Covenant Language in Biblical Religions and the Book of Mormon

Noel B. Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Part of the Mormon Studies Commons, and the Religious Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol61/iss2/8

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Because 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 reexamine 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 (KJV) 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 the KJV and Protestant teachings 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 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. In contrast, 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” — a definition once echoed by Joseph Smith

himself. 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 that “have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away” (1 Ne. 13:26, emphasis added).

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

The Evolution of Covenant Theology 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 the relatively limited appearances in the New

---

2. “It requires two parties to make a covenant and those two parties must be agreed or no covenant can be made.” Joseph Smith, in Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833, ed. Matthew C. Godfrey and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 351.

3. In this paper, quotations from the Book of Mormon follow Royal Skousen, The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009). When italics are used in Book of Mormon quotations, they are added to draw the reader’s attention to key words in a quoted passage.
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.

**Covenant Language in the New Testament**

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.”

Christian interpreters have often portrayed Jeremiah’s “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, emphasis added), 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, Jer. 31:31, 33, emphasis added).

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

---


5. This statement in Luke 22:20 is the only place where the Greek New Testament uses *diatheke* as a translation for something Jesus probably said in Aramaic.
covenants. . . . [It] does not make null the other covenants, but it reaf-
frmrs them.” Because covenant is the Lord’s chosen means to relate him-
self 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 differ-
ence 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.6 In
his analysis, Rata echoes Clement of Alexandria, who preached the har-
mony of the two testaments, referring to them as one “eternal covenant.”7

Like Rata, Johannes Behm focused on the continuity of the new cov-
enant with the old. The principal difference he finds between the two is
“in the step from prophecy to fulfillment.” Even though the New Testa-
mament attributes only this one mention of diatheke to Jesus, Behm 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
diagnosis [diatheke] a central position in their theological understanding
of history” because the covenant expressed “the mighty declaration of
the sovereign will of God in history.”8

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 pre-
vious essay.9

6. Tiberius Rata, The Covenant Motif in Jeremiah’s Book of Comfort: Textual and
Intertextual Studies of Jeremiah 30–33 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 123. Walter C. Kai-
sen, Jr., “The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31–34,” Journal of the Evan-
gelical Theological Society 15 (1972): 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.

Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, ed. Alexander Roberts,
James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, 1 vols., reprint (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans,
1950), 2:198, and the discussion in Douglas Andrew Stoute, The Origins and
Early Development of the Reformed Idea of the Covenant (PhD diss.: King’s College, Cam-
bidge, 1979), 22.

8. Behm, “Greek Term διαθηκη,” 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 124–34. Of course, it should be remembered that Jesus would
not likely have used the Greek term. There must necessarily remain some uncertainty
about what he may actually have said on this topic.

9. See Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of
Ben Witherington . . . follows Augustine and sees in baptism as understood 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 God to bless one to be able to keep that pledge.\(^\text{10}\) 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.\(^\text{11}\) 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.”\(^\text{12}\) Ferguson relies on John H. Elliott’s recent translation: “Baptism now saves you too—not as a removal of filth from the body, but as a pledge to God of a sound mindfulness of God’s will.” (emphasis added)\(^\text{13}\)

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.”\(^\text{14}\) It would not be long before baptism and the other recognized rituals or ordinances of the Christian church would be relabeled as “sacraments,” and their basic connection to the covenant would be transformed.\(^\text{15}\)


\(^{11}\) François Bovon, “Baptism in the Ancient Church,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 42 (1999): 429–58, 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.


The Decline of Covenant in Early Christian Theology

In an earlier paper, I have documented the transformation that occurred in the second and third centuries AD, during which covenant-based rituals and ordinances became “sacraments.” The term sacramentum was most likely borrowed from the Roman army’s practice of extracting a loyalty oath from conscripts. Gary A. Heron says, “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.”

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

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.” I’ve said elsewhere that “Christians

18. For a detailed account and documentation of these developments, see Bryson L. Bachman and Noel B. Reynolds, “Traditional Christian Sacraments and Covenants,” in Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church, The 33rd Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 24–39.
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.”

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.”

Some elements of the Reformation did react against these developments, as Swiss theologians Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) and Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) 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 that continues to this day to express early divergences of approach: “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.’”

Heinrich Bullinger became the leading architect of the Protestant covenant theology emerging from the sixteenth 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 irreprouachable life. Secondly, its effect is to keep us for Christ in the covenant or in life pleasing to God.” 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 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 way 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. 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.


Developments in Old Testament Studies of Covenant

Traditional Jewish and Christian approaches to interpreting 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 work, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*. Wellhausen's work has had enormous influence on the assumptions, methodology, and interpretations of generations of Old Testament 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—with the Mosaic covenant it presents—was written about 621 BC and that the Hebrew word for covenant (*berit*) has no older origins. 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 reanalyzed as amalgamations of multiple hypothesized earlier texts that often contributed competing versions of historical events and theologies. It is a testimony to the 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.

25. A variety of English reprints are available. See, for example, Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

26. 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): 110–21.

27. The claim that a handful of earlier mentions of *berit* in the writings of eighth-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 Duane Andre Smith, "Kinship and Covenant in Hosea 11:1–4," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 16, no. 1 (1994): 41–53.

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 mention a few highlights.\(^2^9\) The persistence of the etymological question about the original meanings of *berit* in the Hebrew Bible may be the best place to start.\(^3^0\)

**Etymological Studies**

Following Wellhausen, the covenant concept itself was already becoming controversial and was understood quite differently in the competing interpretive traditions. No small part of the difficulty stemmed from the fact that for a variety of reasons the Hebrew term *berit*, which is usually translated as *covenant*, firmly resisted the most competent efforts of linguists and biblical theologians to ascertain its original meaning in the

---


\(^3^0\) An earlier 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,” (PhD diss.: Indiana University, 1974).
times of Abraham and his successors. 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. He concluded that berit is an unusual word (it has no Hebrew 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.”

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. In a later publication, 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.” 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) already, during the period c. 1400–1170 BC, the end-part of this period 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

31. For a convenient summary of these linguistic studies and the continuing uncertainty of their proposed solutions, see Davidson, “Covenant Ideology in Ancient Israel,” 324–25. Davidson’s paper provides a useful and evenhanded 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 barit, b'rit, b'rith, b'rioth, or berith.


even 1400 BC into the third millennium BC, being attested between
king Uru’inimga (‘Urukagina’) of Lagash and his deity Ningirsu.36

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.”37

Covenants Are Not Contracts

While some modern interpreters—including some LDS writers38—have
designated biblical covenants as contracts, that seems to be clearly inap-
propriate. “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, liturgical, and other dimensions.”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,

37. “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 reli-
gion” is available in a forty-seven-page mimeographed form in some academic libraries
as “Report No. 14/79: Getting at the Roots of Wellhausen’s Understanding of the Law of
Israel on the 100th Anniversary of the Prolegomena,” distributed in 1979 by the Insti-
tute 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
Yehezkel Kaufmann’s seven-volume effort to restate what the scholarly world could say
positively after forty years of effective critique of Wellhausen and his followers in the
historical criticism movement in Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel: From Its
Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chi-

38. See, for example, Brent L. Top, “Covenant,” in LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Refer-
ence, ed. Robert L. Millet, Camille Fronk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top
(Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 136–37, which opens with the statement that “a cov-
enant is a binding agreement—a contract between at least two parties,” echoing Bruce
R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 166. The LDS
Bible Dictionary (p. 622) and Wouter Van Beek, “Covenant,” in Encyclopedia of Mor-
approaches that reflect substantial awareness of biblical studies of the topic.

39. Hahn, Kinship by Covenant, 8.
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.”

As Dennis J. McCarthy points out, “covenant is not a contract.” Rather, “it is a pledged, personal commitment.” Here, he retracted his previous use of the analogy between contract and covenant, even though he had previously cautioned, “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 Yahweh, 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.”

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. 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 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 promises oath between Yahweh and Israel, is then the pledge of the parties to loyalty. This pledge at the heart of the ideal covenant is expressed by

40. *Leal* means to be loyal or true.
Jeremiah. Yahweh says: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. xxxi 33).45

Tucker’s position was strongly supported by an independent line of inquiry published in a series of articles by other authors that culminated 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 agreement but obligation or pledge.”46 Weinfeld cites several equivalent idioms in related languages that “express the notion of bond by pledge or oath”47 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” (RSV Num. 30:1–2).48 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.”49 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.”50

Twentieth-Century Interpretations

Once scholars had adjusted to the shock of Wellhausen’s arguments for locating the authorship of Deuteronomy in the late seventh century BC, they turned increasingly to canonical approaches to interpreting the Old Testament—that is, 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 increasingly recognized God’s covenant with Abraham as the principal unifying thread for the entire Bible. 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 Yahweh, from the earliest times.” 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.

**Hittite Treaties and Biblical Covenants**

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. 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. 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 studies 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 summarized in his Anchor Bible Dictionary article much of what had been learned as well as the continuing issues.56 But the battles were far from over. Dennis McCarthy responded with a powerful critique of Mendenhall and his associates,57 and by 1986, Nicholson published what many thought was an effective defense of Wellhausen’s original conclusions.58

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 toward the one who will violate the rights of the king’s vassal, while in the treaty the curse is directed toward the vassal who will violate the rights of his king. In other words,

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. 56. George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1179–202. In the 1980s a handful of LDS scholars applied the findings of the treaty/covenant research program to the Book of Mormon and other LDS texts, noting and documenting an impressive set of similarities. For an excellent summary and restatement of that effort see David Rolph Seely, “The Restoration as Covenant Renewal,” republished in Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 311–36. 57. 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. McCarthy provides a brief outline of his critique of Mendenhall on pages 4–6 of both editions, but the entire volumes should be read as an assemblage of the evidence assumed in the critique. 58. Nicholson, God and His People.
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).59

At this point in the debate, it would seem that Kenneth Kitchen and his coauthor, Paul Lawrence, may have had the last word once again. The preliminary studies Kitchen had been citing for decades finally culminated in 2012 in the exhaustive study of a comprehensive collection of ANE law codes, treaties, and covenants.60 In their detailed analysis of over eighty 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 to twelfth centuries BC than with the later eighth- to seventh-century texts as had been claimed by Wellhausen, Nicholson, and others.

**Covenants Establish and Manage Kinship Relationships**

The debate about the origins and dating of biblical covenant texts lasted over a century and could resurface in the future 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 by Harvard’s distinguished Semiticist, 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 prelegal kinship language of covenant, both the Hittite kings and the Hebrew tribes (and the Davidic monarch they would spawn) were able to connect to the ethos of their times while developing significant innovation in their sociopolitical and religious worlds. 

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. Scott W. Hahn provides one of the most comprehensive and accessible overviews and will be relied upon in much of what is offered below. Like Hahn, I will take the definition of Old Testament covenant proposed by Gordon P. Hugenberger and the perspective of Frank Moore Cross as starting points.

**Kinship Associations and the Origins of the Biblical Covenant Concept**

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 prelegal and familial context. The nonurban world of...
the earliest Bible people was organized tribally. 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 prelegal 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 family through marriage, adoption, servitude, or alliance. As Paul Kalluveettil defined it, “A covenant implies an adoption into the household, an extension of kinship, the making of a brother.”

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.” 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 McCarthy who could see echoes of Bedouin culture and the nomad life even in the biblical account of the Sinai covenant. 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 (1963), 162, compare 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,” in Humanizing America’s Iconic Book: Society of Biblical Literature Addresses 1980, ed. Gene M. Tucker and Douglas A. Knight (Chico, Calif.: 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, no. 1 (November 1964): 19.


66. Hugenberger, Marriage as a Covenant, 171, emphasis added. 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,” in Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine, ed. Robert Chazan, William W. Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 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.”
Cross in which he traced this biblical covenancing practice to the family-based West Semitic tribal groups in the ANE: “The social organization of West Semitic tribal groups was grounded in kinship. Kinship relations defined the rights and obligations, the duties, status, and privileges of tribal members, and kinship terminology provided the only language for expressing legal, political, and religious institutions.”

Anthropologists have also paid close attention to what happens when local kinship systems of social organization overlap with larger cities and states that 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 intervillage issues: “Lozi judges explicitly recognize the distinction between legal right enforceable by the courts, and moral right, the implementation of which is left to the pressure of public opinion, individual conscience, and social reciprocity. Lozi judges invoke these where a dispute is between persons in their capacity as kinsmen and affines. When they litigate as fellow villagers or citizens of the kingdom, . . . the legal sanctions of the politico-jural relations often clash with the ethic of generosity prescribed for the familial domain.”

**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 traditional 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.  

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 complementary set of expectations that the covenant community and the Lord had of their mutual conduct toward and care for 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 Nelson Glueck concluded in his classic study on the topic, “God’s *hesed* can only be understood as Yahweh’s covenantal relationship toward his followers.”

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.

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, 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.

---


Adoption as the Fundamental Metaphor

While the marriage metaphor is used occasionally to illuminate the covenant relationship between Israel and the Lord, it can only be pushed so far. But legal adoption provides a metaphor that always seems appropriate. Because there is no biological parental relationship between the Lord and his people, as predominates in kinship associations, all Israelites are bound to the Lord through the covenant by which they are adopted as children to a parent. Janet Melnyk has explored the law of adoption in ancient Mesopotamia and Mari and argues that the biblical covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people fits the ANE institution of adoption both in its general characteristics and in the details. Adoption has always depended on choices. Even children born to a concubine or a wife’s handmaiden were not considered to be adopted sons or daughters automatically, but only after explicit decisions to that effect had been made. Serious issues of inheritance and care responsibility would affect that decision.

The binding formula for adoption would usually be a statement consisting of “two parts: (1) the declaration of the new relationship between the adopted child and the adoptive parent, and (2) the description of the parties involved.” This declaration of a parental relationship “is the single thread on which a legal adoption process hangs.” As Nathan reported the Lord’s words to David: “I will be his father, and he will be my son.” Jeremiah applies the same concept to Israel as a whole: “I am Israel’s father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son” (Jer. 31:9). A more complete statement of the adoptive relationship is given in NIV Jeremiah 3:19: “How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation. I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me.”

As intimated in this passage, there are inherent stipulations in the adoptive relationship—“raising the child, providing an inheritance (usually land), and punishment for the rebellious child.” While Melnyk

---

goes on to illustrate examples of all these conditions in both the ANE and biblical texts, for some reason she does not pick up on the covenant connection for adoption that Hugenberger and Cross will identify and emphasize only a few years later. She does conclude helpfully that “by identifying Israel as God’s child, the biblical writers wrote Israel into a state of legitimacy, recognition, and inalienable inheritance.”

**The Case of Ruth and Naomi**

The voluntary nature of these covenants is illustrated at the beginning of the story of Naomi and her two widowed daughters-in-law. 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 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 with both Naomi and Yahweh: “Your people is my people, and your god is my god. . . . So may the Lord do to me.” The fact that both options facing the 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.”

---

76. 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, no. 2 (1989): 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” (292).
Not only does Ruth’s statement feature the three dimensions of Israel’s covenant relationship with Yahweh, but it also ends with the “solemn oath formulary”—“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.”

By her marriage, Ruth left her Moabite family and homeland and bound herself first in a covenant relationship not only to her Jewish husband 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.” Mark Smith has summarized these and has then used Ruth to defend his view that the 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 political and legal practices may be derived from the everyday realities of family life in the ANE. “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.”

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 the privileges of kinship. He leads in battle, redeems from slavery, loves his family, shares the land of his heritage (nahalāh), 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.84

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.85 Because the league was multifunctional, it could be referred to as a militia, a kinship organization, a religious organization, or “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.”86

Because the organizing covenant was established with the clan patriarch Abraham, Yahweh is the Divine Kinsman and the “god of the father.”87 “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.”88 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.89

85. The transliteration ‘am Yahweh is based on the Hebrew original יְהוָֹה עָּמָּה (people of Yahweh, people of Jehovah, people of the Lord), which can also be transliterated as ‘am Yahweh or ‘am YHWH.
89. 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,”
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 include the requirement that his name be put on them:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,
“Thus shall you bless the Israelites. Say to them:
May the Lord bless you and guard you.
May the Lord light up His face to you and grant grace to you;
May the Lord lift up His face to you and give you peace.”
And they shall set My name over the Israelites, and I Myself shall bless them.”

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. 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. Margaret Barker clarifies these two traditions in this way: “One strand of the Old Testament tradition shows that the Name had been used as a substitute for the presence of the Lord in the temple, but those who did not accept this new convention of the Deuteronomists kept to more ancient ways. For them the Name was simply one of the many ways of describing Yahweh.”

But here and in many other places, putting or taking the name of the Lord on a person or people obviously refers to the establishment of a covenant relationship between the Lord and his people.

---

91. 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), 87–91.
93. Margaret Barker, The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 208. Barker assembles extensive references in the ancient literature to demonstrate that the Name in the Jewish literature was Yahweh, which for the early Christians was Jesus. See 208–12.
The People of the Lord

The Nephite prophets obviously take the view that taking the name of the Lord upon oneself at the time of covenanting with the Lord is a metaphor for an internal commitment—a self-chosen obligation—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 Ne. 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 oneself 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.”94 Israel is referred to repeatedly as the people (‘am) of the Lord, which can signal either their genealogical connection to Abraham or their adoptive covenant relationship with Yahweh or both. “The Covenant people of the Lord will be one united people. That does not mean only biological descendants of Abraham are the ‘am.”95 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.”96

One of the more thorough studies of biblical thought on this paternal relationship of Yahweh to his people was done by New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne.97 “The description of Israel or Israelites as ‘sons (son) of God,’ together with the corresponding idea of God as ‘Father’ . . . never implies real paternity on God’s part. Rather, in a metaphorical way it expresses the intimate and unique relationship between Yahweh and Israel, founded upon the fact that he has chosen and created this people for himself.” Further, the specific application of this relationship

to David—“I will be his father, and he shall be my son”—“sets the filial relationship firmly within the framework of the covenantal theology that applies to the people as a whole.”

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” (NIV Hosea 11:1). 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 132:1–12.99 Other passages mentioning sons of God or of gods in the Hebrew Bible or related noncanonical texts are usually interpreted to refer to angels or other vaguely divine beings and not to mortals in covenant relationship with Yahweh.100

The Third Commandment Viewed from a Covenant Perspective

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” (KJV Ex. 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.101 Shepherd notes that the fifty-three 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


101. The transliteration shav’ is based on the Hebrew original שָׁוָא (emptiness, vanity), which can also be transliterated as šāv’, šāw’, shaw’, shav, or shaw. See 7723, נָשָׁו, Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible, in James Strong, The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 113.
from the idea that hopes and expectations prove false when placed in persons or things that are ineffective and therefore untrustworthy.”

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 even formal situations of swearing. 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. 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 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.

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


103. These traditional interpretations were reviewed and summarized effectively in W. E. Staples, “The Third Commandment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58, no. 4 (December 1939): 326–27; and more recently in Allan M. Harman, “The Interpretation of the Third Commandment,” *Reformed Theological Review* 47, no. 1 (January–April 1988): 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,” Staples, “The Third Commandment,” 329.

104. A different, but parallel interpretation is offered by Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan. See English abstract for Bar-Ilan, “They Shall Put My Name upon the People of Israel.”

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.\textsuperscript{106} 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.\textsuperscript{107} 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 integration of individualist and corporate understandings of salvation for God’s covenant people, (2) Nephite adaptation of the Abrahamic covenant to their own promised land tradition and to the revelation of Christ’s gospel to their first generation of prophets, (3) the apparent Nephite dependence on the same moral structure of a covenant society that is referred to as both divine and human \textit{hesed} in the Bible, and (4) the kinship character of the covenant society that the Nephites promoted as they adapted the revelation of Christ and his gospel to their Abrahamic religion.


\textsuperscript{107} Kerry Muhlestein has helpfully demonstrated the similarity between the way in which the Abrahamic covenant was reinstituted by Moses during the exodus and by Lehi and Nephi in their exodus from Jerusalem to a new promised land. See his “Prospering in the Land: A Comparison of Covenant Promises in Leviticus and First Nephi 2,” \textit{Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship} 32 (2019): 87–296. In a second article, Muhlestein proposes that Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 present and reconfirm the basic terminology of the Abrahamic covenant that will guide LDS readers to recognize allusions to that covenant in Restoration scripture. While starting with this Old Testament terminology, my paper will show the evolution of that vocabulary as the gospel of Jesus Christ was revealed to the Nephites and as they interpreted it within their inherited covenantal framework, thus resolving much of the tension that theologians and scriptural scholars have detected between the two covenantal traditions. Compare Kerry Muhlestein, “Recognizing the Everlasting Covenant in the Scriptures,” \textit{Religious Educator} 21, no. 2 (2020): 41–71.
Holistic versus 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, which includes taking the Lord’s name upon oneself, 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 and who are blessed or cursed corporately. ¹⁰⁸ This same issue sometimes plays itself out under the question of what it means to be “chosen.” Truman Madsen has provided one important analysis of that question from the perspective of LDS scriptures and teachings.¹⁰⁹

That holistic interpretation is certainly tempered to some extent by accounts of covenant renewal rituals in which all the people participated. And one passage 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” (KJV Isa. 56:1–7).

Historically, Jewish and Christian theologies that focused on corporatist blessings and punishments for the people of God tended to explain

¹⁰⁸ In his important series of papers on temples in the ANE, John M. Lundquist has focused on covenants as the mechanisms that linked new states to the gods, thereby legitimizing said states. See J. M. Lundquist, “Temple, Covenant, and Law in the Ancient Near East,” in Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 293–305.

these by reference to the Abrahamic covenant that promised blessings of land and posterity to Abraham’s seed. One forceful and continuing version of that debate in Christian circles derives from Luther’s theology of a predestinated elect that will receive salvation.110 LDS scholars have taken the theme up from the perspective of the Book of Mormon and have shown through independent analyses how the Nephite prophets interpreted the Abrahamic covenant as being fully compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which focuses on the repentance and obedience of individuals. Heather Hardy demonstrates how Nephi’s presentation of the great vision given to Lehi and Nephi combines the long-term prophecies or salvation history of Israel, Lehi’s posterity, and the Gentiles; and the revelation of the gospel in that vision provides double, but fully compatible, perspectives on how God works with his people.111

I have also argued that from Lehi to Moroni, the Nephite prophets and Jesus Christ use the gospel of Jesus Christ to show how individuals can become “the people of the Lord” and therefore recipients of the blessings promised to Abraham.112 At the judgment day, all people will be judged “according to their works” and not their genealogy. For as Nephi explains after reviewing the salvation history of Israel, “As many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For the Lord covenants with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, which is the Holy One of Israel” (2 Ne. 30:2). Nephi clearly denies that anyone


will be included among the Lord’s covenant people except they individually repent. And it will only be when those who belong to the house of Israel come to the knowledge of their promised blessings and choose to repent and follow Christ that they will receive the long-promised blessings listed in the Abrahamic covenant.

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 rearticulated 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 15 are more general or inclusive—speaking of the covenants of the Lord with 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 so labeled only 3 times but is repeated or cited 80 times somewhere in the text—without the word *covenant* being used.¹¹³

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:

---

¹¹³ Victor L. Ludlow has focused much of his attention over the years to the frequency of references to *covenant* and related terms in the Book of Mormon. In so doing, he has noted that almost two-thirds of the references to *covenant* in that text are attributed to three persons—Nephi, Jesus Christ, and Mormon. See his “Covenant Teachings of the Book of Mormon,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson,* ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 67–93, and his very detailed analysis of parts of 3 Nephi in “The Father’s Covenant People Sermon: 3 Nephi 20:10–23:5,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture,* ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 147–74.
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.114

**Biblical hesed in Nephite Covenant Culture**

Glueck’s 1927 dissertation 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 insight Cross provides that corresponds closely to the Nephite understandings of these covenants with the Lord is that “there are no ‘unilateral’ covenants in a kinship-based society.” Rather, “kinship

obligations are necessarily mutual." 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 previous 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. 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 into his presence and receive eternal life. 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 taught that all those who chose to make this covenant must “take upon [themselves] the name of Christ by baptism” (2 Ne. 31:13). The farewell sermon given by Benjamin at the center of the Nephite dispensation exemplifies

117. 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,” Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship 46 (2021): 131–55.
118. This is echoed clearly in Mosiah 5:8, 25:23, Alma 34:38, and in the sacrament prayer recorded in Moroni 4:3.
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
that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedi-
ent 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).
Because the name could be blotted out only through transgression, Ben-
jamin urged his people to “remember to retain the name written always
in [their] hearts” that they might “hear and know the voice by which
[they] shall be called, and also the name by which he shall call [them]”
(Mosiah 5:11–12).

As Mormon abridged the Nephite records at the end of that dispen-
sation, he described how the people in Alma’s day who were “desirous
to take upon them the name of Christ” and to be baptized did “join the
churches of God,” and “were called the people of God” (Mosiah 25:23–24,
emphasis added).119 Jesus himself reminded the Nephites of the scrip-
ture 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 Ne. 27:6, emphasis added). Not only
did he require repentant individuals to take upon themselves his name,
but he went on to explain that these same people, when organized as
a church, should be called by his name (3 Ne. 27:7–9). 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 46:21, see also verse 18). 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,”

119. Compare with Alma 34:38, where Amulek teaches the people to repent and “take
upon [them] the name of 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” (Moro. 7:47–48). Here, 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 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.”

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 initially 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 have risen and fallen. 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 moral structure of the ancient desert tribes understood as kinship associations. While the Israelite adaptation of that covenant culture had its own distinctive features, especially in the characterization of its god Yahweh and his love for his people, it fit comfortably in that cultural context and persisted 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 were 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 and 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 inherited 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 the covenant culture of Abrahamic religion.

Noel B. Reynolds is professor emeritus of political science at Brigham Young University, where he taught courses in political and legal philosophy, Book of Mormon, and American heritage. He has published scholarly papers and books in a number of subfields, including Mormon studies, authorship studies, political and legal philosophy, and ancient studies. Among Reynolds’s published writings are several articles about rhetorical techniques and chiastic structures in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon. Some of his current work explores the implications of new discoveries in Hebrew rhetoric for chiastic analysis.