Covenant Assumptions in the Book of Mormon

The Lord promised marvelous covenant blessings to ancient patriarchs such as Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Included are such blessings as the right for them and their righteous posterity to inherit a promised land, receive all of the priesthood ordinances, and become the means of blessing all the families of the earth with the blessings of the gospel. Additionally, they were promised that if their posterity drifted from the gospel path and forsook the Lord, he would not ultimately forsake them but would, in his own way and timing, reach out his merciful arm to future generations and offer them the blessings of the gospel from whence their fathers strayed. Moreover, they and their righteous posterity would ultimately be delivered from all enemies, inherit the earth, and rule and reign on earth with Christ as kings and priests, and queens and priestesses. The posterity of these patriarchs—the rightful heirs of these covenant blessings—came to be known as the “covenant people of the Lord,” the seed of Abraham, the children of Israel, the house of Israel, or simply Israel. The sum total of these promises came to be spoken of succinctly as “the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel.”

As Book of Mormon authors such as Nephi, Jacob, Mormon, and Moroni record their teachings and histories they often make the assumption that their readers are aware of the details of the Lord’s covenant promises as well as Israel’s rich covenantal history and future. This assumption of covenant consciousness on the part of their reader allows Book of Mormon authors to write in a kind of covenant shorthand, referring to such things as “the covenants of the Lord,” “the covenants of the Father,” the “house of Israel,” the “God of Israel,” and the fulfillment of “the covenant” with the expectation that readers will understand the story they are telling and the connections they are making. Much of this covenant backstory—both the history and covenant details—is found in the Old Testament. Book of Mormon authors therefore assume that readers are familiar with that foundational book of scripture. An understanding of the Bible is therefore essential to fully understand the crucial covenant messages of the Book of Mormon. Thus, to be fully understood, the Book of Mormon needs the Bible.

“Many Covenants of the Lord … Taken Away”

There is, however, a way in which the Bible also deeply needs the Book of Mormon. An angel explained to Nephi that when the Bible was originally written it contained “the covenants of the Lord, which he had made unto the house of Israel.” Over time, however, “many covenants of the Lord” were taken away from the Bible by the great and abominable church. Thus, in spite of its current covenant richness, the Bible yet lacks the completeness and fullness it once possessed. The angel explained to Nephi that in the latter-days the Book of Mormon would come forth not only to establish the truthfulness of the Bible, but also to restore “the plain and precious things which have been taken away” from this sacred text, including “the knowledge of the covenants.” Thus, to be fully understood, the Bible needs the Book of Mormon.
Joseph of Egypt prophesied that one of his descendants—Joseph Smith—would be “a choice seer” bringing other descendants “to the knowledge of the covenants” that God made with their ancestors.13 The Lord explained that this covenant knowledge would primarily come forth through Joseph Smith as God gave him “power to bring forth my word” written by the descendants of Joseph in Egypt.14 The Lord declared that through Joseph Smith’s ministry the Book of Mormon and the Bible would “grow together” in bringing people to “the knowledge of my covenants” in the latter-days.15 The coming forth of the Book of Mormon thus represents one vital way in which Joseph the Seer would become “an instrument in the hands of God” in “bringing to pass much restoration unto the house of Israel.”16

The Book of Mormon’s Covenant Clarity

What then does the Book of Mormon contribute to our understanding of the Lord’s covenants with the house of Israel? What covenant knowledge do we find restored in the Book of Mormon which clarifies and completes what we find in our current Bible? Perhaps the greatest covenant contribution of the Book of Mormon lies in its clear delineation of the timeline, sequence, and historic fulfillment of those covenants throughout time.

There is a prophetic thread woven again and again throughout the pages of the Book of Mormon foretelling how the Father will ultimately fulfill his covenants to the house of Israel. With crystal clarity we are taught repeatedly in the book—by prophets, angels, and Christ himself—of the multi-dispensational timetable of the Lord’s covenants and the ultimate prospects of hope available to all mankind because of those covenants. These elements form a prophetic refrain throughout the book, all of which is couched in the language of prophecy with a precision and completeness unparalleled in the Bible. In fact, virtually every prophecy in the Book of Mormon ties in one way or another to this overarching covenant prophecy.

The Covenant Prophecy of the Book of Mormon

The following chart captures the ten major elements of the covenant prophecy repeated throughout the Book of Mormon. Each element represents God’s dealings with his covenant people during four major divisions of time. The first division begins with the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, the subsequent return of the Jews and their rejection of the mortal Messiah. Division two includes a sad saga of scattering and suffering—what appears to be the loss of all covenant blessings. The third division moves into the dawning of a hope-filled season of gospel restoration and in-gathering to covenant blessings; and division four climaxes in the glorious fulfilment of the covenant during the millennial day.
### I. The Captivity & Return of the Jews and their Rejection of Christ  
*(ca. 587 BC—34 AD)*

| 1. | Jerusalem is destroyed by Babylon and many Jews are taken captive to Babylon (see 1 Nephi 10:3; 2 Nephi 6:8; 25:10). |
| 2. | The Jews return again to Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 10:3; 2 Nephi 6:8-9; 25:11). |
| 3. | Jesus Christ comes among the Jews. He is rejected by them, crucified, and resurrected (see 1 Nephi 10:4-11; 19:8-12; 22:5; 2 Nephi 6:9; 10:3-5; 25:12-13, 19). |

### II. The Season of Scattering  
*(ca. 70 AD—1800 AD)*


### III. Era of Restoration and Gathering; Fulness of the Gentiles; Expansion and Conflict  
*(ca. 1800 AD—Just Prior to 2nd Coming of Christ)*

| 7. | The Book of Mormon plays a significant role in restoring the Jews and the seed of Lehi to a knowledge of the Gospel of their Redeemer in the last days. The Gospel is given to them by Gentiles (see 1 Nephi 13:35-42; 2 Nephi 3:11-23; 25:18, 21-23; 26:15-17; 27:6-35; 30:3-7; 3 Nephi 16:4; 21:1-7). |
| 8. | Both Zion and Babylon spread throughout the earth. Gentiles who accept the gospel are numbered among the covenant people of the House of Israel. Those who reject the gospel are cut off from the covenant people and become part of Babylon. The covenant people of the Lord are found throughout the earth. They assist in building the New Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Babylon, the whore, has dominion throughout the world. The Great and Abominable church fights against the covenant people of the Lord in the latter-days (see 1 Nephi 14:1-2, 8-13; 2 Nephi 10:18; 30:1-2; 3 Nephi 16:12-15; 21:6, 11, 20-24). |

### IV. Triumph of Israel and the Fulfillment of the Covenant  
*(ca. 2nd Coming of Christ—End of Millennium)*


From this prophetic sketch we see how one of the central messages of the Book of Mormon will play out—namely the declaration that Lehi’s seed, though temporarily cast off because of rejecting Christ, is “not cast off forever.” Prophetic writers in the Book of Mormon understood well that by the time the Book of Mormon came forth in the latter-days the seed of Lehi would be broken, scattered, and lost (see #5 in the chart above). They, like the other tribes of the House
of Israel, would be severed and cast off from the covenant blessings of the Lord. Yet the prophetic message is clear—although they have been cast off for a season and scattered for a time (#4 and #5), the Lord will, in the latter-days, send his Gospel again throughout the world to offer scattered Israel, Jews, and Gentiles the chance to become God’s covenant people (#6 and #7). And God’s covenant people who remain righteous, despite the widespread seductions of the whore of the earth, will be empowered to build up the Lord’s kingdom on earth in preparation for his second coming (#8).

God’s ultimate promise to the house of Israel is, in a word, that they will finally triumph and subdue all enemies beneath their feet. All who fight against them shall fall, and they will come off victorious in the end (#9). This outcome is fixed. God will see to that. The faithful will be with the Lord when he comes again, will rule and reign with him in the Millennial day, and will ultimately gain eternal life (#10).

Using This Prophecy to Unlock the Book of Mormon

One of the major benefits of recognizing this deliberate covenantal tapestry intricately woven throughout the book is that it helps to clarify the purpose and meaning of some of the more challenging passages in the Book of Mormon. That is, it provides an interpretive lens through which passages which have heretofore been obscure become clear and those which were once mysterious become imbued with meaning. For example, Nephi’s vision in 1 Nephi 11-14, rather than seeming like a disjointed set of visions loosely tied to his father’s dream, becomes a scene-by-scene disclosure and unfolding of how God’s covenant with Israel will ultimately be fulfilled. And Zenos’ allegory of the olive tree quoted in Jacob 5, instead of tripping up the reader in a tangle of ancient botany and veiled prophecy, helps the reader to comprehend the multi-dispensational mercy of God in preparing a way to save both scattered Jew and wild Gentile in the latter-day fulfillment of his ancient covenant.18

Likewise, as millions scratch their heads in bewilderment as to why Nephi, Jacob, and Christ quote so extensively from Isaiah, the reader who understands this covenant framework in the Book of Mormon will see that Isaiah is invoked by these teachers to give hope to those who are scattered and feel cast off and forsaken by God. Indeed, Isaiah is often quoted to remind listeners/readers of God's covenant timeline and to reassure them of the ultimate victory of Israel.19 The Savior strongly endorsed Isaiah’s words because “he spake as touching all things concerning my people which are of the house of Israel.”20 Thus the Isaiah passages quoted in the Book of Mormon bear directly upon the house of Israel, God’s dealings with them, and how God will ultimately fulfill his covenant with them. The ten elements of the covenant prophecy outlined in the chart above can help the reader get their “covenant bearings” as they read Isaiah’s words in the Book of Mormon and decipher which time period he is speaking of.

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest contribution the Book of Mormon makes to our “knowledge of the covenants” which God made with ancient Israel lies in the clear delineation of the timeline, sequence, and historic fulfillment of those covenants.21 The overall effect of this clarity is to
increase faith and confidence in God’s plans and timing and to offer hope in what otherwise may seem an uncertain future. Whether living in Book of Mormon times or in the latter-days, being able to recognize one’s location within the timeline of the fulfillment of the Lord’s covenants gives one a sense of purpose and peace. It conveys the feeling that, no matter how chaotic and confusing things may be in the present, everything will ultimately work out for the righteous. Indeed, the covenant message of the Book of Mormon could be summarized in this statement of President Howard W. Hunter: “If our lives and our faith are centered upon Jesus Christ and his restored gospel, nothing can ever go permanently wrong. On the other hand, if our lives are not centered on the Savior and his teachings, no other success can ever be permanently right.”

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2 See Abraham 2:9, 11; D&C 86:8-9; see also Genesis 17:7, 19; Abraham 1:4.
4 See Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 37:21-28; Isaiah 54:1-10; see also Book of Mormon Title Page.
7 See Revelation 1:5-6; 5:10; 20:6.
8 See 1 Nephi 15:14; Isaiah 41:8; 5:7; Jeremiah 33:26; Psalms 105:6; Genesis 17:9; Exodus 16:31; 19:3.
9 1 Nephi 13:23; see also 3 Nephi 16:5; 29:9.
10 1 Nephi 13:23.
12 1 Nephi 13:40; 2 Nephi 3:7.
14 2 Nephi 3:11-12.
15 2 Nephi 3:12.
17 Book of Mormon Title Page.
18 See Jacob 6:4.
20 3 Nephi 23:2.
21 2 Nephi 3:7.