

Jesus' Covenant Teachings in Third Nephi

Victor L. Ludlow

The title page of the Book of Mormon states that the first purpose of the book is “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.” This means that the Book of Mormon is intended, in part, to teach Lehi’s descendants about the covenants that the Lord has made with them. The key covenant they will learn about is that they would be a blessing for all nations—a consecrated people of God. Beyond teaching about the covenants, the Book of Mormon also prophesies key signs and events that will demonstrate when the promised covenant is being fulfilled in the latter days.

To fulfill this purpose, the Book of Mormon contains many important teachings about the Lord’s covenants with his people. There are at least 113 references in the Book of Mormon to the Lord’s covenants with Israel. Some references can be found in nearly every part of the book, but they are concentrated most heavily at the beginning, in 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi, and at the end, in 3 Nephi and Mormon. Seventy percent of the references to covenants come from just three people. Nephi at the beginning of Book of Mormon history and Mormon at the end refer to covenants twenty-one times each. But by far the greatest emphasis is in the words of the Lord himself, especially in 3 Nephi, as he specifically mentioned covenants thirty-seven times.

Jesus gave three major sermons or discourses recorded in 3 Nephi. The first is the American version of the Sermon on the Mount (see chapters 12-14), which is basically the same talk recorded in the New Testament book of Matthew, with a number of important changes. The 3 Nephi version of the Sermon on the Mount clarifies one important puzzle that has bothered some people as they have read in Matthew. Was he speaking to all humans or to only a special group? The Nephite account makes plain that the Savior was directing his sermon to those who had already been baptized. That is, they had already covenanted with the Lord to keep his commandments (see 3 Nephi 11:21-28; 12:1-2). It is safe to conclude that when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount that Matthew has passed on to us, the Lord was there speaking to a similar set of believers, not just to everyone who happened to be listening.

The second of Jesus’ sermons to the Nephites teaches the people of Israel about the law and the covenant that Jehovah established long ago with the early fathers of the house of Israel (see 3 Nephi 15-16). It includes material also found in the Old and New Testaments, but with greater detail.

The last and most crucial of the three sermons is what I think of as his “Covenant People Discourse,” which runs from 3 Nephi 20:10 to 23:5. This discourse is particularly valuable because it contains teachings unique to the Book of Mormon. Jesus may have taught them elsewhere, but they have not been recorded and passed down to us anywhere else.

Jesus Teaches about the Law and the Covenant

In the second discourse, starting in 3 Nephi 15, Jesus clarified some misunderstandings the Nephites had about the law of Moses. Earlier, when signs were given to the Nephites confirming that Jesus had been born, some of them thought that they no longer needed to keep the requirements of the law of Moses, since the Son of God was now on the earth and a new religious era had begun. However, their prophets told them that they needed to live the law until instructed otherwise. About thirty years later, Christ appeared at the city Bountiful and told them

that the law had been fulfilled now that he had been slain and resurrected: “Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses” (3 Nephi 15:4). How could they be sure of that? He continues:

I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end. Behold, I do not destroy the prophets [and their prophecies], for as many as have not been fulfilled in me, verily I say unto you, shall all be fulfilled. And because I said unto you that old things have passed away, I do not destroy that which hath been spoken concerning things which are to come. For behold, the *covenant* which I have made with my people *is not all fulfilled*; but the *law* which was given unto Moses *hath an end in me* (3 Nephi 15:5-8; italics added).

He told them that the law Moses gave them was fulfilled, but that the covenant was not, so the two are not the same thing. The original covenant with Abraham was established over five hundred years earlier than the law through Moses was received among Abraham’s descendants, the twelve tribes.

The Abrahamic covenant was established about 1900 B.C. At that time God made special promises to Abraham, then later renewed those to Abraham’s son Isaac and grandson Jacob. Parts of the promises were fulfilled in earlier times, while other parts were not fulfilled until after Joseph Smith had begun this gospel dispensation. But some of the covenant promises have yet to be fulfilled. Indeed, the last of them will not be completed until Christ begins to rule the earth at the Millennium.

The law of Moses, that is, the statutes and regulations covering hundreds of situations of everyday life (Torah), was given to Israel about 1300 B.C. All those ceremonial details were intended to lead the Israelites to think of Jesus Christ and look forward to his great sacrifice. That law was fulfilled in Christ’s actions at Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Jesus continued his teaching to the Nephites by discussing some of the covenant promises that remained to be fulfilled and what needed to be done to fulfill them. He discussed for example the unification of all Israel under the Messiah’s leadership in their lands of inheritance. Starting in 3 Nephi 16:17, the Lord told us: “Then the words of the prophet Isaiah shall be fulfilled.” He then quoted the last three verses from chapter fifty-two of Isaiah, which foretell that the watchmen (leaders) of Zion will sing joyfully and the inhabitants will rejoice because Zion, the Lord’s city, has been established.

This short but profound discourse as recorded by Mormon and translated by Joseph Smith is consistent with the historical context and with passages of the Bible. It serves as a bridge between the simple, broad expectations of the Sermon on the Mount and the profound, specific requirements of what I call the “Covenant People Discourse.”

Jesus’ “Covenant People Discourse”

The rest of 3 Nephi 17, all of 18 and 19, and the first part of 20 all record what Christ did before leaving that day and what he did upon returning the following day. In chapter twenty we pick up where he started teaching the people on the next day. Here he began his unique “Covenant People Discourse”:

When they had all given glory unto Jesus, he said unto them: Behold now I finish the commandment which the Father hath commanded me concerning this people, who are the remnant of the house of Israel. Ye remember that I spake unto you [yesterday], and said that when the words of Isaiah should be fulfilled—behold they are written, ye have them before you, therefore search them—and verily, verily, I say unto

you, that when they [the words of Isaiah] shall be fulfilled then is the fulfilling of the covenant which the Father hath made unto his people, O house of Israel (vv. 10-12).

The prophecies of Isaiah referred to include events concerning the second coming of the Lord and the start of the Millennium. At that time the covenant is to be finally and completely fulfilled. Jesus did not, of course, tell us the specific time when this would take place, but he did point us to a kind of checklist of prophecies in Isaiah that would mark the fulfillment of the covenant.

Before getting to Isaiah directly, Jesus renewed the promises that the remnants of Israel would be gathered to their promised lands and given power over the unrepentant Gentiles (see 3 Nephi 20:13-20). He also reviewed prophecies given to Moses that tell of the coming of the Messiah and the covenant promises made to Abraham (see vv. 21-31). But Isaiah is the one who receives Jesus' emphasis. At verse thirty-two, without announcing it, Jesus starts quoting from Isaiah 52. Toward the end of his discourse, he also quotes all of chapter 54 of Isaiah (see 3 Nephi 22).

I have found it challenging to try to grasp why the Lord emphasized Isaiah so much at this point. Years ago, I studied these pages segment by segment, analyzing and reviewing this part over and over. I knew there was something unusually valuable in his teachings that I was not comprehending. For a long time I felt frustrated with these three chapters (20-22). I reviewed dictionaries and commentaries and studied the Hebrew roots of Isaiah's words. I cut and pasted the verses into clusters. I studied the passages in different translations. After all this work, I had to confess that I still did not see how the teachings all fit together.

A Key: The Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant

Finally, while I was reading in chapter twenty-one, the whole structure of the discourse came into focus. The insight started with verse seven. Here the Lord says: "When these things come to pass that thy seed shall begin to know these things—it shall be a sign unto them." The word *sign* rang a bell in my mind. He continued: "That they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced unto the fulfilling of the covenant." Here was another key word, *covenant*, and a sign was to be given that its fulfillment had commenced.

I backtracked to verse one, "I give unto you a sign [there was that key word again], that ye may know the time when these things shall be about to take place" (3 Nephi 21:1). When what things would take place? That Christ would gather Israel in from their long dispersion and fulfill his promises to them (see 20:46).

Reading verses seven and one a little more closely reveals one important distinction. In verse one a sign was to be given "when these things shall be *about to take place*." These last four words tell us that something is almost ready to start—but not quite yet. In verse seven a sign was to be given "that they may know that the work of the Father *hath already commenced*." The final three words describe something that has already started. Somewhere between verse one and verse seven the verb tense had shifted from future to past.

I looked more closely to see how the first and the seventh verses connect to each other. The first sentence of the chapter starts in verse one and does not conclude until the end of verse seven. The promised sign is actually within one long, very complex sentence. The longer I studied this complicated sentence, the clearer its subtle and profound messages became, and I realized that this was not a haphazard, convoluted sentence thrown together by Joseph Smith, but an eloquent declaration of the Lord. First, the Lord promised a sign so we would know when the promised covenant was about to be fulfilled, then he revealed the sign, and finally he testified that, after the sign was given, we would know that the Father's covenant promises were nearing fulfillment.

To clarify this complicated statement, I have pulled out the central core of the sentence (without noting the lengthy omissions, for the sake of clarity):

I give unto you a sign: when these things [the Book of Mormon] shall be made known unto the Gentiles and shall come forth from them unto a remnant of your seed [the Lamanites], [so] that the covenant of the Father may be fulfilled which he hath covenanted with his people, O house of Israel; therefore, when these works [the Book of Mormon] shall come forth from the Gentiles, unto your seed [so] that your seed shall begin to know these things, [then] it [the Book of Mormon record] shall be a sign unto them, that they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the people who are of the house of Israel.

The core of this sentence comes through very clearly when all the secondary concepts and explanatory notes, which make up the bulk of the sentence, are dropped out. Note that the key sign that will mark the beginning of the fulfillment of the Lord's promises to Israel is that the Book of Mormon will go from the Gentiles to the Lamanites, so that the Lamanites will begin to know its teachings.

After saying what the sign is to be, Jesus continued his "Covenant People Discourse" by promising marvelous blessings not only to the native Israelites, but also to the Gentiles who would join them by accepting the gospel in the period when the sign was becoming visible. In chapter 20, verses 10-46, the Lord summarized the great work to be done among the Gentiles as well as among his covenant people (see 3 Nephi 21:8-11). In 21:26-29 he summarized the Father's work in gathering the dispersed of Israel. He prophesied the blessings to be enjoyed by Zion (the Church) and her stakes in the last days by quoting all of Isaiah 54 (in 3 Nephi 22).

The covenant with Israel would finally be fulfilled by Christ's kingdom being established over the whole earth, as stakes are organized and Israel—both the original Israelites by descent and also the additional converted Gentiles—settle down in peace. Jesus concluded his discourse in 3 Nephi 23 by telling us to search the words of Isaiah, since they contain the key promises given to Israel (see 3 Nephi 23:1-5)

Has the Key Sign Been Fulfilled Yet?

The fulfillment of this prophesied sign becomes a barometer by which Latter-day Saints can measure how much of the Father's work with his children on earth has been completed in preparation for the Second Coming. Was this sign—the Lamanites knowing the Book of Mormon message—fulfilled early in this dispensation? Granted, Joseph Smith sent missionaries with the Book of Mormon to a few Lamanite groups, but very little success resulted. The early converts to the Church instead came from scattered Israel among the Gentile nations—the United States and Canada, the British Isles, Scandinavia, and Germany. At least through the Church's first century, little progress had been made among the Lamanites, the native Americans.

When I went on my first mission in 1962, I was sent to West Germany, where there were six missions. We had over eleven percent of the Church's missionary force there. At that same time, the Church had only six missions in all of South America and three in Mexico. Thus even in the early 1960s, the Lamanites were apparently not receiving and accepting the Book of Mormon message in sufficient numbers so that we could say that the promised sign had been fulfilled.

When I served as a mission president in Germany a generation later, there were only three missions in Germany. But by then the Church in Central and South America had vaulted ahead. As of 1990, there were seventeen missions in Mexico, and any one of them baptized more than all the missions in Germany, Austria, Switzerland,

Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and Iceland combined. There were, in 1990, seventy missions in Central and South America compared to ten in the same area when I went on my first mission in 1962.

The Fulfillment of the Covenant Promise

The covenant with Israel is beginning to be fulfilled. The descendants of Abraham are to be a blessing to the nations of the earth—by leading out in carrying the gospel to all peoples. This promised sign of success was to start among the remnants of the Lamanite part of Israel. The Savior’s words in 3 Nephi 22 are being brought to pass dramatically in our day.

It seems that 1975 may have been the pivotal year, after which nobody should fail to see that the prophesied sign—the marvelous missionary work among the House of Israel in the Americas—has unmistakably appeared. At that time President Spencer W. Kimball stated three times that “Now is the time of the Jew” or Israelite in the unfolding of God’s work among his children. Since then, success among the Lamanites and peoples of Central and South America has truly blossomed.

The key sign promised in 3 Nephi indicates the beginning of the end for the final prophetic period immediately prior to the Millennium. It appears that this sign has now been given. God’s work is rolling forth to bring about the promises given to the patriarchs regarding their descendants.

The teachings about the covenant laid out in Christ’s words in 3 Nephi are complex and subtle. They include and integrate prophecies given over thousands of years. At the same time they clarify how all those prophecies connect to the restoration of the Book of Mormon and the Lord’s kingdom in modern times. For us individually, they help us catch the vision and recognize the signs that were recorded so long ago.

This is a marvelous time to be on the earth, a period the ancient prophets foresaw and yearned for. As they prophesied about our age, they told of servants in the vineyards and workers in the fields of God’s final harvest scenes. Rather than ignoring or resisting God’s expanding kingdom, we share the possibility of actually bringing to reality the things that the prophets promised so long ago. The acts of Christ at the time of his life and death on the earth fulfilled the old law and ushered in a new religious age. In a similar way, he now invites our action in fulfilling his covenant promises so we can help usher in his millennial reign.