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Sacred History, Covenants, and the Messiah: The Religious Background of the World of Lehi

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Chapter 14

SACRED HISTORY, COVENANTS, AND THE MESSIAH: THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE WORLD OF LEHI

David Rolph Seely

Lehi and his family were shaped by their ancient heritage preserved to some extent for us today in the Old Testament. A knowledge of the religious background of Lehi and his family can help us to understand many aspects of the Book of Mormon. In particular, the title page of the Book of Mormon, probably written by Moroni, describes the contents of the Book of Mormon and identifies the three intended purposes of the Book of Mormon to the readers in the latter days. These three purposes are:

1. “To show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers”;
2. “And that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever”;
3. “And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.”

This study approaches the religious background of Lehi’s world and its impact on the Book of Mormon by discussing

these three subjects: the great things contained in sacred history, the covenants of the Lord, and the significance of Jesus as the Christ.

The religious heritage of Lehi and his family was transmitted both orally and in written form. While the stories of the past about Adam and Eve, Abraham, and Moses were passed from parents to children, the key to understanding the religious background and tradition of Lehi and his world is to be found in the plates of brass, which contained the written form of the ancient religious traditions. In this record we can see the importance of the three purposes of the Book of Mormon.

Nephi described the contents of the brass plates as containing four kinds of material: law, history, writings of the prophets, and genealogy. Nephi noted that the record would be important for his people in that it contained the law (1 Nephi 4:16) in the “five books of Moses” (1 Nephi 5:11) that would be of “great worth unto us, insomuch that we could preserve the commandments of the Lord unto our children” (1 Nephi 5:21). The law was the heart of the biblical covenants made with Abraham and Moses and foreshadowed the “new covenant” that Jesus Christ would bring.

In addition, the plates of brass contained a history of Israel, “a record of the Jews from the beginning [including the creation and the account of Adam and Eve], even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” (1 Nephi 5:12). From this record the Nephites would be able to remember and teach the “great things” that the Lord had done for their fathers from Adam and Eve to Abraham and Moses all the way to the present.

The brass plates also preserved “the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” (1 Nephi 5:13). From the plates

of brass, Nephi, Jacob, Abinadi, and other Book of Mormon prophets would have had access to the words of Isaiah, Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and others. The most important prophecies were those of the coming of the Messiah since the Book of Mormon peoples lived before Christ and had to rely on inspired views of the future in order to understand the nature and reality of Jesus Christ and the atonement.

Finally, Lehi was delighted to find that his family genealogy tracing his lineage back to Joseph was also preserved on this record (1 Nephi 5:14); this helped them to understand their place in the Abrahamic covenant through the promises and covenants of the birthright son, Joseph. In addition, Nephi noted that the language of his fathers would be preserved through this record (1 Nephi 3:19).

While there is much we do not know about the brass plates—their origin, transmission, and exact contents¹—we do know enough to be able to appreciate the importance of a written record to a religious community and to see the significance of sacred history, prophecies, and expectations concerning the coming of Christ. These three elements were part of Lehi’s Jerusalem, growing out of his rich Israelite heritage.

Sacred History as a Record of the Great Things the Lord Has Done for the Fathers

Which is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel
what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers
(Title Page)

The sacred history (a history that acknowledges the participation of God in the affairs of humans) contained in the Bible preserves the record of the great things the Lord has done for his children throughout history. The covenant people

at the time of Lehi understood that their relationship was with a God who could and would intervene in history on their behalf. The central events that defined Israel—as judged by the Old Testament—are the creation, the calling of Abraham out of the world by covenant, the exodus and crossing of the Red Sea, and the conquest of the promised land. Lehi and his family secured the plates of brass as a record of these events in order to better help them remember their sacred history. The Book of Mormon carries on this tradition of measuring Israel’s relationship with God by recording the great things God had done in the past for their fathers and in the present for them. The Book of Mormon prophets exhort future readers to remember all these great things.

From the beginning of time, records were kept of the relationship between God and his children. Adam kept a record by the spirit of inspiration, and Adam and Eve taught their children to read and write (Moses 6:5–6) and taught them the gospel (Moses 6:56–58). The most important teaching was “that all men, everywhere, must repent,” and this must have included the knowledge of the coming of the Only Begotten to atone for the sins of the world—that God would intervene in the course of history and redeem his children from the fall. Abraham also had access to and created sacred records. Specifically, he referred to a “chronology running back from myself to the beginning of the creation” (Abraham 1:28). The Pearl of Great Price preserves a book that he left to his posterity.

Moses came and established the Mosaic covenant with the people. According to the Book of Moses, he received a vision of the creation, the fall and the atonement, and the record of Enoch. According to tradition, the books from Genesis to Deuteronomy were authored by Moses, and Nephi mentions that the five books of Moses were found on the brass plates.

Sacred History

Before the Lord gave the covenant on Mount Sinai, he rehearsed for his people his role in delivering them from Egypt, “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself” (Exodus 19:4). This set the pattern in the Bible that the covenant obligations were to be preceded by a recital of the great things the Lord had done for his people. The purpose of this reminder was to prompt Israel about her obligation to the Lord and to inspire the Israelites to be obedient to their covenants.

Another example is found in the book of Deuteronomy, which is a restatement at Mount Nebo of the covenant given at Sinai. The first four chapters of Deuteronomy review the specific ways in which the Lord intervened on behalf of the children of Israel during the exodus from Egypt through the wilderness to Mount Nebo and on the plains of Moab. The law is then rehearsed in the ensuing chapters. The book of Deuteronomy identifies the significance of the exodus in sacred history: “For ask now of the days that are past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and ask from the one side of heaven unto the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it?” (Deuteronomy 4:32).

At Shechem Joshua led the people in a ceremony of covenant renewal in which he reminded the people of a series of important events beginning with the call of Abraham: “And I took your father Abraham from the other side of the flood [Euphrates], and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed, and gave him Isaac” (Joshua 24:3). Joshua also reminded the people how the Lord through Moses and Aaron had delivered them from Egypt and how the Lord delivered the land of Canaan to them through their faithfulness

and the victory over their enemies. The function of this historical prologue is stated: “Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood [the Euphrates], and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord” (Joshua 24:14).

The most complete recounting of Israel’s sacred history is found in Ezra’s ceremony of covenant renewal with the exiles returned from Babylon (Nehemiah 9:6–38). In this ceremony Ezra recounted the history of Israel and included such events and people as the creation, Abraham, Moses, the conquest, the period of the judges, the ensuing years in which the Lord sent prophets to his disobedient children to warn them of impending destruction, and the return and reestablishment of the covenant.

Remembering in the Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord implored his children to “remember” him and to measure their relationship with him through the events of the past.² The defining event of the Old Testament world was the deliverance from bondage in Egypt and from death at the Red Sea and the deliverance through the wilderness to the promised land. “Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou has redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation” (Exodus 15:12). “And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness” (Deuteronomy 8:2). “Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations” (Deuteronomy 32:7). “Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me” (Isaiah 44:21). Regarding the sabbath: “And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out

thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:15; cf. 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:18).

Through the law of Moses, the Lord provided the children of Israel a host of different ways of remembering him through sacrifices and offerings, holy days, festivals, and laws of cleanliness and uncleanness: on the Sabbath Israel was to remember the creation (Exodus 20:8–11) and the deliverance from bondage at the exodus (Deuteronomy 5:12–15). Passover (Exodus 12) was a celebration to remember the night the Lord delivered them from Egypt. In addition, the Lord commanded Israel to erect a series of memorials of stone to commemorate his great acts: the pile of stones to recall the miraculous crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 4:9) and the stone pillar at Shechem to remember the covenant (Joshua 24:27). The Lord commanded Israel to remember him and his words as they sat, walked, lay down, and rose up; he also commanded Israel to bind the words of the Lord on their hand, between their eyes, and on their doors (Deuteronomy 6:7–9), which led to the tradition of the *tefillin* and *mezuzah*. Most important, the records of the events and the laws were preserved, and the Lord commanded the children of Israel to review the events and laws by reading the records and to participate in a process of covenant renewal (Deuteronomy 31:10–11).

Remembering in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon continues this tradition brought with Lehi from the world of Jerusalem. From the beginning, Book of Mormon prophets exhorted their people to remember the great things the Lord had done for their fathers in the past.³ Lehi reminded his descendants that they were blessed with the knowledge of the creation (2 Nephi 1:10). Many prophets reminded the people of their ancestor Abraham and the covenants the

Lord made with him (2 Nephi 8:2; 27:33; Jacob 4:5; Alma 5:24; 7:25; 13:15; Helaman 3:30; 8:16–17). Lehi and Moroni rehearsed to their people the important role Joseph played in their history (2 Nephi 3; Alma 46:23–24). But the most important event of the past for the Book of Mormon peoples—just as for their Old Testament counterparts—was the exodus, including the divine intervention in the deliverance from Egypt; the dramatic miracle at the Red Sea; guidance, sustenance, and protection in the wilderness; and the eventual conquest of the land of Canaan. Several Latter-day Saint scholars have studied at some length the nature of the typology of the exodus throughout the Book of Mormon.⁴

At the beginning of his record, Nephi identified the theme of his work on the small plates: “The tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance” (1 Nephi 1:20; cf. 1 Nephi 1:14; 2 Nephi 1:2–3; 2:8, 12; 4:26; 9:8, 19; 11:5; 24:1). In light of this theme and together with his faith that the Lord gives no commandments “save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7), Nephi quickly identified the Lord’s deliverance of Lehi and his family from Jerusalem into the wilderness and the journey to the promised land as an experience parallel to that of the exodus. He likened their situation in the wilderness to that at the time of Moses, complete with murmuring, hunger, thirst, affliction, death, and the need for direction. Nephi sought to inspire faith in their attempt to get the plates of brass from Laban when he exhorted his brothers, “Therefore let us go up; let us be strong like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea. . . . Let

us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 4:2–3).

In this case the power of remembering the great things the Lord had done for their fathers can be seen from these events. And those who remember these events can thus derive the faith and the strength to accomplish the Lord’s will. Later Nephi chastised his brothers for forgetting “what great things the Lord hath done for us, in delivering us out of the hands of Laban, and also that we should obtain the record” (1 Nephi 7:11).

In the Book of Mormon, the Lord’s deliverance of Lehi and his family from destruction at Jerusalem became for them the pivotal event in their own history.⁵ Their consciousness of sacred history expanded to include the exodus as well as their own personal deliverance from destruction. Nephi rebuked his brothers because they had forgotten that they had seen an angel (1 Nephi 7:10). Additionally, they had forgotten “that the Lord is able to do all things according to his will” (1 Nephi 7:12). On his deathbed, Lehi spoke to his family “and rehearsed unto them, how great things the Lord had done for them in bringing them out of the land of Jerusalem” (2 Nephi 1:1), attributing the divine intervention on their behalf to the “mercies of God” (2 Nephi 1:2). Later Book of Mormon prophets continued this tradition: King Benjamin (Mosiah 7:19), Alma (Alma 36:28), and Nephi₂ (Helaman 8:11). The exodus typology continued to be applied to other situations. For example, when Alma’s people were delivered from Lamanite bondage (Mosiah 24), Alma said, “Yea, and I also remember the captivity of my fathers; for I surely do know that the Lord did deliver them out of bondage, and by this did establish his church. . . . Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers; and the same God who delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians did deliver them out of bondage” (Alma 29:11–12).

The most important thing to be remembered in the pages of the Book of Mormon is the coming and mission of the Messiah.

For those who lived before his time, Lehi and Nephi provided visions of the future. Nephi identified prophecies about his death and resurrection from the brass plates (1 Nephi 22:20–21; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15–18) and added to them his own prophecies (1 Nephi 11; 2 Nephi 31). The events of deliverance in the past are all seen as types and shadows of the deliverance made possible through the atonement.

This was dramatically illustrated by Alma the Younger in recounting the story of his conversion to his son Helaman (Alma 36). Many have noted that chapter 36 is a long, complex, and elegant chiasmus centering on Alma's crying out to the Savior for forgiveness and mercy.⁶ On either side of the center is an informative passage that shows the development of the concept of remembering in the Book of Mormon. Alma exhorted Helaman, "I would that you should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he surely did deliver them in their afflictions" (Alma 36:2). At the end of the chapter, Alma further listed the great things that the Lord had done for his fathers and exhorted his son to retain in remembrance that he had delivered

our fathers out of Egypt, and he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea; and he led them by his power into the promised land; yea, and he delivered them out of bondage and captivity from time to time. Yea, and he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem; and he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity, from time to time even down to the present day; and I have always retained in remembrance their captivity; yea, and ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity. (Alma 36:28–29)

But Alma taught that in the middle of his conversion, “while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ . . . to atone for the sins of the world.” Therefore, he cried to the Lord Jesus Christ, and he was cleansed and delivered from his sins—that “I could remember my pains no more” (Alma 36:17, 19). In other words, Alma invited all to remember first and foremost the atonement of Jesus Christ as the culmination of the great things the Lord has done for our fathers and for us.

When the Savior appeared to the Nephites, he taught them the gospel and administered the sacrament as a covenantal ordinance—representing the power of the atonement—and admonished his disciples to “always remember me. And if ye do always remember me ye shall have my Spirit to be with you” (3 Nephi 18:7, 11). And thus the Book of Mormon shows unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord has done for their fathers (see 1 Nephi 7:11; 2 Nephi 1:1; Mosiah 27:16). Moroni, at the end of his record, concluded by reminding us of the importance of remembering in our quest for spiritual knowledge: “when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things” (Moroni 10:3).

The Covenants of the Lord

And that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever (Title Page)

Lehi and his family understood their relationship with God through covenants. They and other righteous people in Lehi’s

Jerusalem inherited this foundational religious concept from their noble predecessors. The scriptures contain records of the covenants made with Adam and Eve, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David, as well as of the “new covenant” established by Jesus Christ and restored in the latter days as the “new and everlasting covenant” (D&C 22). Two important covenants are emphasized in the Old Testament that must be explored in order to better understand the religious background of Lehi: the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants. In addition, the temple is a focal point of the covenant.

Abrahamic Covenant

The most important of all of the covenants is the Abrahamic covenant—established through the patriarch Abraham sometime around 2000 B.C. As part of the covenant, the Lord commanded Abraham to become like God: “Walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Genesis 17:1). In addition, Abraham continued to worship the Lord through the offering of blood sacrifice in similitude of the future sacrifice of the Lamb of God and instituted the practice of circumcision (Genesis 17). The Abrahamic covenant was accompanied and administered by the Melchizedek Priesthood, which Abraham received from Melchizedek (D&C 84:14). This covenant continues to be the covenant through which the Lord administers the plan of salvation to his children today. The Abrahamic covenant is variously expressed throughout the book of Genesis (Genesis 12:1–7; 15:1–16; 17:1–6; 22:15–18), as well as in the Book of Abraham (Abraham 2), and includes three specific promises that are essential to understanding the Book of Mormon: land, posterity, and blessing.

First, the Lord promised the land of Canaan to Abraham: “Unto thy seed will I give this land” (Genesis 12:7). This was never realized by Abraham himself but would be by his poster-

ity (Genesis 15:16). It is clear that the Abrahamic promise of land represented a much greater blessing than simply the land of Canaan. The patriarchal blessing given to Joseph by his father, Jacob, declared that “Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall” (Genesis 49:22). This promise was fulfilled by Lehi and his descendants as the Lord led them to the promised land in the New World (1 Nephi 19:24; Jacob 2:25; cf. 1 Nephi 5:14, 16; 2 Nephi 3:4; Alma 10:3) and resulted in the expansion of the covenant lands to include the Americas in the Abrahamic covenant as the inheritance of Joseph. The resurrected Savior taught the Nephites: “And behold, this people will I establish in this land, unto the fulfilling of the covenant which I made with your father Jacob; and it shall be a New Jerusalem” (3 Nephi 20:22).

The Abrahamic promise of land transcends geography. In the Old Testament theology of the land, the promised land belongs to the Lord, “for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me” (Leviticus 25:23). In this sense the covenant promise of land represents an earthly inheritance with a more exalted spiritual promise of a place in the kingdom of God. This is the way the promise of land is understood in the New Testament as an “heir of the world” (Romans 4:13) and a “better country, that is, an heavenly” (Hebrews 11:16). Ultimately the eternal reward for the faithful will be the celestial kingdom, which will be on the earth (D&C 88:14–26; cf. 77:1; 130:7).

The second promise was that of posterity—a posterity as numerous as the stars in the heaven and the sand of the sea (Genesis 22:17). While Abraham for many years did not have any children, eventually he had at least eight sons (Genesis 25:1–9). Related to this promise, the Lord changed the name of the patriarch Abram to Abraham, meaning “father of many nations” (Genesis 17:5), representing the fact that his descendants

would spread throughout the earth. Throughout the history of Israel, the people would be blessed with posterity. This promise is prominent in the Book of Mormon. Lehi prophesied that his descendants would “raise up seed unto the Lord in the land of promise” (1 Nephi 7:1). Nephi beheld his seed and the seed of his brethren in the future “even as it were in number as many as the sand of the sea” (1 Nephi 12:1) and prophesied that the seed of Joseph “should never perish as long as the earth should stand” (2 Nephi 25:21).

This promise was also a spiritual one. The Lord promised Abraham that all who would accept the gospel would be “called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed” (Abraham 2:10). Thus Abraham was to become the spiritual father of all those who accept Christ. Additionally, inherent in this promise is the assurance given to Abraham and his faithful descendants of eternal increase (D&C 131:1–4; 132:19–25, 30, 55).

The third promise was that of blessing. The Lord promised Abraham and his posterity that they would enjoy the blessings of the earth, be a great nation, and have the blessings of the gospel, the priesthood, and eternal life (Abraham 2:9–11). Most notably, the Lord promised Abraham that his seed would be the means by which the Lord could bless the whole world with the knowledge of Christ and his atonement: “And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). This blessing was further explained in the Book of Abraham—the Lord clarified that this blessing would be brought about through the priesthood (Abraham 2:9–11). The “seed” of Abraham that would bless the nations would have a twofold fulfillment. This promise also included the coming—through the lineage of Abraham—of the Savior Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:1–17), who would bless all nations through his atonement. This was recog-

nized by Paul in his epistle to the Galatians: “And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Galatians 3:16). Nephi₂ declared, “Abraham saw of his coming, and was filled with gladness and did rejoice” (Helaman 8:17).

The covenant of Abraham was meant to be passed along to Abraham’s descendants through Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob, like Abraham, received a covenantal name, “Israel” (Genesis 32:28). Great emphasis was placed in the scriptures on the duty of the seed of Abraham, often called the house or children of Israel, to bless the nations. The Book of Mormon peoples were keenly aware of their role as heirs to the Abrahamic covenant. Nephi referred to the role of the house of Israel in bringing about the salvation of the world in the latter days: “In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 15:18; 22:9). The resurrected Savior repeated this charge to the Nephites at the temple in Bountiful: “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” (3 Nephi 20:26–27).

Abraham and Sarah, as well as their ancestors Adam and Eve, were models for their descendants through their lives of faith and righteousness. Throughout the stories in Genesis, Abraham and Sarah were tested in terms of their faith, obedience, hospitality, loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice everything for the Lord. The final test came when the Lord asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22). This he did willingly, and the Lord called out to him, “Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (Genesis 22:12), and

restated for the final time the glorious promises of the covenant (Genesis 22:15–18). In the Book of Mormon Jacob taught that this act of faith was a sign of the atonement: “It was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the commands of God in offering up his son Isaac, which is a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:5).

Probably because the brass plates were kept by the descendants of Joseph (1 Nephi 5:14; 2 Nephi 3:4), they contain records of the promises the Lord gave to Joseph that are no longer in the Bible (although see those restored in Genesis 50:24–38 JST). On his deathbed Lehi read these promises from the record to his family, and these promises are prominent throughout the Book of Mormon. Lehi revealed to his son Joseph that Joseph of Egypt saw the day of the Lehites and recognized that the Lord had broken off a branch of Israel and that the Messiah would be made manifest to them in the latter days (2 Nephi 3:5). Further, he saw that the Lord would raise up Moses to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt (2 Nephi 3:10, 16–18). And in the latter days the Lord would raise up a prophet and seer—the Prophet Joseph Smith (named after Joseph of old as well as after his father)—from the lineage of Joseph of Egypt, who would bring many to the “knowledge of the covenants” that the Lord had made with their fathers (2 Nephi 3:7–9, 11–15, 18–20). Most important for the Book of Mormon peoples, this prophet would be instrumental in bringing forth their writings (2 Nephi 3:11–12) to lead their descendants, as well as all people, to salvation (2 Nephi 3:19–21). The promises given to Joseph of the preservation of his seed were echoed later by Captain Moroni at the raising of the title of liberty (Alma 46:23–24) and by the Savior (3 Nephi 10:17; 15:12). And the role of the remnant of Joseph in the latter days was seen and taught by Moroni (Ether 13:6–10).

Mosaic Covenant

Moses was called to deliver his people from Egypt and take them to Mount Sinai, where the Lord would give them the higher law. Because of the faithlessness, hardheartedness, and spiritual immaturity of the Israelites, the Lord gave to them the lower law instead—the Mosaic covenant. Whereas the Lord commanded Abraham to “be . . . perfect” (Genesis 17:1), he commanded the children of Israel to “be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). The promises of the Mosaic covenant were the same as of the Abrahamic covenant: land, posterity, and blessing. The conditional nature of the Mosaic covenant was emphasized in that the temporal blessings of prosperity and protection were spelled out in greater detail and were accompanied by an ominous series of corresponding curses. While the goal of the two covenants is essentially the same, the laws were somewhat different. The lower law was to be administered primarily through the Aaronic Priesthood, and the carnal commandments were added to what had been the higher law (Exodus 34:1–2 JST).

The Structure of the Covenant

Based on the pioneering work of George E. Mendenhall and others,⁷ biblical scholars have identified a simple underlying structure to a biblical covenant pattern consisting of seven elements. These seven elements are present in the narrative of the giving of the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (Exodus 19–24) and also in the numerous occasions when the covenant is formally renewed in the Bible in Deuteronomy 1–31, Joshua 24, 2 Kings 22–23, and Nehemiah 9–10. A review of these elements can greatly aid in understanding the contents and dynamics of the Mosaic covenant.

1. *Preamble.* In each example of the giving of a covenant, a preamble acknowledges the divine origin and authority of the covenant, either from God himself or through his prophet. For

example, in Exodus the covenant is introduced first through Moses as the Lord's agent: "And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob . . ." (Exodus 19:3) and then by the Lord himself: "And God spake all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God . . ." (Exodus 20:1–2). Joshua introduced the covenant simply: "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel . . ." (Joshua 24:2). In terms of the Book of Mormon, Nephi, Lehi, and all the other prophets acknowledged the divine origin of the promise of the land to them and their descendants.

2. *Historical Prologue.* Whenever the Lord reiterates the covenant, he commences by reminding the children of Israel of the "great things" he has done for their fathers and for them. For example, when the Lord gave the covenant on Sinai he began: "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people" (Exodus 19:4–5). In this brief statement the Lord reminded Israel of his past intervention on their behalf and reiterated their future obligation—that they were to remain faithful to his covenant.

Joshua at Shechem recounted the divine relationship beginning with the Lord calling Abraham out of the world and then turning to the miraculous events of the exodus and the conquest (Joshua 24:2–18). Ezra, when he officiated at the renewal of the covenant in Jerusalem after the exile, commenced with the creation, then Abraham, the exodus, and the conquest and finally dwelt on the ensuing ingratitude of the children of Israel as demonstrated by their disobedience to the commandments (Nehemiah 9:6–33). In fact, much of the narrative in the Old Testament serves as a historical prologue to the covenant.

This aspect of the covenant is extremely important in the Book of Mormon. As discussed above in the first section of this paper, the Book of Mormon acknowledges the importance of the sacred history on the title page, where it says to remember the “great things the Lord hath done for their fathers.” The Book of Mormon writers constantly acknowledged their deliverance from Jerusalem as an event that played out in the typology of the exodus and ultimately recognized that the greatest event of intervention by God on behalf of his children was the atonement—an event to which all other events were types and shadows.

3. *Stipulations.* The heart of the covenant is the law—the commandments—those things the Lord has commanded his children to do or not to do. In the Book of Mormon, this is probably what is meant by the phrase *law of Moses*. The commandments of the law of Moses can be conveniently divided into two categories: ethical commandments—as represented and epitomized by the Ten Commandments and supplemented by a host of religious and civil commandments regarding how to treat others, deal with crime in society, and take care of the poor—and the ritual laws pertaining to festivals, concepts of being clean and unclean, sacrifices, and offerings.⁸

The Book of Mormon peoples constantly reminded us that they were living the law of Moses. Nephi recorded that he and his people “did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses” (2 Nephi 5:10; cf. Jarom 1:5; Alma 30:2–3). While the Book of Mormon peoples lived the law of Moses, they did so with the Melchizedek Priesthood (Alma 5:3; 13:6–11), and this may have had an impact on how they lived the law. They surely continued the practice of blood sacrifice and circumcision required by the covenant of Abraham until the coming of the resurrected

Savior, at which time these practices were fulfilled (3 Nephi 9:19–20; Moroni 8:8).

The Ten Commandments were also inscribed on the plates of brass in the same form that has come down to us in the Bible—Abinadi quoted them to the priests of Noah in essentially the same form as that found in Exodus (Mosiah 13). The Ten Commandments are well documented throughout the Book of Mormon and are central to the preaching of Book of Mormon prophets, who taught that keeping the Ten Commandments was the standard required by the covenant. However, failure to keep them was cited as the reason for the moral decline and destruction of the people.⁹ Nephi warned that those who failed to keep the commandments not to murder, lie, steal, envy, commit whoredoms, and take the name of the Lord in vain would perish (2 Nephi 26:32). The breaking of three commandments of the ten—murder, stealing, and adultery—is often cited as the reason for the destruction of the covenant people in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 2:13; Alma 16:18; 50:21; Helaman 6:23; 7:21–22; 13:22), just as in the teachings of Old Testament prophets (Hosea 4:1–2; Jeremiah 7:9; Ezekiel 18; 22).

In addition to the Ten Commandments, other ethical commandments are given under the law of Moses as found primarily in the Covenant Code in Exodus 21–24, the Holiness Code in Leviticus 19–26, and the legal portion of Deuteronomy 12–26. The Book of Mormon includes references to many of these laws that have been studied at length by Latter-day Saint scholars.¹⁰

While in the Bible ritual law is described in great detail, the Book of Mormon reveals very little information about these commandments. Lehi and his family offered sacrifices in the wilderness, but there is no mention of the dietary code, of laws of cleanliness and uncleanness, of the festivals (by name at least) besides the Sabbath, or of the various sacrifices and

offerings besides the burnt offering and perhaps the thanksgiving offering. This has led to some speculation that since the Nephites had the Melchizedek Priesthood, perhaps they did not obey each and every aspect of the law as recorded in the Bible. On the other hand, the Nephites had the brass plates with the five books of Moses on them—though we do not know exactly what was on them or in what form the texts were at that time. And since the Book of Mormon is largely a spiritual record and the product of abridgment, perhaps we should not expect to find a detailed account of the ritual laws in its pages.¹¹

4. *Witnesses.* As in all ancient cultures, the sealing of covenant or treaties is accompanied by a citation of witnesses. In the Bible, Deuteronomy specifies the witness of the covenant of Moses as the “heavens” and the “earth” (Deuteronomy 32:1) and as a hymn to be sung by the people. In the account of Joshua at Shechem, Joshua said, “Ye [the people] are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the Lord, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses” (Joshua 24:22). In addition, Joshua erected a stone monument that was accounted as a witness (Joshua 24:26–27). Ezra, at the end of the covenant renewal ceremony, had the people who renewed the covenant enter their names on a list as a witness (Nehemiah 10). Similarly, the Book of Mormon people who obeyed King Benjamin’s invitation to renew their covenants with God recorded their names on a list as a witness (Mosiah 6:1).

5. *Provisions for Deposit and Public Reading.* Under the law of Moses, the law was to be safely deposited and publicly read in order to aid in remembrance. According to Deuteronomy, the law was deposited in the ark of the covenant and read to the people every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 31:10–11). The plates of brass served as the repository of the

covenant for the people in the Book of Mormon. Copies must have been made from this record since Abinadi and others had access to its teachings. The importance of the brass plates to Lehi's descendants is demonstrated by what happened to the Mulekites, who brought no records with them and gradually lost their language and their religious traditions (Omni 1:14, 17).

6. *Blessings and Curses.* While the Abrahamic covenant is spoken of throughout the scriptures with emphasis on the blessings of the covenant, the Mosaic covenant, perhaps because it was given to a people who were spiritually immature—hardhearted and stiffnecked—contains a series of specific blessings and curses. The blessings are found explicitly stated in Deuteronomy 27–28. The blessings include prosperity from the fields and the flocks, posterity, and protection from disease and from enemies (Deuteronomy 28:1–13). The curses are the opposite: famine, poverty, pestilence, and destruction (Deuteronomy 28:15–68).

Legally, the breaking of the covenant would result in the destruction of Israel, but because of his mercy (Isaiah 14:1), the Lord promised that he would preserve a remnant (Isaiah 10:20–22) that would be scattered (Deuteronomy 28:63–65) and eventually gathered (Deuteronomy 30:1–10). This is the basis for the entire discussion in the Book of Mormon in which Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob understood that the destruction of Jerusalem was due to Israel's disobedience. At the same time, ancient prophets recognized that a remnant would be preserved and that in the future the Lord would provide a way to gather scattered Israel. The gathering of Israel is a central concern of nearly all the Book of Mormon prophets.

The Book of Mormon presents a similar situation in which the descendants of Lehi who were to inherit the land through

promise would break the covenant and be destroyed and scattered: the Nephites by the Lamanites and the Lamanites eventually by the Gentiles. This mechanism is also at work in the course of the Nephite cycle, where obedience is followed by prosperity, then apostasy, destruction, repentance, and so on.

7. *Oath Ceremony.* When Moses initially made the covenant with the children of Israel at Sinai, he first read the words of the Lord given on Sinai. The people agreed to obey them, and Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of the sacrifices: “Behold the blood of the covenant” (Exodus 24:8). Covenant renewal ceremonies are recorded in the Bible in Deuteronomy 27–28; Joshua 24; 2 Kings 23; and Nehemiah 9–10. In each case the seven elements of covenant are apparent and the people reaffirm their commitment to the covenant. From modern revelation we know that baptism was practiced under the law of Moses in ancient Israel (D&C 84:26–27). Nephi and the other Book of Mormon prophets emphasized that the covenant oath ceremony in the New World was also baptism (2 Nephi 31; Mosiah 18).

Latter-day Saint scholars have studied the speech of King Benjamin and hypothesized that this was a covenant renewal ceremony associated with the Feast of Tabernacles in the Bible. King Benjamin assembled his people in tents, and all seven elements of the covenant can be identified in the narrative demonstrating the biblical dynamics of covenant structure.¹² Stephen D. Ricks identified the following: (1) in the preamble, King Benjamin delivered the words given him by an angel (Mosiah 3:2); (2) the historical prologue included King Benjamin reviewing his selfless service as king (Mosiah 2:19, 21); (3) the stipulations were stated when King Benjamin commanded the people to believe in God, repent of their sins, and seek forgiveness in humility (Mosiah 4:9–10); (4) the witnesses were the people themselves, who were willing to

enter into the covenant (Mosiah 5:5) and allow their names to be listed (Mosiah 6:1); (5) blessings and curses were implied—those who accepted the name of Christ were portrayed as sitting at his right hand, while those who did not were consigned to his left and those who transgressed the name of Christ would be blotted out in their hearts (Mosiah 5:8–11); (6) the deposit and public reading occurred when King Benjamin had the words of his speech published and distributed (Mosiah 2:8–9); and (7) the oath ceremony consisted of the people repenting of their sins and having their names recorded on a list (Mosiah 6:1).

The covenant given to Lehi and his descendants is connected to both the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants. The covenant is simply stated in the Book of Mormon—apparently assuming that the Lehites knew of the promises and blessings and curses of those earlier covenants. The covenant is first stated to Nephi: “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, 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; cf. 4:14). Lehi restated this promise and added that the land would be consecrated for liberty and the worship of the Lord God of Israel and the inhabitants of the land—if they kept his commandments, they would be protected by the Lord from their enemies (2 Nephi 1:1–12).

The Book of Mormon, the voice from the dust written by the seed of Abraham, dramatically fills the role of the seed of Abraham in blessing the world. Thus this record contains a history of a covenant people in the New World who find their identity in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. Throughout their history they often broke the covenant and suffered the consequences. This record reminds us that the covenants of the Lord are still in effect and that the restoration is going forth to gather covenant Israel for the final time. In addition, the Book

of Mormon calls to us—as the seed of Abraham—to valiantly fill our role as heirs to the covenant to bless the nations. In the Book of Mormon many prophets exhorted their contemporaries and us to remember the Abrahamic covenant: Isaiah cried out, “Look unto Abraham, your father” (2 Nephi 8:2//Isaiah 51:2). Nephi specifically identified his work in writing his record to bring souls to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (1 Nephi 6:4). Alma and Nephi₂ invited us to “sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Alma 7:25; cf. 5:24; Helaman 3:30). And Mormon (Mormon 5:20) and Moroni promised that the covenants of Abraham would ultimately be fulfilled (Mormon 9:11; Ether 13:11).

The Temple

The Temple of Solomon is another important part of the religious background of Lehi’s world. It was a symbol of the covenant, and many of the symbols and ordinances celebrated were certainly types and shadows of the coming of the Messiah. Thus a brief description of Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem may prove useful. In the Old Testament, the temple is called “the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 3:1), which clearly describes the primary symbol of this building—the presence of the Lord in the midst of his people. The presence of God is important in the spiritual history of the covenant people. After the fall and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve sought to regain the presence of God through worship, prayer, the building of altars, and the offering of sacrifice in “similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” (Moses 5:7).

Abraham and the patriarchs followed this model and erected altars, often at the top of a hill or mountain, to offer prayer and sacrifice. At several sacred places like Shechem,

Bethel, Hebron, and Beersheba, the Lord appeared to them, blessed them, and gave them covenants. At Bethel Jacob saw a dramatic vision of the ladder of heaven with angels ascending and descending. The Lord appeared and made the Abrahamic covenant with him there. At the end of this experience Jacob exclaimed, “This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17)—and he named the place Bethel, which means “the house of God.”

Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, where they were to worship the Lord and enter into his presence. While the spiritually immature children of Israel were not able to receive the higher law at Sinai, they did enter into the Mosaic covenant with the promise that if they were faithful, they would be able to enter into the presence of God. The Lord gave them directions to build the tabernacle complex and the ark of the covenant—concrete and visible symbols of their quest through covenant to enter back into the presence of God. Thus, the tabernacle was an important institution of the law of Moses. The tabernacle would serve as a portable center of worship under the law of Moses until the temple was built in Jerusalem.

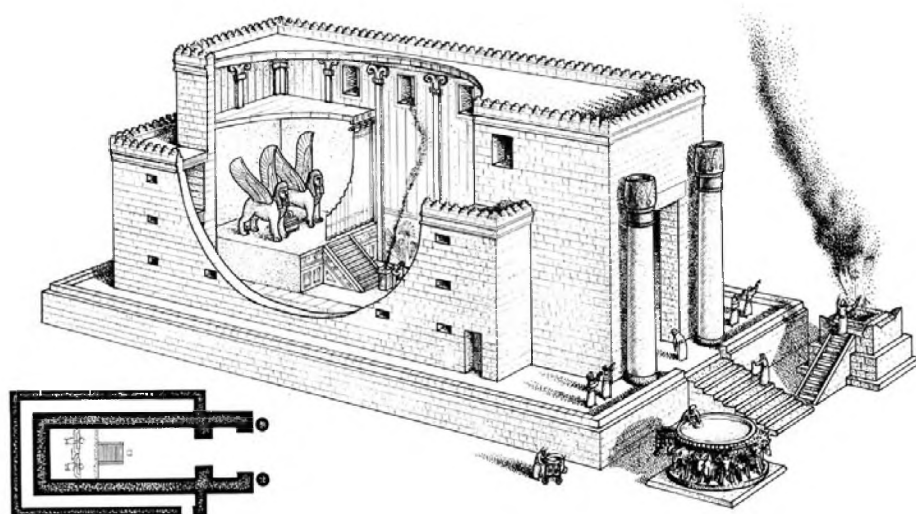
Following the conquest, the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant resided in various locations until David conquered the Jebusites and moved them to his capital, Jerusalem. Solomon built and dedicated the temple in about 960 B.C. Throughout the history of Israel, however, the people were not obedient to the commandments but continuously sought to build idols both to Jehovah and to other gods and goddesses of their Canaanite neighbors.

The Lord sent prophets like Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah to warn of the dangers of such practices, but to little avail. King Hezekiah (715–687) sought to reform Israel’s religion, as did his

grandson Josiah (640–609). Josiah was successful, and the writer of Kings records that he cleansed the land and the temple from idolatrous practices. Most important, Josiah implemented a plan of centralization—probably based on the texts of Deuteronomy 12–26—in which all sacrifice must be offered only at the temple in Jerusalem. This dramatically changed the practice of religion in Israel; from that time forth, all sacrifices and thus all the ordinances and festivals requiring sacrifice had to be observed at Jerusalem. Thus at the time of Lehi, on the eve of the destruction of the temple, Solomon’s temple had been cleansed by Josiah and was, according to Kings, being run according to the law of the Lord.¹³

Shortly after Lehi and his family departed from Jerusalem, the temple was destroyed by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, and many temple vessels were taken to Babylon in 586 B.C. The children of Israel would later return from Babylon in 539 to rebuild the temple—called the Second Temple, or Temple of Zerubbabel—in 515. This temple would stand until it was replaced by that of King Herod at the time of Christ. Herod’s temple would be destroyed in A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and the Jews were scattered from Jerusalem.

The dimensions and furnishings of Solomon’s temple are described in 1 Kings 6–7 and 2 Chronicles 3–5. The temple was oriented with the doors facing to the east—which in Jerusalem was away from the city toward the Mount of Olives. A courtyard in front of the building contained a great altar, a bronze basin, and ten portable bronze water basins. The great altar, fifteen feet high and thirty feet square, was a place of sacrifice where the burnt offerings—probably the continuation of the sacrifice given by Adam and Eve in similitude of the Lamb of God—were sacrificed along with the host of other sacrifices of the law of Moses. The brazen sea, fifteen feet in diameter and over seven feet tall, rested



Drawing by Michael P. Lyon

The Temple of Solomon had a large courtyard containing an altar for sacrifices and a great bronze basin that rested on the backs of twelve oxen for the ritual washings of the priests. The temple was divided into three rooms: the porch; the holy place, containing the menorah, the table of shewbread, and the altar of incense; and the holy of holies, with the cherubim on each side of the ark of the covenant.

on the backs of twelve oxen, three facing each of the cardinal directions. Together with the ten smaller bronze basins mounted on wheels, the basin provided water that was used for washing and purification for the priests.

The temple building itself was a rectangular building that measured approximately 150 feet long and 75 feet wide and was divided into three rooms. At either side of the huge entrance doors were two large pillars of bronze called Jachin and Boaz—each twenty-seven feet high. Their function is unknown, though scholars speculate that they were symbols of the covenant—Jachin meaning “he establishes” (cf. Psalm 89:4) and Boaz “in him is strength” (cf. Psalm 21:1).

The first room, called the porch (Heb. *ʾulam*), was thirty feet square and appears to have been an empty space that served as a transition into the temple. The second room, the

holy place (Heb. *hekhal*)—sixty feet long, thirty feet wide, and forty-five feet high—contained several furnishings. First, there were ten large wooden lampstands overlaid with gold—the light of the lamps probably represented the presence of God. They were probably in the form of the seven-armed menorah in the tabernacle that in Jewish tradition symbolized the tree of life. Next were ten tables containing the “shewbread,” or “bread of the presence,” offered by the people and eaten by the priests as representatives of the Lord. Finally there was a golden incense altar where incense was offered to the Lord, perhaps symbolizing prayer (Psalm 141:2; Revelation 5:8; 8:3).

Between the holy place and the most holy place (Heb. *debir*)—or holy of holies—was a large and beautiful veil decorated with cherubim, understood as creatures guarding the throne of God. The holy of holies was a room with the dimensions of a cube of thirty feet—probably signifying the perfection of God. Inside the holy of holies was the ark of the covenant—a wooden box or chest covered with pure gold that represented both the covenant and the throne of God. Inside the box were the stone tablets, a bowl of manna, and the rod of Aaron. On top of the box was a gold slab—called the mercy seat—and on either side of this slab were two gigantic cherubim fifteen feet high, made of olive wood and covered with gold foil. In the Old Testament God is said to “dwell” or “sit” between the cherubim (Psalm 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16).

Temple worship consisted of the daily sacrifices and offerings at the temple. The high priest and the other priests officiated and were accompanied by the Levites. Israel gathered at the temple to celebrate the festivals of the year: the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Weeks, and Tabernacles, and the Day of Atonement—the only time when the high priest would enter the holy of holies and offer the blood of the sacrifice on

the mercy seat to expiate sin (Leviticus 16). The people came to the temple daily to offer and observe the sacrifices and offerings, to sing and pray, and to receive the blessing of the high priest (Numbers 6:22–27).

The basic theology of the temple can easily be derived from the Bible in the dedicatory prayer offered by Solomon in 1 Kings 8 (2 Chronicles 6). Clearly the temple represented the house of the Lord and the dwelling place of God among his people. Solomon declared, “I have surely built thee an house to dwell in, a settled place for thee to abide in for ever” (1 Kings 8:13). In addition, the temple was closely connected with the covenant. Solomon addressed the Lord “who keepest covenant and mercy” and prayed that the Lord would hear the prayers of the faithful and repentant offered toward the temple. Solomon also recognized the blessings and curses connected with the covenant and asked the Lord to justify the righteous and condemn the wicked and to deliver his people from enemies, famine, pestilence, and sickness. Finally Solomon identified the temple as a symbol of missionary work as he prayed that the Lord would acknowledge the prayers of the stranger who came to worship the one and only true God (1 Kings 8:23–53). After the dedication the Lord warned Israel, repeating the conditional nature of the covenant, “But if ye shall at all turn from following me, ye or your children, and will not keep the commandments . . . then will I cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house, which I have hallowed for my name, will I cast out of my sight” (1 Kings 9:6–7).

There are many other aspects of temple theology found throughout the scriptures, such as visions, angels, the throne theophany, the creation, the Garden of Eden, the tree of life, levels of sacredness, the theology of the high priest as a representative of

Jehovah, and the temple as a place of judgment—many of which also occur in the Book of Mormon.¹⁴

The Book of Mormon records that Nephi built a temple in the New World after the pattern of the Old: “And I, Nephi, did build a temple; and I did construct it after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things; for they were not to be found upon the land, wherefore, it could not be built like unto Solomon’s temple. But the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine” (2 Nephi 5:16). Nephi built the first temple in the land of Nephi, and further temples were eventually built elsewhere. King Benjamin taught at a temple in Zarahemla (Mosiah 1:18–2:7), Alma and Amulek preached repentance at several temples in the land of Zarahemla (Alma 16:13), and Jesus Christ appeared to the surviving Nephites in the temple at Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:1).

After leaving Jerusalem, Lehi built an altar and offered sacrifice in the wilderness (1 Nephi 2:7; 5:9; 7:22).¹⁵ The writers of the Book of Mormon continually tell us that they practiced the whole of the law of Moses. Because temple worship and practices are never explicitly described in the Book of Mormon, it is difficult to know exactly what Nephite temple worship consisted of. If the Book of Mormon people practiced the law of Moses as described in the Bible, temple worship in the New World was probably very similar to that in the Old. On the other hand, since the Book of Mormon people had the Melchizedek Priesthood, it is possible that the law of Moses as recorded in the Bible was altered in terms of temple worship to better suit their needs.

John W. Welch exhaustively described the history and significance of the temple in the Book of Mormon and the many possible connections that may have existed between the temple

and living the law of Moses.¹⁶ He presented evidence that the Nephites practiced a system of sacrifices and offerings and that they celebrated festivals connected with the law of Moses—in particular the Feast of Tabernacles and the Day of Atonement.

Jesus Is the Christ

And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations (Title Page)

Because the people in the Old Testament and in the first half of the Book of Mormon lived in a time before the coming of the Savior, their knowledge of his coming, his ministry, and his atoning sacrifice depended on the teachings of the prophets. Throughout history the Lord has sent prophets to his children as custodians of the covenant—to preach repentance to those who were members of the covenant and to invite those who were not to be baptized. Indeed, the Lord has said that he will do nothing except he reveal his “secret [Heb. *sôd*]” to his prophets (Amos 3:7). Prophets such as Enoch, Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah all delivered a similar message to the covenant people—repent or face the consequences. They worshipped the Lord, the great Jehovah, who would himself come down to redeem his people. Preexilic Israelite religion pointed those who had eyes to see and ears to hear toward the salvation of this Lord and anointed Messiah.

In addition to their message of repentance, prophets often revealed future events—usually promising either blessings or destruction—in order to help motivate the people to repent. Lehi and his family lived during one of the greatest crises in Israelite history—the disobedience of the people would subsequently lead to their deliverance into the hands of the Babylonians. The

Book of Mormon records, “And in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4). Prophets from this period include Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Huldah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Urijah. The writings of many of these prophets have survived, most notably the prophecies of Jeremiah. Chronicles describes the time period of Zedekiah’s reign in precisely the same terms as the Book of Mormon: “And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy” (2 Chronicles 36:15–16).

At the same time, many false prophets appeared. In particular, the false prophets at the time of Jeremiah predicted that the Babylonian threat would soon end, while Jeremiah preached the word of the Lord to surrender to Babylon. Jeremiah explained the critical factor between true prophets and false prophets: “For who hath stood in the counsel [Heb. *sôd*] of the Lord, and hath perceived and heard his word?” (Jeremiah 23:18). Jeremiah accused the prophets of not having access to the heavenly council and speaking the words and visions from themselves and not from the Lord: “Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: that speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:16).

The most important future event prophesied by all the true prophets was the coming of the Messiah. A knowledge of the reality of the future coming of the Messiah and of the doctrine of the atonement was essential for the people to practice repentance.

The Book of Moses reveals that the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ was taught to the human family from the beginning. Adam and Eve were commanded to offer sacrifice in “similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” (Moses 5:7). The Old Testament is full of prophecies and allusions to the coming of the Son of God in the flesh to redeem the world. Abraham offering his son Isaac (Genesis 22) was already anciently understood by the Nephites to be in similitude of the Father offering his Only Begotten Son (Jacob 4:5). In the patriarchal blessing given to Judah, mention is made of the kingship that would reside in Judah and an entity named Shiloh that would come to gather the people (Genesis 49:10–11). The Lord revealed to Moses the coming of a prophet like unto Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15–18)—a prophecy that was understood by Nephi (1 Nephi 22:20–21), and later by Peter, to be a reference to the Savior (Acts 3:22).

The greatest of the messianic prophecies to have survived in the Old Testament are found in the writings of Isaiah, which were preserved on the plates of brass and used by the Nephites in their own writings. Nephi loved these writings, in particular the writings of Isaiah, which he quoted at length in his record (1 Nephi 20–21//Isaiah 48–49; 2 Nephi 12–24//Isaiah 2–14). Abinadi quoted portions of messianic prophecies in Isaiah 52 and all of 53 in his address to the priests of Noah (Mosiah 12, 14). Nephi and others quoted from the messianic prophecies of the Israelite prophets Zenock, Neum, and Zenos (1 Nephi 19:10), which are not found in the Old Testament.

Lehi, and later his son Nephi, were called to be prophets, and their calls match well the biblical tradition associated with the calling of prophets. Latter-day Saint scholars who have studied the call of Lehi have found that it contains many elements in common with accounts of the calls of other Israelite

prophets. In particular, the vision of God sitting on his throne surrounded by angels fulfills Jeremiah's primary definition of a prophet—that he has become a member of the Lord's divine council.¹⁷ The message of Lehi and Nephi also corresponded with the messages of other Old Testament prophets—repent or be destroyed. Lehi and Nephi both prophesied of the coming of the Messiah. Lehi received a knowledge of “the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world” (1 Nephi 1:19) and prophesied “a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world” (1 Nephi 10:4). Nephi saw a vision of the earthly ministry of Jesus in connection with the vision of the tree of life (1 Nephi 11).

The Book of Mormon specifically claims that Lehi and his descendants understood the whole of the law of Moses as pointing toward Christ. Jacob taught: “Behold, my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ; for, for this end hath the law of Moses been given; and all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him” (2 Nephi 11:4; cf. 2 Nephi 25:24–25, 27, 30; Alma 25:15; 30:3). King Benjamin further taught, “Yet the Lord God saw that his people were a stiffnecked people, and he appointed unto them a law, even the law of Moses. And many signs, and wonders, and types, and shadows showed he unto them, concerning his coming; and also holy prophets spake unto them concerning his coming” (Mosiah 3:14–15).

Thus some people in Old Testament times as well as in the Book of Mormon had many indications of the coming of the Messiah through the law of Moses. The many sacrifices and offerings commemorated various aspects of the atonement and were fulfilled in Christ (3 Nephi 9:19–20). The feast of Passover looked backward and forward to deliverance through a sacrificial

lamb and was fulfilled by Christ at the last supper (Exodus 12; Matthew 26:26–29). Likewise, the high priest entering the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement looked forward to Christ as explained by Hebrews 9–10. And Moses raised the brazen serpent in the wilderness as a type of the “lifting up of Christ” (Numbers 21:6–9; John 3:14; 2 Nephi 25:20). Jacob and Abinadi taught that all the prophets knew and taught of the coming of Christ (Jacob 4:4; Mosiah 13:33). Nephi₂ taught that “Abraham saw of his coming, and was filled with gladness and did rejoice” (Helaman 8:17); he also reported that all the prophets from the time of Abraham prophesied of the coming of the Messiah (Helaman 8:16).

The Book of Mormon thus teaches about Christ from three vantage points. First, it contains prophecies and testimonies uttered by prophets who lived in times before his coming: Zenos, Zenock, Neum, Isaiah, Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, Alma, and Nephi₂. Many of these prophets such as Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob had actually seen the Savior (1 Nephi 1:9; 2:16; Jacob 2:4; 11:2–3). Most important, these men taught the doctrine of Christ and the atonement in a more complete way. Second, the Book of Mormon contains another witness, besides the biblical record, of the resurrection of the Savior. During his visit he delivered a pure statement of his doctrine and church. Finally, the prophets in the Book of Mormon looked back to the time of Christ, indicating to us how to gain a testimony of him.

The Book of Mormon prophets not only understood the future coming of the Messiah, but they understood that the Messiah would be God in the flesh. Nephi saw a vision of the divine parentage of Jesus Christ in his vision of the condescension of God in connection with the tree of life (1 Nephi 11). Jacob taught that “the Holy One of Israel, should manifest himself to them in the flesh” (2 Nephi 6:9). And Abinadi expounded on the messianic prophecies in Isaiah 52–53, demon-

strating how the Messiah would be God coming to earth and would minister as the Father and the Son (Mosiah 12–15).

The prophet Isaiah prophesied, “The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isaiah 52:10). Nephi saw the day when the Savior “shall manifest himself unto all nations, both unto the Jews and also unto the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 13:42). Abinadi interpreted the Isaiah passage to refer to the atonement of Jesus Christ—the knowledge of which must go forth to all. Further, all the Book of Mormon prophets taught of the atonement of Jesus Christ. As prophesied by the prophets, Jesus Christ came first to the Jews, then to his lost sheep—the remnant of the Nephites and the other tribes of the house of Israel (3 Nephi 15).

But more important than the simple testimony of the coming of the Messiah, the Book of Mormon teaches us the meaning of the Messiah and his atoning mission. Consider Nephi’s vision about Christ and his teaching the condescension of God (1 Nephi 11) and his description of the doctrine of Christ (2 Nephi 31). Remember Alma’s dramatic description of the intervention of the Savior into his life and the power of the atonement to make us new persons (Alma 5, 36). And consider Moroni’s closing words in the Book of Mormon inviting all to come to Christ: “Come unto Christ, and be perfected in him,” that by his grace “ye become holy, without spot” (Moroni 10:32–33).

The Book of Mormon was translated and published by the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1830. The gospel has since gone forth as prophesied by the Book of Mormon prophets. The three anciently stated purposes of the Book of Mormon are being fulfilled. As the Book of Mormon goes forth to the world, many read in its pages of the “great things” the Lord has done for their fathers, including the ancient patriarchs, Moses and

the children of Israel, and Lehi and his family, whose deliverance from Jerusalem made the Book of Mormon possible. Further, readers of this book can identify and testify of the “great things” he has done and continues to do for them. Most important, readers can identify the greatest thing the Lord has done for us in the atonement of Jesus Christ.

The fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant continues as the seed of Abraham goes forth to bless the nations of the earth, teaching the remnant of the house of Israel that the covenants of the Lord are still in force and that they are not cast off forever. And the Book of Mormon adds its testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ to the testimony of the Bible. An astute observer of the restoration and the going forth of the Book of Mormon can readily see that Jesus the Christ is in the process of “manifesting himself unto all nations” (Title Page).

NOTES

1. See John L. Sorenson, “The ‘Brass Plates’ and Biblical Scholarship,” *Dialogue* 10/4 (1977): 31–39; Robert L. Millet, “The Influence of the Brass Plates on the Teachings of Nephi,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 207–25; Noel B. Reynolds, “The Brass Plates Version of Genesis,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:136–73; and John W. Welch, “Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 430–34.

2. An informative and stimulating study of the concept of “remember” in the Bible and in the history of Judaism is found in Yosef Hayim

Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

3. For studies on the concept of remembering in the Book of Mormon, see Louis Midgley, “The Ways of Remembrance,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 168–76, and “‘O Man, Remember, and Perish Not’ (Mosiah 4:30),” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 127–29.

4. Several substantial and significant articles trace the typology of the exodus in the Book of Mormon: George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–62; Terrence L. Szink, “Nephi and the Exodus,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 38–51; S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 111–26.

5. This same acknowledgment is found in the Jaredite narrative as Shule remembers the great things the Lord did for his people in delivering them across the sea (Ether 7:27).

6. John W. Welch, “A Masterpiece: Alma 36,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 114–31.

7. George E. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 17/3 (1954): 50–76. See also Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), and Moshe Weinfeld, “*berith*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:253–79.

8. An excellent article on the law of Moses in the Book of Mormon is Kent P. Jackson, “Law of Moses,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey et al. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 504–6.

9. David Rolph Seely, “The Ten Commandments in the Book of Mormon,” in *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon, The 1991 Sperry*

Symposium, ed. Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 166–81.

10. See John W. Welch, Proceedings of the Book of Mormon Law Conference, in *Studia Antiqua* (Summer 2003).

11. For a discussion of this issue, see John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 297–387.

12. Stephen D. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 233–76.

13. The biblical view of Josiah’s reforms is found in 2 Kings 22–23. For another point of view see Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” in this volume, pages 523–42. Barker believes that in the process of reform Josiah and his followers discarded many important aspects of the ancient Israelite temple religion.

14. See Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker,” in this volume, pages 449–522.

15. For a discussion of the possible significance of these sacrifices see S. Kent Brown, “Why Were Those Sacrifices Offered by Lehi?” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 1–8. For a discussion of the fact that Lehi built an altar and offered sacrifice outside of Jerusalem, see David Rolph Seely, “Lehi’s Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/1 (2001): 62–69, 80.

16. Welch, “Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 297–379.

17. Blake T. Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26/4 (1986): 67–95. See also John W. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” in this volume, pages 421–48.