23, 32:41-43, 38:3, 39:1, 49:30 and 3 Nephi 6:14

their concept of faith.[35]

> "according to the <u>faith and diligence</u>" (1 Nephi 16:28 and 29)

> "did exhort my brethren to <u>faithfulness and diligence</u>" (1 Nephi 17:15)

> "because of <u>your diligence and your faith</u>" (Alma 32:42)

> "the rewards of <u>your faith and your diligence</u>" (Alma 32:43)

> "forgat to exercise their <u>faith and diligence</u>" (Alma 37:41)

> "because of <u>thy faithfulness and thy diligence</u>" (Alma 38:3)

> "<u>his faithfulness and his diligence </u>in keeping the commandments" (Alma 39:1)

Faith, Belief, and Knowledge

While the writers of the Hebrew Bible consistently affirm the necessity of faithfulness toward the Lord, they never engage in any straightforward explorations of the meanings of faith and belief and their relationship to knowledge. It is therefore striking to see the ways in which Book of Mormon

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[35] For a preliminary discussion of *hendiadys* in the Book of Mormon, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Language of Repentance in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (2020), forthcoming. The growing list of probable *hendiadyses* in the Book of Mormon text suggests a need for a systematic and comprehensive study of this biblical rhetorical figure of speech as deployed by the Nephite writers.

writers openly engage such questions. As will be shown below, almost all their references to faith and belief occur in the covenantal context described above in which the faithful are evident to the extent that they obey the commandments of the Lord in compliance with the covenant by which they are bound to the Lord as his people. But they also speak of belief and knowledge as experienced by those who have not entered into any such covenant and undertake directly to consider the similarities and differences.

Without reference to any underlying technical analysis, the Nephite writers distinguish two important forms of human knowledge. Most basic is the universal form of knowledge of things in the world that comes through personal experience. One knows what one sees, hears, or feels. It should be noted that such knowledge is radically individual and internal to one's own experience and thought and can be compared with the knowledge of others only symbolically using art or language. *Knowledge* can also be used to refer to teachings or ideas to which one has been exposed or with which one may be acquainted or familiar. In all of these, we choose what we want to believe for whatever reasons may be most important to us.

The most important form of knowledge discussed in the Book of Mormon is spiritual knowledge—knowledge of God and his ways, which is given by divine revelation. The possibility of gaining spiritual knowledge comes when one learns

about the plan of salvation and the gospel which it contains, spelling out for all mankind their relationship to God and the process they can engage if they choose to return to him. As people learn about this gospel, the Holy Ghost witnesses to them of its truthfulness, touching or softening their hearts, inviting them to turn away from all other life patterns and to enter into the covenant path through repentance and baptism, trusting in the Lord that he will guide them by his Spirit as they endure to the end and become like him in the process. In his famous analogy showing how one can gain spiritual faith and knowledge by planting a seed, the word or the gospel of Christ, in one's heart, Alma shows how this universal form of human knowledge can produce the spiritual form in the lives of repentant and truth-seeking individuals. This passage will be discussed in more detail at a later point in this paper.[36]

A millennium of consistent teachings about faith

The Book of Mormon begins and ends with a focus on the question of faith. How and why does one decide to believe and follow or to reject the prophecies and teachings of the prophets? The book opens with Lehi and other prophets warning

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[36] For a detailed and documented discussion of the Nephites' understanding of this basic function of the Holy Ghost, see Noel B. Reynolds, "The Language of the Spirit in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter*, 2019, forthcoming.

the people of Jerusalem to repent or be destroyed in response to visions they have

been given from the Lord (1 Nephi 1). It closes with Moroni's appeal to future

generations of Gentiles and Israelites to repent and accept the gospel taught in this

book, lest they be destroyed in this life and suffer eternally (Moroni 10). While

Nephi uses his own experience to answer these questions at the beginning, Moroni

provides an extended explanation of God's relationship with and plan for man at

the end of the book. Both emphasize that true answers will be given to those who

humbly seek the direction of the Lord.

Nephi first offers the example of his own father who had incurred the anger

of the Jews with his prophesying to the extent that they were seeking to kill him.

He prefaces the stories to follow with an announcement of his thesis— "that the

tender mercies of the Lord is over all them whom he hath chosen because of their

faith to make them mighty, even unto *the power of deliverance*" (1 Nephi 1:20).

The Lord's deliverance for Lehi begins with a dream in which he is commanded to

take his family and flee into the wilderness. Obedient to the Lord's command,

Lehi left house, lands, gold, silver, and precious things and took only his family,

provisions, and tents in his flight to the shores of the Red Sea (1 Nephi 2:1–5).

Lehi's obedience provides a stark contrast with the developing rebellion of his

oldest sons. They deeply resented the dramatic change in their personal

circumstances and life prospects and rejected their father's visions as "foolish imaginations of his heart" (1 Nephi 2:11).

Nephi describes the unbelieving responses of his older brothers "who did murmur because they *knew not* the dealings of that God who had created them" (1 Nephi 2:11). Like most of the Jews at Jerusalem, they *did not believe* that Jerusalem could be destroyed. In this negative description of his own family members, Nephi exposes us to the simple distinction between those who have personally engaged in a covenant relationship with their creator and those who have not. While the descendants of Abraham are known as the covenant people of the Lord, they can only come to know the dealings of God with men as they engage him individually in that covenant. All people must make that decision for themselves, and Abraham cannot do it for them. Nephi then gives his own experience as a believer:

> Wherefore I *cried unto the Lord*. And behold, he did visit me and did *soften my heart* that *I did believe all the words* which had been spoken by my father; wherefore *I did not rebel against him* like unto my brothers. And I spake unto Sam, making known unto him the things which the Lord had *manifested unto me by his Holy Spirit*. And it came to pass that *he believed* in my words. But behold, *Laman and Lemuel would not hearken* unto my

words. And being grieved because of *the hardness of their hearts*, I cried

unto the Lord for them. And it came to pass that *the Lord spake unto me*,

saying: *Blessed art thou Nephi because of thy faith*, for thou hast *sought me*

diligently with lowliness of heart. And inasmuch *as ye shall keep my*

commandments, ye shall prosper and shall be led to a land of promise. (1

Nephi 2:16–20)[37]

The Lord recognized the faith of Nephi as demonstrated by his taking the initiative

to pray "diligently with lowliness of heart" and by allowing his heart to be softened

by the manifestation of the Holy Ghost to him rather than hardening his heart and

rebelling. And he invited Nephi to continue in that covenant path by promising

him that "inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments," he would "prosper and

shall be led to a land of promise" (1 Nephi 2:19–20).

It is impressive to see that a millennium later, the last Nephite prophets still

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[37] Like other passages, this one appears to play on the pun identified by Matthew L.

Bowen by which the Nephites may have seen the names *Laman* and *Lamanite* as imbued "with

the meaning of 'unfaithful' or 'unbelieving ones'." See his essay "*Not* Partaking of the Fruit: Its

Generational Consequences and Its Remedy," in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches*

to Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision, edited by Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley

A. Johnson, Religious Studies Center, 2011, pp. 242–243.

understood faith in the same covenantal context that we have noted in the words of Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob and in the Old Testament. Mormon's discussion of faith starts with the premise that "men were fallen and there could no good thing come unto them." But "all things which are good cometh of Christ," and by heavenly revelations, men "began to *exercise faith in Christ. And thus by faith* they did lay hold upon every good thing. . . Men also were *saved by faith in his name*, and *by faith* they became the sons of God" (Moroni 7:24–26). Mormon goes on to make clear that this entire process of sending the gospel to mankind to enable their salvation is centered on the covenants of the Father as these are taught by angels and prophets:

a   And the office of their ministry is to call men unto repentance and to fulfill and to do the work of *the covenants of the Father which he hath made unto the children of men,*

b   *to prepare the way among the children of men* by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may *bear testimony* of him.

b'   And by so doing the Lord God *prepareth the way that the residue of men* may have *faith in Christ*, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts according to the power thereof.

a'   And after this manner bringeth to pass the Father *the covenants which he*

     hath made unto the children of men. (Moroni 7:31–32)

     Mormon understood that the process by which people are prepared for

salvation from their fallen state depends for each individual on their faith—

presumably on their obedience to the commandments as they are tried and tested,

cleaving "unto every good thing" along the path that leads to eternal life:

a   Wherefore, my beloved brethren, hath miracles ceased because that Christ

     hath *ascended into heaven*

b   and hath sit down on the right hand of God, to claim of the Father his

          rights of mercy which he hath upon *the children of men?*

c   For he hath answered the ends of the law, and he claimeth all

               those *that hath faith in him*.

c'   And they *that have faith in him* will cleave unto every good

               thing.

b'   Wherefore he advocateth the cause of *the children of men*,

a'   and he *dwelleth eternally in the heavens*. (Moroni 7:27–28)

     In his closing chapter for the Book of Mormon, Moroni returns to the topic

of faith and provides additional insight into its workings. His general teaching is

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that "by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may *know the truth* of all things" (Moroni 10:5). But he qualifies that principle by restricting it to a covenant context. The truth seeker must first "remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men . . . and ponder it in your hearts" (Moroni 10:3). Like the Israelites in the Old Testament, the Nephites always refer to the many ways in which the Lord has delivered and will deliver them as the foundation of their covenants with him. Moroni next instructs the truth seeker to "ask God the Eternal Father in the name of Christ, if these things are not true" (Moroni 10:4). Such a prayer already assumes belief in the Father and in Jesus Christ and that the persons praying can pray in the name of Jesus Christ because they have already entered into a covenant to take the name of Christ upon themselves.

This point is emphasized by the further restriction that supplicants must "ask with *a sincere heart, with real intent*, having faith in Christ." Here Moroni seems to echo the original gospel teaching of Nephi that converts must "follow the Son with *full purpose of heart*, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God but *with real intent*, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ by baptism, . . behold, then shall ye

receive the Holy Ghost" (2 Nephi 31:13).[38] For all who will pray in this way, Moroni promises that the Father "will manifest the truth of it unto you by *the power of the Holy Ghost*" (v. 4). Moroni goes on to extend the promise: "Ye may know that [Christ] is by *the power of the Holy Ghost*. Wherefore I would exhort you that ye deny not *the power of God*, for *he worketh by power* according to *the faith of the children of men*, the same today and tomorrow and forever" (Moroni 10:7).[39]

In each of these examples, the prophets refer to the way that God communicates with his covenant people as they approach him for knowledge. Based on their sincerity, obedience, and faith, the Lord answers them through "the power of the Holy Ghost." If they allow that power to soften their hearts, the Lord can offer covenants through which those who live faithfully to the end can become his sons and daughters and qualify for salvation. But if they are stiff necked and harden their hearts against the word of God and his Spirit, they are found in

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[38] The phrase "with real intent" is introduced by Nephi in his original exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ as one of five terms used to emphasize the requirement that repentance be sincere, but it does not reappear in the text until Mormon's sermon on faith and Moroni's subsequent summaries and closing remarks. Cf. Moroni 7:6–7, 9, 6:8 and 10:4.

[39] See, Reynolds, "Language of the Spirit."

rebellion, and whatever blessing they have had previously will be taken from them and they inevitably become followers of the devil and experience all the consequences that follow from that.

Faith and unbelief would then seem to be a consequence of each person's reaction to the witness of the Holy Ghost that they may receive at some point in their lives. This would seem to be the criterion that determines who can be saved. There must be something eternal in the heart of each human being that will lead them to either rejoice in the power and influence of the Holy Ghost, or to reject and deny it. This mortal probation provides all men and women with an opportunity to have their hearts tested in this regard and to choose to join the people of the Lord through a covenant with him or to choose instead to follow their own road in this life.

Alma on faith

Beginning with Nephi, the Book of Mormon prophets generally used the metaphor of a *path* or *way* to teach the gospel. He identified repentance and baptism as the gate by which one could enter into that "straight and narrow path," the Holy Ghost as the means by which one could be guided up that path, and faithful obedience to the commandments as a description of how one could endure "with unshaken faith in [Christ]," to the end of this life and qualify to receive

eternal life.[40] In teaching the unbelieving Zoramites, Alma advanced a novel

metaphor that was explicitly designed for those who did not yet share his faith in

Jesus Christ. His objective was to help them understand what they could do to

progress from a state of unbelief to a life of faith and an eventual partaking of the

fruit of the tree of life. Alma chose another common experience of pre-modern

life, the planting of seeds, as the core image for his metaphor and shaped it

specifically for the needs of non-believers.

In a long preface, Alma first teaches the disenfranchised Zoramite poor the

basics of the covenant way that is so different than their Zoramite religion based on

pride and self-indulgence. He explains that their poverty is a blessing because, as

they are compelled to be humble, they are in the right posture to seek repentance.

"And now surely, whosoever repenteth shall find mercy. And he that findeth

mercy and endureth to the end, the same shall be saved" (Alma 32:13). Even more

"blessed are they who humbleth themselves without being compelled . . . he that

believeth in the word of God and is baptized without stubbornness of heart, yea,

without being . . . compelled to know—before they will believe" (Alma 32:15–16).

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[40] See 2 Nephi 31:17–20 and Noel B. Reynolds, "This is the Way," *Religious Educator* 13, no. 3 (2013), 81–82.

Alma is counterposing faith with knowledge based on proof—such as "a sign from heaven" by which one could "know of a surety" or to have "a perfect knowledge"—personal experience by which one could be "compelled to know" (Alma 32:16–17, 21).   But the faith God requires is not like this but is linked to "hope for things which is not seen, which are true." But "God is merciful unto all who *believe on his name*" and "desireth . . . that [they] should *believe . . . on his word*" (Alma 32:21–22). The things which are not seen externally which are essential for faith turn out to be the internal experiences of those who plant the word or the gospel[41] in their lives and experience the spiritual development that gives them reason to have hope for eternal life as they endure to the end. This metaphorical process of planting the seed and believing is the gospel process of repenting and covenanting with the Father and keeping his commandments. And as Alma concludes his long explanation,

> If ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow by your *faith* with great *diligence* and with patience,. . it shall take root. And behold, it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life. And because of

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[41] The synonymous term used most frequently in the Book of Mormon for the gospel or doctrine of Christ is "the/his word." See "This is the Way," 84–86.

your *diligence* and your *faith* and your *patience* with *the word* in nourishing it that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious. (Alma 32:41–42)

King Benjamin

Near the mid-point of the Nephite dispensation, this same covenantal conception of faith is clearly taught by Benjamin to his assembled people. He begins by pointing to the foundation of their covenant with the Lord which is possible because of his goodness, power, long-suffering, and love as manifest in the atonement. The people respond by pointing to their faith in this teaching, their rejoicing in the "great knowledge" that it gives them, and announce their desire to "enter into a covenant with our God" and to keep his commandments throughout their lives:

> I say unto you that if ye have come to a *knowledge* of the goodness of God and his matchless power and his wisdom and his patience and his long-suffering towards the children of men, and also the atonement which hath been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his *trust in the Lord* and should be *diligent in keeping his commandments* and continue in the *faith*, even unto the end of his life—I mean the life of the mortal body—I say that this is the man that

receiveth salvation through the atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world. (Mosiah 4:6–7, cited previously at greater length)

And it is the *faith* which we have had on the things which our king hath spoken unto us and hath brought us to this great knowledge, whereby we do rejoice with such exceeding great joy. And we are willing to *enter into a covenant* with our God to do his will and to be *obedient to his commandments* in all things that he shall command us all the remainder of our days. (Mosiah 5:4–5)

Conclusions

The numerous references to *faith* and *faithfulness* in the Book of Mormon cannot all be reviewed in a paper of this length. But I am aware of none which pose difficulties for the commentary offered herein. The concept of covenantal faithfulness toward Yahweh that Old Testament scholars have recognized and defined over the last century turns out to be a far better account of the Book of Mormon understanding of faith in the Lord, in Jesus Christ, than are any of the competing concepts of faith that have grown out of the Christian tradition over the last two millennia. For the Nephite prophets, *faith* was an active concept, better understood as *faithfulness*—as diligent obedience to the commandments the Lord has given to those who have accepted the gospel covenant through repentance and

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baptism. The divine expectation for all who have embraced that covenant and aspire to be recipients of eternal life is that they endure faithfully to the end of their lives on the covenant path prescribed by the gospel and the words of Christ given to the faithful individually by the Holy Ghost, showing them all things which they should do. But outside this covenantal context, no amount of strong or determined belief can produce salvation.