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**Be Ye Therefore Loyal, Even as Your Father
Which is in Heaven is Loyal**

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BE YE THEREFORE LOYAL, EVEN AS YOUR FATHER WHICH IS IN HEAVEN IS LOYAL

Taylor Halverson

Abstract: *The scriptures are saturated with covenantal words and terms. Any serious or close reading of the scriptures that misses or ignores the covenantal words, phrases, and literary structure of scripture runs the risk of missing the full purpose of why God preserved the scriptures for us. This is especially true for the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, which emerged out of an Old Testament cultural context. Research during the past century on ancient Near Eastern covenants has brought clarity to the covenantal meaning and context of a variety of words and literary structures in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. This article builds on that revealing research to show that the English word “perfect” in a covenantal context in scripture can also be represented with the covenantal synonyms of “loyal, loyalty, faithful, and trustworthy.” God has revealed and preserved the scriptures as records of these covenants and of the consequences of covenantal loyalty or disloyalty. The Lord’s injunction to “be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48) is beautifully magnified when we realize that we are not simply asked to be without sin, but, rather, to “be ye therefore covenantally loyal” even as God has been eternally and covenantally loyal to us.*

For Latter-day Saint readers, one of the most consternation-creating passages in scripture is Jesus’s admonition in the Sermon on the Mount to “be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). For those of us already desiring to be more like God, that is, with tendencies toward perfectionism, this charge from Jesus can feel overwhelming, overpowering, and dispiriting. Who, among the fallen children of Adam and Eve, will ever in this mortal life be able to be perfect? The cause seems hopeless.

A different perspective may come by considering the difference in the Book of Mormon when Christ reiterates His commandment, but this time also referring to Himself: “Be perfect, even as I or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48). Perhaps the perfection referred to requires a perspective going beyond mortality and looking to the fullness that comes after the resurrection. But even then, the commandment to be “perfect” is given to us as flawed mortals for whom perfection seems so unobtainable.

Thankfully, there have been regular reminders from scholars¹ and church leaders² that the original meaning of the Greek word “teleios,” far from evincing the meaning of flawlessness, instead evokes the sense of completion, goal-orientation, maturity, and purposefulness. For example, after a careful examination of the Hebrew and Greek words involved in KJV passages that use the word “perfect” with respect to mortals, Frank Judd explains that mortal flawlessness is not implied in Matthew 5:48; on the contrary, the “essential sense of the Savior’s command to be perfect is a call to live the gospel of Jesus Christ to the best of one’s ability, using the Atonement to repent when necessary.”³

We could translate the phrase as “be ye therefore purposeful [in seeking after the Kingdom of God], even as your Father which is in heaven is purposeful [in His role in the Plan of Salvation].” As helpful as these insights are from the Greek, we may miss the larger covenantal context within which the word “perfect” is embedded.

I propose that a better translation of the phrase, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” would be, “Be ye therefore loyal, even as your Father which is in heaven is loyal.”

I’ll first describe how covenants create the context for understanding “perfection” and “loyalty.” I’ll also explain why “loyal” may be a better translation of the word “perfect.” And I hope to demonstrate how loyalty ties us back into the covenant God made with his people through Moses which was renewed and updated by Jesus himself and which we reenact each week at Sacrament. In summary, instead of worrying about being

1. Frank F. Judd, Jr., “‘Be Ye Therefore Perfect’: The Elusive Quest for Perfection,” in *The Sermon on the Mount in Latter-day Scripture*, ed. Gaye Strathearn, Thomas A. Wayment, and Daniel L. Belnap (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 125-41, <https://rsc.byu.edu/sermon-mountain-latter-day-scripture/be-ye-therefore-perfect>.

2. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Be Ye Therefore Perfect — Eventually,” *Ensign* 47, no. 11 (November 2017), 40-42, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2017/11/saturday-morning-session/be-ye-therefore-perfect-eventually>.

3. Judd, “Be Ye Therefore Perfect,” 126.

perfect, Jesus's charge to "be ye therefore loyal, even as your Father which is in heaven is loyal" is a call for us to enter into and remain in a loyal covenantal relationship with God.

Covenants as a Lens for Loyalty and Perfection

There are two key covenants that undergird the Old Testament (and, significantly, the Book of Mormon). They are (1) the covenant with Abraham, which follows the format of an Ancient Near Eastern unconditional *covenant of grant*, and (2) the covenant with the Israelites at Sinai, which follows the Ancient Near Eastern conditional *suzerain-vassal treaty*. These two covenants work together. The covenant of grant persists in perpetuity with all of Abraham's posterity. No one, except God himself, can break this covenant to Abraham and his posterity. However, God's servants, His people, must demonstrate their loyalty to Him by maintaining the conditional covenant delivered at Sinai. Anyone who breaks the conditional suzerain-vassal treaty of Sinai loses access to the blessings God freely offers to Abraham and his posterity.

Unconditional Covenant of Grant

"And they will be my people, and I will be their God" (Jeremiah 32:38).⁴ God initiated this covenant with Abraham, as expressed in Genesis 17:1–9

And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of

4. See another variation on this covenant in Deuteronomy 26:17-19: "Thou hast avouched the Lord this day to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and to hearken unto his voice: And the Lord hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people, as he hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all his commandments; And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God, as he hath spoken."

thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.

The format and structure of this covenant follows a pattern found throughout the Ancient Near East that scholars have labeled a “covenant of grant” or a “royal grant.” These covenants typically were created by a powerful king to reward loyal and impressive service from a servant or member of the society. The covenant would identify unconditional blessings that the loyal servant would receive and enjoy in perpetuity. These covenants of grant typically included the promises of land and a house (or dynasty). And the blessings would extend to encompass future generations of the faithful servant’s posterity, remaining in the family’s possession for all time, no matter what the servant or his future family might do. Even if the loyal servant or anyone in his posterity committed egregious acts the covenant would not be abrogated. Even if the offense merited capital punishment, the covenant would endure. These blessings and promises could never be lost, transferred, or taken away. They were the right and privilege, unconditionally and in perpetuity, for the loyal servants and his descendants.

The king seeks the ongoing loyalty of the faithful servant by asking the servant to “walk perfectly” or to “walk uprightly” or to “be perfect” in faithful loyalty to the king. Bible scholar Moshe Weinfeld shared an example from ancient Assyria that provides elucidating clarification on the connection between “perfection” and “loyalty.” In one instance, the Assyrian king made a covenant of grant with a faithful servant named Baltya “whose heart is devoted (lit. is whole) to his master, served me (lit. stood before me) with truthfulness, acted perfectly (lit. walked in perfection) in my palace, grew up with a good name and kept the charge of my kingship.”⁵ Similarly, Noah is described as a devoted, faithful, and loyal servant to God: “Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God” (Genesis 6:9). The words and

5. Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and Ancient Near East,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, no. 2 (April–June 1970): 186.

phrases that are used in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East to describe faithful loyalty are: perfection, walk before me, with a whole heart, righteousness, uprightness, and stand before me in truth.⁶

The covenant of grant preserves and guarantees the rights of the loyal servant. In the covenantal context, curses are directed against any who will infringe upon the rights of the loyal servant, the royal seal is the sign that the covenant cannot be breached, and the king (who creates the covenant) takes upon himself the obligation to ensure that the covenantal promises are delivered. Otherwise, the king takes upon himself curses.⁷

For example, one ancient covenant of grant reads thus,

After you, your son and grandson will possess it, nobody will take it away from them. If one of your descendants sins the king will prosecute him at this court. Then when he is found guilty ... if he deserves death he will die. But nobody will take away from the descendant of [personal name of loyal servant] *either his house or his land* in order to give it to a descendant of somebody else.⁸

Another ancient covenant of grant example reads,

Nobody in the future shall take away this house from [personal name of loyal servant], her children, her grandchildren and her offspring. When anyone of the descendants of [personal name of loyal servant] provokes the anger of the kings ... whether he is to be forgiven or whether he is to be killed, one will treat him according to the wish of his master but his house they will not take away and they will not give it to somebody else.⁹

We see a similar example in the promise to King David, found in 2 Samuel 7:13–16:

I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart away from

6. Ibid.

7. See Genesis 15:7–21 where God takes upon himself the covenantal obligations, including the penalties of being cut in two, of the Abraham covenant, if God does not fulfill the covenant.

8. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and Ancient Near East,” 189.

9. Ibid., 189–90.

him ... And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established
for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.

As Moshe Weinfeld so aptly described, the “[covenant of] grant serves to protect the rights of the *servant*, while the [suzerain-vassal] treaty comes to protect the rights of the *master*. What is more, while the grant is a reward for loyalty and good deeds already performed, the treaty is an inducement for future loyalty.”¹⁰

Suzerain-Vassal Treaty

The suzerain-vassal treaty or covenant, a topic which has received extensive attention from scholars in the last few decades,¹¹ differs in several ways from the unconditional covenant of grant. Treaties between rulers (suzerains) and their subjects (vassals) in the ancient Near East often followed formulaic patterns that are sometimes called the “covenant formulary,” and related covenant patterns can be seen in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon.¹² The formula typically

10. Ibid., 185.

11. 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, 1985); George E. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954): 50-76; Dennis J. McCarthy, “Covenant in the Old Testament,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965); Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in the Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Biblical Institute Press, 1981); Guy Tucker, “Covenant Forms and Contract Forms,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965); Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and Ancient Near East,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, no. 2 (1970); Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1972): 116-129; Moshe Weinfeld, “Covenant Terminology,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93, no. 2 (1973); Moshe Weinfeld, “The Loyalty Oath in the Ancient Near East,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 8 (1976). For an example of an ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaty see James B. Pritchard, ed., “The Treaty between Mursilis and Duppi Tesub of Amurru,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 203-205, <http://jewishchristianlit.com/Topics/Contracts/treat01.html>.

12. Stephen D. Ricks, “Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1-6” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998): 233-75; RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Treaties and

included specific conditions as part of the covenants, including obedience to the suzerain, and a list of blessings for compliance with the covenant and a list of punishments or curses for failure to obey and keep the terms of the covenant. Other common elements include a preamble or introduction, a historical review of what the suzerain has done for the vassals, a reference to witnesses of the covenant making process, and means for recording and preserving the terms of the covenants. Loyalty, of course, was a critical part of such a covenant.

Perfection as Loyalty in a Covenant Relationship

The language used between giver and receiver of these covenants may provide insight into the larger contextual meaning of the word “perfect” that shows up in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount.

The Bible is divided into two major sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. Some scholars call the Old Testament the Hebrew Bible or the Hebrew Scriptures. However, these scholarly names for the Old Testament obscure the purpose and focus the name “Old Testament” conveys. As others have demonstrated, the phrase *Old Testament* really means *Old Covenant*.¹³ What is the Old Covenant? It is the covenant that God made with his people at Sinai: If they would keep the commandments (which are stipulations of loyalty) then they would prosper in the land. A sacrificial system was enacted to reinforce the meaning and significance of the covenant.

The New Testament really should be called the New Covenant. And, actually, the New Covenant is only new in the sense that Jesus is, Himself, the New Covenant, whereas the Old Covenant pointed the way to Jesus.¹⁴ Each sacrificial lamb of the older system only symbolized the

Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 48-61. It is also found in lament psalms of the Old Testament, as described in 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, David R. Seely, “The Restoration as Covenant Renewal” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2005): 311-36.

13. Scott Hahn, *Consuming the Word: The New Testament and the Eucharist in the Early Church* (New York: Image Books), 2013.

14. Incidentally, in the modern church we understand the word “testament” to mean witness, and thus the subtitle for the Book of Mormon is “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.” Technically, since “testament” means covenant and the

then-future last and eternal sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who enlivens the covenant offered to all of us. Again, that covenant is summarized by the phrase, found abundantly in the Book of Mormon, “If ye keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land.”¹⁵

The covenant invites loyalty to God. The commandments are the stipulations or guideposts for loyalty. Insofar as we are loyal to God, we receive His measure of peace and prosperity in the land. God is always loyal to the covenant; He will always honor the covenant. We should seek to be loyal to the covenant as He is. As we practice our loyalty, by keeping the commandments, we become more like God. We are invited on a weekly basis to remember our loyalty and to recommit our loyalty to God through covenant when we pronounce “amen” (or “I agree”) at the phrase, “They are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son, and always remember him and keep his commandments which he has given them; that they may always have his Spirit to be with them” (D&C 20:77).

With this covenantal context, we can expand our understanding of Jesus’s call in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘Be ye therefore covenantally loyal [as originally expressed in the Mosaic covenant and now updated in the Sermon on the Mount], even as your Father which is in Heaven has been covenantally loyal to the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all their descendants.’ And with this new understanding of the word “perfection” as meaning covenantal loyalty, we can stop worrying about perfectionism. We should pursue loyalty to God as invited by the covenant mediated by the final and last sacrifice, the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

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Book of Mormon is not another covenant of Jesus Christ, the subtitle is not fully accurate. There is only one covenant; that covenant is with Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Book of Mormon subtitle would be more accurate if it read “Another Witness of Jesus Christ” or “Another Witness of the Covenant with Jesus Christ.”

15. Taylor Halverson, “The Origin and Purpose of the Book of Mormon Phrase “If Ye Keep My Commandments Ye Shall Prosper in the Land,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021): 201-208; Taylor Halverson, *The Covenant Path in the Bible and the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Line of Sight Publishing), 2020.

and America's national parks). He is a prolific author and editor of 20 books and more than 300 articles and a developer of 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 games, learning, and laughing. Taylor's academic training includes: BA, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Brigham Young University; MA, Biblical Studies, Yale University; MS, Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University; PhD, Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University; PhD, Judaism & Christianity in Antiquity, Indiana University.

