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Stephen O. Smoot

John Gee

Kerry Muhlestein

John S. Thompson

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The Abrahamic Covenant

One of the important doctrinal contributions of the Book of Abraham is its elaboration on the nature of the Abrahamic covenant (Abr. 2:6–11).¹ While some details about the Abrahamic covenant can be read in the book of Genesis (12:1–5; compare 26:1–4, 24; 28; 35:9–13; 48:3–4), it is in the Book of Abraham where additional important aspects about this covenant are revealed. The main significance of the Abrahamic covenant as expanded upon in the Book of Abraham is that it involves a “right to the priesthood . . . as the essence of Abraham’s inheritance.”² Indeed, the covenant Abraham entered into with God, according to the text, encompassed specific blessings and priesthood responsibilities and included a charge to Abraham’s descendants to share the gospel with all the families of the earth.

1. See Monte S. Nyman, “The Covenant of Abraham,” in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 155–70; Kent P. Jackson, *The Restored Gospel and the Book of Genesis* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 127–52; Michael Goodman, “The Abrahamic Covenant: A Foundational Theme for the Old Testament,” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003): 43–53; and Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 121–25. For important recent treatments on covenants in the scriptures, including the Abrahamic covenants, see Kerry Muhlestein, Joshua M. Sears, and Avram R. Shannon, “New and Everlasting: The Relationship between Gospel Covenants in History,” *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 21–40; Kerry Muhlestein, “Recognizing the Everlasting Covenant in the Scriptures,” *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 41–71; and Shon D. Hopkin, “The Covenant among Covenants: The Abrahamic Covenant and Biblical Covenant Making,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 237–49.

2. Givens with Hauglid, *Pearl of Greatest Price*, 122.

Also significant is that the Abrahamic covenant, as presented in the Book of Abraham, “has several features that appear in other covenants and treaties of the ancient world. Treaties and covenants in Abraham’s day typically have a preamble or title, stipulations, an oath or other solemn ceremony, and, more rarely, curses conditional on violation of the covenant. . . . The covenant in the Book of Abraham follows the pattern for Abraham’s day.”³ This should not come as a surprise, since God communicates with his children “after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24; compare 2 Ne. 31:3).⁴ So if Abraham were to enter into a covenant with God, it would not be unusual for the structure of that covenant to resemble the way people made covenants and treaties in his day, or at the very least for Abraham to have understood and structured his covenant with God in those terms.

With this in mind, and thanks to the comparative data uncovered by scholars over the past century that help us better understand the form and content of ancient covenants,⁵ the Abrahamic covenant as depicted in the Book of Abraham can be structured as follows:

Ancient Covenant Pattern Abraham 2:6–11

Solemn Ceremony

But I, Abraham, and Lot, my brother’s son, prayed unto the Lord, and the Lord appeared unto me, and said unto me:

Preamble

Arise, and take Lot with thee; for I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to bear my name in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice. For I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; I stretch my hand over the sea, and it obeys my voice; I cause the wind and the fire to be my chariot; I say to the mountains—Depart hence—and behold, they are taken away by a whirlwind, in an instant, suddenly. My name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee.

3. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 108–9.

4. See also the insightful thoughts offered by Mark Alan Wright, “According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding”: The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–65, esp. 55–58.

5. See the invaluable Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul J. N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law, and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012).

Ancient Covenant Pattern Abraham 2:6–11

Stipulations

And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee above measure, and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations; and I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father; and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee; and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed (that is, thy Priesthood), for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal.

This structure helps make sense of the content of Abraham’s covenant and shows that “the covenant in the Book of Abraham follows the pattern of treaties and covenants in his day.”⁶ So while the content of the Abrahamic covenant is what is most important for Latter-day Saints today,⁷ the form or structure of the covenant as depicted in the Book of Abraham is one way the text can be grounded in the ancient world from which it purports to derive.

Further Reading

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6. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 111.

7. See Russell M. Nelson, “The Gathering of Scattered Israel,” *Ensign* 36, no. 11 (November 2006): 79–81.

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