

Covenant Teachings of the Scriptures

VICTOR L. LUDLOW

As I have taught scripture classes at BYU during the past 26 years, I have been pleasantly reminded of the many great works of God through the ages. One of the most enduring memorials of Heavenly Father's work has been the preservation of the scriptures. The written word of God has not only survived through millennia of political, social, and moral changes, but the scriptures have provided ethical guidelines and spiritual light for millions of readers and listeners through the ages.

According to a belief statement from the book *Principles and Practices of the Restored Gospel*, the major purposes and values of God's holy writ are as follows:

SCRIPTURES are pearls of divine wisdom and gems of sacred writing that

Record God the Father's plans and works,

Teach his commandments and covenants,

Inspire expressions of his truths through great literature and profound doctrine,

Verify his prophecies and promises, and

Testify of him and his Son.

[Victor L. Ludlow, *Principles and Practices of the Restored Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), pp. 131, 641; emphasis added]

Today I wish to talk about one of these primary purposes of the scriptures. In fact, we find it stated on the title page of the Book of Mormon. If I were to ask you, "What is the first stated purpose of the Book of Mormon as recorded on its title page?" what answer would go through your mind? The standard response is usually something about "the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ." That is a major role of the Book of Mormon, but it is *not* the first stated purpose. Indeed, the statement about convincing Jew and Gentile is prefaced with the words *And also*, indicating that something else precedes it.

The first stated purpose of the Book of Mormon is found in the second paragraph, beginning in the fourth line: "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" (emphasis added). The first purpose of the Book of Mormon is to *teach* the covenants of the Lord. And then, building on that foundation, it *testifies* of Jesus as the Christ.

Victor L. Ludlow was a professor of ancient scripture when this devotional address was given on 13 October 1998.

Understanding covenants can, without exaggeration, be identified as a major key to unlocking the scriptures. Covenant concepts are found throughout the standard works, and we'll highlight some of them as found in the Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants, and then we will return to the Book of Mormon.

Covenant teachings are an important part of the Bible. Some of the earliest English translations of the Bible were divided into two portions—the Old and New Covenant, for what we today call the Old and New Testament. To begin to understand the Lord's covenants, one should study Genesis 12–50 to see how the covenant promises were established with Abraham and his family down to Joseph and Ephraim. Next one will want to read Deuteronomy carefully. The book of Deuteronomy is structured as a covenant contract between the Lord and the Israelites, with Moses as the intermediary. Isaiah and Jeremiah also present important Old Testament teachings about covenants. The Old Testament provides an ancient context to discuss “what is a covenant?” and “what are its essential elements?”

What Is a Covenant?

Let's review first what a covenant is. The standard definition of a *covenant* is “a solemn agreement between two or more parties.” A covenant is a compact between these parties in which promises are made and conditions are agreed upon, usually in the presence of witnesses. As the conditions are fulfilled, the promised benefits are bestowed. “A solemn agreement between two or more parties” implies that all parties are willing participants in the covenant arrangement. Granted, one of the parties may have drafted the terms of the contract and may have greater power and administrative authority in the covenant agreement—such as a king entering into a vassal treaty with a lesser ruler or God providing and defining our covenant opportunities with him.

Ideally all parties are anxious to enter into covenants with each other.

Heavenly Father has always seemed anxious to make covenants with us. Early in our premortal existence he made promises that resulted in our present circumstances on this earth. The scriptures contain so many of his covenants and promises with us that another common definition of *covenant* is “a promise of God to his children.”

What Does It Mean “to Covenant”?

Let us move from English definitions to the language roots of the Old Testament and discuss some ancient meanings of *covenant* and *covenant making*. *Covenant* as a noun derives in the Old Testament from the Hebrew word *be'rith*, which has Semitic roots in the languages of the ancient Near East. The noun *be'rith* also joins with a common verb in order to describe the process of entering into a covenant. The technical phrase for “making a covenant” that is used most frequently in the Old Testament is *karat be'rith*, meaning literally “to cut a covenant.” This Hebrew construct is similar to the English legal phrase “to cut a contract,” or, as expressed in the vernacular, “to cut a deal.” The origin of this expression may lie in the ancient covenant ceremony practice of sacrificing animals by *cutting* their throats, which symbolized a point of finalization and personal commitment in the contractual process. In other words, when the two parties came to an agreement, they would indicate it through an unusual act—such as cutting the throat of an animal to be used as a sacrificial offering or as the main dish for their feast of celebration. Today we would probably just “shake hands on it.” Depending upon which language etymology one follows, the term *be'rith* seems to have three possible meanings, each of which will be recognized by Latter-day Saints in our covenant tradition.

First, one meaning of *be'rith* derives from the Hebrew root *bara*, meaning to “select” or

“choose.” This root conveys the analogy of a woodcutter going into the forest to select or mark with the cut of his axe certain trees for the harvest. God does not arbitrarily enter into a covenant relationship with each and all of his children. As those with faith choose to come unto Christ and are baptized, Heavenly Father enters into a covenant relationship with them. His Holy Spirit “makes a mark” upon them as they are sanctified and born anew. Thus a covenant is a selective choice carefully entered into by both parties. The union is marked with signs or tokens that each party has accepted the covenant arrangement. By the way, the Native American custom of people becoming “blood brothers” by cutting a mark on their wrists and then pressing them together could be considered as a type of this covenant process.

The second meaning of *be’rith* is a “bond” or “joining together.” Scholars believe this context derives from the Akkadian root *biritu*, which means to “fetter” or “chain.” We may feel uncomfortable with such strong language of being fettered or chained because, for us, a covenant is not an obligatory or forceful type of binding together; it is to be a voluntary relationship. However, when there is a joining in mutual commitment between two parties, once they have made their pact, they are bound together! As Latter-day Saints, we talk about a “new and everlasting covenant” and being “sealed together,” such as in temple ordinances. This joining together represents an absolute, binding compact between God and his children (see D&C 82:10–11).

Indeed, when one looks at covenant making and the meaning of “cutting” a *be’rith* in this second context, the symbolism of the cutting motion can represent a penalty involved if one breaks a solemn oath. A list of such penalties, such as cutting a mark on the body or slitting the throat of the offending party, is found in the text of ancient Near Eastern contracts. So to “cut a bond” can also mean to commit your-

self to dire consequences if you break your promise. However, when we think of “cutting a bond,” there is also a positive dimension and the implication of a liberation if one maintains vows with a powerful, loving God. In a gospel context, as we cut ourselves from the chains of sin by entering into a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ, we free ourselves from spiritual bondage and hell to achieve our ultimate, eternal destiny. This promise of freedom was also given in the Book of Mormon as King Benjamin spoke to his covenant Israelites in Mosiah 5.

The third root of *be’rith* has a more unusual meaning. According to some scholars, the Hebrew root *bara* in *karat be’rith* really means “to break bread” together with someone. This concept is best understood in the Semitic tradition of hospitality and guest protection. According to the Arabian and Bedouin customs, even if someone had been your fierce enemy or a complete stranger, when you invite that person into your home or tent and share bread with him or her, you are duty-bound to defend and protect this guest—even at peril of your own life. This external, physical act of breaking bread together symbolizes an internal, moral commitment that obligates the host to protect his guest. Likewise there are some examples in the Old Testament of special ceremonial meals as a part of covenantal experiences, such as when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek and they partook of blessed bread and wine together; when Jacob and his father-in-law made a covenant with each other and ate bread together over a stone altar; and when Moses placed Israel under covenant and then went on the mountain where he, Aaron, and the 70 elders saw God and did eat and drink (see Genesis 14:18, 31:44–54; Exodus 24:7–11). It seems to have been a common pattern in the ancient Near East to eat bread as a symbol of a covenant commitment.

Although we in modern society might find this act of eating bread a bit unusual as a

covenant process, it is very much a part of covenant making in the lives of most Latter-day Saints. We renew our covenants weekly as we partake of the bread of the sacrament. The eating of bread may be much closer to covenant making in the ritual sense than we generally think. Among the direct parallels between the performances of sacrifice in the Old Testament and the sacrament in the New Testament, we remember that the important and common peace offering was ritually cut or divided and then eaten by the Levitical Priesthood holders and the Israelites together as a part of their covenant-making and covenant-renewal process. We, as modern covenant Israelites, follow this same procedure as our priests separate or break the bread, representing Christ's sacrifice, and we eat it together in a covenant-type meal.

In review, a covenant is a binding, solemn agreement between God and man, conditional upon certain stipulations as recorded in the scriptures. To enter into a covenant implies a voluntary, binding process between the covenant parties, often symbolized by some special act, such as eating bread together. As all parties choose to enter into this relationship, they are then committed to adhere to the terms of the contract.

What Are the Basic Elements of a Covenant?

In any covenant, certain and constant elements help to define and solidify the commitment relationship between the respective parties. Understanding these elements helps us appreciate the different dimensions of our covenant relationships. The basic elements of a covenant are sixfold, and all six elements are found in the book of Deuteronomy:

First, there is a preamble, prologue, or preface in the covenant contract that introduces the involved parties and the basic nature of the covenant. This introduction simply brings the parties together so they can now enter into their agreement. For example, the first five

verses of Deuteronomy 1 review how the Lord and Israel came together as they prepared to enter a covenant relationship (note especially verse 3).

Second, the historical context of the covenant is presented, sometimes in great detail. This may seem unnecessary, but it is in ancient vassal treaties and in many scriptural contexts. Chapters 1 through 4 of Deuteronomy provide this historical context.

Third, the stipulations of the covenant are explained. This “fine print of the contract” is what we usually think of and what we should seriously study when we evaluate any specific covenant. Before we enter into any covenant, we should understand exactly what we are agreeing to. Chapters 5 through 26 of Deuteronomy present general as well as specific stipulations—the major commandments and the particular laws that the Lord expected of Israel.

Fourth, for any covenant to be binding, it must be duly witnessed or, as we say today, “notarized by proper officials.” To solidify the covenant arrangement, a multitude and variety of witnesses are involved. Scattered throughout the last chapters of Deuteronomy we find the following witnesses: Moses, the 70 elders who with him saw God on Mount Sinai, the priests and Levites, a variety of written records, and a special hymn. Indeed, all heaven and earth and various signs and wonders were called forth as special witnesses.

Fifth, a listing of blessings and curses or, as we would say in today's politically correct language, “incentives and penalties” are a part of the covenant. The rewards for proper and prompt adherence and punishments for the neglect or disregard of covenant promises are an essential part of the contract. Chapters 27 through 33 in Deuteronomy contain many lists of blessings and curses.

Sixth, a record of the covenant is made, and steps for its perpetuation are outlined. A covenant, especially one with God, is rarely for just one time and place. Sometimes the

covenant document needs to be brought forth and read aloud in the presence of the covenant parties. It usually needs to be reviewed, maybe even revised, and regularly renewed so that it can continue to bless the relationship between the individuals. These elements of preservation and perpetuation are in chapters 27 and 31 of Deuteronomy.

These same six covenant elements are found in Isaiah 48 as Isaiah prepared the Israelites of his time to renew their covenant relationship with the Lord. This same chapter is cited by Nephi in 1 Nephi 20 as he prepared the Lehite community to become a covenant people after their arrival in the new land.

What Covenant Models Do We Have in the Church?

Lest we think these six covenant elements only belong to ancient Israelite or Nephite communities, let's review how they are found in the Church today. In fact, these elements are so much a part of our being a covenant people that we may not appreciate how much they permeate our Latter-day Saint society. For example, we could talk about our membership in the Church and how it is a solemn covenant commitment. Simply stated, we were first introduced to the gospel and then we were instructed about the Restoration, which provided the historical framework of our membership. We also learned the stipulations or commandments that were expected of us as Church members. Our formal entrance into the Church at baptism was duly witnessed by two priesthood holders. Blessings and/or punishments followed us as Church members, and we are reminded of them in a variety of Church settings and as we study the scriptures. Finally, as members of record, we have weekly opportunities to perpetuate our covenant relationship through the sacrament.

Our most consistent covenant model is found in the sacrament, which is a precise covenant ordinance. Following the same six

elements, we first come together to renew our covenants. The sacrament hymn then provides the historical framework as we come out of a worldly environment (and our wondering why the bishop called *that* person to the calling we just sustained), and our thoughts are turned to places like Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the Garden Tomb. In the precise wording of the sacramental prayers, we agree to take Christ's name upon us, to always remember him, and to keep his commandments. The sacrament covenant is not only witnessed by the priesthood leaders, but we witness it to each other as we individually partake of the bread and water. Those around us can see and witness that we have done an external act as a symbol of an internal commitment. A wonderful blessing, the companionship of the Holy Spirit, is promised in the prayers. Once we have experienced that blessing, to lose the Spirit is indeed a curse. And, finally, partaking of the sacrament is the latest renewal of our covenant relationship with God.

The temple provides the most solemn covenant opportunities for Latter-day Saints. Although one would expect to learn a lot of details and specifics about temple covenants during the endowment session, the covenants themselves are usually just introduced and briefly defined and explained in the temple. However, we are told where we can learn more about them—in the scriptures! Thus a conscientious study of the scriptures is an excellent preparation for going to the temple so we can review the covenant framework and the Lord's expectations before we go into his house and make solemn promises to keep specific temple covenants. Like the ancient Israelites, we Latter-day Saints are indeed a covenant people.

Covenant Teachings in the New Testament and the Doctrine and Covenants

In addition to the foundation covenant teachings of the Old Testament, we find valuable covenantal concepts in the New

Testament. Some of them are connected, such as Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31 and Paul’s witness of this covenant’s fulfillment in Hebrews 8. The blessings of this new covenant were first offered to the Jews in Galilee and Judea, and they were received by many—such as John, Peter, James, and others. But as most Jews turned away from the gospel, Christ’s new covenant was offered to the Gentiles. As Christ taught, the great symbol of his new covenant or new testament was his blood that he shed for our sins (see Matthew 26:28). Eventually all nations and peoples were to hear Christ’s gospel and enter into the new covenant, but persecution and early Christian apostasy prevented this from happening (see Matthew 28:19). Thus the full blessings of the new covenant were short-lived as recorded in the New Testament.

Covenant teachings are also important in the latter-day work of scripture containing the writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith—as evidenced in its title: *The Doctrine and Covenants*. Covenant references appear 94 times in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, about once every three pages—roughly the same ratio as in the *Book of Mormon*. When we think of covenant concepts in the *Doctrine and Covenants*, we first usually identify one of two sections: either section 84, where the oath and covenant of the priesthood is presented, or section 132, where the new and everlasting covenant of marriage is taught. Indeed, section 132 has more covenant references, 16 of them, than any other section or chapter of scripture. Section 107 also contains important covenant teachings connected to the priesthood. And section 42 has some valuable teachings about the law and the covenant.

Why Do We Have Covenants?

Obviously, the idea of being a covenant people is important for Latter-day Saints. I believe there are at least four sets of reasons why covenants are so valuable for us as members of Christ’s Church.

Teachings and Guidelines

First, covenants provide valuable teachings and guidelines. As we prepare to enter into covenants, we receive instruction about the doctrinal framework of the covenant. We are taught the commandments that God expects of us. This instruction provides gospel teachings and guidelines that give us direction and focus as we commit ourselves to keep his commandments.

Incentives and Rewards

Second, covenants give us incentives and rewards. Sometimes the blessings of a particular commandment or covenant are so important to us that we receive extra motivation to be obedient. Such incentives can be a positive influence in our lives to counter the many negative enticements that surround us. Granted, eventually we will want to do good for good’s sake and to keep our covenants because that’s really what we want to do. But in the meantime, and as motivators in moments of weakness, covenant incentives and rewards encourage us on the path toward God.

Gateways and Ordinances

Third, covenants are required gospel gateways and ordinances if we want to return to God’s presence. An obvious role of covenants is to define essential commitments and ordinances that God requires of us as we seek to return to his celestial realm. Certain covenant gateways, such as baptism, are absolutely essential for all of us, even Jesus, the Son of God. We must participate in these covenants if we want to fulfill our divine destiny.

Patterns and Measurements

Fourth, covenants develop patterns and measurements of righteous behavior. As we not only enter into but also keep our many covenant commitments, patterns of obedience make it easier for us to make and keep higher and higher levels of covenants. Knowing God’s

expectations for us and then formalizing our commitment to them through a covenant act provides us with a somewhat objective means of measuring our religious performance. Our progress on the path of life is verified, and we feel trustworthy for greater opportunities of service. By keeping covenants and being faithful in what may seem to be little things, we are proven worthy to receive greater things.

In summary, covenants help us in many ways as we sojourn through life. Covenant teachings and guidelines give us direction. Covenant incentives and rewards encourage us to stay on the correct path. Covenant gateways and ordinances define what is expected of us and where we should be along the way. And covenant patterns and measurements develop further righteous behavior and reinforce our sense of fulfillment. Without covenants, we would be lost and frustrated, eternally. With covenants, we not only draw nearer to our Heavenly Father and Elder Brother, but we also become more like them, eternally.

Covenants in the Book of Mormon

Some of the clearest and most profound covenant teachings are found in the Book of Mormon. The word *covenant* in one form or another appears 154 times in this work of scripture. The first reference is on the title page, as cited earlier, and the last one is in the next to the last verse of the Book of Mormon as Moroni exhorts us to receive the covenant of the Father that we might become perfect and holy (see Moroni 10:33). There are two types of covenant relationships presented in the Book of Mormon: horizontal and vertical. *Horizontal* covenants are where human beings enter into a peer covenant relationship with each other. For example, Captain Moroni made covenants both with some Nephites that they would keep the peace in the land (see Alma 46:31) and with some Lamanites that they would no more take up their weapons of war against the Nephites (see Alma 62:16). There are 41 such horizontal

covenant references in the Book of Mormon, especially in the books of Alma and Helaman. *Vertical* covenants are between God and mortals, either individually or collectively. The teachings of Nephi, Jacob, King Benjamin, Alma, Mormon, and Moroni enrich our understanding of God's covenants (see 1 Nephi 13–15; 2 Nephi 9–10; Mosiah 5–6, 18; 3 Nephi 29; Mormon 8; Moroni 10). There are 113 vertical covenant passages in the Book of Mormon. The great majority of them are found in three books easily remembered with a single name, but with different numerical prefixes: 1, 2, and 3 Nephi.

The Savior's Covenant Sermons in 3 Nephi

The great teacher of covenants in the Book of Mormon is the resurrected Savior during his three major public sermons—each with a covenant context. The first sermon, the so-called Sermon on the Mount (or, in its 3 Nephi setting, the sermon at Bountiful or the temple), begins with a covenant contract. As stated in the first two verses of 3 Nephi 12, the Savior's teachings are directed to those who will believe in his words and be baptized in a covenant relationship. The Sermon on the Mount establishes the contract between Christ and his covenant followers. It has also been called the "constitution of Christianity" because it outlines our rights and responsibilities as members of his kingdom.

The Savior's second sermon, found in 3 Nephi 15 and 16, is referred to as the "Law and Covenant Discourse." In it, Jesus clarifies some important distinctions between the law and the covenant. He explains that the *law*, which was given to Moses about 1300 years earlier, had been fulfilled by him, the Savior. Yahweh, the premortal Lord, had given the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. And Jesus, the Anointed One, had fulfilled the law at Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the Garden Tomb. But, Christ goes on to explain, the *covenant* he had made with his people was not yet all fulfilled. The covenant,

which was given to Abraham around 1900 B.C., had been partially fulfilled in the intervening two millennia, but there were many wonderful covenant promises waiting to be fulfilled, especially in these latter days.

The Law and Covenant Discourse distinguishes the Mosaic law, which was completed at Christ's first coming, from the Abrahamic covenant, which will be fulfilled at his second coming. In the classic pattern of "the last shall be first, and the first shall be last," the covenant that was made earlier with Abraham will be fulfilled in the end of days, whereas the law, made later with Moses, was already completed in the meridian of time.

The Abrahamic Covenant

This would be an appropriate time to highlight the Abrahamic covenant. As recorded in Genesis 12 and later passages, three profound promises were given to Abraham. First, he would be the literal father of many nations and a countless posterity. Second, his descendants would inherit and rule the lands of the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Third, through his lineage all nations and families of the earth would be blessed.

The fulfillment of these promises started very slowly for Abraham. After many years he fathered eight sons with three different wives. He had about three dozen grandsons, and the numbers have multiplied until today hundreds of millions of people on this planet are the literal descendants of Father Abraham.

As far as governing great lands was concerned, Abraham was no great ruler or emperor. His obituary might have mentioned his many travels, his teaching sojourn in Egypt, his successful military campaign as he rescued Lot and others, his honorable relations with his neighbors, and his growing flocks and family—but he was no major historical figure in the world scene of his time. Indeed, at his death the only property that he controlled was

a small grove of trees and a cave that became the family cemetery near Hebron. But after his lifetime, Abraham's posterity went on to control the lands originally promised him as well as other territories in Asia and Africa. In addition, further lands of inheritance were promised Abraham's family here in the Americas, as confirmed by the Savior in 3 Nephi 16:16.

The third promise, that Abraham's posterity would bless the earth, has found fulfillment in many, many ways. First and foremost, the Savior and the blessings of his life and atonement are eternal legacies of one of Abraham's "sons." Associated with them are the spiritual blessings of Christ's church, priesthood, and gospel, which have enriched millions through the ages and will endure into the eternities. In addition, the moral, intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and material/financial areas of our lives have been enriched through Abraham's seed. As examples, the messages and moral-ethical values of the Bible have established the foundation for Western society. Indeed, much of our modern civilization might not even have been established without the great classical works of science, philosophy, drama, and mathematics that the Arab descendants of Abraham preserved through the Dark Ages. Arab society provided important incentives and resources for the European renaissance. Also, the Jews, although only one small remnant of Abraham's lineage, have constantly demonstrated the capacity to bring forth notable advancements in science, medicine, and other areas of human endeavor. This is recognized by identifying the high percentage of Jews in any annual listing of Nobel Prize recipients. Although Jews only make up about one out of 400 people in the world, they will often receive one out of four Nobel awards as they enrich and bless the lives of others. Thus through the centuries Abraham's descendants have made major contributions to world civilization through their advances and discoveries

in government, philosophy, science, commerce, arts and letters, and many other areas of our lives.

Religious historians recognize that within a couple of years there will be as many Latter-day Saints on this earth as Jews. In the year 2001 do you think that one out of four Nobel Prize recipients will be Latter-day Saints? Last year one was—but we would need three or four from an LDS background every year to begin to match the annual average of the Jews in this area of world recognition. Granted, Latter-day Saints have many ways whereby they benefit humanity, but I see especially great potential in the current generation of LDS youth and university students. I fully expect to see some of their pictures on the front covers of *Time* magazine when future Nobel Prizes are announced. What contributions are you making and how are you blessing others? Remember—as Abraham’s heirs, *you* will provide many future blessings through missionary, temple, and Church work, and *you* contribute to society and make discoveries and improvements with *your* gifts and talents. So when the Savior told the Nephites that the covenant was not yet all fulfilled, he knew that further numbers and wonderful blessings were yet to be provided by Abraham’s family, especially in this dispensation of the fulness of times.

The Savior’s Covenant People Discourse

Returning to Jesus’ ministry in 3 Nephi, after quoting some Isaiah and completing the Law and Covenant Discourse, the Savior admonished his listeners to return to their homes and to ponder and pray about the things that he had taught them. Continuing his teachings the next day, he delivered his profound “Covenant People Discourse,” found from 3 Nephi 20:10 to 3 Nephi 23:5. Most of us have probably not studied this sermon in great depth because of its eloquent style, its elaborate prophecies, and the fact that a lot of Isaiah

is quoted in it. Suffice it to say, if the contents of this sermon of Jesus were to be discovered and verified in some ancient archive in the Middle East, it would be the most significant archaeological discovery of this millennium. What an addition to the scriptures it would be! And yet we who have this unique sermon may not have appreciated its value and the keen insights, signs, and promises it reveals for us as Christ’s covenant people in the latter days. In fact, the word *covenant* appears 10 times just in 3 Nephi 20—more times than in any other chapter of the Book of Mormon—highlighting the covenant nature of this sermon.

In essence, the Covenant People Discourse begins with a promise that when the prophecies of Isaiah are fulfilled, then Heavenly Father’s covenant with Israel will be fulfilled. The threefold promise to Abraham will be completed as the remnants of Israel (Abraham’s posterity) will return to their lands of inheritance (the places promised them in the covenant) and as they become a blessing of righteousness (fulfilling their covenant commitments and opportunities of service) for all peoples of the earth. The Savior then cites significant prophecies of Isaiah and Micah to be fulfilled as the New Jerusalem is established and as Jesus, himself, dwells on earth.

Jesus continues in chapter 21 with a promised sign so that we can know when these covenants are being fulfilled—because as the covenants are fulfilled, then Christ’s millennial reign will be established. Would you like to know what that sign is? You have probably read it many times but may not have recognized its significance.

The Promised Sign That the Covenant Is Being Fulfilled

Let’s pick up the Covenant People Discourse in the last verse of chapter 20. Jesus has just finished quoting most of Isaiah 52. He then summarizes:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, all these things [these prophecies of Isaiah] shall surely come, even as the Father hath commanded me. Then shall this covenant which the Father hath covenanted with his people be fulfilled.

He then continues in verse 1 of chapter 21:

And verily I say unto you, I give unto you a sign, that ye may know the time when these things shall be about to take place [Which things?]-that I shall gather in, from their long dispersion, my people, O house of Israel, and shall establish again among them my Zion.

And in verse 2 he continues, “And behold, this is the thing which I will give unto you for a sign.” But before he tells us the sign, he explains the significance of some things that he has revealed or that he will yet reveal. And then he tells us about the Gentiles being established in this land and the great works he will show forth among them. And soon we are in verse 7, where he tells us that when the latter-day Lamanites “begin to know these things—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.”

Wait a minute! In verse 1 the Savior promises us a sign so that we can “know the time when these things shall be about to take place.” Note the future tense in promising something “about to take place.” It’s still ahead, but it seems to be close at hand. Then, in verse 7 Jesus tells us that the Lamanites knowing these things will be a *sign* that we can know “that the work of the Father hath already commenced.” Note the past tense here: it “hath already commenced,” or, as we would say, “It has already started.” So somewhere between verse 1 and verse 7 we pass from a *future* promise to a *past fulfillment*. To go from the future to the past we have to pass through the present. Somewhere in the middle verses we missed the sign that would be the transition

from a time when something was about to take place to the time when it had already commenced.

Maybe a couple of suggestions will help with these verses. First of all, note that verses 1 through 7 of chapter 21 are punctuated as one long sentence—one very long, complicated sentence. English teachers would require numerous large blackboards just to diagram the grammatical parts of this sophisticated sentence. Then theologians would take hundreds of hours trying to understand the doctrinal meanings of this profound sentence. So don’t be discouraged if you don’t comprehend this sentence the first few times you read it.

Second, the Savior has some techniques to alert us to when something important is coming up. He could speak in a loud voice to let us know about something important! And maybe he did, but that does not carry over into the printed text. But he does give us some “attention getters” in the text to let us know when something important, something *very* important, is coming up. He uses foremost the word *verily*. Note in verse 3 the double use of *verily*, indicating that what is coming is *very, very* important. Another attention getter is the word *therefore*. Note how it introduces verse 5. So let us read verses 3 to 5 and see if we can recognize the important promised sign. As I read these verses, I’ll insert some definitions of key terms as established in the earlier verses:

Verily, verily, I [the Savior] say unto you [the audience in Bountiful], when these things [of the Book of Mormon] shall be made known unto them [the Gentiles] of the Father, and shall come forth of the Father, from them unto you;

For it is wisdom in the Father that they [the Gentiles] should be established in this land [America], and be set up as a free people by the power of the Father, that these things [as found here in the Book of Mormon] might come forth from them unto a remnant of your seed [the Lamanites], that the covenant of the Father may be

fulfilled which he hath covenanted with his people, O house of Israel;

Therefore, when these works and the works which shall be wrought among you hereafter [as later recorded in the Book of Mormon] shall come forth from the Gentiles, unto your seed.

Then, continuing in verse 7:

And when these things come to pass that thy seed [the Lamanites] shall begin to know these things [of the Book of Mormon]—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 who are of the house of Israel. [3 Nephi 21:3–5, 7]

So the sign is when the Book of Mormon comes from the Gentiles to the Lamanites and they begin to accept it! Then is the time of the fulfillment of the covenant promises in preparation for Christ's millennial reign. Although many attempts were made in earlier Church history to take the gospel and the Book of Mormon to the Lamanites, it wasn't really until the 1960s that they began to accept the teachings and come into the Church in great numbers. Thus the sign as promised by Jesus in the Covenant People Discourse has finally been given, and now is the generation for the fulfillment of the covenant promises!

This profound sentence with its promised sign is the pivotal point in the Covenant People Discourse. The second half of the discourse is, in many ways, a mirror image of the first. Passages from Micah and Isaiah 54 are quoted as covenant promises are highlighted. The Savior concludes the Covenant People Discourse with an admonition and a promise. The admonition is to "search these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah" (3 Nephi 23:1). And the promise is similar to the one at the beginning of the sermon—that

all things that Isaiah spoke either have been or will be fulfilled, even according to the words he spoke (see verse 3). So in addition to studying the covenant teachings found in the Book of Mormon, we need to continually study Isaiah's writings in the Bible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Heavenly Father is a covenantal God. His creation of this earth and our existence here is a covenantal act as promised in the premortal councils. His sending forth of his Son and the prophets is to instruct, prepare, supervise, remind, and perpetuate the covenants among us, the children of God on earth. His priesthood keys and the temples and tabernacles provide places for us to enter into covenant relationships and to receive instruction from living prophets about covenant teachings. By covenant, we become his representatives to the world as we seek and encourage others to enter into covenants with him. By covenant, we commit ourselves to build and perfect each other in Christ's kingdom. By covenant, we open the gates of heaven as we enter the house of the Lord and make solemn promises with God. We cannot draw close to Heavenly Father and we cannot dwell in his celestial realms without being in a covenant relationship with him. This covenant relationship must be administered by his Son and must be verified by the Holy Spirit. *Covenants are our bond with the Divine!*

"I am a child of God, And he has sent me here" to follow a covenant pathway back to his presence (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 301). I hope that as we study the covenant teachings of the scriptures we will be inspired to more fully honor our sacred covenants. By following Christ's example, and with the sanctifying companionship of the Holy Spirit, I know we can truly keep our past and future covenants with Heavenly Father. I pray that we will do so in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.