



Understanding our Covenant

Part of "The Learning of the Jews"

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There is a hidden message in the first two verses of the Book of Mormon. The message is to search out "the learning of the Jews." The key to finding this hidden message is to know that these two verses are a chiasm, which is one form of Hebrew poetry. A chiasm is an inverted parallelism, or in other words, you say something then repeat yourself in reverse order. One advantage of writing chiastically is that you can place special emphasis on the most important point by placing it in the center of the chiasm. Nephi deliberately constructed his chiasm so that "the learning of the Jews" was in the center: A) knowledge; B) record; C) language; D) **the learning of the Jews**; C') language; B') record; A') knowledge. Nephi is telling us that "the learning of the Jews" is an important key to understanding the Book of Mormon. This should come as no surprise because we already know that "the learning of the Jews" is a key to understanding the Bible. We have just used one area of "the learning of the Jews"--Hebrew poetry--to find a hidden message. Another area in which "the learning of the Jews" greatly enhances our understanding is that of covenant-making.

COVENANTS NOT UNDERSTOOD

The concept of covenant-making in the ancient world is emerging as one of the most profound and far-reaching topics in all scripture. This is because the making of a covenant is at the heart of the gospel. God has made it possible for us to have a covenant with him through faith in Jesus Christ who was the sacrificial lamb slain for us. Nephi is correct when he states that only the Jews or those who study their ways understand the things of the Jews (2 Nephi 11:8). Until we knew about chiasms in the Book of Mormon, we could not fully understand the intent of Nephi's opening statement. In the same way, until we know what a covenant meant to an ancient Hebrew, the true understanding of our covenant will elude us. I have been greatly blessed as I continue to learn more about this subject. It also takes time to "soak in." I am looking forward to even greater blessings as I fully implement my covenant. Please consider this information very carefully and very prayerfully. If you do this I know you too will be greatly blessed as the word of God and the Holy Spirit reveal to you the real meaning of the covenant you have with God.

In the account of Nephi and Zoram, we see how seriously the ancient Hebrews took their covenants. After Nephi killed Laban in obtaining the brass plates, he made an oath to Zoram that Zoram could go with them into the wilderness (1 Nephi 1:136-144). Zoram accepted and made an oath to live with them. Both Zoram and Nephi had much at risk. Zoram had his life at risk; Nephi and his brothers had their lives and the success of their mission at risk.

By Raymond C. Treat

Yet in verse 144, Nephi states in a matter-of-fact way “that when Zoram had made an oath unto us, our fears did cease concerning him.”

In the western world today we do not understand how, in a life-or-death situation such as this, just a few words could bring about complete trust. Obviously these oaths meant much more to those men than they would to us today. By swearing an oath to each other, Nephi and Zoram had entered into a covenant. What did a covenant mean to them?

OLD TESTAMENT COVENANTS

In the Old Testament a covenant was a sacred and binding agreement between two people. God’s covenant with Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed is no doubt the best-known covenant in scripture. This covenant was initiated by God and was unconditional. One aspect of this covenant was the promise of inheriting a land:

And the Lord said unto him, I the Lord,
brought thee out of Ur, of the Chaldees,
to give thee this land to inherit it.
And Abram said, Lord, whereby shall I know
that I shall inherit it?

Genesis 15:13-14

What did God do to assure Abraham? He made a blood covenant with him. The establishment of this covenant removed any doubt from Abraham’s mind. Let’s look at the way the ancient Hebrews made covenants.

Steps in a Hebrew Covenant

In his book, *The Miracle of the Scarlet Thread*, Richard Booker outlines the steps ancient Hebrews typically followed in making a covenant. They exchanged robes and belts, cut the covenant, raised their right arms and mingled their blood, exchanged names, made a scar, stated the covenant terms, ate a memorial meal and planted a memorial tree. Let’s examine the significance of each of these steps.

■ *Exchanged robes*

A man’s robe was symbolic of all his material possessions. Therefore, by giving his robe, he was pledging everything he had to his covenant brother.

■ *Exchanged belts*

The symbolism of this act is lost to our modern culture because our belts serve a different purpose. The ancient belts were weapons belts. Therefore, the message of giving one’s belt was--“all the power I have I now give to you. If necessary, I will defend you to the death.”

■ *Cut the covenant*

The Hebrew word for covenant means “to cut or make an incision.” The two covenant makers cut an animal down the middle and stood between the halves, their backs to each other. They then walked through the sacrifice, made a figure eight and came back to face each other. The dead animal represented self--dying to self and giving up rights to your own life. The figure eight represented a new beginning with the covenant partner until death. This ritual also reminded the covenant partners that if they broke their covenant, they would become food for vultures as was the animal used in this step.

■ *Raised right arm and mixed blood*

The covenant partners then raised their right arms, cut their palms and intermingled their blood, while swearing allegiance to each other. Then, as now, blood represented life; the intermingling represented two lives becoming one life.

■ *Exchanged names*

Each would take the other person’s last name and add it to his own. God and Abram exchanged names. God’s name in Hebrew is YHWH. So God took an “H” from his name and gave it to Abram, changing his name to Abraham. Abraham’s wife Sarai was also given an “H” which changed her name to Sarah. Abraham gave his name to God. That is why he is called the God of Abraham. The next time you see that name in scripture, it will remind you that God made a covenant with Abraham.

■ *Made a scar*

The participants made sure there would be a scar as a remembrance of the covenant. One common practice to ensure scarring was to rub dirt into the cut. If anyone tried to harm a person under covenant, he would simply raise his right arm and show the scar. The enemy then knew that he would also have to fight the man’s covenant partner. The scars in the body of Jesus Christ are covenant scars.

■ *Gave the covenant terms*

The participants recited the terms of the covenant in the presence of witnesses. Because we can, through faith, receive the benefits of the covenant between God and Abraham, we need to be very familiar with the terms of that covenant. Abraham was given a promised land. For the children of Abraham in the last days that promised land is called Zion. If we keep our covenant, our inheritance is Zion; if not then we inherit death, because that is always the punishment for breaking a covenant. This punishment extends for several generations if necessary. In like manner, the blessings of a covenant also extend to one’s seed.

■ *Ate a memorial meal*

The covenant partners then had a meal together to commemorate their covenant. This explains the symbolism of communion-- a remembrance of the covenant which we have made with Jesus Christ. Today, when a bride and groom feed the wedding cake to each other, they are acting out a custom which had its origin in the blood covenant.

■ *Planted a memorial tree*

The participants would plant a tree and sprinkle it with the blood of the sacrifice. If there were no witnesses to the covenant, they would pile up some stones and sprinkle some blood on them so that the stones became a witness that they had made a covenant. That is why Jesus said that if the people did not praise God on Palm Sunday, the stones themselves would have cried out in witness of what was occurring (Luke 19:39).

Mephibosheth

Now that we have had an introduction to a Hebrew covenant let us see if this information will help us to better understand the word of God. Let's apply our new knowledge to the story of Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan. We will start the story in I Samuel 18:3-4:

Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.

We now know that the reason Jonathan gave his robe and his weapons to David was because that was part of the way a covenant was made. If the words "made a covenant" had been left out, we would still know that Jonathan and David had made a covenant because of the rituals they followed.

It is important in the story of Mephibosheth that we notice that King Saul, Jonathan's father, became jealous of David and tried to kill him because he feared David would take the kingdom away from him. Next, we turn to 2 Samuel 4:4:

And Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son that was lame of his feet. He was five years old when the tidings came of Saul and Jonathan out of Jezreel, and his nurse took him up, and fled; and it came to pass, as she made haste to flee, that he fell, and became lame. And his name was Mephibosheth.

Here we are told how Mephibosheth became lame. Why was the nurse fleeing? She had heard that Saul and Jonathan were dead, and it was clear to her that David

would be the king. Since King Saul had poisoned the minds of his household (except Jonathan) against David, the nurse naturally assumed that as soon as David took over, he would kill all of Saul's family; therefore, she fled with Mephibosheth. Apparently she did not know about the covenant between David and Jonathan. We now pick up the story in 2 Samuel 9:1:

And David said, Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?

David wanted to bless Saul's family because of the covenant he had with Jonathan. The covenant was still in force even though Jonathan was dead. All this time the nurse had been hiding Mephibosheth because she feared for his life. We continue the story with 2 Samuel 9:7-8. Mephibosheth was found and brought before King David:

And David said unto him, Fear not; for I will surely show thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually. And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am?

Even after David told Mephibosheth what he was going to do for him, Mephibosheth was incapable of understanding. He still thought he was going to be killed. He had been living a miserable existence in hiding without a knowledge of the covenant he had with the king. The message should not be lost on us. We are like poor Mephibosheth. We have a covenant with God but are not taking advantage of it because we do not know anything about it. We can clearly see from the story of Mephibosheth how an understanding of the ancient Hebrew covenant helps us to understand the word of God.

ORIGIN OF THE BLOOD COVENANT

The blood covenant, however, did not begin with Abraham. We are told in Revelation 13:8 about the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." From this reference we learn that the blood covenant was in effect from the beginning. Adam was taught that the sacrifices he was told to make were "a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father . . ." (Genesis 4:7). Since the covenant we make with God through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins is central to God's plan for the redemption of mankind, we can expect that Satan would try to defeat the covenant by perverting it. As we know, Satan deceived Cain. Also,

in Genesis 5:35-38 we are told that Lamech entered into a covenant with Satan, which resulted in him murdering Irad, who had also made a covenant with Satan. Irad had broken the evil covenant by revealing it to the sons of Adam. The penalty for breaking a blood covenant was (and still is) death, whether the covenant was an evil covenant or a holy covenant.

We must realize that the only way we will be able to survive in the final days is by having a covenant with God. Those who wish to follow Satan will already have made their covenant through which they will receive whatever power Satan has. Their primary goal will then be the destruction of the rest of mankind. Only those who have a covenant with God will be able to stand in such a day. These people will have all the power they need from God to withstand and overcome wickedness. We call this power the endowment.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR COVENANT

We all know that baptism means we have made a covenant with God. This is clearly stated in these two Book of Mormon verses:

Now I say unto you,
If this be the desire of your hearts,
What have you against being baptized
in the name of the Lord,
As a witness before him that ye have entered
into a covenant with him
That ye will serve him and keep his
commandments,
That he may pour out his Spirit more
abundantly upon you?

Mosiah 9:41

Yea, come and go forth,
And shew unto your God that ye are willing
to repent of your sins,
And enter into a covenant with him to keep
his commandments
And witness it unto him this day, by going into
the waters of baptism.

Alma 5:27

Everyone who is baptized recognizes that he has made a covenant. In this respect we are unlike Mephibosheth, who did not know he had a covenant with the king. Yet, if we who are baptized do not understand the significance of our covenant, we are like Mephibosheth in that we are not able to enjoy the benefits of having a covenant with the king. I believe most of us fit this second category. We use the word "covenant" but do not yet fully understand the meaning of the word. It is as if we are groveling on the floor, satisfied with the

crumbs from the Master's table, when we should be seated as invited guests enjoying the feast. One scripture which points out that we do not understand our covenant and are therefore not making use of it in our daily lives is Malachi 2:10:

Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers?

According to some, backbiting is one of the most widespread sins among this people. Passing on rumors (most of which are false) seems to be one of our favorite pastimes. If we understood the type of relationship God wants each of us to have with each other as a result of our covenant with him, we would not participate in any activity that would harm a brother or sister in any way.

The Covenant Disperses Doubt

If the Lord has blessed us as a people as much as he has in spite of our lack of understanding of our covenant, then how much more do we have to look forward to as we improve our response to that covenant!

One thing we can look forward to as we establish the covenant more firmly in our lives is that our doubts will begin to diminish until all doubt is removed about the word of God, including the promises made to the covenant people. Nephi reminds us that God always remembers his covenants:

Behold, he loved our fathers and he
covenanted with them,
Yea, even Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob;
And he remembered the covenants
which he had made.

1 Nephi 5:132

Jacob agrees:

For the Lord God will fulfill his covenants
which he has made unto his children;
And for this cause the prophet has written
these things.

2 Nephi 5:32

Doubt and faith are opposites. If all doubt is removed then we would be living a life of faith to its fullest extent. Fear would also disappear since fear and faith are also opposites. The hope of such a great blessing alone should inspire us to learn more about this covenant we say we have.

The Covenant Brings Power

As we establish the covenant more firmly in our lives, we can look forward to greater spiritual power.

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Nephi tells us:

And blessed are they who shall seek to bring
forth my Zion at that day,
For they shall have the gift and the power of
the Holy Ghost

1 Nephi 3:187

The following scripture establishes that it is the people of the covenant who will receive the power mentioned in the above scripture. Sec. 83:17a tells us that Zion will be established because of the covenant made with the fathers:

The Lord hath brought again Zion:
The Lord hath redeemed his people, Israel,
according to the election of grace
Which was brought to pass by the faith and
covenant of their fathers.

The power of the Holy Ghost does not necessarily come at the same time as the gift. At the present time there are very few of us, if any, who have the kind of power to which Nephi refers. In addition to the examples of spiritual power in Nephi's life, we get a clue about Nephi's definition of power from his brother Jacob:

Wherefore, we search the prophets;
And we have many revelations and the spirit
of prophecy;
And having all these witnesses we obtain a
hope;
And our faith becometh unshaken
Insomuch that we truly can command in the
name of Jesus,
And the very trees obey us,
Or the mountains, or the waves of the sea.

Jacob 3:7

Notice that Jacob says that "our faith becometh unshaken." This kind of faith does not leave any room for doubt. This is the kind of faith that Abraham demonstrated when he obeyed God's instructions to take Isaac up to the mountain to offer him as a sacrifice. In Gen. 22:6 he told his servants that he and Isaac would return. Abraham could say this because there was no doubt in his mind that he would return with Isaac. He knew because of his covenant that God would preserve Isaac, even to the extent of resurrecting him on the spot if necessary. Abraham would not have taken "the knife to slay his son" (Gen. 22:12) if there had been any doubt whatsoever in his mind. Abraham's faith was unshaken. As a result, he became the father of the house of Israel.

Zion will be established for the purpose of gathering the latter day house of Israel together according to the covenant. We are told that after the remnant are brought

to a knowledge of their Redeemer:

... then will I gather them in from the four
quarters of the earth
And then will I fulfill the covenant which the Father
hath made
Unto all the people of the house of Israel.
3 Nephi 7:29

This gathering of the house of Israel is also called the restoration of the house of Israel. Only those who are part of the spiritual house of Israel through faith in Jesus Christ will be part of Zion as we can see from the following:

For behold, I say unto you,
That as many of the Gentiles as will repent are
the covenant people of the Lord;
And as many of the Jews as will not repent
shall be cast off;
For the Lord covenanteth with none
Save it be with them that repent and believe in his
Son,
Who is the Holy One of Israel.

2 Nephi 5:32

These are those who will have the spiritual power.

Covenant Names

If we establish the covenant fully in our lives we will exchange names just as Abraham did and we will take upon us the name of Jesus Christ and be called the children of Christ:

And we are willing to enter into a covenant
with our God,
To do his will and to be obedient to his
commandments in all things
That he shall command us all the remainder of
our days,
That we may not bring upon ourselves a never
ending torment, as has been spoken by the
angel,
That we may not drink out of the cup of the
wrath of God.
And now these are the words which King
Benjamin desired of them;
And therefore he said unto them,

"Ye have spoken the words that I desired;
And the covenant which ye have made is a
righteous covenant.
And now, because of the covenant which ye
have made,
Ye shall be called the children of Christ,
His sons, and his daughters."

Mosiah 3:6-8

Jesus also took our name upon him and became

known as the Son of Man. When we take his name we become "children of Christ." This is a very important title and carries with it all of the benefits of the covenant. I would recommend that we all make a list from the scriptures of the attributes of the children of Christ to assist us to better establish the covenant in our lives. (Those who have a copy of the *Zarahemla Record* 24-26 may use the list printed there to get a head start.) Studying this list should convince us all, if we have not been convinced thus far, that we have not yet fully established the covenant in our lives.

Purpose of the Book of Mormon: Establish The Covenant

One of the main purposes of the Book of Mormon is the restoration of the house of Israel, or in other words, establishing the covenant in the hearts of the house of Israel. One way to demonstrate that establishing the covenant is a primary purpose of the Book of Mormon is to point out that it begins and ends with the covenant. In the preface we read:

. . . which is to shew unto the remnant of the
house of Israel
What great things the Lord hath done for
their fathers;
And that they may know the covenants of the
Lord,
That they are not cast off for ever . . .

And then in the second to the last verse in the Book of Mormon, which is the last verse before Moroni's farewell, we again see the covenant:

And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect
in Christ and deny not his power,
Then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of
God,
Through the shedding of the blood of Christ
Which is in the covenant of the Father, unto
the remission of your sins,
That ye become holy without spot.

Moroni 10:30

If we make proper use of the concept of the covenant according to the "learning of the Jews" as taught in the Book of Mormon and the other scriptures, then we will not only receive greater blessings now but we will also be in a position to receive more scripture including additional information about the covenants. Lehi tells us:

. . . I am a descendant of Joseph, who was
carried captive into Egypt.
And great were the covenants of the Lord
which he made unto Joseph;
Wherefore, Joseph truly saw our day.

2 Nephi 2:5-6

Lehi obtained this information from the plates of brass which we do not yet have. These plates along with all the other records, which are part of what we call Mormon's library, will be available to those who make proper use of the record we have now--the Book of Mormon (see 3 Nephi 12:1-5).

In view of all the benefits of establishing the covenant in our lives more fully let us like Nephi delight "in the covenants of the Lord" (2 Nephi 8:10). We are told in Psalms 1:2 that if we delight in something we will think about it constantly. Let's start thinking more about our covenant. Perhaps the Lord will grant us further enlightenment that we might better understand that all he has is ours if we will keep our part of the covenant by giving all that we have unto him ZRF