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All Kindreds shall be Blessed: Nephite , Jewish, and Christian Interpretations of the Abrahamic Covenant

Noel B. Reynolds, July 18, 2017 draft

Over the last two decades there has been a small, but important revival of scholarly interest in the ancient promises God made to Abraham. The resurgence of scholarly study on this topic appears to be a natural consequence of the major transitions taking place in Old Testament studies across the board. As the last two centuries' dominance by source criticism fades faster and faster, scholars favoring holistic and literary approaches to the canonical texts are taking new looks at old materials that had been thought by most to have been exhausted long since.

While Genesis 12:2–3 is usually treated as the *locus classicus* of the original Abrahamic covenant, it surfaces in other locations and in somewhat different formulations. And there is no universal agreement as to what the covenant says or includes. Most studies of this topic focus on the twin promises of descendants and land implicit in the opening statement: “I will make you into a great nation.” Much less attention has been given to the closing promise that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:2–3, *NIV*). This third promise provides the principal focus for most Book of Mormon discussion of the Abrahamic covenant. And it is the Nephite interpretation of this specific promise that

contrasts so sharply with traditional Jewish and Christian interpretations. As will be explained below, one prominent line of twentieth-century biblical criticism focused on a completely different formulation, the identification of Israel as the people of God and of YHWH as Israel's god, as the basic form of the Abrahamic covenant.

Changing methodologies in Old Testament studies

For most of the twentieth century, the writings of Bible scholars regarding God's promises to Abraham featured efforts to fit these references to covenant into the documentary hypothesis of Julius Wellhausen by matching them individually to the various hypothetical documents that were thought to have been used at various stages in the composition of Genesis and much of our Old Testament.¹ But the last half of that century spawned a growing variety of literary and rhetorical studies that recognized unexpected evidences of unity and deliberate structure in the final/canonical versions of most books of the Old Testament. Those more recent efforts have produced in turn a new group of Abrahamic studies which offer

¹ See the thorough review of that period's treatment of *covenant* in Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, 3–117.

insights with important potential for understanding of the Abrahamic covenant and the role it plays in the Book of Mormon.

More than two decades ago, Heidelberg's Old Testament scholar, Rolf Rendtorff wrote about the paradigm for Old Testament scholarship having disintegrated to the point that it was in a Kuhnian crisis stage, without a clear direction toward a new paradigm having yet emerged. He saw this as a promising development and expressed hope that what would continue would be

the attitude of taking the text seriously in its given form, in its final shape.

In this respect there are close connections between some of the new literary approaches and so-called canon criticism. . . . Taking a synchronic approach to the text in its given shape is a task Old Testament scholarship has neglected too long and too intentionally. Scholars still seem to be proud of knowing things better than the final redactors or compilers. This is a kind of nineteenth-century hubris we should have left behind us. The last writers . . . were . . . much closer to the original meaning of the text than we can ever be. . . . We receive the text from the hands of these last writers, and they are the ones whose voice and message we have to hear first.²

² Rolf Rendtorff, "The Paradigm is Changing: Hopes—and Fears," *Biblical Interpretation* 1, 1 (1993), p. 52.

Most scholarly effort to understand the Abrahamic covenant in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries endorsed the diachronic approach of Julius Wellhausen. Scholars usually interpreted the variations in the wording of the relevant passages as a natural outcome of a process through which our current Genesis was formed through the merger of earlier documents containing their own versions of related materials. This approach tends to minimize the differences and to assume that all these passages were understood in ancient Israel to be saying the same thing. While most Latter-day Saint commentators have maintained some distance from Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis, they have also tended to gloss over differences in wording in these texts. But those very differences have motivated a growing number of scholars generally to look ever more carefully for meaningful explanations of those differences that would enable a more precise understanding of God's covenant(s) with Abraham from the perspective of each book's final author or editor.

Christian approaches

While the Christian interpretations of the Abrahamic promises have not historically been much emphasized, beginning with Gerhard von Rad in the

twentieth century, these have been the focus of renewed emphasis.³ Von Rad has focused on the third promise to Abraham arguing that it shows God's purposes as expressed to the patriarchs extending beyond Israel with a universal salvation prepared for all mankind.⁴ Claus Westermann was another prominent exegete of that period who follows Paul and von Rad in seeing the blessings of Abraham extended not just to Israel, but to "all the families of the earth".⁵ Similarly, in the interpretation of Brevard Childs, when Paul saw the Abrahamic promise extended "to include the inheritance of the world (Rom. 4.13), he was only exploiting an interpretative direction which had long been represented in the canonical construal of the tradition."⁶ Richard Bauckham went so far as to interpret "the blessing of the nations as the ultimate purpose of God's call of Abraham."⁷ Bauckham acknowledges that "Abraham, Israel and David are not sent out to evangelize the world," But in a straightforward manner, he believes they

³ See the discussion by R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, Cambridge UP, 2009, pp. 142ff. In the following summary of twentieth century Christian appropriation of the third promise to Abraham, I follow Moberly's lead closely. See Moberly, pp. 142–148.

⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, rev. ed. SCM, 1972, 152–54.

⁵ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12—36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion, Augsburg, 1985, 152.

⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, Fortress Press, 1983, 239.

⁷ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*, Baker Academic, 2003, 28.

make the church's mission intelligible as a necessary and coherent part of the whole biblical metanarrative. They establish the movement from the particular to the universal that the church is called in its mission to embody in a particular form. They establish the purpose of God for the world that, again, the church is called to serve in mission to the world.⁸

Christopher J. H. Wright later proposed the same direct connection between Genesis 12:3 and the Christian mission:

So the Gentile mission, Paul argued, far from being a betrayal of the Scriptures, was rather the fulfilment of them. The ingathering of the nations was the very thing Israel existed for in the purpose of God; it was the fulfilment of the bottom line of God's promise to Abraham. Since Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and since the Messiah embodied in his own person the identity and mission of Israel, then to belong to the Messiah through faith was to belong to Israel.⁹

Further, Wright interpreted the Great Commission given to the disciples "as a christological mutation of the original Abraham commission—"Go . . . and be a

⁸ Bauckham, 46–47.

⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, InterVarsity, 2006, 194.

blessing . . . and all the nations on earth will be blessed through you.”¹⁰

Paul R. Williamson

While many of these twentieth-century Christian interpretations took certain lines of Old Testament interpretation for granted, the noted Australian evangelical scholar, Paul R. Williamson, has recently published a comprehensive monograph on the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis, which builds on the full range of twentieth-century Old Testament scholarship and provides a far more detailed defense of the Christian interpretation.¹¹ More than any other scholar, Williamson has produced a synchronic study that approaches Genesis, the Pentateuch, and even the entire Deuteronomic History (Genesis through 2 Kings) as an integrated whole that did have a unitary view of Abraham’s covenant relationship with God that in turn informs and distinguishes the wording of the various relevant passages of the text.

Because Williamson’s analysis is still regarded by many as the most comprehensive and thorough analysis of scholarly interpretations of these biblical

¹⁰ Wright, 213. Cf. Matthew 28:18–20.

¹¹ See P. R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: the Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis*, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000. This volume subsequently provided the basis for his 17-page summary analysis and exposition of the covenant in a major reference work. See “Covenant,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, InterVarsity Press, 2003, pp. 139–155.

Abrahamic covenant texts, I will provide a brief summary here as a backdrop for the following analysis of the far more numerous and expansive parallel texts in the Book of Mormon. His approach is focused productively by his acceptance of the growing scholarly consensus that the Abraham cycle (Genesis 11:27–25:5) is dominated by an inclusio (Genesis 12:1–22:19) which contains “the covenantal promises and obligations relating to Abraham.”¹² The unit begins with the Lord’s announcement to Abram:

- A I will make you into a great nation,
 and I will bless you;
- B I will make your name great,
 and you will be a blessing.
- B* I will bless those who bless you,
 and whoever curses you I will curse;
- A* and all peoples on earth
 will be blessed through you. Genesis 12:2–3

It ends after Abraham was tested by the commandment to sacrifice Isaac:

- A because you have done this
 and have not withheld your son, your only son,
- B *I will surely bless you*
- C and make your descendants as numerous as the
 stars in the sky

¹² Williamson, p. 253.

and as the sand on the seashore.

C* Your descendants will take possession
 of the cities of their enemies,

B* and through your offspring, all nations on earth will be blessed,

A* because you have obeyed me. Genesis 22:16–18

While these introductory and concluding promissory statements contain the same principal elements and even similar chiastic structures—constituting thereby bookends around this eleven-chapter inclusio—the explicitly covenantal passages in Genesis 15 and 17 are more complex. (Note that the second chiasm differs from the first only by the addition of a third element—the obedience of Abraham as stated in A and A*.) After detailed analysis of both the texts and the leading scholarly attempts to interpret and reconcile all these texts, Williamson proposes that this main section of the Abraham narrative

is bound together by two major promissory themes: Abraham as the physical progenitor of a “great nation,” and Abraham as the spiritual benefactor of “all the nations of the earth.” The establishment of the “great nation” is the primary focus up to and including the covenant established in Genesis 15. From this point on, however, attention is chiefly paid to the “seed” through whom Abraham will mediate blessing to “many nations.” This emphasis

culminates in the establishment of an eternal covenant (in Gen. 22) that will be perpetuated exclusively through the special “seed” who will descend from Abraham through Isaac (and Judah).¹³

Williamson goes on to show how this holistic view agrees with the modern Christian interpretation that sees Christ as the promised Abrahamic “offspring” and the christianization of the world by the church as the means by which all nations are being blessed. Recognizing that the Babylonian exile brought an important chapter “of covenant history” to a conclusion, he reminds readers that according to “the prophetic oracles of hope, this history was ‘to be continued’.”

The ancient covenant promises would yet be fulfilled, for God would establish a “new covenant” with his people through which his universal purpose would ultimately be realized. For the establishment of this new covenant, we must look to the NT, where it finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the royal “seed” of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth are blessed.¹⁴

The growing weight and confidence of these accumulating Christian interpretations has stimulated a very high level of response from Jewish , secular,

¹³ Williamson, pp. 258–9.

¹⁴ “Covenant,” pp. 154–155.

and even Christian some scholars. These studies have raised the ante considerably by questioning (1) the assumption that the universalism featured in the Christian interpretation is a Christian innovation, (2) the linguistic formulation of the Abrahamic covenant by Christian scholars, and (3) the cultural origins and meaning of the covenant language in their ancient contexts.

Walter Moberly

University of Durham professor of theology, R. W. L. Moberly has stepped forward, from a Christian perspective, to challenge the traditional Christian interpretation. In spite of the attractiveness of that interpretation for Christians and in spite of the roster of heavy hitters who have defended it, Moberly finds strong reasons to ask “whether this is the only, or indeed the best, construal of the Genesis text.”¹⁵ Motivated by his view that contemporary interpretations should accommodate the needs and challenges of current religious, cultural, and political circumstances, Moberly undertakes a careful re-examination of scholarly efforts to interpret Genesis 12:3b.

Moberly begins with the recognition that Old Testament scholars and

¹⁵ Moberly 148.

translators have long recognized that the translation of Genesis 12:3b containing the third promise to Abraham could be interpreted reflexively, even though the resultant reading is more awkward or difficult to interpret than the passive reading that predominates Christian interpretation. The King James Version set a pattern in which the preposition was translated as “in” or “through,” and the verb form was assumed to be passive: “*In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.*” The consistent Book of Mormon phrasing also uses the passive verb: “In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth *be blessed.*”¹⁶ But from medieval times, Jewish readings have recognized implied reciprocity or reflexivity in the verb form and have favored interpreting the preposition as “by.” For example, the New Jewish Publication Society version reads: “And all the families of the earth/ Shall *bless themselves by you.*”¹⁷

The reflexive reading provides strong support for the radically particular understanding of the blessing as understood in much Jewish tradition. Following some biblical analogs, medieval commentators such as Rashi, and various translators explicitly refer to the common situation in which people from whatever

¹⁶ Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 1 Nephi 15:18. All quotations from the Book of Mormon are taken from this critical edition.

¹⁷ *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, p. 12. See the discussion in Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Princeton University Press, 2012, pp. 24–26, where he leans on Moberly’s analysis.

cultural or religious background seek or confer a blessing on themselves or someone else while appealing to some famous example of a blessed person, such as Abraham. For example, “May you be blessed as Abraham was.” The word blessing here is interpreted as the opposite of cursing, and this interpretation is supported by Jeremiah 24:8–9, where the cursing of Zedekiah is invoked as an example. Moberly also points out that the biblical examples of such invocations do not imply that the invocation itself will have any effect on the outcome.¹⁸ This minimalist understanding of Genesis 12:3b pervades much of the interpretive corpus, but, as Moberly points out, ultimately does lose out to the more universalist interpretations resulting from reading this passage as passive, rather than reflexive. The Jewish translators of Genesis in Septuagint give a straightforwardly passive rendering in the Greek. And major Jewish commentaries by Benno Jacob and Umberto Cassuto also favor that reading. Following them, Nahum M. Sarna explicitly rejects the *Tanakh* reversion to a reflexive reading in his Genesis commentary:

This rendering understands Hebrew *ve-nivrekhu* as reflexive. People will take your own good fortune as the desired measure when making a blessing

¹⁸ Moberly, 154.

on themselves. A more likely translation of the verb is as a passive: “shall be blessed through–because of–you.” God’s promises to Abraham would then proceed in three stages from the particular to the universal: a blessing on Abram personally, a blessing (or curse) on those with whom he interacts, a blessing on the entire human race.¹⁹

After considering these commentaries and the thorough linguistic analysis of Keith N. Grüneberg,²⁰ Moberly agrees that the passive reading is most probable and most supportive of the meaning the phrasing would have had for Abraham in his cultural context. This brings Moberly into agreement with the leading Christian interpretations of the last century, but also demonstrates that the leading Jewish interpretation of recent decades have supported similarly universalistic readings of the text, bringing the two traditions into unprecedented agreement on the meaning of the text, if not on its application in real world interpretation. While these translation differences do help explain some of the variation in Jewish and Christian traditions, they do not relate directly to the kinds of differences that can be seen between these traditions and the Nephite interpretation of the Abrahamic

¹⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, The JPS Torah Commentary, Jewish Publication Society, 1989, 89.

²⁰ Keith N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context*, de Gruyter, 2003.

covenant and its significance.

Jon D. Levenson

Jon D. Levenson, distinguished professor of Jewish studies at Harvard University, is largely sympathetic to Moberly's analysis and has helpfully included a summary history of these competing traditions in his recent volume on Abraham. Levenson acknowledges the generally assumed distinction between a tribalistic Jewish tradition that anticipates the fulfillment of this promise to Abraham primarily in terms of a promised land and numerous descendants, and the Christian understanding that focuses more on the third promise, derived principally from Paul, that Abraham will become "the father of all them that believe" and that the blessing "of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ" (Romans 4:11–13 and Galatians 3:14).

But Levenson also challenges the validity of that traditional distinction by documenting the teachings of multiple rabbis across the centuries, including even Maimonides, who could see the fulfillment of this third promise to Abraham in universal benefits that would come to all peoples through the spreading influence of Abraham's faith and teaching across the generations. He finds the traditional

distinction to be “*too* convenient” inasmuch as “traditional Jewish interpretations” approximate “the universal aspiration evident in the Pauline reading” and falsify “the convenient dichotomy, along with the equally wrongheaded stereotype that Judaism is tribalistic and inward-looking (or even misanthropic), while Christianity is universal and outward looking.” In the classical Christian tradition, “Abram and the Jews were only instrumental to the emergence of the gospel and its exportation to all the nations of the world.” But, “for the classical Jewish tradition . . . , Abram and the people who descend from him have full importance in their own right.” “The promises endure” even “when they [the Jews] fail at the lofty ethical and theological missions that come to be associated with their first father.”²¹

Joel S. Baden

A decade after Williamson’s monograph was published, Joel S. Baden published his own detailed review of the scholarly literature and raised some second thoughts about the wholesale move to a synchronic reading. On the one hand, Baden does look at the Pentateuch as a whole, and recognizes the central role of the Abrahamic covenant in that text:

²¹ *Inheriting Abraham*, p. 35. See pp. 24–35 for the full presentation of his argument and evidence.

From the perspective of the canonical Pentateuch, the patriarchal promise is the guiding force behind the entire narrative. At the moment that Abraham emerges on the scene, Yahweh promises to make him into a great nation, a promise that by necessity involves the inseparably linked aspects of progeny and land. The rest of the Pentateuch is nothing other than the story of how that promise comes to be fulfilled. . . .

The story of the promise is not one among many in the Pentateuch. It is the sole story of the Pentateuch.²²

On the other hand, his careful reconsideration of the long traditions of both diachronic and synchronic readings leads him to conclude that “the history of scholarship, be it documentary or nondocumentary, has obscured in one way or another the intimate and intricate links between the promise and the sources to which it is central.”²³ Baden’s analysis leads him to the admittedly controversial conclusion “that the source-critical readings of the promise can be combined with a canonical approach to construct novel theological interpretations of the Pentateuch as a whole.”²⁴ But while he has injected a rich reconsideration of the implications

²² Joel S. Baden, *The Promise to the Patriarchs*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 158.

²³ *Promise*, 159–60.

²⁴ *Promise*, 162.

of methodological approaches for an understanding of the Abrahamic covenant, this newest comprehensive study of the covenant largely ignores the third part that promises blessings to the nations through Abraham's seed. And so it does not add appreciably to our ability to comprehend the Book of Mormon approach.

Rolf Rendtorff

At the end of the century, Rolf Rendtorff sought to transcend the insights and methods of both historical and form criticism by giving exegetical priority to the final form and the context of the text.²⁵ Following a different approach pioneered in biblical form criticism, Rendtorff saw the most basic formulation of the Abrahamic covenant in the statements indicating that YHWH would be Israel's god, and Israel would be his people. Again, he begins with methodological considerations:

A theological interpretation of the Old Testament must not allow itself to be hindered by either historical or form criticism from reading and interpreting the texts in the contexts in which they are given to us. In this process the

²⁵ Rendtorff's original *Die Bundesformel* was published in 1995 by Verlag Katholisches. It was translated into English by Margaret Kohl and published by T&T Clark in 1998 as *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*.

observations which have been made in the light of historical and form-critical questions will undoubtedly have to be taken into account. But they can only have a subordinate function, and must ultimately contribute to a better understanding of the text in its final form.²⁶

With that methodological perspective, Rendtorff undertook to identify and explore “the covenant formula” of the Hebrew Bible, beginning with the passages in which Abraham received a covenant.

Following meticulous contextual analysis of the long list of relevant Old Testament passages, Rendtorff proposes that we should recognize three versions of the covenant formula in Old Testament texts. The first four books of the Pentateuch tend to feature the first one (A)—“I will be your God.” Deuteronomy tends to use (B)—“you will be my people.” And a third form (C) that combines these two occurs less frequently, but is distributed throughout the Pentateuch and other writings. In the middle of a long rehearsal of the expectations of his covenant with Israel, the Lord tells Israel: “And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people”(Leviticus 26:12). The frequent occurrence of the Hebrew word *berit* in conjunction with these formulations justifies calling it

²⁶ Rendtorff, 10.

the “covenant formula,” and Rendtorff concludes that “the formula may be positively said to be an exposition of what the word *berit* means.”²⁷

Rendtorff outlines a wide range of insights, a few of which turn out to be of particular value for Book of Mormon comparisons. He notes the rise of version B of the formula in Deuteronomy and explains this timing with the actual emergence of Israel as a people that Yahweh chose to liberate from Egypt. He goes on to explain that the requirement that Israel obey the commandments is inherent in the formula that they be the Lord’s people. “For Israel, to be God’s people means in particular keeping his commandments.”²⁸ He explains this in terms of the holiness code in Leviticus 11. To be God’s people, Israel must be holy because God is holy.²⁹ “The requirement to keep the commandments is therefore also an essential element in the narrower definition of what it means to be a people for God’s possession.”³⁰

This requirement is also a constant theme in the way the Nephite prophets referred to the covenants of Lehi and Abraham as they taught the people and called sinners to repentance. Rendtorff’s covenant form A occurs 102 times in the Book

²⁷ Rendtorff, 88. See also pages 22 and 26.

²⁸ Rendtorff, 22.

²⁹ Leviticus 11:44–45. Rendtorff, 26.

³⁰ Rendtorff, 25–26.

of Mormon by my account. Most of these speak of turning to or from, remembering or forgetting, thanking or worshipping “the Lord their/our/his God.” Seven of these are divine assertions that “I am the Lord thy God,” or that the people “shall know” or be brought to the knowledge of “the Lord their God.”³¹ Nephi teaches his rebellious brothers that the Lord “loveth them which will have him to be their God.”³² As explained above, Rendtorff’s B form of the covenant is prominent in Deuteronomy which speaks repeatedly of Israel as “the people of the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 27:9).³³ This second form of the covenant formula occurs frequently as a reference to “my/his people” and notably predominates in the second day of Christ’s teachings to the Nephites where variations of *my people* occur 27 times. Jesus refers to himself or the Father as their god only three times explicitly, though the relationship is obviously assumed throughout.³⁴ A version of Rendtorff’s combined third form C only occurs once in the Book of Mormon that I have noticed: “that ye may know of a surety that *I the Lord God* do visit *my people* in their afflictions” (Mosiah 24:14).

³¹ Mosiah 11:22, 12:24, 13:13, 26:26, 28:2, Alma 37:9, and 3 Nephi 20:13.

³² 1 Nephi 17:40.

³³ Cf. Leviticus 11:45, 22:33, 25:38, 26, 45, Numbers 15:41 and Ezekiel 34:24 with Deuteronomy 4:20, 7:6, 14:2, and 28:9. These two forms are combined four times as a third version of the formula: Exodus 20:7 (I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.), Leviticus 26:12, Deuteronomy 26:17–19, and 29:12–13.

³⁴ See 3 Nephi 20:23 (“the Lord your God”), 40, 42.

Book of Mormon interpretations

Informed readers might expect the 1830 Book of Mormon with its heavy emphasis on Jesus Christ to share the traditional Christian interpretation. But instead of pointing to Christ as “the seed” that will bring blessings to all nations, it points to itself as a new scripture written by the descendants of Abraham’s great grandson Joseph specifically. And rather than portraying the Christian church as the solution, it loudly condemns the dominant Christian traditions as a major part of the problem. A similar stance is taken toward apostate Judaism.³⁵

The first prophets in the Book of Mormon also saw the Lord’s promises to their branch of Israel as an extension of the Lord’s covenant with Abraham and as focused on what Abraham’s descendants would do to bless all people:

Wherefore our father hath not spoken of our seed alone but also of all the house of Israel, pointing to the covenant which should be fulfilled in the latter days, which covenant the Lord made to our father Abraham, saying: *In*

³⁵ In a separate paper, I distinguish three streams of covenant discourse in the Book of Mormon: 1) the Lehitic and Jaredite promise of a promised land for their righteous posterity, 2) the Abrahamic covenant with a focus on a blessing for “all the kindreds of the earth,” and 3) the covenant made by individuals when they repent and accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. Based on a comprehensive survey of the text, I show how each of these is developed in the text and how they are integrated in the teachings of the Nephite prophets and of Jesus Christ to the Nephites. See, “Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant through the Book of Mormon,” working paper, available online at BYU’s ScholarsArchive.

*thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.*³⁶ (1 Nephi 15:18)

This consistent Book of Mormon formulation of this promise to Abraham most closely corresponds to the Old Testament version in Genesis 28:14: “In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed,” and in two ways. First, like Genesis 22:18 and 26:4, it clarifies that the blessing will come to the families of the earth through Abraham’s descendants, and not through him personally. That phrasing reinforces the universal interpretation of the blessing. And second, Genesis 28:14 uniquely echoes the Book of Mormon “all the kindreds” with “all the families.”³⁷ The oft repeated interpretation of this blessing in the Book of Mormon will point to the distant descendants of Joseph, great-grandson of Abraham, as the specific Abrahamic progeny through whom universal blessings will be offered to both the Gentile nations and the apostate descendants of Jacob.

In his last preaching to his own brothers, Nephi draws even more deeply on what he learned in the great vision for a much expanded explanation of this part of God’s covenant with Abraham:

And after that our seed is scattered, the Lord God will proceed to do a

³⁶ This exact wording recurs three times in 1 Nephi 22:9, 3 Nephi 20:25 and 27.

³⁷ Cf. Acts 3:25 where the same wording occurs in the KJV, but with a different interpretation. The Septuagint would seem to preserve a somewhat distinct tradition: “All the tribes of the earth shall be blessed *in you and in your offspring.*” (Genesis 28:14)

marvelous work among the Gentiles which shall be of great worth unto our seed. Wherefore it is likened unto the being nursed by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon their shoulders. And it shall also be of worth unto the Gentiles—and not only unto the Gentiles but unto all the house of Israel—unto the making known of the covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham, saying: *In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.* And I would, my brethren that ye should know that all the kindreds of the earth cannot be blessed unless he 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 them which are of the house of Israel. Wherefore he will bring them again out of captivity, and they shall be gathered together to the lands of their first inheritance. And they shall be brought out of obscurity and out of darkness, and they shall know that the Lord is their Savior and their Redeemer, the Mighty One of Israel. (1 Nephi 22:8–12)

This same focus on the third Abrahamic promise is strongly reinforced in Jesus Christ's second day of teaching the Nephites. After rehearsing prophecies about his own coming, he focused on the covenant of the Father with Abraham,

and specifically on the third part of that ancient promise—citing it twelve times in the recorded version of that day’s teachings.

And behold, ye are the children of the prophets,

and ye are of the house of Israel,

and ye are of the covenant which the Father made with your fathers,

saying unto Abraham: *And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.*

The Father having raised me up unto you first

and sent me to bless you in turning away every one of you from his iniquities—

and this because ye are the children of the covenant.

And after that ye were blessed,

then fulfilleth the Father the covenant which he made with Abraham,

saying: *In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed—*

unto the pouring out of the Holy Ghost through me upon the Gentiles,

which blessing upon the Gentiles shall make them mighty above all,

unto the scattering of my people, O house of Israel. 3 Nephi
20:25–7

In these three passages, we have two repetitions of the Abrahamic covenant by Nephi and two by Jesus Christ—each of which uses exactly the same wording that focuses on the last part of the covenant as recorded in Genesis 12:3. Also, both defer or delay any mention of promised lands or posterity. Minimally, this would suggest that this wording corresponds to what Nephi would have been reading from the plates of brass. But we should not infer that the brass plates version did not include the promise of land and posterity—but only that that part of the Abrahamic promises was secondary from the perspective of Book of Mormon writers, even though it might have been the primary concern of ancient Israel’s writers.

The reason for this reversal in priorities is simple. The Nephite prophets understood that the book that would result from their writing efforts would constitute the principal instrument by which the nations of the world would be blessed in the last days. That vision was shared by the Nephite prophets from Lehi and Nephi in the beginning all the way to Mormon and Moroni at the end. And it seems to have provided the primary motivation for them to carry on their shared

literary project in the face of enormous personal obstacles—as is especially evident in the last decades of the record’s composition.

It may be surprising—or even jarring—to Book of Mormon readers that this obviously christocentric volume does not support the traditional Christian interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant which touts Jesus Christ himself as the fulfillment of the promise that in Abraham’s seed all kindreds of the earth would be blessed. Nor did the Nephite writers see the descendants of Judah as the chosen line through which Abraham’s seed would provide this great blessing to the world. Rather, they were inspired by visions that taught them of the key role their writings would play in that prophesied future and by writings of the brass plates prophesying that these writings would be produced by the descendants of Jacob’s favored son Joseph. Those segments of the great vision given to Lehi and Nephi that described this future role for their writings and of Joseph’s descendants were subsequently and vigorously endorsed by Jesus himself when he came to the Nephites after his resurrection. As Lehi quotes from an ancient revelation to Joseph that is not included in the Old Testament,

Wherefore the fruit of thy loins shall write, and the fruit of the loins of Judah shall write. And that which shall be written by the fruit of thy loins, and also

that which shall be written by the fruit of the loins of Judah, shall grow together unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions and establishing peace among the fruit of thy loins and 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

As Mormon reaches the point in his abridgement of the Nephite record that he will present an account of the visit and teachings of Jesus, he twice reminds his readers that the Nephite people are descendants of Joseph, the great grandson of Abraham.

Behold, our father Jacob also testified concerning a remnant of the seed of Joseph. And behold, are not we a remnant of the seed of Joseph? And these things which testify of us, are they not written upon the plates of brass which our father Lehi brought out of Jerusalem? (3 Nephi 10:17)

This lineage reminder is contextualized by Mormon's larger vision of the prophecies for Israel generally:

I am Mormon, and a pure descendant of Lehi. I have reason to bless my God and my Savior Jesus Christ, that he brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem . . . and that he hath given me and my people so much knowledge

unto the salvation of our souls. Surely he hath blessed the house of Jacob, and hath been merciful unto the seed of Joseph. And insomuch as the children of Lehi have kept his commandments he hath blessed them and prospered them according to his word. Yea, and surely shall he again bring a remnant of the seed of Joseph to the knowledge of the Lord their God. And as surely as the Lord liveth, will he gather in from the four quarters of the earth all the remnant of the seed of Jacob, who are scattered abroad upon all the face of the earth. And as he hath covenanted with all the house of Jacob, even so shall the covenant wherewith he hath covenanted with the house of Jacob be fulfilled in his own due time, unto the restoring all the house of Jacob unto the knowledge of the covenant that he hath covenanted with them. And then shall they know their Redeemer, who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and then shall they be gathered in from the four quarters of the earth unto their own lands, from whence they have been dispersed; yea, as the Lord liveth so shall it be. Amen. (3 Nephi 5:20–26)

The final sentence makes it clear that the Nephite prophets fully anticipated the restoration of Israel to its promised lands. But it also clearly puts the priority on the spiritual restoration or “gathering.” Mormon goes on later to quote Jesus’s

own affirmation of this understanding of the future gathering of Israel and of the identification of the Nephites as descendants of Joseph: “Ye are my disciples; and ye are a light unto this people, who are a remnant of the house of Joseph. And behold, this is the land of your inheritance; and the Father hath given it unto you” (3 Nephi 15:12–13).

Because of the things Nephi saw in his first great vision and that he further expounded in his prophecies to his brethren, he and his successors understood that the record of the Nephites containing the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it was revealed to them, together with the lost records of other branches of scattered Israel, including the lost tribes, would be brought forth in the last days to convince Gentiles and Jews, Nephites and lost tribes of Israel, that Jesus Christ is the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that they must accept and follow his gospel as individuals in order to be saved. As Jesus explained to the Nephites:

I give unto you a sign that ye may know the time when these things shall be about to take place, that I shall gather in from their long dispersion my people, O house of Israel, and shall establish again among them my Zion. And behold, this is the thing which I will give unto you for a sign. For verily I say unto you that when these things which I declare unto you—and

which I shall declare unto you hereafter of myself and by the power of the Holy Ghost, which shall be given unto you of the Father—shall be made known unto the Gentiles, that they may know concerning this people which are a remnant of the house of Jacob and concerning this my people which shall be scattered by them—verily verily I say unto you: When these things shall be made known unto them of the Father and shall come forth of the Father from them unto you . . .it 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 which are of the house of Israel. 3 Nephi 21:1–3, 7

This teaching of Christ to the assembled Nephite survivors with its focus on this part of the Abrahamic covenant provides by far the most complete explanation of that covenant and goes far beyond what most interpreters have found in the Bible.

Book of Mormon readers who were surprised by the Nephite teaching that their record, and not Jesus Christ himself, would be the prophesied future blessing of Abraham's seed to the world, will likely also be surprised by the strong Nephite rejection of the view that the christianization of the world by the Christian churches over the two millennia after Christ would be a featured part of Abraham's

contribution. Again, in the great vision given to Lehi and Nephi immediately after their flight from Jerusalem, they were shown that the churches that would succeed Christ's original disciples in Jerusalem would become a major part of the problem. They were shown "among the nations of the Gentiles the formation of a great church . . . which is most abominable above all other churches . . . and I saw the devil that he was the founder of it" (1 Nephi 13:3–4, 6). They were also shown that the "record of the Jews," which contained "the covenants of the Lord" and "many of the prophecies of the holy prophets," as well as "the fullness of the gospel of the Lamb" initially went "forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 13:23–25). But they were also shown that subsequently, the great and abominable church would take "away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious," including "many covenants of the Lord" (1 Nephi 13:26). Because these developments would "pervert the right ways of the Lord" and "blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men, . . . an exceeding great many" would stumble, and Satan would have "great power over them" (1 Nephi 13:27–29).

Accordingly, the Lord promised Nephi and Lehi in that vision that in that day he would "bring forth . . . much of my gospel, which shall be plain and

precious” which would be contained in the writings of the Nephites to whom the Lord would manifest himself. But these writings would be hidden up “to come forth unto the Gentiles.” They would contain “my gospel, saith the Lamb, and my rock and my salvation” (1 Nephi 13:34–36). And the Nephites were not the only Israelites who had been led away before the destruction of Jerusalem.

Consequently, there would be “other books” that would come forth “unto the convincing of the Gentiles and the remnant of the seed of my brethren—and also to the Jews, which were scattered upon all the face of the earth—that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true” (1 Nephi 13:39).

Conclusions

The covenant God made with Abraham provides the central theme for much of the Old Testament and is even more visibly emphasized in text of the Book of Mormon. Competing religious and scholarly traditions have produced both disagreement and confusion about how that covenant should be understood and about what its future fulfillment might entail. Jewish traditions have tended to follow later Old Testament texts by emphasizing the focus on the promise of nationhood—to include a vast posterity and a promised land. Christian interpretations, following Paul, have seen the fulfillment of the promises in the

blessings Jesus Christ brought to all peoples and in the subsequent christianization of much of the world's peoples. Biblical scholars over the last two centuries have tended to downplay the covenant. And only recently as the grip of the documentary hypothesis on Old Testament studies has loosened, have scholars returned to holistic studies of the text and refocused on the third part of the covenant that promised blessings to the families of all nations through Abraham's seed. The Book of Mormon understanding of the Abrahamic covenant always did emphasize that third element. But it also rejected any optimism about Judaism providing a great example that would bless the world over time or that Christianity would be that blessing. Rather, from start to finish, the Nephite prophets reported having learned in their own visions that the blessing to the nations would be something far more specific. It would come principally through the line of Joseph—not Judah—and it would be the record of the Nephites containing the fulness of Christ's gospel that would be the immediate instrument by which the nations would be blessed in the last days.

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