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PROSPERING IN THE LAND: A COMPARISON OF COVENANT PROMISES IN LEVITICUS AND FIRST NEPHI 2

Kerry Muhlestein

Abstract: *A careful examination of the Abrahamic covenant, as contained in Leviticus 26, and the covenant established with the Lehites during their exodus to the New World, found in 1 Nephi 2, shows deliberate similarities. These similarities are important to understand, as the role of covenant is central in both ancient Israelite practice and current Latter-day Saint theology.*

For some time, I have been researching the language and textual cues associated with the Abrahamic Covenant as used in the Old Testament. It is clear that covenant consciousness was an important part of the identity Israel assumed and God assigned to them throughout the Old Testament.¹ There is no doubt the covenant was a constant presence in Israelite thought, that it evolved over time, and that it was used differently in differing specific circumstances.² Even knowing all this, as

1. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J.A. Baker, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), argues that the covenant is the central theme of the entire Old Testament. See also Michael A. Goodman, “The Abrahamic Covenant: A Foundational Theme for the Old Testament,” in *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003): 43–53.

2. For some examples of this, see Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament. Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000); Keith H. Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” in *the Master’s Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (1999): 191–212; and John Eaton, *Mysterious Messengers: a Course on Hebrew Prophecy from Amos Onwards* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 23.

I wrote a verse-by-verse commentary on portions of the Old Testament,³ I was surprised at how pervasive and powerful I found the theme to be. As I explored the meaning of each verse for the chapters covered in the Old Testament Gospel Doctrine manual and several other chapters, I ended up writing about the Abrahamic Covenant more than 1300 times. Clearly this is an important topic to the Lord and His people! As a result, I have begun a large study of how the theme is used in the Old Testament and how that should impact Latter-day Saints.

In the meantime, because that covenant is so important to Latter-day Saints,⁴ I have also begun to investigate how that theme is developed in other books of scripture. It is a major component in the Book of Mormon,⁵ the title page of which states that covenant is an important theme of the book.⁶ Furthermore, Professor Victor L. Ludlow notes that a form of the word *covenant* is employed at least 154 times in the Book of Mormon text.⁷

3. Kerry Muhlestein, *Scripture Study Made Simple: The Old Testament, the Complete Text and Verse by Verse Commentary* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2017).

4. See Truman G. Madsen, “Choseness: Implications and Extensions in Mormonism and Judaism,” in *Covenant and Choseness in Judaism and Mormonism*, eds. Raphael Jospe and Truman G. Madsen (London: Associated University Press, 2001), 131, 133–35; and David Rolph Seely, “The Restoration as Covenant Renewal,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2005), 311.

5. See Douglas E. Brinley, “The Promised Land and Its Covenant Peoples,” in Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., *The Book of Mormon: Helaman through 3 Nephi 8, According to Thy Word* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1992), 39–46, for a discussion of how the covenant in the Book of Mormon ties its peoples to the antediluvian patriarchs.

6. See also Victor L. Ludlow, “Covenant Teachings in the Book of Mormon,” in *The Disciple as Scholar. Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, eds. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 67, who notes the importance of the covenant on the title page. See also Raymond C. Treat, “The Importance of Covenant in the Restoration of the House of Israel,” *The Zarahemla Record* 50 (August 1990): 3–4, who notes that the theme of covenant is found in the opening and closing verses of the Book of Mormon, highlighting its importance as a theme.

7. Victor L. Ludlow, “Jesus’ Covenant Teachings in Third Nephi,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, eds. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 177–85, initially identified 113 instances. He later updated that number to 154. See Victor L. Ludlow, “The Father’s Covenant People Sermon: 3 Nephi 20:10–23:5,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, eds. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2012), fn. 5 & 6.

While the role of covenant in the Book of Mormon as a whole will also become a larger study in the future, it is worth noting a striking similarity between the establishment of the Abrahamic Covenant during Israel's Exodus and its (re)establishment with Lehi's family during their exodus.

The Abrahamic Covenant is most fully outlined for Israel when it was reestablished with them during their journey from Egypt. This is presented in Leviticus 26.⁸ Here, the Lord outlines the Covenant in the following way:

1. Israel's obligation is to keep the statutes and commandments of the Lord (Leviticus 26:3).
2. If Israel keeps these commandments, the Lord will provide a land and rain in that land, which will yield bounteous production of both trees and crops planted in the ground (Leviticus 26:4).
3. They will have peace and protection from enemies in the land (Leviticus 26:6).
4. They will conquer their enemies (Leviticus 26:7–8).
5. They will be fruitful and multiply (Leviticus 26:9).
6. They will have plenty to eat (Leviticus 26:10).
7. God will establish His house among them and His presence will be with them, and they will be His people (Leviticus 26:11–12).
8. It is God who has delivered them and given them freedom (Leviticus 26:13).

Leviticus 26 represents the end of what scholars refer to as the "Holiness Code," which is comprised of chapters 17–26 and which outlines a series of laws regarding rituals, sexual conduct, family relations, priestly conduct, regulations of religious festivals and the tabernacle, blasphemy, and redemption.⁹ The statutes and commandments that Israel

8. The covenant is also summarized in Deuteronomy 28. According to the Biblical text, the Deuteronomic summary of the covenant would post-date that of Leviticus. There is scholarly debate about this, largely focused on the way the Leviticus Holiness Code, which Leviticus 26 is a part of, assumes the existence of some laws present in Deuteronomy. See Henry T. C. Sun, "Holiness Code," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, eds. David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, and John David Pleins (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:256. Of course, if the laws in Deuteronomy were a review of laws and covenants given a generation earlier, as the text portrays, then these laws would have been known by the time the Holiness Code was created, whenever that was. The dating of both texts is complicated and difficult, as Sun outlines.

9. See Sun, "Holiness Code," 254–57. It is worth noting the lack of complete agreement upon the inclusion of chapter 17 in the Holiness Code, and there is also

is told to keep as part of the covenant most directly apply to the laws found in this section of scripture.

As is typical of covenant pericopes in the Old Testament, the promise of blessings for keeping the covenant was immediately followed by a presentation of the cursings that would follow if Israel did not remain faithful.¹⁰ These are outlined thus:

1. If Israel does not keep the commandments, judgments, and statutes of God, they will have broken the Covenant (Leviticus 26:14–15, 18, 21, 23–24).
2. Sickness will then come from the land instead of crops (Leviticus 26:16).
3. Their enemies will have power over them (Leviticus 26:16–17).
4. No efforts will bring forth the produce of the land (Leviticus 26:19–20).
5. Beasts will kill them (Leviticus 26:22).
6. Their enemies will have power over them (Leviticus 26:25).

As can be seen, aspects of covenantal cursing are repeated in this list, e.g., no crops and no protection. They continue to be repeated through verse 38, after which God tells Israel that if their punishments eventually lead them to repent, they can still be forgiven, at which point the blessings of the Covenant will be restored (Leviticus 26:39–45). This last idea seems to represent a summation of the availability of the covenant outlined in such detail throughout the chapter.

There is a striking similarity between this Leviticus 26 covenant explication and the much more succinct version recorded by Nephi as he and his family left Jerusalem. As they departed, Nephi sought to learn God's will concerning them. In answer, he received a promise that can be outlined thus:

debate on whether or not the Holiness Code is dependent upon an earlier corpus of laws. As noted above, there is also debate about when this corpus was created, ranging from a pre-Deuteronomistic composition to a post-exilic one. The comparison of Leviticus 26 with the Book of Mormon strongly suggests that Leviticus 26 and any of its precedents pre-date the Nephite exodus. Sun presents both sides but presents most strongly the case that there is not an originally independent corpus beneath this material.

10. See Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 23–27, a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2286–87. Milgrom notes that the cursings section is longer than the blessings section, which is typical of covenants and treaties in the ancient Near East.

1. Nephi and his seed need to keep the commandments (1 Nephi 2:20).
2. Nephi and his seed will then prosper (1 Nephi 2:20).
3. Nephi and his seed will have a promised land (1 Nephi 2:20).
4. If Nephi's brothers rebel against God, they will be cut off from God's presence (implying that Nephi and his seed will enjoy God's presence) (1 Nephi 2:21).
5. Nephi will rule over his brothers if they become enemies to God and Nephi (1 Nephi 2:22).
6. Nephi's enemy brothers will have no power over him or his seed (1 Nephi 2:23).

In language that mirrors the Leviticus emphasis on how breaking the covenant would lead to punishment that would force Israel to return to God, Nephi is then told that if his people do not keep the commandments (rebel against God), that God will use their enemy brethren to bring them back to Him.¹¹

There is an important addendum to this promise. When Lehi's family arrived at Bountiful, Nephi used language that echoes the promises made when the covenant was established with him as he left Jerusalem. At both the beginning and the end of this iteration, Nephi makes it clear that he is referring to an earlier instance when God had spoken to him about these promises. Towards the end of this discourse, Nephi adds that God had insisted that they would know they had been delivered and led to the promised land by Him (1 Nephi 17:13–14). Perhaps Nephi was expanding upon the promise he had received in 1 Nephi 2 (the covenant outlined above), suggesting that he had only recorded an abbreviated version of the full promise given him, but at the very least, Nephi was providing an expansion on that promise that God had made at some point early in the Nephite Exodus. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the Nephites understood that recognizing God's delivering power was part of the covenant.

It is not uncommon for scriptural authors to quote, paraphrase, or allude to earlier scriptural authors. We often refer to this as

11. See John L. Fowles, "The Decline of the Nephites: Rejection of the Covenant and Word of God," in *The Book of Mormon: Helaman through 3 Nephi 8, According to Thy Word*, eds. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1992), 81–92, for a discussion on how rejection of the Covenant eventually led to the destruction of the Nephites.

intertextuality.¹² What I am proposing here is similar to but importantly different from such a practice. If we were to propose that Nephi was drawing on Leviticus, we would need to demonstrate things such as the availability and applicability of the Leviticus text to Nephi.¹³ Yet, what I am proposing here is that the same being who established the covenant with Israel, namely Jehovah, (re)established that same covenant with Lehi and Nephi. Thus, the issue is not whether Nephi was aware of and employed the language of Leviticus (which is an interesting topic on its own), but rather that the Lord established the same covenant and thus used similar language and ideas.¹⁴ It would follow that, based on Lehi and Nephi's being familiar with the written Law of Moses (1 Nephi 5:11), they would recognize the language and therefore its significance. Studying that is another topic. Here, we address only the similarity in language and concept of the covenant that God (re)established with Israel and then again with the Lehites. It seems clear that this is the same covenant.

The following chart of verses helps make the comparison clearer:

12. See, for example, Nicholas J. Frederick, "The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament Gospels," in *Prophets and Prophecies of the Old Testament*, eds. Aaron P. Schade, Brian M. Hauglid, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2017), 123–160. Also Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

13. See Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 29–33.

14. Of course, there will be those who posit that the language is similar because Joseph Smith is the creator and author of the Book of Mormon text and was familiar with Leviticus. On this kind of reasoning, see Benjamin McGuire "Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part One," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 5 (2013), 1–59; <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-one/>; and McGuire "Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 5 (2013), 61–104; <https://www.mormoninterpreter.com/finding-parallels-some-cautions-and-criticisms-part-two/>. Whether or not one would acknowledge the parallel covenant being the work of God or of Joseph Smith depends upon your initial assumptions, something that I am not discussing here, though I have elsewhere regarding the Book of Abraham. See Kerry Muhlestein, "Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 22 (2016), 18–19. For the current paper, the initial assumption is that Joseph Smith was the inspired translator not the author of the Book of Mormon and that the language Nephi purports came from God did so.

Leviticus Verses	1 Nephi Verses
If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; (Leviticus 26:3)	And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments (1 Nephi 2:20)
Then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time: and ye shall eat your bread to the full. (Leviticus 26:4–5) For I will have respect unto you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you, and establish my covenant with you. And ye shall eat old store, and bring forth the old because of the new. (Leviticus 26:9–10)	ye shall prosper. (1 Nephi 2:20)
and dwell in your land safely. And I will give peace in the land. (Leviticus 26:5–6)	and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands. (1 Nephi 2:20)
and ye shall lie down, and none shall make <i>you</i> afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land. And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. And five of you shall chase an hundred, and an hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight: and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. (Leviticus 26:6–8)	And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren. For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed. (1 Nephi 2:22–23)
And I will set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people. (Leviticus 26:11–12)	And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord [implying that when there is no rebellion there is an absence of God abhorring them and thus they all have the presence of God]. (1 Nephi 2:21)

Leviticus Verses	1 Nephi Verses
<p>I <i>am</i> the LORD your God, which brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, that ye should not be their bondmen; and I have broken the bands of your yoke, and made you go upright. (Leviticus 26:13)</p>	<p>wherefore, inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led. Yea, and the Lord said also that: After ye have arrived in the promised land, ye shall know that I, the Lord, am God; and that I, the Lord, did deliver you from destruction; yea, that I did bring you out of the land of Jerusalem. (1 Nephi 17:13–14)</p>
<p>But if ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments; And if ye shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments, so that ye will not do all my commandments, but that ye break my covenant: I also will do this unto you; I will even appoint over you terror, consumption, and the burning ague, that shall consume the eyes, and cause sorrow of heart: and ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. And I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you. (Leviticus 26:14–17)</p>	<p>And if it so be that they [Nephi’s seed] rebel against me, they [Laman’s seed] shall be a scourge unto thy seed. (1 Nephi 2:24)</p>
<p>if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept of the punishment of their iniquity: Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land. (Leviticus 26:41–42)</p>	<p>They shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance. (1 Nephi 2:24)</p>

Many have noticed the presence of the Abrahamic Covenant in the Book of Mormon before, even from the earliest days of the Church.¹⁵ Some have focused on the way the Book of Mormon makes the covenant more universally available and is part of fulfilling how the world is blessed

15. See William W. Phelps, “The Book of Mormon,” in *The Evening and Morning Star* 1 (January 1833): 57–59.

by Abraham.¹⁶ Others have analyzed how the Savior taught the Nephites about the Abrahamic Covenant (most notably Victor Ludlow).¹⁷

Still others have emphasized the Book of Mormon's role in fulfilling the Abrahamic Covenant¹⁸ or even the various ways the covenant is presented in the Book of Mormon¹⁹ and how covenant renewal in the Book of Mormon is similar to Old Testament patterns.²⁰ Yet it seems that all studies of covenant in the Book of Mormon will be better founded if we recognize that when the covenant was first established with the Nephites, it closely mirrored its establishment among the Israelites. This covenant parallel, established so early in the Lehite journey, likely influenced Nephi's recognition of the parallels between his family's exodus and that of ancient Israel's.²¹ Furthermore, the Book of Mormon's thematization of the covenant is surely affected by the precise parallel inception of that covenant. Thus, I believe that when we recognize the clear consciousness of a mirrored covenant identity that informed

16. Noel B. Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant Through the Book of Mormon" (working paper, BYU Scholars Archive, 2017), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1817>.

17. Ludlow, "The Father's Covenant People Sermon," 147–174. Also Mark A. Shields, "3 Things You Didn't Know About Your Connection to the Abrahamic Covenant," *LDS Living*, <http://www.ldsiving.com/3-Things-You-Need-to-Know-about-the-Abrahamic-Covenant/s/82074>.

18. Joseph Fielding McConkie, "The Doctrine of a Covenant People," in *3 Nephi 9–30, This is My Gospel*, Book of Mormon Symposium Series, eds. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1993), 8:357–377; and Reynolds, "Understanding the Abrahamic Covenant Through the Book of Mormon."

19. Stephen D. Ricks, "Abrahamic covenant," in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 2003), 25–26.

20. Blake T. Ostler, "The Covenant Tradition in the Book of Mormon," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, eds. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City, Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 230–40; also Stephen D. Ricks, "Deuteronomy: A Covenant of Love," *Ensign* 20 (April 1990): 55–59.

21. On that parallel, see S. Kent Brown, "The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in *BYU Studies* 30 (Summer 1991): 111–26; George S. Tate, "The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon," in N. Lambers, ed., *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scriptures* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–62; Terrence L. Szink, "Nephi and the Exodus," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 38–51; and D. Kelly Ogden, "Answering the Lord's Call," in Kent P. Jackson, ed., *Studies in Scripture: 1 Nephi to Alma 29* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 27–31.

Nephi, Jacob, their followers, and their descendants, we will be better able to understand how they used and adapted covenant consciousness in their specific circumstances over time and how they used prophetic utterances about the covenant as they grappled with the role of the covenant in those circumstances.

Kerry Muhlestein received his PhD from UCLA in Egyptology. He is a professor in the Ancient Scripture Department at Brigham Young University, where he directs the BYU Egypt Excavation Project. He has served in various positions for the American Research Center in Egypt and as Vice President of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities/Société pour l'Étude de l'Égypte Ancienne. He is a Senior Fellow of the William F. Albright Institute for Archaeological Research and was appointed as a Visiting Fellow at the University of Oxford for the 2016–17 academic year.