

McConkie, Joseph Fielding, “The Doctrine of a Covenant People” in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators*, (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 357–77.

## The Doctrine of a Covenant People

Joseph Fielding McConkie

Joseph Fielding McConkie is a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

According to holy writ, whenever the Lord has a people whom He acknowledges as His own, that acknowledgment comes in the form of a covenant. In our day we hear much about “making a commitment for Christ.” But it is covenants of which we speak, not commitments. The word *commitments* is not found in the scriptures. The word *covenants* is found a multitude of times. A commitment is a personal pledge and may be quite serious, while a covenant is a two-way promise. God is its author and is the guarantor of its terms. Angels are its witnesses. It is, in the realms of spiritual things, a legal and binding agreement between God and the individual.

It is the concept of a covenant that binds all the books of the Bible and all the generations of faithful Saints together. The two divisions of the Bible, the Old Testament and New Testament, could have been more properly denominated the Old Covenant and New Covenant. The Bible story is like the popular historical novels of our day in which the saga of a family is traced from generation to generation. In order to study the Bible we divide its books into chapters and verses. We rarely get the whole thing pieced back together so that we see it as the epic family saga that it is. In so doing, we could be compared to people so busy collecting pebbles on the beach that they fail to see the ocean.

One problem with this kind of Bible study is that all too often those who are busily collecting scriptural pebbles are doing so primarily to have something to throw at those whose interpretation differs from their own. Meanwhile they lose sight of the book’s most plain and precious parts. Among the precious things lost is the concept of the eternal family unit. Forgotten is the fact that salvation is a family affair, that God made covenants with our ancient fathers, and that those covenants center in blessings that were also promised to us. We become theological and spiritual orphans. We are, in the words of Malachi, left without “root nor branch” (Malachi 4:1). We suppose we can have salvation independent of family responsibilities. The whole thing is akin to going through life without really knowing our parents or families.

The readers of the Book of Mormon, if they have a Bible background, will immediately be aware that it purports to be a continuation of the Bible story. It is a part of the same great family saga. Perhaps we have been insensitive to how tightly the visit and teachings of the Savior as recorded in 3 Nephi fit with the biblical account.

### Definitions

Before we analyze that story, it will be helpful for us to briefly define some key words and phrases. We will define terms as the Book of Mormon writers used them.

*Jew.* Lehi, a descendant of Joseph through Manasseh (see Alma 10:3), considered himself a Jew because he was a citizen of the kingdom of Judah. He was a Jewish national. Thus, the Book of Mormon writers speak of themselves and their posterity as descendants of the Jews (see 2 Nephi 30:4; D&C 19:27).

*Gentile.* As used in the Bible the word *Gentile* means “nation”—i.e., a collective body. It is used in a similar manner in the Book of Mormon. As a Jew is a Jewish national, so a Gentile is a citizen of a Gentile nation. Thus Joseph Smith, a pure-blooded Israelite, is referred to as a Gentile, and the gospel, it is prophesied, will be restored in a Gentile nation. Any nation that does not have prophets at its head, revelation as its constitution, and the Messiah as its king, is a Gentile nation.

*Remnant of Jacob.* The remnant of Jacob is the twelve tribes collectively. A remnant of Jacob could be any of the various scattered parts of Jacob’s family. For instance, Lehi’s descendants are a remnant of Jacob.

*Times of the Gentiles.* The phrase *times of the Gentiles* refers to the period between the destruction of the kingdom of Israel after the earthly ministry of Christ and the reestablishment of that nation with Christ as its king in the Millennium. At the beginning of the Millennium, all Gentile or man-made governments will be superseded by the law of the gospel with Christ as king.

*Redemption of Jerusalem.* To be redeemed is to be freed from the dominion and power of Satan. Jerusalem will be redeemed when the law of the gospel again becomes the law of its citizens. Christ will be their king, and the citizens of that kingdom will have taken upon themselves His name in the waters of baptism and will again be a covenant people.

*Salvation of our God.* The phrase *salvation of our God*, which is commonly found in prophetic descriptions of the winding up scene of earth's history, refers to the ultimate triumph of Christ. The word *salvation* used in the Bible is a translation of the Hebrew word *yeshooaw* and could also have been translated "deliverance" or "victory." To see the salvation of our God is to see the triumph of Christ over all His enemies. It will include the gathering of all the tribes of Israel into one fold with the Lord's sanctuary in their midst.

With this background we turn to the account of Christ's visit to the Nephites as recorded in 3 Nephi. In doing so, it is a panoramic view that we seek, not the pebbles on the beach. Our interest is to see the relationship Christ establishes between the doctrine of covenants and the promise of salvation.

### **A Voice to Those In Darkness**

Twice during that terrible night of darkness that attested to the death of Christ in the Old World, the voice of the Redeemer spoke to those in the New World. I do not think I overstate the matter in suggesting that the world has never known a more dramatic teaching moment. The audible voice of the Lord had been heard speaking from the heavens before, but never to such an extensive and numerous audience. May I suggest that we have not given sufficient attention to what was said on those two occasions. We will begin this study at that point.

First came a voice of warning: "Wo, wo, wo unto this people; wo unto the inhabitants of the whole earth except they shall repent; for the devil laugheth, and his angels rejoice, because of the slain of the fair sons and daughters of my people; and it is because of their iniquity and abominations that they are fallen!" (3 Nephi 9:2). Note the language used to describe those who had been slain. They were the "fair sons and daughters of [Christ's] people"—the seed of those with whom He had covenanted.

The recitation of the destruction of great cities followed: Zarahemla, Moroni, Moronihah, Gilgal, Onihah, Mocum, Jerusalem, Gadiandi, Gadiomnah, Jacob, Gimgimno, Jacobugath, Laman, Josh, Gad, and Kishkumen. Their destruction came because there were no righteous among them and because they had soiled themselves with the blood of the Lord's prophets and Saints. Then came the testimony: "I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. . . . I came unto my own, and my own received me not" (3 Nephi 9:15–16). Of those who had received Him He said, "Them have I given to become the sons of God; and even so will I to as many as shall believe on my name, for behold, by me redemption cometh, and in me is the law of Moses fulfilled" (3 Nephi 9:17).

The Mosaic dispensation had now ended. The old covenant had been fulfilled. Thus the instruction: "Ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood; yea, your sacrifices and your burnt offerings shall be done away, for I will accept none of your sacrifices and your burnt offerings" (3 Nephi 9:19). Foreshadowing the new order or covenant, He said: "Ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost" (3 Nephi 9:20). So great was the astonishment caused by this most unique communication from heaven that there was silence in the land for the space of many hours. Even the wailing over the loss of kindred and loved ones ceased.

A second time, from the midst of the darkness, the voice of the Lord was heard:

"O ye people of these great cities which have fallen, who are descendants of Jacob, yea, who are of the house of Israel, how oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and have nourished you.

"And again, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, yea, O ye people of the house of Israel, who have fallen; yea, O ye people of the house of Israel, ye that dwell at Jerusalem, as ye that have fallen; yea, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not.

"O ye house of Israel whom I have spared, how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart.

"But if not, O house of Israel, the places of your dwellings shall become desolate until the time of the fulfilling of the covenant to your fathers" (3 Nephi 10:4–7).

This lament is familiar to the New Testament reader though this is an expanded version of it. It has meaning only in the context of the covenant made to the fathers. It certifies the speaker as the Messiah. No one else has power to gather Israel, and no one else is under covenant to do so. The burden of the message is that because of their family ties and because their fathers were the children of Jacob, they were gathered and nourished. Had other branches of the family been equally willing, they too would have been gathered and blessed in a like manner. The refrain then switches from a past to a future tense with a rhetorical question—"How oft will I gather you" if you will repent and return to me? Then the warning, a very believable warning, to those to whom the Lord spoke: If you refuse spiritual fidelity, if you are not my children according to the terms of the covenant, if you have no claim to an inheritance either temporally or spiritually, your dwelling places will be desolate, a desolation which will continue "until ye have received from the hand of the Lord a just recompense for all your sins" (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 13:36). Following these words, the

weeping and howling for those who had been lost again filled the darkness of the night.

Mormon, who is writing the account of these things, observes at this point that Jacob had prophesied concerning a remnant of Joseph. He asks, “Are not we a remnant of the seed of Joseph? And these things which testify of us, are they not written upon the plates of brass?” (3 Nephi 10:17).

### **Christ’s Appearance at the Temple**

The third occasion in which a voice from heaven was heard in 3 Nephi was that of the Father introducing His Son to those assembled at the temple in the land Bountiful. In my judgment, the best reading of the text places this a year later (see 3 Nephi 8:5; 10:18). A group of about 2,500 people—men, women, and children—were assembled “conversing about this Jesus Christ, of whom the sign had been given concerning his death” (3 Nephi 11:2; see also 17:25). They were there as families. The nature of temple worship either anciently or in our own dispensation is not such that we would normally expect a family congregation of this size to be present. I wonder if this was not a meeting being held for the purpose of commemorating the events of the terrible night of darkness.

The unannounced and unanticipated appearance of Christ fits the pattern of Malachi’s prophecy that the messenger of the covenant would “suddenly come to his temple” (Malachi 3:1). In so saying, I am not suggesting that this constitutes the fulfillment of that prophecy, only that it fits the pattern, a pattern that I anticipate would have been duplicated in Christ’s visits among the other scattered remnants of Israel.

The voice from heaven attested that the glorious being descending from heaven was His Beloved Son and all were commanded to hear Him. The heavenly visitor announced Himself to be the Christ, the light and life of the world. The multitude fell to the earth in a reverent awe. They were then invited to come forth, each in turn, to feel the prints in His hands and in His feet that they might know that this was indeed the “God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and [that he had] been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Nephi 11:14).

### **Calling the Twelve to Head the New Dispensation**

Following this matchless experience in which each of those present became special witnesses of the reality of Christ’s suffering and triumph over death, Nephi was called and given the authority to baptize. Eleven others were also called and given the same authority. Instructions then followed relative to the manner in which that ordinance was to be performed. All capable of repentance were to be baptized (see 3 Nephi 11:21–27).

The reader of the Book of Mormon will be aware that the ordinance of baptism was not new to the nation of the Nephites. Easily the greatest discourse on the subject in holy writ was penned by Nephi, the son of Lehi, nearly six hundred years earlier (see 2 Nephi 31). Why then would a second baptism be necessary? The text does not answer this question. It is obvious, however, that the old covenant, namely the law of Moses, had come to an end. This was a new day, and a new order of things was now being introduced. The appearance of Christ, with His renewal of authority, formally constituted a new gospel dispensation among the Nephites. It was a time of new beginnings, and all were invited to claim anew their birthright in the household of faith.

Thus, the twelve disciples were called to stand at the head of the new covenant or dispensation. Again the Old World pattern was followed. Their number is significant and that significance would not have been lost on either the twelve or the multitude. The action is both symbolic and prophetic. Elder Bruce R. McConkie observed: “As there are twelve tribes in Israel, so there are twelve apostles for all Israel and the world; as Jehovah gave his saving truths to the twelve sons of Jacob and their seed, throughout their generations, so Jesus is placing in the hands of his twelve friends the saving truths and powers for their day; and as the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are written on the twelve gates of the Holy Jerusalem, which shall descend from God out of heaven, so are the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb written on the twelve foundations of the walls of that celestial city.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Calling a quorum of twelve would also have been understood as a prophecy of an ultimate day when all twelve tribes of Israel would again be united as one nation under their true Messiah. As long as we have twelve apostles, the promise exists that Israel will be gathered and the promises made to the fathers will be fulfilled.<sup>[2]</sup>

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Quorum of the Twelve in the destiny of the Church and kingdom of God. We have it in the mouths of three witnesses—the organizations instituted by Christ in Palestine, among the Nephites, and in our own dispensation. In each instance the foundation of the Church is the Quorum of Twelve Apostles.

There are always those would-be leaders and self-ordained prophets who break with the order instituted by the Savior. Their claim is predictable enough—the Brethren are in a state of apostasy, while they just happen to be the “one

mighty and strong” (D&C 85:7), who will, according to prophecy (Isaiah is usually the source), enter the scene just in time to save us all. What ought not be lost on us is that such claims violate the covenant made to the fathers in both a symbolic and a literal sense. The Twelve have the authority to perform the ordinance of baptism whereby all others become heirs of the covenant of salvation. True ministers always come with the ordinances of salvation. They are always covenant spokesmen.

The New World version of the sermon at the temple in Bountiful identifies the first beatitude, the one upon which all the others rest, as the sustaining of the Twelve. The second is the covenant of baptism by the authority given to the Twelve. The revelations of our dispensation build on this pattern—the following language from the Doctrine and Covenants:

“The Twelve shall be my disciples, and they shall take upon them my name; and the Twelve are they who shall desire to take upon them my name with full purpose of heart.

“And if they desire to take upon them my name with full purpose of heart, they are called to go into all the world to preach my gospel unto every creature.

“And they are they who are ordained of me to baptize in my name, according to that which is written;

“And you have that which is written before you [having reference to the very things we are reading in 3 Nephi]; wherefore, you must perform it according to the words which are written” (D&C 18:27–30).

This places the remainder of Christ’s discourse to the Nephites in the context of covenant worthiness.

Some have tripped over the fact that those called in the New World were referred to as disciples rather than apostles. Note that in the revelation just cited, the emphasis is similar to that in the Book of Mormon. It centers on the idea of “the Twelve” rather than on that of disciples or apostles.

*A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* observes: “They were twelve, and were accordingly known as ‘the Twelve.’ It is doubtful whether it is proper to supply such a substantive as ‘disciples’ or ‘apostles.’ There is authority in the [New Testament] for the use of both of these phrases, but it does not follow that the name first given to this inmost circle of our Lord’s adherents was ‘the twelve disciples’ rather than ‘the Twelve.’”<sup>[3]</sup> Joseph Smith assured us, however, that those in the New World were apostles in the full sense of the word. He taught that the order on this continent was the same, the offices the same, the priesthood the same, the ordinances the same, and the gifts and powers the same as were enjoyed on the Eastern continent.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Old World version of this sermon has been interpreted as an ethical discourse by a great teacher in the community. The Book of Mormon counterpart makes it plain that these are the words of the Messiah spelling out the great doctrines of the kingdom or the conditions of the covenant. This stands as a classical illustration of the plain and precious things that have been taken from the Bible.

In the New World beatitudes, those who “give heed” to the words of the Twelve and are baptized by their authority are promised that they will receive the companionship of the Holy Ghost. More blessed still, we are told, are those who will accept the testimony of the apostles without having seen Christ. These too are promised a remission of sins and the companionship of the Holy Ghost after their baptism (see 3 Nephi 12:1–2). The doctrine of baptism and sustaining the Twelve places what follows in the context of a covenant between Christ and those who bear His name.

### **The Covenant Sermon**

All who have so covenanted are charged with being the salt of the earth. The symbolism and imagery of this metaphor are poignant. Salt, we assume, would have been used among the Nephites, as it was in the Old World, to preserve the meat used in the sacrificial offerings and also as a purifying agent. Such is the role of the covenant people. They are to preserve and purify all that is acceptable to the Lord. Salt loses its savor only through mixture and contamination; so it is with Israel: they lose their chosen role by compromising their actions or their faith. In so doing, they break the terms of their covenant and are, in the words of the Master, “good for nothing, but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men” (3 Nephi 12:13).

Further emphasizing the idea of a new day and a new covenant, the Savior said:

“Therefore those things which were of old time, which were under the law, in me are all fulfilled.

“Old things are done away, and all things have become new” (3 Nephi 12:46–47).

Notwithstanding this statement, some were still unclear as to the fulfillment of the law of Moses, and the Savior said to them:

“Marvel not that I said unto you that old things had passed away, and that all things had become new.

“Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses.

“Behold, I am he that gave the law, and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfill the law; therefore it hath an end” (3 Nephi 15:3–5).

Then comes the assurance:

“I do not destroy the prophets, for as many as have not been fulfilled in me, verily I say unto you, shall all be fulfilled.

“And because I said unto you that old things have passed away, I do not destroy that which hath been spoken concerning things which are to come.

“For behold, the covenant which I have made with my people is not all fulfilled; but the law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me.

“Behold, I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life.

“Behold, I have given unto you the commandments; therefore keep my commandments. And this is the law and the prophets, for they truly testified of me” (3 Nephi 15:6–10).

Turning His attention again to the Twelve, Jesus said: “Ye are my disciples; and ye are a light unto this people, who are a remnant of the house of Joseph.

“And behold, this is the land of your inheritance; and the Father hath given it unto you” (3 Nephi 15:12–13).

### Other Sheep

At this point in His discourse Christ linked those of the New World with their counterparts in the Old: “Ye are they of whom I said: Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd” (3 Nephi 15:21). The Savior explained that people in the Old World had not understood what He meant when He spoke of “other sheep.” Their failure to understand, He said, was the result of “stiffneckedness,” “unbelief,” and “iniquity” (3 Nephi 15:18–19). This is an instructive note explaining why so many are not able to understand the words of the Savior today. As to those in the Old World, the Savior indicated that if they were to ask, having made the proper spiritual preparations to receive, they could obtain by the Holy Ghost a knowledge of the lost remnants of their family. In either case, the Nephites were commanded to make a record of those sayings that they might go forth to the believing among the Gentiles in a future day (see 3 Nephi 16:4).

Those of the Old World supposed that Christ was referring to the Gentiles in His reference to “other sheep.” This indicates that they did not fully understand the implications of the Abrahamic covenant. In the divine economy of things, those of Israel were to be accorded the privilege of His personal appearance while others were to obtain their assurance of saving truths by and through the Holy Ghost. This favored status, Christ said, came by the will of the Father (see 3 Nephi 15:15–24). This is a strong and not particularly popular doctrine. Singularly of the synoptic writers, Matthew is virtually alone in referring to it. This accords with the idea that he was writing to those of his own lineage who knew the scriptural promises. John also makes some references to Israel’s favored status in the verses that surround the “other sheep” text. Let us briefly consider the words of both men.

In recording the commission given to the Twelve, Matthew notes that they were directed to limit their preaching and healing ministry to Israel (see Matthew 10:5–6). Both he and Mark record the occasion when the Savior cast a devil out of a Gentile girl because of the faith of her mother. Matthew’s language, however, is more emphatic in emphasizing the status of Israel. Matthew has the woman addressing Jesus as both “Lord” and the “Son of David” (Matthew 15:22). Mark records neither. Matthew also recounts that Jesus turned a deaf ear to her plea for help until the Twelve encouraged Him to hear her. He then took the teaching moment, stating, “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). Again she pleaded for His help and He responded, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs [to share it with Gentiles]” (Matthew 15:26). Undaunted, the Gentile woman responded: “Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour” (Matthew 15:27–28).

Initially, Jesus declined not only to heal the woman’s daughter, but even to give courteous response to her for no reason other than that she was a Gentile. Though perhaps less dramatic, the feel of these words recorded by John in the context of the “other sheep” discourse carry much the same spirit:

“Ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you.

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:

“And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

“My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:26–29).

A knowledge of worthiness in the premortal existence is essential to understanding such actions. Independent of such understanding, God becomes capricious and grossly unjust. But, when this concept is understood we see Him as both just and wise. Just as whatever degree of intelligence one obtained in the first estate is so much the advantage in mortal probation, likewise the first to be gathered or brought into the gospel fold are those prepared to listen, those born with faith and a propensity to be obedient, those whom He can send forth to declare the saving truths of the gospel to all the nations of the earth. These are the spirits that God promised Abraham would be born as his seed. <sup>[5]</sup>

### **The Covenant Meal and the Sacrament**

What we have traditionally supposed to be the ordinance of sacrament is recorded in both chapters 18 and 20 of 3 Nephi. A careful reading suggests that something more is taking place. First, the purpose of the sacrament is the renewal of the covenant of baptism. Earlier in the day's activities the Savior had called the Twelve and commissioned them to baptize, or rebaptize as the case might be, all who sought membership in the Church and kingdom of God. At this point, however, none of them had been baptized. The Twelve were baptized between Christ's first and second visits, but there is no indication that anyone else was. The other baptisms would have to wait until after the three-day ministry of the Savior. Second, it should also be noted that the administration of the sacrament preceded Christ's formal conferral of authority on the newly called Twelve.

The third peculiarity of these two sacrament services is the emphasis given to the fact that all present made a meal of the bread and wine. This is particularly clear in the first instance. Following Christ's breaking and blessing the bread, we read: "And when they [the Twelve] had eaten and were filled, he commanded that they should give unto the multitude. And when the multitude had eaten and were filled" (3 Nephi 18:4–5). In like manner, following His administering of the wine, we read that after the Twelve were "filled," they "gave unto the multitude, and they did drink, and they were filled" (3 Nephi 18:9).

When I have asked classes what the implications of this are, they have been quick to respond that it means that the multitude were filled with the Spirit. Yet they had already heard the audible voice of God introduce His Son from heaven, witnessed the descent of the Son of Man, heard Him testify of His divine Sonship, witnessed the appearance of angels and a circling flame of fire, witnessed mass healings, and had their children blessed. To suppose that they had not yet been filled with the Spirit is inconceivable.

In the instance of the first sacrament service, the Savior sent the Twelve to get bread and wine. In the second instance He miraculously provided it. This second instance is obviously a New World counterpart of His feeding of the multitude in the Old World. The number present on this occasion is unknown but was far in excess of the 2,500 who had been in attendance the previous day.

It should also be noted that there would have been a need for physical nourishment, if not for the adults, then certainly for the children. Consider the time it would take for approximately 2,500 people to personally handle and feel the wounds in His hands and His feet. For each of them to have shared ten seconds with the Savior would have consumed nearly seven hours.

In the context of the covenant traditions of Israel, it seems a natural thing to suppose that this was a covenant meal after the pattern of the one recorded in Exodus 24 where Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy princes or elders of Israel went up on the side of Sinai (symbolically the holy place) and there saw God and "did eat and drink" (Exodus 24:11). This text is almost universally understood as referring to the eating of a covenant meal by the representatives of Israel in the presence of God on the holy mountain. <sup>[6]</sup> One commentary notes: "By means of the meal, Yahweh takes the whole community, represented by the clan elders, into his family. The meal is the assurance and support given by the superior, Yahweh, to the inferior, Israel." <sup>[7]</sup> The idea of two parties eating and drinking together to formally ratify a covenant is common to both the Bible and the customs of the ancient Near East. <sup>[8]</sup> To eat together was to be bound together by mutual obligation. <sup>[9]</sup> The meal was a seal of the alliance whereby "the weaker is taken into the family of the stronger," who provides the meal. <sup>[10]</sup>

The Old Testament and the Book of Mormon occasions have obvious similarities. The place of the meal in both cases is the temple or the holy mount, which represents the temple. Both meals are in the presence of the God of Israel. The occasion in both instances is the introduction of a new gospel dispensation. Symbolically, both represent a ratifying seal of the covenant the people have made.

After the three-day ministry in the Americas, it appears that the more traditional sacrament observance became

the order of the day. Indeed, we read that Christ continued to appear to His disciples on many occasions to break bread and bless it for them (see 3 Nephi 26:13).

## The Day of the Gentiles

Perhaps no part of Christ's instruction to the Nephites, relative to the promises of the covenant and the events of the last days, has been more misunderstood than those things He said relative to the days of the Gentiles. This section will attempt to unravel that misunderstanding.

Taking the meridian of time as a starting point, the gospel was preached first to the Jews and thereafter to the Gentiles. In our dispensation, the dispensation of the fulness of times, the gospel was, according to prophecy, brought forth by Gentiles who in turn will take it to all the nations of the earth. After the Gentiles have had ample opportunity to receive it and then turn on it in wickedness, it will be taken from them and given back to its original stewards. Thus, the first shall be last and the last first (see 1 Nephi 13:42).

When we speak of the day of the Gentiles being fulfilled, we are speaking of that time when "the consumption decreed" will make "a full end of all nations" (D&C 87:6) and a messianic kingdom will be established in their stead. Thus, the day of the Gentile will end—its power, authority, and influence will be no more. With the millennial kingdom established, the great work of the gathering of all the tribes of Israel will continue until Jacob's sons enjoy that glory and power of which King David's and King Solomon's days were but a type and shadow (see 3 Nephi 21:13–18; 22).

Three times the Savior refers to the words of Micah relative to the remnant of Jacob, who are to be "among the Gentiles in the midst of many people as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep: who, if he go through, both treadeth down, and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver" (Micah 5:8; see also 3 Nephi 16:15; 20:16; 21:12). Interpretations of this are plentiful. Typically, they center in a censuring labor of the Lamanites within the Church. In fact, the prophecy was directed to *all* the remnants of Israel, not just one. Furthermore, the censuring is to be among "all the nations of the Gentiles" (3 Nephi 20:20) not just those in the New World. This is not a matter of someone posing as one mighty and strong coming forward to purge the Church.

This warning, as it is given in 3 Nephi 16, may be directed at the United States and those who were members of the Church but have drifted from it. It invites the Gentiles to "turn" to the Lord and speaks of those who fail to do so as "salt that hath lost its savor" (3 Nephi 16:15), thus intimating that a covenant had once been made. The twentieth chapter speaks in the broader context of all the house of Israel and all the nations of the earth. It then speaks of the New Jerusalem that is to be built in the Americas. It intimates that all the land will be a New Zion or New Jerusalem (see 3

Nephi 20:22). <sup>[11]</sup> In this chapter, the Savior reminds the Nephites that they are the children of the prophets, that they are of Israel and are rightful heirs of the covenant. He further notes that in and through them all the families of the earth are to receive the blessings of the gospel (see 3 Nephi 20:27).

In 3 Nephi 21 the Lord promises a sign whereby the things He has promised might be confirmed. The sign is the establishment of a free people in the United States of America, the Restoration of the gospel, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and His own eternal triumph. The Lord declares that those who reject the testimony of the Book of Mormon will, as Moses promised, "be cut off" from the Lord's people, meaning they will be left without root or branch in the eternities to come (see 3 Nephi 11:1–26).

Again the passages from Micah are quoted, and this time the announcement is made that those who repent will be members of Christ's Church and numbered among those of the covenant. These, the Lord said, will be called on to assist the remnant of Jacob in building the New Jerusalem (see 3 Nephi 21:12–24). Then, in what is clearly a millennial context, the announcement is made that the work of the Father in gathering Israel will commence. Four times the word *commence* is used relative to the gathering of Israel in the context of the Millennium (see 3 Nephi 21:26–28).

## Seeing the Salvation of Our God

Third Nephi could be seen as a type for the Second Coming of Christ: it establishes the pattern. First will come the destruction of the wicked, those who have rejected the prophets and who have the blood of the Saints on their hands. Then, the Savior will come suddenly, as Malachi prophesied, to His temple, where He will greet His covenant people. Here the assurance will again be given that the promises made to the fathers will all be fulfilled and the ancient covenant renewed. At this time, all Gentile governments will end and the day of the Israelites will begin. In the Millennium, the gathering of Israel will begin in earnest as the lost tribes are gathered into the fold, and those waiting to join the Church will far outnumber those who have already embraced the covenant of salvation. Thus, it will be necessary to enlarge the place of Israel's tent, to lengthen the cords and strengthen the stakes (see 3 Nephi 21:23–29; 22).

## Guidelines for Understanding the Promises to the Covenant People in 3 Nephi

Third Nephi contains some key passages relative to the promises of the Lord to the house of Israel. I have particular reference to chapters 16, 20, and 21. These passages have been misunderstood and misused. Often this happens innocently, sometimes not. Unstable views frequently strain the meaning of these texts to justify speculative or personally aggrandizing views. To that end, perhaps these observations ought to be made:

1. The Book of Mormon came forth to gather Israel—all Israel, not a particular or exclusive part of Israel. On the title page Moroni states that the purpose of the book is “to show 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 forever.” Note that the emphasis is on *the* remnant of Israel, not *a* remnant. Long before Christ visited the Nephites, Israel had been scattered throughout the earth (see 1 Nephi 22:4), thus Christ’s announcement to the Nephites that there were still others whom He had been commanded of the Father to visit. All these scattered remnants of Jacob have claim on the promises made to their fathers. Each is “a remnant of Jacob,” and collectively they are “the remnant.” We can be confident that the same promises given to the remnant of Jacob in the Americas were also given to the rest of Jacob’s children, wherever they may have been when the resurrected Christ visited them.

2. These chapters cannot be properly understood in isolation from the rest of the covenant sermon. They assume an understanding of the call and ordination of the Twelve (see 3 Nephi 18:36; Moroni 2:2). The whole idea of there being “twelve” instead of some other number is their symbolic representation of the twelve tribes of Israel. The unity with which they stand at the head of the Church was and is to be a constant reminder of the Lord’s promise to unite all of Israel in His millennial kingdom. The gathering of Israel and building of Zion must take place under their direction. Any doctrine that holds that some remnant of Israel can do some portion of the gathering or the building of Zion independent of the direction of the Twelve, or likewise any leader who comes on the scene to do some marvelous thing independent of their direction, is out of harmony with the covenant of baptism and the covenant to sustain the Twelve, with which the Savior began His instruction to the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 12:1).

It ought also to be observed that the same pattern and principle exists in our dispensation. The keys of the gathering of Israel and the building of Zion rest with the First Presidency and the Twelve but no others. The Church is governed by modern revelation, not the writings of ancient prophets. Isaiah may have stood at the head of the Church in his day but he does not stand at the head of the Church in our day. The Book of Mormon unlocks the book of Isaiah, not the other way around.

3. Spiritual stability and sound understanding are not found in strained phrases. We ought to be inherently suspicious of interpretations that aggrandize a particular group or some marvelous or mighty leader who is going to come onto the scene to straighten out the Church. The Twelve are in place. I have read the agreement that the phrase “the arm of the Lord” was reference to a special servant of the Lord who is to come on the scene and save the day when present leaders fall short of their calling. It rather strains the idea of “the arm of the Lord” to suppose that it no longer needs to be attached to the body. In the realm of my experience, arms are always an appendage to a body and do not operate without it. Nor is it reasonable to suppose that the keys given the Twelve will be taken from them or surrendered by them to some individual who supposes himself to be the one mighty and strong called to set the Church in order.

4. Wisdom suggests moderation and caution in scriptural interpretation. In discussing chapters 16, 20, and 21, Elder McConkie suggested that there were things contained therein that the Lord had not chosen to make plain at the present time. It would be unwise for us to attempt to clarify what the Lord or His covenant spokesmen have not. In writing on these chapters Elder McConkie observed: “It is not always possible for us in our present state of spiritual enlightenment to put every event into an exact category or time frame.” He also noted that some of these texts “apply to both pre- and post-millennial events; some have an initial and partial fulfillment in our day and shall have a second and grander completion in the days ahead.”<sup>[12]</sup>

5. In a past general conference we were warned about false views relative to the gathering. The warning was specifically against “cults” and “colonies.”<sup>[13]</sup> The caution was to beware of those who think themselves a part of some inner circle, who think their understanding is ahead of those called to hold the keys of the gathering of Israel and thus think they are to preside over all that takes place relative to it.

## Conclusion

Moroni told Joseph Smith that the “fulness of the everlasting Gospel” was to be found in the instruction given by the Savior to the Nephites (see JS–H 1:34). The message of Christ recorded there centers on the blessings and obligations of a covenant people. “Ye are the children of the prophets,” Christ told them, “and ye are of the house of



Israel; and ye are of the covenant which the Father made with your fathers, saying unto Abraham: And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (3 Nephi 20:25).

The chosen seed of Abraham have the promise that they will be endowed with the fulness of all gospel blessings. Such is their right by birth. It is the obligation of those so endowed to carry those same blessings of salvation to all others that all the kindreds of the earth might be blessed. According to the Abrahamic covenant, Christ endowed the Nephites with the fulness of His gospel and the promise that in and through them all nations of the earth would be blessed. This becomes literally so as their testament, or record of Christ, in the form of the Book of Mormon, goes forth in these the last days to gather the honest in heart out of all nations. That gathering, as the Book of Mormon attests, will be to the covenants of salvation which bring with them the fulness of all gospel blessings.

We too are the seed of Abraham and as such are heirs of the same promises and thus recipients of the same obligations as have been the faithful Saints in all ages. Like our ancient counterparts we have been blessed with the fulness of the gospel and the obligation to declare it among all nations and peoples. As ours is the God of our fathers, so theirs is the God of our fathers. Their hearts were turned to us, and ours turn to them. Their covenant is our covenant, and their testimony becomes our testimony as we boldly declare the message of the Book of Mormon to all the nations of the earth.

---

[1] Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 2:102.

[2] I was interested to find the following by A. B. Bruce: “The number twelve was recommended by obvious symbolic reasons. It happily expressed in figures what Jesus claimed to be, and what He had come to do, and thus furnished a support to the faith and a stimulus to the devotion of His followers. It significantly hinted that Jesus was the divine Messianic King of Israel, come to set up the kingdom whose advent was foretold by prophets in glowing language, suggested by the balmy days of Israel’s history, when the theocratic community existed in its integrity, and all the tribes of the chosen nation were united under the royal house of David” (*The Training of the Twelve* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971], 32).

[3] *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), 1:105.

[4] See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 4:538.

[5] See McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 3:218–19.

[6] E. W. Nicholson, “The Interpretation of Exodus XXIV 9–11,” *Vesta Testamentum*, January 1974, 84.

[7] Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris, eds., *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989), 104.

[8] See John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1985), 2:146. Examples would include the covenant made between Isaac and Abimelech (see Genesis 26:26–31); the statement in Genesis 31:54, which reads, “Then Jacob offered sacrifice upon the mount, and called his brethren to eat bread: and they did eat bread, and tarried all night in the mount”; and the meeting in the king’s dale between Melchizedek and Abraham (see Genesis 14:17–20). The Joseph Smith Translation of this last example reads, “and he break bread and blest it; and he blest the wine, he being the priest of the most high God (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 14:17; emphasis added).

[9] See Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 616.

[10] Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 254.

[11] See Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 301.

[12] McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah*, 251.

[13] Boyd K. Packer, ““To Be Learned Is Good If . . .”” *Ensign*, November 1992, 71.