

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 50 · 2022 · Pages 79- 92.j

Covenant Theology for Latter-day Saints

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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COVENANT THEOLOGY FOR LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye

Review of Kerry Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail: Ancient Covenants, Modern Blessings, and the Gathering of Israel* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2021). 177 pages. \$14.99 (hardcover).

Abstract: *Covenants are central in the Latter-day Saint temple liturgy, our scriptural canon is infused with them, and General Authorities have increasingly drawn attention to their importance in the last half-century. Yet many Latter-day Saints are still unfamiliar with the form and function of covenants and the role they play in God's plan of salvation. Kerry Muhlestein, well-informed by his academic training in ancient history and scripture, provides a lucid introduction to covenants for Latter-day Saints.*

Latter-day Saint theology is, at its core, a covenant theology. Latter-day Saints believe that God first covenanted with man in the Garden of Eden. That covenant was perpetuated through Abraham, Moses, David, the Nephites and Lamanites, Jesus Christ, and finally through Joseph Smith in the restoration of the gospel. By entering into this new and everlasting covenant, Latter-day Saints promise to love and obey God and to love and serve others. In return, God promises exaltation and eternal life. This essentially describes God's plan of salvation, yet many Latter-day Saints struggle to understand the importance of covenants and the brethren's recent emphasis on "the covenant path."¹

1. The first reference in General Conference to "the covenant path" was in 2007 in an address by Elaine S. Dalton. She quoted an *Ensign* article wherein Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught that "The promptings of the Holy Ghost will always be sufficient for our needs if we keep to the covenant path." See Jeffrey R. Holland, "What I Wish Every New Member Knew — and Every Longtime Member Remembered," *Ensign* (October 2006), 11–12; Elaine S. Dalton, "Stay on the Path,"

Kerry Muhlestein provides an approachable introduction to and exploration of this covenant theology. His explanation of these ancient and sometimes esoteric concepts is easy to understand. Because of his rigorous academic background in ancient Near Eastern studies and Egyptology, he helps Latter-day Saints view covenants through the rich lens of antiquity, while keeping the concepts relevant to our day. Muhlestein's book is comprised of eight chapters with three appendices. He first defines the new and everlasting covenant that encompasses God's great plan of happiness, covering how it operated in the Old Testament, and focusing particularly on its implementation with Abraham. After a brief excursus to explain this covenant's inclusivity, he details both its blessings and stipulations. The rest of the book largely deals with the covenant's implementation in our lives — how to be a covenant people, how to gather Israel in the latter days, and how to rely on the grace of Jesus Christ for our shortcomings.

The Many Covenants in Israel's History

One of the important contributions of this book is Muhlestein's ability to simplify what at first appears to be a confusing assortment of different covenants with different people. Latter-day Saints are likely familiar with covenants made in the temple and thus familiar with the idea that God covenanted with Adam and Eve. However, God also made a formal covenant with Abraham, called the Abrahamic Covenant. Then God covenanted with the Israelites on Mt. Sinai to form the Mosaic Covenant and the Law of Moses. God forged a covenant with King David and his line. Jesus's teachings in the four gospels are sometimes referred to as the "new" covenant, which supersedes the Mosaic law. Then finally, in the latter days, God established a "new and everlasting covenant," often thought to refer to celestial marriages.

While these may all seem like disparate covenants, Muhlestein argues that they are one and the same (pp. 4–6), so the New and Everlasting Covenant is the Abrahamic Covenant. The covenant given to Moses, Adam and Eve, David, the Nephites, and Joseph Smith are all reimplementations of the same promise that God makes with his

Ensign (May 2007), 113. Since that time, there has been an exponential increase in discussion on "the covenant path," which refers to the way to eternal life that is paved with covenants.

children. As Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “the new and everlasting covenant is the sum total of all gospel covenants and obligations.”²

The phrase “new and everlasting covenant” (D&C 22:1; 131:2; 132:6, 19, 26–27, 41–42) can cause confusion because of its seeming relationship to recency and to marriage. Many Latter-day Saints associate the “new and everlasting covenant” with celestial marriage and even plural marriage because of its extended discussion in D&C 132. However, the phrase was first used years earlier to refer to entering into the gate of baptism (D&C 22:1). This implies that the new and everlasting covenant is not just about the sealing covenant but the totality of all covenants that lead souls back to Heavenly Father. The reason it is referred to as “new” is not because of its recent invention but because of its perpetual novelty. “New and everlasting” form a hendiadys: two words joined by a conjunction to express a single, unified idea. Instead of viewing the covenant as paradoxically both eternal and never-before-seen, one can view the covenant as eternally fresh or everlastingly new. As Muhlestein puts it, “This covenant is everlasting because it was established before the world was created, and its blessings will never end. It is new because it is continually reestablished in dispensation after dispensation. It is new each time it is given again” (p. 5).

Muhlestein takes some time to note that the topic of covenant has garnered increased interest among Latter-day Saints. Muhlestein attributes this increased interest to President Nelson’s emphatic coverage of the topic. He noted several instances since 2018 when the prophet has spoken extensively on covenants. I believe President Nelson’s emphasis on covenants is one important data point within a larger trend. The Church has seen a steady increase in covenant discussion for most of the 20th century, as seen by a survey of General Conference mentions of “covenant” over the years (see Figure 1).

In this first chapter, Muhlestein also answers why covenants are necessary. A God of unconditional and infinite love wants to bless His children. However, God knows that the greatest blessings and joy are to come from forging a special bond with Him and ultimately learning to become like Him. The process of drawing close to God and becoming like God can only come through a covenantal connection. Covenants require commitment and sacrifice from both parties and result in strong ties of loyalty and love. The particular kind of love engendered

2. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, vol. I, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 1:156, quoted in Muhlestein, *God Will Prevail*, 4.

through God’s covenant was referred to in the Old Testament as *hesed* or “loving-kindness,” “mercy,” or “love.” This covenantal kind of love compels God to love and care for us as his children. No matter how many times we stray or falter in our commitments, God’s *hesed* means that he will never stop working with us to reach our potential.

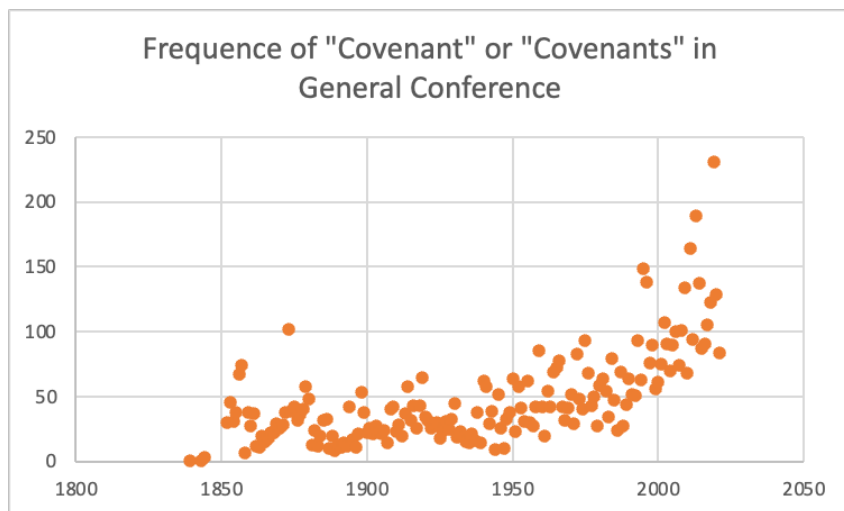


Figure 1. The number of times “covenant” has been mentioned in General Conference from 1839–2021, determined by a search in the Word Cruncher General Conference library. (Excludes instances of “Doctrine and Covenants.”)

Establishing the Covenant

The second chapter of this book expounds on the history of how God first implemented this eternal covenant with mankind. This covenant was first formed before the creation of the earth. God the Father covenanted with the Son, and the Godhead covenanted with mankind. They established the plan of salvation by covenanting to save mankind through faith and obedience to gospel principles. God first covenanted with mortal man upon the Fall of Adam and Eve. However, because of wickedness, the commitment to the covenant eventually waned. God renewed his covenant with Noah and his family and again with Abraham and Sarah.

After establishing that this Abrahamic Covenant is the same covenant made with Adam, Muhlestein clarifies that the Abrahamic iteration of this covenant required the members of this covenant to be part of Abraham and Sarah’s seed. From this point on, the covenant would be associated with lineage (p. 23).

Muhlestein takes time to helpfully explain the practice of covenant making in the ancient world through an explanation of Genesis 15. In this episode, the Lord desires to ratify his covenant with Abraham, so the Lord has Abraham cut various animals in half and line them up in two rows. A smoking, burning light then passes through the severed animal carcasses to certify the covenant. As strange and morbid as this scene appears to modern audiences, the act is pregnant with meaning. In antiquity, one did not simply “make” a covenant, but rather one “cut” a covenant. Cutting a covenant alluded to the sacrifice of animals or signaling potential bodily harm as a consequence for breaking the covenant. God’s presence passing through the halved animals was an outward sign to communicate something to the effect of, “may I be cut as these animals if I do not fulfill my end of the covenant.” Muhlestein rightly points out this context, as it is crucial for understanding the solemnity of covenants and the consequences of disloyalty.

Between Genesis 11–25, the Book of Abraham, the Joseph Smith Translation,³ and the Book of Mormon,⁴ we have quite a bit of information on the Abrahamic implementation of God’s covenant with mankind. This covenant includes possible officiators (Melchizedek), a progressive sequence of initiation, terms and conditions, a symbolic ritual to confirm the covenant, new names for both Abraham and Sarah, and children (pp. 24–25). Latter-day Saints may find helpful parallels in their own temple worship as they strive to understand the magnitude of God’s covenants with his people.

This focus on covenant persists throughout the Old Testament, when Jacob receives a new name as a token of his new covenant with God and again in the Exodus narrative, which is preoccupied with Israel covenanting with God on Mount Sinai. When God establishes his tabernacle, he ritualizes many aspects of this covenant through the cult of priests, who wear sacred robes, perform ritual gestures, and administer in God’s liturgy. The covenant is again reiterated in the entirety of the book of Deuteronomy, which resembles the structure of other Near Eastern covenant-treaty patterns (p. 29). This covenant is renewed regularly between the time of Joshua and the reign of Israel’s kings. As Muhlestein articulated, “the teachings of the Old Testament

3. See Genesis 14:25–40 JST; Genesis 15:9–12 JST; Genesis 17:3–12 JST; Genesis 17:23–24 JST; Genesis 21:31–32 JST.

4. See 1 Nephi 15:18; 22:19; 2 Nephi 29:14; Jacob 4:5; Alma 13:15; Helaman 8:16–19; 3 Nephi 20:25–27; Ether 13:11.

prophets make clear that the covenant was the central and unifying theme of their society” (p. 29).

The Inclusive Nature of a Chosen People

The third chapter in this book is a short but effective one. It targets a pain point for many members of the church who feel that being a “chosen people” is a form of elitism. Being the “one true church” can seem exclusionary to other religions with virtue and truth. However, Muhlestein explains that such sentiments arise from misunderstanding covenant theology. Those who participate in God’s covenant are indeed a chosen people. However, the purpose of being “chosen” is not to assume a position of power but rather to be of service. Members of the covenant community have a sacred obligation to share the covenant with all humanity. The ultimate goal of Heavenly Father’s plan is to make all of his children “chosen.” “The covenant is not only a group that all can join, it is a community of which everyone is vigorously encouraged to become a part” (p. 32).

Part of being in God’s covenant is sharing the covenant. When one understands this concept, the Church’s emphasis on missionary work reflects new significance. Volunteering to serve a mission is not simply a recruitment trip, it’s a consecration of time that allows all God’s children to join the new and everlasting covenant. Missionary work opens the gate for all to become the peculiar treasure of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This work applies to more than full-time missionaries; it is a sacred obligation of every member of the covenant community. Historically, there are several examples in the Old Testament of willing outsiders being brought into the covenant community. This includes groups such as Jonah’s converts at Ninevah as well as individuals such as Caleb and Ruth. Muhlestein argues that Jesus may have limited his ministry to Israel because Christ needed to reestablish the covenant he had already made with them. It was then the task of Israel to go out to all the world and gather everyone else (pp. 36–37).⁵

The author notes that covenant keepers throughout history have not always been perfect at creating inclusion. There have been times in the history of ancient Israel and the restored Church when imperfect people have contributed to exclusionary behavior and attitudes. However, the most important truth of the covenant is that “there are no covenant

5. Muhlestein further adds that the inclusivity of the covenant is not limited to people currently living. Part of being a member of the covenant is spreading the covenant with those on the other side of the veil (p. 38). This involves dedicated temple and family history work.

blessings that are not fully available to each and every person who is willing to make the covenant” (p. 39).

Blessings, Cursings, and Obligations of the Covenant

Chapters four and five deal with the content of God’s covenant: the obligations, the blessings, and the cursings. If the participants of the covenant successfully adhere to the covenant’s stipulations and requirements, they will be overwhelmingly blessed with all that God has. Conversely, covenant members who do not fulfill their obligations will be met with consequences. However, as Muhlestein points out, God’s blessings far outweigh the consequences, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ redeems mankind from their missteps.

The most important blessing and result of the covenant is a new relationship with God:

It also welds a special connection between covenanters and God, one in which they behave more like God and develop/receive a more godly nature as God aids them in this process. Covenants are about connections, and the primary connection is the one we make with God. This is one of the main reasons why the path God has chosen for us is the covenant path, because it has within it the ability to help us become what we need to become by helping us create an exalting connection with God. (p. 45)

In addition to a new relationship, the covenant brings about a multitude of blessings. Muhlestein summarizes the blessings of the covenant as follows:

- Special relationship with God
- Access to special mercy and love
- Prosperity
- Promised land
- Protection
- Rulership
- Posterity
- We will be a blessing to posterity
- Access to the gospel and its ordinances for us and our posterity
- We will be gathered
- Exaltation

For each item, he goes into detail explaining how that blessing fits into the overall covenantal plan. He details the specific blessings promised to Abraham, and how those blessings map onto latter-day Israel. Of particular interest is his discussion on priesthood ordinances. While the Abraham narrative is predominantly from a male perspective, Muhlestein is careful to frequently emphasize the necessary feminine component of the new and everlasting covenant. One of the main vehicles for God's covenant is priesthood ordinances. Muhlestein explains, "It seems covenant is the primary way we draw priesthood power into our lives" (p. 48). Instead of emphasizing particular priesthood offices or functions, he underscores how the ordinances of the temple are what truly manifest the power of godliness. Both men and women have equal access to the priesthood through the ordinances of the temple, which help us become more like God.

With the abundant blessings of the covenant come covenantal obligations. Covenants are two-way promises, and the blessings are conditional upon our fulfilling our obligations. However, Muhlestein is quick to point out that the list of blessings far outstrips the few requirements God asks of us. Our obligations to God are as follows:

- Love God
- Worship no other Gods
- Let God prevail in our lives
- Obedience
- Love and care for others
- Enter into covenantal ordinances
- Share the covenant, its ordinances, and the gospel (gather Israel)
- Return (repent) when we stray

The requirement of obedience is of particular interest to Latter-day Saints, who receive instruction in temples to obey the Lord. Obedience to God's commandments may seem to some an arduous or mundane commitment. However, it is the first law of heaven and is much more than checking off a list of "thou shalt's" and "thou shalt not's." "When our relationship with God is such that our burning, overarching, and overwhelming emotion, the yearning of our soul, is a love for Him, then we naturally seek to do His will. We call this keeping the commandments" (p. 63). Muhlestein notes that while the English phrase "keep the commandments" refers to obedience, its Hebrew counterpart contains rich undertones of meaning. To "keep" in Hebrew is *shamar*, which also connotes to "guard, watch, observe, or protect." In this light,

“‘Keeping’ isn’t just something we do, it is something we feel; it is part of who we are” (p. 63).

As Jesus taught in his ministry, and as the law of Moses emphasizes, second to loving God is loving one’s fellow man. Muhlestein teaches that Alma’s admonition to “mourn with those that mourn” and “comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:8–9) entails protecting “groups of people who were at an inherent disadvantage” (p. 65). Bible justice refers to meting out fair and equitable judgments to the poor, widowed, and disadvantaged in society. It is the obligation of every covenant keeper to identify the vulnerable segments of society and do our best to minister to their needs.

Since all of humanity are fallen and imperfect, it is inevitable that we will falter in our adherence to God’s covenant. The new and everlasting covenant lays out consequences for breaking the covenant as well as the path back towards progress. The beauty of God’s consequences is that they all lead back to him. Because of God’s covenantal love towards his people, when his people turn away from him, God responds by inflicting circumstances that would naturally draw his people back to him in contrition. Affliction and difficulty are never enjoyable, but they are often the catalyst needed to compel God’s people to humility and repentance (p. 70). The Lord promises Israel that no matter how many times they stray, if they sincerely turn back to him, he will have compassion and gather them into covenantal communion once again.

How to Be a Covenant People

Chapter six turns the reader’s attention to how to build a covenant community. Many Latter-day Saints conceptualize their covenants as individual commitments with God. However, God’s new and everlasting covenant is both individual in attention and corporate in scope. The covenant deals with how individuals can return to the presence of their Heavenly Parents. However, the covenant is incomplete unless the entire human race is saved. The atonement of Jesus Christ allows all of humanity the opportunity for exaltation. Part of entering into this covenant with God entails sharing that covenant with others and building a covenant, Zion community.

We must realize that our own salvation is tied to how well we bring salvation to others on both sides of the veil, and at the same time, we must forget about saving ourselves and concentrate on saving others, on saving Israel. We have to

recognize that for covenant holders, salvation is a community affair. Jehovah is the Redeemer of *all* Israel. (p. 82)

Individual piety will get a person only so far. The covenant community is vital for becoming like God, for only by loving others can we approach godliness. According to Muhlestein, members of a covenant community:

- Are a “peculiar” or special, distinct people from the rest of the world
- Are sanctified by God when they obey His commandments.
- Help and support each other temporally and spiritually
- Belong to the tribes of Israel through lineage and adoption

Muhlestein goes over principles of birthright and primogeniture in ancient Israel. He then takes time to discuss the blessings and heritage of each tribe of the house of Israel. While many Latter-day Saints claim Ephraim as their spiritual heritage, each tribe has rich blessings associated with it. “While each tribe has its own unique characteristics and role, the tribes of Israel have more in common within the covenant than they have differences. They will each do their individual part, while all will experience the blessings of Abraham” (p. 96).

Covenant in the Latter-Days

In the final chapters of his book, Kerry Muhlestein turns from antiquity to the present day by helping readers gain perspective on how God’s new and everlasting covenant has been implemented in the dispensation of the fulness of times. While the ancient world is clearly his area of expertise, he does a good job situating covenant theology in the 19th century and in today’s church. Our discussions on the Restoration often center on plates, angels, seer stones, and miraculous visions, yet Muhlestein argues that covenant theology was always a primary focus of the restoration of the gospel. The Lord taught Joseph Smith in his First Vision that “the Everlasting Covenant” was broken and needed to be restored; the angel Moroni emphasized to Joseph that the Restoration existed “that the covenant which God made with ancient Israel was at hand to be fulfilled” (p. 99).⁶ Emphasis on God’s covenant is continually woven throughout Joseph’s revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants.

6. Quoting “The Wentworth Letter,” in *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* eds. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard L. Jensen, (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 494.

Muhlestein helps shift perspective on the purposes and nature of the Restoration. Instead of viewing the Restoration as a long list of discrete doctrine and practices that needed to be restored (such as baptism, priesthood, apostleship, temple rites, Relief Society, celestial marriage, etc.), readers can appreciate that the Restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be framed in one holistic paradigm: God's new and everlasting covenant. All ordinances, priesthood offices, organizational structures, policies, doctrines, and theological innovations can be circumscribed into one great whole, as God's covenant relationship with His children.

The covenant theology described in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants⁷ comes to tangible fruition in the ordinances of the temple. The dedication of the Kirtland temple restored the keys necessary to make sacred covenants in the temple and gather Israel. The gathering of Israel is essential for God's plan of salvation, as gathering allows all of God's children to develop a more intimate, covenantal relationship with Him. The primary tool for the gathering of Israel will be the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ. With the tribe of Ephraim as the messengers, the message of the Book of Mormon will gather the members of Israel who have lost their covenant consciousness to a remembrance of their Redeemer. Essentially, to be a covenant people, we must be focused on developing a close, covenantal relationship with our Heavenly Father and on gathering Israel through the message of the Book of Mormon.

Yet despite the simplicity of the formula, Muhlestein warns that we must be careful not to get complacent in our covenant keeping. One check against complacency is always assessing whether our actions are motivated by Christlike love. Our behavior should be motivated by pure love for our God and pure love for our fellow men:

After feeling God's love, we are more able to love Him, and *that* is even more powerful. Feeling loved by others, including God, is fulfilling, motivating, and joyful. Still, the greatest joy we will ever experience is when we are consumed with a love of God. This should not be surprising. God is not trying to help His children become beings with a perfect capacity to feel loved, He is trying to help us become beings with a perfect

7. Muhlestein provides three helpful appendices that more systematically analyze covenant theology in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon, respectively. They provide useful background in contextualizing covenant theology in the Restoration. For a more thorough explanation of covenant theology in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, see Taylor Halverson, *The Covenant Path in the Bible and the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Line of Sight Publishing, 2020).

capacity to love. That is the higher ideal, and hence, it will lead to the higher joy. (p. 120)

One helpful connection Muhlestein makes is between covenant and sacrifice. He underscores the importance of the Atonement of Jesus Christ by reminding readers that covenants always involved sacrifice. Jesus Christ sacrificed his life to atone for the sins of the world and put in motion God's new and everlasting covenant. Members individually sacrifice themselves when they enter into the covenant of baptism. In the temple, members again promise to sacrifice. Our individual sacrifices emulate the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ's atonement and help us exemplify true covenant keeping.

Jesus Christ is at the center of the new and everlasting covenant. His atonement enables all God's covenant children to return to his presence. Christ's influence can help sanctify us and make us more holy in God's eyes. Focusing our thoughts and hearts on Jesus Christ can help us develop greater love and charity for God and for God's children. To conclude the book, Muhlestein summarizes:

Above all, remember this: the covenant you have willingly made has bound you to the Great God of the Universe. That bond provides you with access to Christ's redeeming power. If you seek to remain bound to Christ, you cannot fail, for He has already succeeded. Learn about and from the covenant and put your heart into keeping it, foremost by loving God. For, above all things, the covenant is about us giving ourselves to God, just as His Son did, and as He has fully devoted Himself to saving us. (p. 135)

Conclusion

Kerry Muhlestein's book is an excellent introduction to covenants for Latter-day Saints. It explains their purpose, their format, their structure, how they manifest throughout various dispensations, and how Latter-day Saints can be covenant people today. The book's brevity and approachable writing make it deceptively simple. Despite its accessibility, it conveys sophisticated concepts that undergird the very foundations of Latter-day Saint theology. Muhlestein's book is a thorough treatment of covenant theology for Latter-day Saints. It provides helpful background in ancient scripture while remaining highly applicable to daily devotion and modern worship. *God Will Prevail* is an excellent addition to Latter-day

Saint literature, especially in preparation for the 2022 *Come, Follow Me* curriculum in the Old Testament.

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