

# Covenant Teachings of the Book of Mormon

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When questioned, few Latter-day Saints can identify the first stated purpose of the Book of Mormon as printed on its title page. They usually answer something about “the convincing of Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ,” forgetting that this phrase is prefaced with the words “And also . . .” However, two lines earlier, we read: “Which 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.*” Thus the first stated purpose of the Book of Mormon is to teach the house of Israel about covenants, and building on that foundation, the second major purpose is to testify about Jesus Christ. This article will highlight the covenant teachings of the Book of Mormon, especially those given by Christ himself.

Covenant teachings are an essential element of the Book of Mormon. The word covenant and its variants<sup>1</sup> appear 159 times in the modern editions of the Book of Mormon, an average of one reference every third page. The first reference occurs on the title page, five others appear in various chapter headings, and the remaining 153 are in the scripture text, including the penultimate verse of Moroni. From beginning to end, covenant concepts permeate the Book of Mormon.

The scope of this article will not permit a full discussion of all these covenant references, but the essential covenantal teachings will be identified and briefly explained. First, it is necessary to define a covenant. Many dictionaries define a covenant as a “solemn agreement between two or more parties.” In the scriptures, God or his agent (usually an angel or prophet) is often represented as one of the parties. The Bible Dictionary in the LDS edition of the King James Bible describes a covenant as “an agreement between persons or nations; more often between God and man” (p. 651).

The holy scriptures serve as the repository for God’s covenant teachings. Not only is this true for the Book of Mormon, whose purpose is to help Israel “know the covenants of the Lord,” but also for the Bible and other scriptures. For example, in some early English translations of the Bible, its two major divisions were called “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant” instead of “Old Testament” and “New Testament” as we know them today. In addition, the Hebrew word usually translated as “testimony” in the Bible is “almost certainly an alternate designation for . . . covenant.” Indeed, the term *testament*, or *testimony*, as recorded in Exodus 31:18 could just as easily be translated as “covenant” since the cognate Akkadian and Aramaic words were commonly used as terms for “covenant.”<sup>2</sup>

Two major types of covenant relationships are found in the scriptures: vertical covenants made between God and man, and horizontal covenants, or solemn commitments between human beings. Most often in the Book of Mormon, the covenants refer to a sacred relationship between God and mortals in the “vertical” dimension, either collectively (such as with the house of Israel or the posterity of Lehi) or individually (through special covenant ordinances such as baptism or in private vows and promises). A majority (118 of 154) of the covenant references in the Book of Mormon amplify various sacred compacts between God and people as initiated from on high, often with an angel or prophet as God’s spokesperson. Less often, solemn agreements or covenants, also called oaths,<sup>3</sup> are made between individuals or groups of people in the “horizontal” dimension, either in a positive context (to establish a “covenant of peace,” for example) or for negative purposes (such as secret, murderous covenants). In the Book of Mormon, one finds 36 examples of covenant commitments between people in a horizontal or person-to-person connection.

As could be expected, the covenant references in the Book of Mormon are neither evenly nor randomly distributed throughout the text. Instead, they tend to be clustered in key areas. When the Book of Mormon is divided into nine historical sections, the covenant references in a given section range from two to twenty-seven. Even more revealing is the fact that the covenant references per page range from .02 (one reference every 45–50 pages) to .59 (one reference every 2 pages) in the various sections. Excluding the five covenant references found in the chapter headings, which were written for the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon, the types of vertical and horizontal covenants and the location of the 154 references in the original scriptural text are shown in table 1:

**Table 1. References to the Word *Covenant* in the Book of Mormon**

Book of Mormon Selections	Vertical Covenants (God-with-People)			Horizontal Covenants (Person-to-Person)			Total	CRPΔ
	Individuals	Groups	Subtotal	Positive	Negative	Subtotal		
Title page—1 Nephi (54 pp.)	2	—17	19	0	0	0	19	.35
2 Nephi* (64 pp.)	4	19	23	0	0	0	23	.36
Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni (26 pp.)	2	0	2	0	0	0	2	.08
Words of Mormon—Mosiah* (64 pp.)	14	0	14	1	0	1	15	.23
Alma 1—35 (90 pp.)	1	1	2	0	0	0	2	.02
Alma 36—63* (71 pp.)	5	6	11	15	2	17	28	.39
Helaman—3 Nephi 7 (54 pp.)	0	5	5	3	15	18	23	.43
3 Nephi 8—4 Nephi* (46 pp.)	—1	—26	27	0	0	0	27	.59
Mormon, Ether, Moroni (63 pp.)	2	13	15	0	0	0	15	.24
Totals	31	87	118	19	17	36	154	.29

Δ Covenant-References-Per-Page average in this column. For example: .59 means a covenant reference would be found on slightly over one-half of the pages, .35 means a covenant reference on about one-third of the pages, and .02 means a covenant reference only once every 50 pages.

— The covenant references in these three groups appear in Old Testament passages being quoted in the Book of Mormon (Isaiah 49:8 in 1 Nephi 21:8; Isaiah 54:10 in 3 Nephi 22:10; and Malachi 3:1 in 3 Nephi 24:1).

\* These sections contain the five modern chapter headings where the word *covenant* appears: 2 Nephi 30, Mosiah 18, Alma 37 and 44, and 3 Nephi 29.

Just as covenant teachings are clustered in certain sections of the Book of Mormon, the multiple spokesmen, prophets, and writers of the Book of Mormon placed varying emphasis on covenant teachings. Table 2 identifies the various Book of Mormon sections in which these different authors presented their covenant teachings.

**Table 2. Covenant Spokesmen in the Book of Mormon by Section of the Book of Mormon (See Table 1)**

Spokesman	1 Nephi	2 Nephi	Jacob	Mosiah	Alma <sub>1</sub>	Alma <sub>2</sub>	Helaman	Section 3 Nephi
Angel	7							
Nephi	9	3						
Zenos	1							
Lehi		5						
Jacob		5						
Enos			2					
People				1				
Benjamin				4				
Zeniff				(1)*				
Alma <sub>1</sub>				2				
Alma <sub>2</sub>					1	(2)*		
Soldier						(1)		
Moroni <sub>1</sub>						2		
Nephites						1		
Helaman <sub>2</sub>						3		
Isaiah								1
Heavenly Father								1
Lord	1	10		3				21
Mormon				4	1	5/(14)*	5/(18)*	4
Moroni <sub>2</sub>	1							

Subtotals 19 23 2 15 2 28 23 27  
\* The numbers in parentheses indicate the 36 horizontal (person-to-person) covenant references in the text, found in Mormon's editorial comments.

To summarize tables 1 and 2, we find that two-thirds of the *vertical* covenant references in the Book of Mormon are located in just three books (1, 2, and 3 Nephi), and all but one of the *horizontal* covenant references are in the section from Alma 36 to 3 Nephi 7. In addition, two-thirds of all the covenant references in the text are cited by only three individuals (Nephi, the Lord, and Mormon).

Having identified the major clusters and spokesmen for the covenant references in the Book of Mormon, I will briefly review the major covenant examples in each of the nine historical sections (as identified in table 1) to help us appreciate what the Book of Mormon teaches us about covenants.

## Title Page—1 Nephi

We have already discussed the importance of the singular covenant reference on the Book of Mormon title page. The word covenant also occurs 18 times in 1 Nephi. These references are concentrated in the latter half of the book, in chapters 13 through 22. Some passages describe the Lord's biblical covenants (see 1 Nephi 13:23–26) and a promise to Lehi about a land of inheritance for his descendants (see 1 Nephi 13:30). Most references refer to covenants with the house of Israel, particularly as a part of the Abrahamic covenant (see 1 Nephi 14:5–17; 15:14–18; 17:40; 19:15; 22:6–11). Some of the references in 1 Nephi deal with the past establishment of covenant relationships, but the majority (about two-thirds) talk about the future fulfillment of special covenants in the latter days. In short, the primary covenant teachings of 1 Nephi emphasize how the Lord's covenant with Abraham will be fulfilled in the last days.

One powerful example illustrates Nephi's teachings about covenants. In 1 Nephi 22, Nephi is teaching his older brothers after having just quoted Isaiah (chapters 48 and 49).<sup>4</sup> The brothers of Nephi then pose some hard questions, asking essentially, "What is the meaning of these Isaiah scriptures you have just read to us?" Answering, Nephi describes how these passages contain promises for their descendants. Starting in 1 Nephi 22:7, he tells them "that after all the house of Israel have been scattered and confounded, that the Lord God will raise up . . . Gentiles . . . upon the face of this land," who would scatter their seed. Then the Lord would proceed to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles, yea, which would be of great worth unto them and all the house of Israel, "unto the making known of the covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham" (1 Nephi 22:9).

Nephi tries to help his brothers appreciate that the future work of the gentiles would bless not only their own descendants in America, but also the whole house of Israel, through whom all the peoples of the earth could be blessed. Continuing in 1 Nephi 22:10–11, he says:

I would, my brethren, that ye should know that all the kindreds of the earth cannot be blessed, unless he [the Lord] shall make bare his arm in the eyes of the nations. Wherefore, the Lord God will proceed to make bare his arm in the eyes of all the nations, in bringing about his covenants and his gospel unto those who are of the house of Israel.

This promise echoes a reference in Isaiah 52:10 (the single most quoted verse from Isaiah in the Book of Mormon), prophesying that the Lord will make bare his arm and that all the nations of the earth will see it.

Nephi teaches that the Lord will show forth his power by bringing about his covenants and his gospel in the last days. In this chapter, Nephi promises that the gentiles will assist his seed in bringing forth covenants unto the

house of Israel, and then from them to all the families of the earth. Indeed, the way will be prepared for righteousness to prevail and wickedness to be destroyed as the promises of Abraham's covenant will be fulfilled when the Lord reveals his power and glory in the last days.

## 2 Nephi

Most of the 23 covenant references in 2 Nephi occur in the first 11 chapters, with another cluster in chapters 29 and 30 at the end of the book. As in 1 Nephi, the passages deal primarily with the Lord's covenants with the house of Israel, but these teachings then go beyond Israel and deal with latter-day promises for other nations, the gentiles. In other words, the covenant promises as given to Abraham will be taken beyond the house of Israel into other parts of the world. The variety of covenant themes found in 2 Nephi include the covenant promise to Lehi of a land of inheritance (see 2 Nephi 1:5) and some divine covenants with Joseph (see 2 Nephi 3:4–12, 21–23) and the "children of men," including the gentiles (see 2 Nephi 9:53; 10:15; 29:1; and 30:2). There is a continued emphasis on promises made with the Lord's covenant people (see 2 Nephi 6:12–17; 29:4–5) and Abraham and the house of Israel (see 2 Nephi 9:1; 10:7; 11:5; and 29:14).

One interesting feature of the covenant references in 2 Nephi is that almost one-half of them are attributed directly to the Lord. That is, the writer introduces a covenant passage with "thus saith the Lord unto me" (2 Nephi 3:7; compare 2 Nephi 6:17; 10:7; and 29:4), completes the passage with "saith the Lord" (2 Nephi 3:12), or quotes the passage in the first-person singular with God as the speaker (see 2 Nephi 3:21; 10:15; and 29:1, 5, 14). In these passages, the Lord, as a premortal spirit being, reveals important covenant teachings to various ancient prophets as recorded in the Book of Mormon. Thus an important feature in 2 Nephi is the recognition of how the premortal Lord amplifies important covenant teachings. Most of these pronouncements of the Savior are found in chapters 3, 10, and 29 as Joseph of Egypt, Jacob (Lehi's son), and Nephi receive divine instruction.

Second Nephi 3 contains six covenant references as Lehi blesses his son Joseph and cites some prophecies of ancient Joseph, who was sold into Egypt. These prophecies contain the Lord's words as given to Joseph of Egypt, highlighting a seer and prophet of the last days, namely Joseph Smith, who would bring forth scriptures from the seed of Joseph. These scriptures, along with the Bible, would teach and comfort the descendants of Joseph, Lehi's seed, "bringing them to the knowledge of their fathers in the latter days, *and also to the knowledge of my covenants*, saith the Lord" (2 Nephi 3:12). The Lord continues in 2 Nephi 3:13 with further instruction about this prophet and a restoration, saying, "And out of weakness he shall be made strong, in that day when my work shall commence among all my people, unto the restoring thee, O house of Israel, saith the Lord." Thus the Lord's personal covenants with Joseph of old, especially about the latter-day Joseph, will be fulfilled as the Lord's covenants with the fathers are restored.

In 2 Nephi 10, Jacob, Nephi's younger brother, also quotes some unique, divine covenant pronouncements. After explaining what happened to the Jews following the crucifixion of Christ, Jacob proclaims in verse 7, "But behold, thus saith the Lord God: When the day cometh that they [the Jews] shall believe in me, that I am Christ, then have I covenanted with their fathers that they shall be restored in the flesh, upon the earth, unto the lands of their inheritance" (2 Nephi 10:7). The Lord then quotes segments from Isaiah 49, which highlight how the gentiles will assist the Jews in the latter days. He then foretells that America would be a land of inheritance for Jacob's descendants and also a land of liberty for the gentiles. The Lord continues, "Wherefore, for this cause, that my covenants may be fulfilled which I have made unto the children of men, . . . I must needs destroy the secret works of darkness, and of murders, and of abominations" (2 Nephi 10:15); he would fulfill his promises to the righteous, which would include having the gentiles both afflict and bless Jacob's seed. Thus the coming of the gentiles to

America is an important precondition for the fulfilling of God's covenants to the house of Israel, especially Lehi's seed.

The Lord repeats and elaborates upon this promise to the house of Israel and Lehi's seed in a revelation to Nephi, as recorded in 2 Nephi 29. After highlighting the roles of the different scriptures that will come forth from the scattered remnants of Israel in the last days, the Lord concludes in verse 14,

And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered in one. And I will show unto them that fight against my word and against my people, who are of the house of Israel that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever. (2 Nephi 29:14)

These covenant passages in 2 Nephi illustrate that the coming of the gentiles to America and the coming forth of a prophet and new scriptures are key elements in God's covenant promises to Israel. Christ himself would continue these teachings almost five centuries later when he appeared to the Nephites as a resurrected being. But the foundation has been laid in 1 and 2 Nephi for important roles that the gentiles and latter-day prophets and scriptures will play. Their coming forth will bring forth covenant and gospel messages not only to the house of Israel, but from them to all the nations of the earth, as promised to Abraham centuries ago.

### **Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni**

No covenant references are found in the books of Jacob, Jarom, or Omni. The two citations in Enos refer to personal promises made by God to Enos concerning divine preservation of the Nephite records (see Enos 1:16–17).

### **Words of Mormon—Mosiah**

In Mosiah, seven covenant references highlight the covenant commitment the people of King Benjamin made after his powerful sermon from the tower (see Mosiah 5:5–6:2). Two later similar covenant passages refer to the baptismal covenant made by the followers of Alma at the waters of Mormon (see Mosiah 18:10–13; 24:13) and a comparable covenant with God made by the people of King Limhi in the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 21:31–32). Two unique passages highlight horizontal and vertical personal covenant promises. First, in Mosiah 9:6 the Lamanite king promises Zeniff that he could possess the land of Lehi-Nephi. This is the first horizontal covenant reference in the Book of Mormon. Second, the Lord promises Alma the gift of eternal life. This passage contains a promise that each covenant member of God's family should receive: "Thou art my servant; and I covenant with thee that thou shalt have eternal life; and thou shalt serve me and go forth in my name, and shalt gather together my sheep" (Mosiah 26:20).

### **Alma 1–35**

The chapters in these 90 pages of Alma contain only two covenant passages. This section of the Book of Mormon has the least number of covenant references per page. In Alma 7:15, Alma the Younger invites the people at Gideon to enter a covenant with God as witnessed by their baptismal ordinance. In Alma 24:18, the converted Lamanite "people of Ammon" covenant with God that they will never again use weapons for the shedding of human blood. These passages demonstrate that both peaceful and warlike people can humble themselves and enter into covenants with God.

## Alma 36–63

This 90-page section contains the first major block of horizontal covenant passages. We also find the first references to the negative person-to-person secret oaths and covenants that the wicked of old developed (see Alma 37:27–29). These negative human covenants are balanced with a number of references to the most common type of a positive person-to-person covenant in the Book of Mormon— the “covenant of peace.” A covenant of peace was usually made as defeated enemies delivered up their weapons and promised to go to war no more (see Alma 44:14–20; 50:36; and 62:16–17). Parallel passages also refer to Nephite preparations for war in a covenant of liberty (see Alma 46:20–22), a covenant of freedom (see Alma 46:35), and a covenant of the freemen with each other (see Alma 51:6). As the Nephites were under severe conditions of a two-front war with the Lamanites, six covenant references are cited concerning the older generation of the people of Ammon and their promise to God to refrain from battle (see Alma 43:11; 53:15–16; and 56:6–8; compare Alma 24:18). As a contrast, in two other covenant passages, two thousand men of the younger generation make their own covenant to fight for the Nephites (see Alma 53:17–18). One final unique covenant passage in the book of Alma describes Captain Moroni and his personal covenant to keep God’s commandments; he admonishes others to adhere likewise to God’s word and to give aid for their countrymen (see Alma 60:34). Thus we see in these Alma passages the significance of keeping covenants, even in periods of extreme distress. Even bitter enemies develop mutual respect and trust toward each other in keeping their covenants, promises, and oaths. In this section it is often difficult to distinguish the vertical and horizontal covenant dimensions from each other because many vows seem to be made both to God and fellow mortals. In any case, the solemn promises are faithfully maintained as the people honor the covenants and oaths they made.

## Helaman–3 Nephi 7

This 54-page block of chapters covers the period of time leading up to Christ’s crucifixion and his ministry among the Nephite-Lamanite people after his resurrection; a great variety of covenant teachings appear in this section. As noted earlier, over two-thirds of the 154 covenant references in the Book of Mormon explain promises made between God and his children on earth. Most of the remaining references describe honorable promises made between leaders and individuals, but a third and smaller selection of seventeen passages refers to evil, secret covenants made between men and the devil.<sup>5</sup> The last of the horizontal covenant references and almost all the secret covenant references are found in this section of Helaman and 3 Nephi 1–7 (see Alma 37:27 and 29 for the only other secret covenant references). Table 3 shows all the covenant references in this part of the Book of Mormon.

**Table 3. Covenant References in Helaman and 3-Nephi 1–7**

*	Helaman	1:11	covenant to protect Kishkumen, the murderer
*		1:12	Kishkumen and his secret band
*		2:3	Kishkumen’s band seeks Helaman’s death
*		6:21	a growing covenant band of robbers
**		6:22	signs and words of the secret band of robbers
*		6:25	Alma’s warning not to reveal secret covenants
*		6:26	satanic origin of the “new” secret covenants
*		6:30	the works and secret covenants of the devil
â—Š	3 Nephi	5:4	robbers who covenant to cease killing are set free
â—Š		5:5	robbers who do not covenant to cease killing are punished
ØØØØØ		5:25	Lord’s covenants with the house of Jacob
â—Š		6:3	covenant by reformed robbers to keep peace in the land
***		6:28	evil men covenant with Satan against the righteous
*		6:29	covenant against the Lord’s people and the laws of the land
*		6:30	covenant to destroy the legal government
*		7:11	opposition to those of the secret covenant band

\* References to negative, “secret” covenants

n References to positive, horizontal covenants

## Ø References to righteous, vertical covenants

Only one verse in this section of the Book of Mormon refers to vertical covenants with God. In 3 Nephi 5:25, Abraham's posterity is promised a full knowledge of God's covenants with the house of Jacob. In fact, the root covenant appears five times in this verse, more than in any other single verse of scripture. In it, Mormon repeats the important promise that the house of Jacob will eventually come to a full knowledge of its covenant relationship.

The three horizontal covenant references in this section highlight promises made with robbers if they would cease their murderous acts (see 3 Nephi 5:4–5 and 6:3). Although few specific details are recorded about these horizontal covenants—such as if they were made in the name of God, what witnesses were required, or possible penalties if they were broken—it is assumed that these promises were honored.

## The Secret Covenants of Men and the Devil

As shown earlier, 15 of the 23 covenant references in Helaman and 3 Nephi 1–7 relate to satanic vows made between men. These references are found in one dozen verses. Analyzing these twelve verses tells us much about secret, evil vows. By evaluating the key secret covenant elements in these passages, one soon recognizes similar elements in contemporary society.

Moses, in the book of Deuteronomy, presents a pattern of covenant making that continued into later dispensations and was distorted by some people during this Book of Mormon period. This model can be divided into five steps, exemplifying the covenant process between the Sovereign of this earth and his children, particularly as demonstrated through baptism and temple ordinances:

1. Historical background = Recounting past events, relationships, and promises (see Deuteronomy 1–4)
2. Stipulations = Listing the general and specific expectations of either party (see Deuteronomy 5:26)
3. Blessings and Curses = Announcing the possible consequences (rewards and punishments) (see Deuteronomy 27–33)
4. Witnesses = Verifying the contract through earthly and heavenly observers (see Deuteronomy 27:1–8; 31:19, 26; and 32)
5. Remembrance = Recording a review, revision, and renewal process (see Deuteronomy 27:2–8; 31:9–13, 24–27)

All five steps<sup>6</sup> are found among the secret covenants of wicked men as recorded in Helaman and 3 Nephi. Thus this is an appropriate place to discuss the Book of Mormon teachings and examples of evil or secret covenants.

*Historical Background.* As Mormon presents information about evil covenants in the Book of Mormon, he provides details about the historical setting of these covenants. Starting some 50 years before Christ, the first of three secret, murdering bands organized to make covenants to protect their members, who had murdered the chief judge Pahoran and attempted to murder the prophet Helaman (see Helaman 1:11; 2:3). This band of Kishkumen later fled into the wilderness, where it seems to have died out (see Helaman 2:11). About 25 years later, a new band of robbers with secret, satanically inspired covenants was established (see Helaman 6:18, 21–30). They gained great control over much of society in spite of prophetic warnings, famines, wars, and the miraculous signs

of the Savior's birth. Finally, after fifty years of wickedness, the Nephites repented and destroyed this secret combination (see 3 Nephi 5:6). Unfortunately, within a decade a new band of murderers and robbers organized, following the satanic pattern of earlier secret combinations (see 3 Nephi 6:28–30). With the dissolution of a strong central government, partially resulting from this band's attempt to destroy the government, it came the largest social group or "tribe," though it was mutually opposed by the other tribes and groups (see 3 Nephi 7:11). Ultimately, this evil group was destroyed, together with all the wicked people in the great destructions preceding the Lord's ministry after his resurrection.

*Stipulations.* In reading the covenant passages in this section of the Book of Mormon, a variety of stipulations can be identified in these negative, vertical covenants. For example, the oaths are sworn in secret, ironically often in God's name to give them some sense of legitimacy and power. The purpose of the covenants is often to overthrow anyone in authority and to rob and murder for gain. The leaders also allow easy acceptance into their bands and develop counterfeit sets of tokens and signs to more easily distinguish their members (see Helaman 1:11; 2:3; 6:21–22; and 3 Nephi 6:28; 7:11).

*Blessings and Curses.* The secret bands seek to escape punishment for their immoral and illegal acts, but they also threaten and murder any who betray their own negative oaths. Often disguised as regular, even exemplary, members of society, they appear harmless, even virtuous. They seek to reward their members with positions of wealth and power. Rather than focusing on the long-term, spiritual consequences of their actions, they promise temporal rewards and riches. Their incentive is the antithesis of "seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). Instead they promise: "Take what you can now, through whatever wicked means, and establish your kingdom here" (see, for example, Helaman 6:21–22; and 3 Nephi 6:28; 7:11).

*Witnesses.* The secret bands seek strength in numbers and make their vows with each other in God's name and before each other, using their own heads or lives as a final witness. However, they do not want their membership and participation to be witnessed or known publicly (see Helaman 1:12; 2:3; 6:21–22; and 3 Nephi 6:28).

*Remembrance.* Tragically, although the secret bands and the records of their evil oaths and doings are sometimes destroyed, they are often revived as Satan inspires a new generation of wicked leaders (see Helaman 6:21–22; and 3 Nephi 6:28; 7:11). The prophets have some records of their doings, but they do not make them public (see Alma 37:27–29). Their names identified as symbols of wickedness, Kishkumen and Gadianton are notorious for their founding of these secret bands.<sup>7</sup>

In this section of varied and concentrated covenant passages, we see that covenants range from the heights of heaven to the depths of hell. Leaving aside the destructive, negative covenants of the secret bands, we can now better appreciate the sublime covenant teachings of the resurrected Savior and the establishment of a Zion covenant community as recorded in the next section of the remaining 3 Nephi chapters and 4 Nephi.

### **3 Nephi 8—4 Nephi**

The great majority of the Savior's covenant teachings of the Book of Mormon are found in 3 Nephi, starting with chapter 10, in which Israel is warned to repent or their lands would be "desolate until the time of the fulfilling of the covenant" in the latter days (3 Nephi 10:7). As Jesus appears to the Lamanites and Nephites, he teaches three major sermons or discourses. The first is the Nephite version of the Sermon of the Mount, recorded in chapters 12 through 14 of 3 Nephi. One important addition to this 3 Nephi account places it in a covenant context, which is not



clearly expressed in Matthew. In the Book of Mormon, the Sermon at the Temple in Bountiful is directed to those who have entered into a covenant relationship through baptism (see 3 Nephi 12:1–2). Thus the expectations taught in the sermon would be directed to baptized members of the church. This sermon is indeed the Christian Constitution for all those who take upon themselves the name of Christ through the covenant ordinance of baptism.

The second discourse in 3 Nephi 15 and 16 contains teachings to Israel on the Mosaic law and the Abrahamic covenant. This Law and Covenant Discourse includes material found in the Old and New Testaments but gives greater detail and explanation. After clarifying some Nephite misunderstandings concerning the Mosaic law, Jesus says to the multitude at Bountiful, “Behold, I am he that gave the law, . . . therefore the law in me is fulfilled.” He then adds, “And I am he who covenanted with my people Israel” (3 Nephi 15:5). Note that he emphasizes two different ideas in this verse, namely *law* and *covenant*. First, he is both the lawgiver and the fulfiller of the law. Second, certain covenants concerning him and the children of Abraham have been made but are not yet all fulfilled. He continues, “For as many as have not been fulfilled in me, verily I say unto you, shall all be fulfilled” (3 Nephi 15:6). His coming, atonement, and resurrection had fulfilled the law; however, certain covenant promises had not yet been fulfilled, although they would be. In 3 Nephi 15:7–8 he continues, “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.” Although the law was fulfilled, the covenant was not yet all fulfilled.

The covenant was given first to Abraham around 1900 B.C., and the law was delivered later to Moses about 1300 B.C. Three major promises were given to Abraham: (1) he would have numberless posterity, (2) a land would be given to him and his posterity, and (3) his lineage would be a blessing to all nations and families of the earth (see Genesis 12:2–3; 15:5; and 17:2–8). These promises were partially fulfilled in earlier times and partially at the coming of Christ. Yet still others would be fulfilled at the close of this dispensation of the fulness of times and as the millennial era is ushered in.

The law (or Torah) given to Moses refers particularly to the elaborate set of preparatory legislation, statutes, and sacrifices that distinguish the Mosaic dispensation. The expectations laid out by the Mosaic law were fulfilled in Christ’s great sacrifice at Gethsemane and Golgotha and as he was resurrected from the garden tomb.

So the law, which was given later, was fulfilled first, but the covenant, which was given earlier, will be fulfilled last. This is just another classic example of a pattern we find throughout the scriptures that the “first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30; see D&C 29:30). Although the law was satisfied about two thousand years ago, we still await the completion of the threefold covenant originally promised to Abraham.

Jesus continues his law and covenant teachings in 3 Nephi 15 by admonishing his listeners to keep his commandments and by discussing some of these remaining covenant promises, particularly those which the house of Israel should fulfill. He mentions that all the sheep of his Israelite fold would need to hear his voice so they could come into his flock. As scattered Israel would hear his voice and become his covenant followers, they could return to their lands of inheritance, where they could be a blessing to other nations of the earth. As Jesus emphasizes in 3 Nephi 16, in order for the covenant to be fulfilled, Israel must reassemble under his leadership in their lands of inheritance and live as a Zion people. Before Zion can be established among Israel, however, the people must gather. And before they can gather, he tells them, gospel truths will need to be presented to them. These truths will come through the gentiles, who would then be numbered among his people. Then the gathering and the covenant promises of Isaiah would be fulfilled (see 3 Nephi 16:17–20). This Law and Covenant Discourse serves

as a vital bridge between the simple, broad expectations of the Sermon on the Mount and the profound specific requirements of the third sermon, the Covenant People Discourse, as Christ begins teaching on the following day.

The Covenant People Discourse begins in 3 Nephi 20:10 and continues through 3 Nephi 23:5. In 3 Nephi 20, the Savior teaches his listeners that when the “words of Isaiah” are fulfilled, then the covenant promises with the house of Israel will be fulfilled (see 3 Nephi 20:10–12). As Isaiah’s prophecies are fulfilled, then the gathering of Israel will take place and Israel will be given power over unrepentant gentiles as the Lord establishes his chosen people (see 3 Nephi 20:13–20). The Savior then reviews the messianic prophecies given to Moses and the covenant promises given to Abraham, which had been taught by the prophets down through the ages (see 3 Nephi 20:21–31). Then without identifying the source, Jesus begins quoting from Isaiah 52. He summarizes in 3 Nephi 20:46 by promising that when these things foretold by Isaiah come to pass, “Then shall this covenant which the Father hath covenanted with his people be fulfilled.”<sup>8</sup>

Starting in the first verse of chapter 21, Christ then gives a unique sign so that his listeners (and later readers) would know when these promises of Isaiah and the gathering would begin to take place. In one very long, complicated sentence that begins in verse 1 and continues through verse 7, the Savior foretells that when the teachings of the Book of Mormon would come from some gentiles unto a remnant of their Nephite-Lamanite seed and their descendants would begin to know these things, then they would 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” (3 Nephi 21:7). Indeed, a great and marvelous work would come forth among them, which would show the Father’s power among his covenant people (see 3 Nephi 21:8–11). Using the words of Micah, the Savior describes the power that covenant Israel will have among the gentiles as the wicked are punished and all are invited to become part of his church and covenant people (see 3 Nephi 21:12–22; Micah 5:8–14). Indeed, covenant Israelites will help his scattered people build the New Jerusalem as the powers of heaven and he himself would come down among them to complete the gathering of Israel (see 3 Nephi 21:23–29).

Israel’s redemption and the fruits of the gentiles are foretold in Isaiah 54, which is then quoted in its entirety by the Savior (see 3 Nephi 22). Together, the children of the desolate (the covenant gentiles) and the children of the married wife (the Israelites) will bring forth stakes of Zion in the last days. The Lord’s mercy will be shown through the maintenance of his covenant of peace (see 3 Nephi 22:10), and righteousness will reign. The Savior concludes his profound Covenant People Discourse in 3 Nephi 23 by admonishing his followers to search the words of Isaiah, who foretold these marvelous things.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of 3 Nephi, Mormon highlights the covenant teachings of the Savior and repeats the sign that when the Book of Mormon comes forth from the gentiles, then the covenant promises are beginning to be fulfilled (see 3 Nephi 29:1). Indeed, the Lord’s covenant with Israel will be remembered and fulfilled (see 3 Nephi 29:3–9).

This Book of Mormon section of less than fifty pages contains more covenant references per page than any other section (see table 1). Particularly profound and insightful are the many covenant teachings of the resurrected Savior. He pledges that all the covenant promises of the Father with Abraham and the house of Israel (especially as recorded by Isaiah) will be fulfilled. One key sign of the beginning of their fulfillment will be when the Book of Mormon comes from the gentiles to the Lamanite remnants and they begin to know its teachings. This sign has been given, especially during and since the administration of President Spencer W. Kimball, inasmuch as missionary success, the establishment of many stakes, and the building of many temples are taking place in Central and South America. Thus the covenant fulfillment is underway.

## Mormon, Ether, Moroni

This last section of the Book of Mormon contains fewer than half the covenant references per page found in the previous section. Most of them are in the form of editorial comments by Mormon and Moroni. Most of Mormon's covenant comments refer to the Lord's covenant people (see Mormon 3:21) and the covenants of the Father with Abraham, the house of Israel, and the children of men (see Mormon 5:20; Moroni 7:31–32). Two interesting passages anticipate the testifying and covenant purposes of the Book of Mormon as presented on its title page (see Mormon 5:14; 7:10). The key passage in Mormon 5:12–14 foretells the coming forth of Mormon's writings, which should go to the Jews "that they may be persuaded that Jesus is the Christ" so that "the Jews, or all the house of Israel" can be gathered by the Father to the land of their inheritance "unto the fulfilling of his covenant."

Moroni also refers to the Lord's covenant people (see Mormon 8:15, 21) and his covenant promises with them (see Mormon 8:21, 23; and 9:37). He even addresses Israel concerning her covenants as he writes his abridgment of the Jaredite history (see Ether 4:15; 13:11). He also reminds his readers that the Father's covenants are an essential element in the gospel principles of faith and repentance (see Moroni 7:31–32). In his last testimony near the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni admonishes the house of Israel to awake, to put on her garments, and to strengthen her stakes "that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto thee, O house of Israel, may be fulfilled" (Moroni 10:31). In conclusion, Moroni then invites the reader to receive the grace of God through Christ's sanctification, "which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot" (Moroni 10:33).

## Conclusion

Literally from the title page to the very last page, the Book of Mormon contains numerous and varied covenant teachings. The primary emphasis is on the covenant promises made to Abraham and the house of Israel. In these covenant teachings, readers are not only taught and reminded of these ancient covenants and the signs and events of their latter-day fulfillment, but they are also invited to receive and honor their own covenant commitments, especially as symbolized in the baptismal ordinance. The secondary emphasis is on the covenants made between people, usually of a positive nature, which bring peace and stability to society. The third and last area of emphasis in the Book of Mormon is on those secret covenants and oaths that wicked people make with each other and Satan as he attempts to further his evil designs upon the children of men.

By carefully studying the 154 covenant references in the Book of Mormon, the reader gains important insights into the nature, purpose, and blessings of covenants. He or she also learns the importance of honoring one's personal covenant commitments, even in times of peril and persecution. And most important, the reader recognizes that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ make and unconditionally honor all their covenant promises, in order to bless the righteous and reward the obedient who have kept their covenants. These covenant relationships and blessings will continue into the eternities. The Book of Mormon reader needs to better understand and appreciate the special, sacred covenant relationship that he or she should maintain with Heavenly Father so that his full, marvelous blessings can be enjoyed.

## Notes

1. The word *covenant* appears 100 times in the original Book of Mormon text, while *covenants* appears 31 times, *covenanted* 20 times, *covenanting* 2 times, and *covenanteth* 1 time.
2. *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingon, 1962), 1:716.

3. A number of references to personal, military, and secret oaths are found in the Book of Mormon. Of the 41 references to *oath* or *oaths*, the great majority are of the horizontal or person-to-person type, almost equally divided between positive and negative examples. They are found mostly in the books of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and Ether.
4. 1 Nephi 20 (Isaiah 48) reviews the elements of a covenant made earlier, and 1 Nephi 21 (Isaiah 49) describes the blessings of a covenant yet to be fulfilled.
5. In a similar pattern, of the 41 *oath* references in the Book of Mormon, 20 of them are positive promises openly made between individuals and leaders while 9 of them are righteous, vertical oaths made with God or his servants, and 12 of them are negative vows entered into with secret combinations.
6. See Stephen D. Ricks, "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin's Address (Mosiah 1–6)," *BYU Studies* 24/2 (1984): 151–62, and Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978).
7. For further details about these secret bands, see Victor L. Ludlow, "Secret Covenant Teachings of Men and the Devil in Helaman through 3 Nephi 8," in *Helaman through 3 Nephi 8, According to Thy Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992), 265–82.
8. The word *covenant* appears ten times in this single chapter, third in frequency only to Doctrine and Covenants 132 (16 times) and Genesis 17 (13 times).
9. The whole Covenant People Discourse is organized into a major chiastic pattern of poetic parallelisms. See Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 432–46.