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THE ORIGIN AND PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON PHRASE “IF YE KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS YE SHALL PROSPER IN THE LAND”

Taylor Halverson

Abstract: *We are told in the Title Page of the Book of Mormon that the Book of Mormon was revealed in our day “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.” Hence, the covenantal context, structure, and logic of the Book of Mormon demand further consideration, exploration, and elucidation. A prosperous starting point is the phrase “If ye keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land.” This covenantal phrase is used throughout the Book of Mormon as a summary of the theological logic of the suzerain-vassal treaty covenant type in which God sought to secure the fidelity of his people, who would receive in exchange continued prosperity in His appointed promised lands.*

One of the most commonly occurring phrases in the Book of Mormon, “If ye keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land,” may easily be mistaken as an almost trite way of saying that it’s good to obey God. However, if the Book of Mormon is read with an understanding of ancient covenants, the meaning of the phrase takes on new light. Understanding that ancient context means not just recognizing the pervasive use of covenants and their monumental importance in the ancient Near East but also appreciating the formulas and conventions that were used to express and make covenants. The theme of prospering in the (promised) land first occurs in 1 Nephi 2:20, where the Lord speaks to Nephi: “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land

which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.” Nephi recalls those words in 1 Nephi 4:14, observing that the Lord had told him, “Inasmuch as thy seed shall keep my commandments, they shall prosper in the land of promise.” The form that may be most familiar to Book of Mormon students is first given in Lehi’s farewell speech to his family in 2 Nephi 1:20, quoting what the Lord has said: “Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence.”

The simple core concept in all of this is the promise “If ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land,” the wording of Alma 37:13. But why is this concept repeated over 20 times in almost every book of the Book of Mormon, with many other related exhortations? What was the purpose of this phrase or formula? I propose that this phrase is a powerful summary statement of a covenant relationship between the people and the Lord, directly related to what is now (thanks to scholarship that began long after Joseph Smith’s day) the familiar concept of the suzerain-vassal treaty,¹ whose conceptual worldview and theology seem to undergird significant portions of the Book of Mormon.²

A suzerain-vassal treaty is a conditional covenant type found in the ancient Near East, the Bible, and other scripture. The purpose of this covenant is for God (or a king) to secure the fidelity of his people with a promise for protection and prosperity in their lands. This covenant typically follows a six-part format:

1. **Introduction:** The great king or God identifies Himself (see Exodus 20:2)
2. **Historical review:** The great king or God reviews past relationship with the vassal (subjects), while emphasizing His blessings to evoke loyalty and allegiance (see Exodus 20:2)
3. **Stipulations:** The great king or God promises security in a promised land insofar as the vassal demonstrates total fidelity and loyalty by keeping the covenant stipulations (see Exodus 20:3-17)
4. **Recording and depositing the text:** The covenant is recorded and deposited in a secure or lasting location, such as at a temple (see Exodus 25:21)
5. **List of witnesses:** God and angels serve as witnesses, though people could as well (see Exodus 24:3)
6. **Curses and blessings:** Consequences are stipulated for obeying or violating the terms of the covenant (see Deuteronomy 27-28)

Book of Mormon writers, conscious of space limitations on the plates and not wanting to write out a lengthy yet significant covenant over and over again, may have resorted to using the shorthand phrase “If ye keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land.” As we see in 1 Nephi 1:20 and 4:14, “prosper in the land” is obviously linked to the promised land, or rather the covenant land. In light of the covenant message of the Book of Mormon, we can naturally understand that the Lord’s purposes in His covenants do not focus simply on material prosperity, though that can clearly be one of the blessings a people at peace and living God’s laws may experience. *Prospering* may also contemplate individual and family happiness, social harmony, honesty and kindness in relationships and transactions, personal purity, and fulfilling one’s purpose in life. The intent of the Book of Mormon as a text for our day should lead us to contemplate the blessings that await all of us individually and especially as a people if we can make and keep covenants with the Lord in our various lands of promise. But for the Nephites and the authors of the Book of Mormon writing with the strong influence of major cultural and religious themes from the ancient Near East, today we can see that this simple phrase recalls, renews, and reinvigorates the entire complex of meaning associated with suzerain-vassal treaties and the theological implications connected to such covenants.

Significantly, we may consider the Book of Mormon as the new covenant (see D&C 84:57), the new witness or symbol of the suzerain-vassal treaty — that if we demonstrate our unswerving loyalty to God, we will have prosperity in the land.

With this phrase in mind, we begin to see this covenant terminology of suzerain-vassal treaties throughout the Book of Mormon. Here are a few examples, though this is definitely not an exhaustive list:

In Alma 45, Alma interviews his son Helaman one last time before giving Helaman charge of the Nephite religious records. As part of that interview Alma asks, “Will ye keep my commandments?” “Yea, I will keep thy commandments with all my heart,” Helaman responds. Alma then pronounces the reward: “Blessed art thou; and the Lord shall prosper thee in this land” (Alma 45:6-8).

The core purpose of the suzerain-vassal covenant was to secure prosperity in the land if one was faithful to the commands of God or the king. We see that Alma promises that prosperity to Helaman because Helaman has vowed to be faithful to the commandments (that is, the stipulations of covenantal loyalty).

A counterexample is found in Mosiah 12:15. The people of Noah, who had thoroughly disregarded the stipulations of covenant fidelity (primarily summarized in the Ten Commandments), needed Abinadi to remind them that they had forgotten the Mosaic Law. Believing in the promises of prosperity in the land but forgetting that covenantal loyalty bought such prosperity, the morally failing people of Noah boasted to their king: “And behold, we are strong, we shall not come into bondage, or be taken captive by our enemies; yea, and thou hast prospered in the land, and thou shalt also prosper.” Sadly, they totally misunderstood the covenant. Their lack of faithfulness brought the curses identified for failing to observe the covenant: war, slavery, loss of land, and destruction.

Not many chapters later, Alma the Elder heeded the message of Abinadi and taught his new covenant community all the words of Abinadi. Because they demonstrated covenantal fidelity they received the promises of prosperity: “And it came to pass that they began to prosper exceedingly in the land” (Mosiah 23:19).

What do we see in the books of Alma, Helaman, 3 Nephi, and 4 Nephi? Multiple instances in which the promise of “prospering in the land” is put in peril or is secured depending on the people’s faithfulness to God as demonstrated by “keeping his commandments.” Alma preached repentance to the people of Ammonihah with this call to remembrance: “Behold, do ye not remember the words which he spake unto Lehi, saying that: Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land? And again it is said that: Inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord” (Alma 9:13). The people of Ammonihah fully rejected the word of God and were literally cut off from the face of the land and from the presence of God; “And thus ended the eleventh year of the judges, the Lamanites having been driven out of the land, and the people of Ammonihah were destroyed; yea, every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed, and also their great city, which they said God could not destroy, because of its greatness” (Alma 16:9).

Alma taught this covenantal principle repeatedly to his sons (see Alma 36:1, 30; 37:13; 38:1), ensuring that generations of Nephites and Book of Mormon readers would be thoroughly exposed to God’s covenant. In fact, the theological covenantal logic of the suzerain-vassal treaty serves as the frame for the beautiful chiasmus of Alma 36:1–30.

The editorial comments of Mormon, or his use of earlier commentary in Nephite records, point to additional aspects of the basic theme of this phrase. In chapters dealing with war and conflict, we see that simply retaining one’s

land in a time of danger is a grand blessing. By the same token, we read that the loss of such blessings and the calamities of war without the Lord's assistance may follow from the sins and crimes of a people who fail to keep the commandments (see, for example Alma 50:19–22).

After years of civil war and of external conflict with the Lamanites, brought on by failing to be faithful to God, the Nephites finally humbled themselves sufficiently so that God allowed them to recover their lost lands. Mormon editorializes on the consequences of covenantal faithfulness in Alma 62, concluding with this thought: "And they did pray unto the Lord their God continually, insomuch that the Lord did bless them, according to his word, so that they did wax strong and prosper in the land" (v. 51).

Unfortunately, the covenantal gains experienced at the end of the Book of Alma did not endure. We find Helaman (Helaman 3) laboring to encourage the people to keep the commandments so that they might prosper. Interestingly, we hear that Helaman himself prospered in the land, even though Mormon makes no comment about the people prospering in the land, because they could not claim the blessings of prosperity when they were not keeping the commandments; "Nevertheless Helaman did fill the judgment-seat with justice and equity; yea, he did observe to keep the statutes, and the judgments, and the commandments of God; and he did do that which was right in the sight of God continually; and he did walk after the ways of his father, insomuch that he did prosper in the land" (Helaman 3:20).

In 4 Nephi, after Jesus had established a society of covenant-keeping saints, Mormon explains the covenantal outcomes of loyalty and fidelity to God: "And the Lord did prosper them exceedingly in the land; yea, insomuch that they did build cities again where there had been cities burned. . . . And how blessed were they! For the Lord did bless them in all their doings; yea, even they were blessed and prospered until an hundred and ten years had passed away; and the first generation from Christ had passed away, and there was no contention in all the land. . . . And now I, Mormon, would that ye should know that the people had multiplied, insomuch that they were spread upon all the face of the land, and that they had become exceedingly rich, because of their prosperity in Christ" (4 Nephi 1: 7, 18, 23).

Unfortunately, the Nephites eventually persisted in breaking the commandments, demonstrating ongoing covenantal disloyalty to God. Their final end was utter ruin; they lost *all* peace and prosperity in the land, as Mormon so potently laments: "O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you! . . . O that

ye had repented before this great destruction had come upon you. But behold, ye are gone, and the Father, yea, the Eternal Father of heaven, knoweth your state; and he doeth with you according to his justice and mercy.” (Mormon 6:17, 22).

We are told in the Title Page of the Book of Mormon that the Book of Mormon was revealed in our day “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.” Hence, the covenantal context, structure, and logic of the Book of Mormon demand further consideration, exploration, and elucidation. A prosperous starting point is the phrase “If ye keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land.” This covenantal phrase is used throughout the Book of Mormon as a summary of the theological logic of the suzerain-vassal treaty covenant type in which God sought to secure the fidelity of his people, who would receive in exchange continued prosperity in His appointed promised lands.

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Taylor Halverson is an aspiring master learner who has discovered his life purpose is to help people find and act on the best ideas and tools in order to experience enduring joy. He currently is an Entrepreneurship Professor in the BYU Marriott School of Business. As an executive coach and entrepreneur, he builds leaders and businesses while creating transformative professional and personal development experiences. Taylor leads acclaimed travel tours to incredible locations throughout the world (Israel, China, India, Europe, Central America, and America’s national parks). Tour members have loved his irresistible enthusiasm, encyclopedic knowledge, spirit of adventure, and sense of fun. Taylor is a prolific author and editor of 20 books and more than 300 articles and a developer of breakthrough scripture study resources with Book of Mormon Central (ScripturePlus app) and BYU’s Virtual Scripture Group (3D Ancient Jerusalem project). Taylor loves to spend time with his wife Lisa and kids David and Rachel on all sorts of adventures including exploring the nooks and crannies of the American West and Southwest, participating with geology and archaeology teams on location, creating and mixing electronic music, watching and discussing edifying shows, reading good books, playing

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Endnotes

1. Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Eight and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974); Rintje Frankena, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy," *Oudtestamentische Studien* 14 (1965): 122–54; A. Kirk Grayson, "Akkadian Treaties of the Seventh Century B.C.," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 39 (1987): 127–60; Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985); George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17, no. 3 (1954): 50–76; Dennis J. McCarthy, "Covenant in the Old Testament: The Present State of Inquiry," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (1965): 217–40; Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978); Gene M. Tucker, "Covenant Forms and Contract Forms," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 487–503; Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, no. 2 (1970): 184–203; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1972): 116–29; Moshe Weinfeld, "Covenant Terminology in the Ancient Near East and Its Influence on the West," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93, no. 2 (1973); Moshe Weinfeld, "The Loyalty Oath in the Ancient Near East," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 8 (1976): 379–414, https://www.academia.edu/44235674/Moshe_Weinfeld_The_Loyalty_Oath_in_the_Ancient_Near_East_Ugarit_Forschungen_vol_8_1976_379_414. For an example of an ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaty see "The Treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969): 203–205, also available at <http://jewishchristianlit.com/Topics/Contracts/treat01.html>.

2. This covenantal style has also been found in the Book of Mormon: Stephen D. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1–6” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* eds. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998): 233–75, [https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/kingship-coronation-and-covenant-mosiah-1%E2%80%930;RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 \(2005\): 48–61, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1389&context=jbms>; it is also found in lament psalms of the Old Testament, Daniel Belnap, “A Comparison of the Communal Lament Psalms and the Treaty-Covenant Formula,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 1 \(2009\): 1–34. Some suggest that the Restoration follows this covenant formulary pattern. See David R. Seely, “The Restoration as Covenant Renewal” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson \(Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2005\): 311–36. This suzerain-vassal treaty covenant type may even underlie D&C 58–59. This would be significant since these were some of the first revelations received when the early saints first arrived to Missouri, the *land* of Zion which God had promised to his people if they would remain faithful.](https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/kingship-coronation-and-covenant-mosiah-1%E2%80%930;RoseAnn%20Benson%20and%20Stephen%20D.%20Ricks,%20%E2%80%9CTreaties%20and%20Covenants:%20Ancient%20Near%20Eastern%20Legal%20Terminology%20in%20the%20Book%20of%20Mormon%E2%80%9314%20no.%201%20(2005):%2048%E2%80%9361%20https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1389&context=jbms)