

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM

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Edited by  
Daniel H. Ludlow

*The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure  
of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

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all people. . . . And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Ex. 19:5–6).

Because ancient Israel rejected God’s word and thereby lost his promises, the prophet Hosea warned:

The Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, . . . my people are destroyed. . . . I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children [Hosea 4:1–6; cf. Amos 8:11–12; Isa. 24:1–6; Jer. 2:11–13].

In New Testament times, Jesus Christ lamented a similar apostasy: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens, . . . and ye would not!” (Matt. 23:37–38; cf. 3 Ne. 10:4–6). Covenant Israel was meant to be expanded in Old Testament times (Abr. 2:9–11; 1 Ne. 17:36–40), and again in the New Testament era, to include all followers of Christ, both literal descendants of Abraham and GENTILES who became part of Abraham’s lineage by adoption. “Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham . . . . For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, . . . for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:7, 27–29; cf. Rom. 4:12–13; Eph. 2:11–12).

The same doctrine applies today: Membership in latter-day covenant Israel, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is not limited to a certain lineage but is open to all who willingly accept and abide by its covenantal terms through the LAW OF ADOPTION. Latter-day Saints accept God’s covenant with Abraham and his lineage, a covenant reestablished at the time of Joseph Smith (D&C 110:12). Known as the “new and everlasting covenant” (D&C 22:1; Jer. 31:31–34; 32:36–40), it is included in the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is considered “new” in each age when it is given to God’s people, yet it is “everlasting” because the conditions and promises never change. Further, covenant Israel implies a community willing to accept God’s complete law, which is based in latter-day revelation of the same covenant that was

revealed in the Old and New Testaments. This requires an acknowledgment that God has spoken to both ancient and latter-day prophets and continues to do so.

Covenants and accompanying ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ are the essence of religious life. LDS teaching holds that all of God’s commandments are based in covenant. Thus the ordinances of BAPTISM, receiving the GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST, and the SACRAMENT, as well as keeping the SABBATH DAY holy and TEMPLE WORSHIP—including eternal marriage—embody covenants with promises, obligations, and opportunities for blessings. These covenants are mutual promises between God in heaven and men and women on earth. Those willing to abide by such agreements are considered part of covenant Israel, with all the attendant blessings and opportunities. Thus the Church teaches that any law or commandment from God to his children, that helps ensure their SALVATION and ETERNAL LIFE is part of the “everlasting covenant.”

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “the ancients . . . obtained from God promises of such weight and glory, that our hearts are often filled with gratitude that we are even permitted to look upon them. . . . If we are the children of the Most High, . . . and embrace the same covenant that they embraced, and are faithful to the testimony of our Lord as they were, we can approach the Father in the name of Christ as they approached Him, and for ourselves obtain the same promises” (*TPJS*, pp. 65–66).

[See also Abrahamic Covenant.]

JAMES B. MAYFIELD

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## COVENANTS

The word “covenant” in the Bible is a translation of the Hebrew *berith* and of the Greek *diathēkē*. The Book of Mormon concept seems close to the Hebrew indication of any formalized relation between two parties, such as a bond, pact, or agreement. As such, the term is used for nonaggression pacts between nations (Gen. 26:26–31), a promise of land-ownership (Gen. 15:18–21), a bond for free slaves (Jer. 34:8–9), or an oath of secrecy (2 Kgs. 11:4). The Greek *diathēkē* is a more legalistic term, implying a formal will, a legal bequest (Gal. 3:17). In the New Testament the term is often translated as

“testament,” but clearly is used for the same kind of bond as “covenant” (cf. Heb. 7:22; 8:6; Anderson, p. 5). This legal aspect is also clear in the Doctrine and Covenants (e.g., D&C 132:7), where certain organizational issues are couched in covenantal terms (e.g., D&C 82:11–12). The English term “covenant,” meaning “coming together,” stresses the relational aspect. In other languages the terms used may have more legal connotations.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints speak of themselves as a “covenant people,” both collectively and individually. Entering into righteous and authorized covenants with God is one of the most important aspects of their lives. They see their covenants as modern counterparts of covenant making in biblical times.

Most covenants mentioned in scripture are made by God with mankind, either with individuals or a group. In a group covenant, like that of ancient Israel or of the NEPHITES, the leader or king “cuts the covenant” (as it is said in Hebrew) for, and in behalf of, his people, who in turn affirm their entrance into the covenant by a collective oath or by REPENTANCE (for example, 2 Chr. 34:29–32). This covenant may be reaffirmed and reestablished, as occurs in King Benjamin’s speech (Mosiah 1–6; *see* Ricks, 1984). When such covenants are established, the collective bond with God holds as long as people are obedient to the commandments stated or implied in the covenant. Yet a gradual shift of emphasis from collective toward individual covenant making is discernible from the Old to the New Testament. It is also within the Book of Mormon and in the teachings of the Church. Some tension between the association with the “elect” (Ps. 89:3–4; D&C 88:130–133) and the more general covenant for all mankind (Isa. 55:3) remains. Individual covenants, in any event, are essential in LDS doctrine and religion, both in sacred history and in present practice.

In covenant making, God takes the initiative with a conditional promise, specifying attainable blessings and setting the terms for people to receive them. Sometimes a sign is given to commemorate the pact, like the tables of the covenant (Deut. 9:9–11). Revelations (Jer. 11:1–5) and miracles (Deut. 5:1–6) sometimes accompany covenants. One enters the covenant, usually through a ritual, a visible sign. Blood sacrifices (“the blood of the covenant,” Ex. 24:8), the “salt covenant” (Num. 18:19; 2 Chr. 13:5), the circumcision of boys (Acts 7:8), baptism (D&C 22:1; Mosiah 18:7–11),

the sacrament (Heb. 8:6; 3 Ne. 18:1–14), the conferral of the priesthood with its “oath and covenant” (D&C 84:33–42), marriage (D&C 132) and other temple rites, all these revealed rituals are called sacraments or ORDINANCES, which have been given as covenants. They serve as a signal that individuals enter into or reaffirm personal covenants with the Lord. As God is bound by his promises (D&C 82:10), covenant making has to be guided by revelation and performed through the AUTHORITY of the priesthood. Otherwise, God is not truly made party to the accord and agreement. Since covenant rites are essential for man’s salvation and EXALTATION, the role of the priesthood in administering these covenantal sacraments is crucial. Without priesthood authority, there are no everlasting covenants. Still, these overt covenant obligations are always directly related to the general commandment of loving God and one’s neighbor, called the “covenant of the heart” (Heb. 10:16; Jer. 31:31–34; Isa. 55:3).

The Lord’s covenants essentially cover the whole PLAN OF SALVATION. God’s promise is to send a Savior for all humans, asking on their part for their obedience to the will of the Lord. Each covenant reflects aspects of the “fulness of his gospel” (D&C 133:57). Though various DISPENSATIONS may have their specific focus, such as Israel’s “covenant of works” and Paul’s “covenant of grace,” Latter-day Saints categorize all divine covenants under the unity of one gospel. As a consequence, all covenants are always new, everlasting, and continually renewed.

Latter-day Saints enter into an eternal covenant with God at baptism, wherein they promise to take upon them the name of Jesus Christ, to keep his commandments, to bear one another’s burdens, to stand as a witness of God at all times, to repent, and to serve and remember Christ always (*see* BAPTISMAL COVENANT; Mosiah 18:8–10; D&C 20:37). They renew this covenant by partaking of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Other covenants involving obligations of faithfulness, magnifying one’s calling, sacrifice, obedience, righteousness, chastity, and consecration are made when one is ordained to the MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD (*see* OATH AND COVENANT OF THE PRIESTHOOD), when one receives the temple ENDOWMENT, and when a man and woman enter into eternal marriage (*see* MARRIAGE: ETERNAL).

Many commentaries stress the one-sidedness of scriptural covenants. Since the Lord’s promises

greatly exceed human obligations, the blessings of deity significantly overshadow the efforts demanded (see Mosiah 2:21), even though a notion of reciprocity is always present. Something is demanded in return, as a covenant is essentially two-sided; before anything else, it is a relation, the means by which God and man become reconciled in the atonement afforded to all by Jesus Christ.

A covenant is a special relationship with the Lord into which a person or a group may enter. The terms have been set by the Lord both for the rewards (blessings, salvation, exaltation) and the efforts demanded (obedience to rules and commandments). A covenant is fulfilled when people keep their promises and endure to the end in faith, with the Lord giving blessings during life, and salvation and exaltation upon completion.

A broken covenant results from a willful breach of promise, that is, transgression of commandments. By breaking this relationship, a person forfeits blessings. These can be restored in full only by repentance and reentering the covenant. Covenants comfort the righteous (Dan. 9:4) and lift the hearts of the oppressed (Ps. 74:20–21), but shame the unrepentant (Ezek. 16:60–63).

Latter-day Saints hold that the first personal covenants were made in PREMORTAL LIFE, later to be taken again on earth. In the sacred history of the earth, covenants have been made by God with Adam and Eve and with all the ancient patriarchs and prophets and their wives. For example, God made covenants of various kinds with Enoch; Abraham and Sarah; Moses; the kings of Israel and Judah, including David, Solomon, and Josiah (2 Chr. 34:29–32); and many of the prophets. Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament as a covenant establishing a personal relationship with his individual followers (Heb. 8:6), his blood replacing the old sacrificial “blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb. 13:20). Through Joseph Smith, the everlasting covenants were established anew (see NEW AND EVERLASTING COVENANT; D&C 1:15, 22; 22:1; 132).

For each respective group of covenant people, this meaningful relation with the deity is also an identity marker, singling out people or a group from among their peers. Often outward signs are used: circumcision (Gen. 17:2–14), the SABBATH DAY (Ex. 31:12–17), endogamy or prohibitions on marriage outside the group (Ezra 10:3), greetings (D&C 88:131–133), and dietary proscriptions, such as the food taboos of Leviticus or the

latter-day health code of the WORD OF WISDOM (D&C 89).

Among Christian churches historically, the focus on making covenants has risen since the Reformation. In John Calvin’s Geneva the notion of covenant was crucial (Lillback, 1987), a tradition that was passed on to many Protestant denominations, including the Puritans (van Pohr, 1986). In early American ecclesiastical history, covenants were also crucial, and the New England Puritans clearly saw themselves as the covenant people of the Lord (Miller, 1966). This concept has remained important in American culture and is a vital and essential part of LDS religion.

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WOUTER VAN BEEK

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## COVENANTS IN BIBLICAL TIMES

The idea of making and keeping covenants is essential to Latter-day Saints, who would readily agree “that the central message of the Bible is God’s covenant with men” (Bruce, p. 139). The “covenant theme pervades Old Testament teachings” and all scripture (Ludlow). A consistent and enduring pattern in God’s dealings with mankind from the beginning of the earth’s history down to present time is that sacred covenants are used to unite individuals to God and to each other.

Bringing extrabiblical revelations to bear on their understanding of biblical covenants, Latter-day Saints consider the history of God’s dealings with mankind to be arranged according to DISPENSATIONS OF THE GOSPEL, in which the gospel (including the priesthood and all the necessary