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WITNESS OF THE COVENANT

Loren Blake Spendlove

Abstract: *Although much has been taught about covenants in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, little attention has been given to the witnesses of those covenants. In this paper I focus on the importance of witnessing the covenants that we make with God — especially the gospel covenant — rather than on the process of making them. Instead of emphasizing the teachings of Latter-day Saint leaders and authors, I prioritize the standard works of the Church in my analysis of this topic. I begin with a discussion of covenants and witnesses in the Hebrew Bible, and then proceed with an examination of the same from the Book of Mormon. I identify the ordinances of baptism and the sacrament as witnesses of the gospel covenant and clarify that it is through the blood of Christ that we are cleansed from sin rather than through the waters of baptism. I conclude by observing the importance of faithfully witnessing the gospel covenant to serve God and keep his commandments.*

From the earliest of times, God has established a pattern of covenant making with his people. Some Jewish scholars have even postulated that the first use of the word *covenant* in the Bible occurs in the very first word of the book of Genesis, בראשית (*bereshit*), translated as “In the beginning” in most English Bibles.¹ Following this theory, the word אש (*esh*), or fire, is sandwiched between the four letters of the word for covenant ברית (*brit*). The result is בר-אש-ית (*br-esh-it*), which when rendered ברית אש (*brit esh*) means *covenant of fire*.

In antiquity, witnesses and testimonies (עדים, *edim*) or signs and tokens (אתה, *otot*) always accompanied and served as *public evidences*

1. See, for example, “Likutei Moharan 63:1:9,” *Sefaria* (website), https://www.sefaria.org/Likutei_Moharan.63.1.9?ven=Likutey_Moharan_Volumes_1-11,_trans._by_Moshe_Mykoff._Breslov_Research_Inst.,_1986-2012&lang=bi.

of these divine covenants. In fact, it is interesting that in the Book of Mormon only the secret combinations had *secret* signs:

And it came to pass that they did have their signs, yea, their secret signs and their secret words — and this that they might distinguish a brother who had entered into the covenant, that whatsoever wickedness his brother should do, he should not be injured by his brother, nor by those who did belong to his band who had taken this covenant. (Helaman 6:22)²

For the sake of simplicity, throughout this paper I refer to עדים (*edim*, witnesses or testimonies) and אותות (*otot*, signs or tokens) using the collective term *witnesses of the covenant*. These witnesses often served as reminders or as warnings to the people to be faithful to the covenantal agreement. In this paper, I discuss the principal covenants in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon, correlated with their associated witnesses.

While Latter-day Saint authors and Church leaders have written and spoken much about covenants, covenant-making, and covenant-keeping, the topic of covenantal witnesses has been largely overlooked. Hence, this paper will focus mainly on the witnesses of the covenant and will primarily rely on scriptural sources rather than on the sermons or writings of Latter-day Saint Church leaders or authors.

Old Testament Covenants and Witnesses

The Old Testament contains accounts of many covenants and witnesses to those covenants. These include Noah, Abraham, Sinai, Moab, the Transjordan witness, Shechem, and Nehemiah. Each of these are discussed in the following sections.

Noah

The first time that the word *covenant* (ברית, *brit*) is used explicitly in the Bible is when God, speaking to Noah prior to the flood, said, “With thee will I establish my covenant” (Genesis 6:18).³ However, it is not clear from this verse or the surrounding text what might have been included

2. All Book of Mormon citations are from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

3. All passages are from the King James translation (KJV) unless otherwise stated.

in that covenant.⁴ Following the receding of the flood waters, God again spoke of the covenant that had been promised to Noah and seemed to enlarge its terms to include all of Noah's descendants and "every living creature" on earth (Genesis 9:10). In other words, this covenant was not intended just for Noah but for all of God's creation, including unborn generations. In this postdiluvian covenant God promised that he would "establish my *covenant* with you [all];⁵ neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth" (Genesis 9:11). This unilateral and unconditional covenant guaranteed that God would never again destroy his earthly creations by flood.

In addition, God provided a sign⁶ — or witness — of the covenant: "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the *sign* of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:13 NIV). Interestingly, God clarified the importance of this sign by stating:

I will *remember* my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and *remember* the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." (Genesis 9:15–16 NIV)

In these verses, God promised to *remember* the covenant that he had made. The method that he prescribed was the rainbow, the witness of the covenant. The ability to remember something also implies the ability to forget. In Hebrews we read, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will *remember* their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:12). In the Hebrew Bible the verb *remember* is זָכַר (*zakhar*), and while in humans it can be understood as the ability to recall an idea, memory, or facts that may have been forgotten or that may not always have been at the forefront of one's mind, with God its meaning is different:

God remembered (*zakhar*): This does not refer to a jogging of the divine memory, as if God had forgotten promises

4. Restoration scripture informs us of a covenant that God made with Enoch, the great-grandfather of Noah, that preceded the covenant with Noah. In this earlier covenant God promised that he would "stay the floods" after the earth had been cleansed during the future days of Noah (Moses 7:50–51). See also Genesis 9:15–16 (JST).

5. אֶתְּחֵם (*etchem*) — with you (plural).

6. אֵימָה (*ot*) — This word is frequently used in the Hebrew bible, and is variously translated as *sign*, *token*, *mark*, *symbol*, *banner*, and *standard*.

made. To remember is to be actively attentive to that which is remembered (6:5; cf. Genesis 8:1); it is a divine sense of obligation to a prior commitment. ... God's remembering always means action that will affect the future.⁷

So, when God said that seeing the rainbow in the sky would cause him to *remember* the covenant, we could replace the word “remember” with the words “follow through with” or “act on.” The verse would then read, “Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and *follow through with* the everlasting covenant between [myself] and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” This type of remembering, what I refer to as *divine remembering*, is always attached to action. Without a doubt, the rainbow also served as a reminder to Noah and his family of the covenant that the Lord had made with them.

It is worth noting that the first use of the verb זָכַר (*zakhar*, to remember) in the Hebrew Bible occurs in the story of Noah: “But God remembered Noah and all the animals and all the livestock that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided” (Genesis 8:1). In fact, God's *remembering* of Noah comprises the central element of an extensive chiasmic structure (see the Appendix), demonstrating the significance of this act of *remembering*. Regarding this chiasm, Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg wrote:

Since the central element of the chiasm functions as the focal point of the entire story — the tipping point not to be missed — we must assign it the first importance. Everything else described in the story is also important, but not nearly as important as the message of Genesis 8:1 (God remembering Noah). This “event” marks the triumph of mercy over judgment. God remembered Noah, just as He will later remember Abraham (Gen. 19:29) and other great figures of Israel's redemptive history — and, perhaps most importantly, the people of Israel during the yet-to-come Passover deliverance from Egypt. At that time, we are told, God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex. 2:23–25).⁸

7. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 48.

8. Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *Becoming Israel* (Tel Aviv: Jewish Studies for Christians, 2019), 22.

In the final section of this paper I will return to this concept of *divine remembering* with the idea of covenant witnesses, and with *our* responsibility to *remember* covenants as God does.

Abraham

The next biblical mention of a specific covenant between God and his children was when the Lord appeared to Abram, saying:

“I am God Almighty; *walk before me faithfully and be blameless*. Then I will make my *covenant* between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my *covenant* with you: You will be the *father of many nations*. No longer will you be called *Abram*; your name will be *Abraham*, for I have made you a father of many nations.” (Genesis 17:1–5 NIV)⁹

Unlike the apparently unilateral and unconditional covenant that God made with Noah, this covenant with Abraham was bilateral and conditional. The condition that God placed on Abraham was that he “walk before me faithfully and be blameless.” In other words, the fulfillment of the covenant required Abraham to follow God’s will and keep his commandments. As will be demonstrated throughout this paper, keeping God’s commandments is the *universal condition* of the gospel covenant as described in the scriptural record.

As he did with Noah, God also provided a sign — or witness — of his covenant with Abraham. In fact, two signs were given. The first was a change of names for both Abram and Sarai:

The Lord would then give both Abram and Sarai a *sign of the purposeful nature of his covenant* with Abram. He would change first Abram’s name, then Sarai’s. In Genesis 17:5 God said, “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.”¹⁰

God changed Abram’s name to Abraham as a witness of the covenant that He had made with him. When God said, “This is my covenant with

9. As with all translations, no single translation of the biblical text always provides the best interpretation from the original language, whether Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. When researching and writing, I choose from among the various English translations, or I provide my own rendering of the text.

10. Patrick Mead, *Lessons for the Life of Faith* (Sherman, TX: Machaira Publications, 2009), 111, emphasis added.

you: You will be the father of many nations,” it was a type of wordplay on the name Abraham, which itself can be interpreted as “father of a multitude.” In this sense, Abram becoming a “father of many nations” was both the covenant and the witness; the changing of Abram’s name to Abraham paralleled the promised fulfillment of the covenant. Patrick Mead identifies another reason for the change of names:

God’s purpose in changing their names was so that every time Abraham and Sarah said their new names it would *remind them that the covenant they entered into with the Lord was a purposeful covenant* of hope and a destiny. By changing their names, God gave Abraham and Sarah a *permanent sign* of his purpose for their lives to be the instruments that brought salvation to the world, to fulfill God’s divine plan of redemption.¹¹

The rainbow, the witness of the covenant with Noah, served as a reminder to God and to Noah of the covenantal promise. With Abram and Sarai, changing their names to Abraham and Sarah fulfilled the same purpose. The rainbow and the changing of Abram’s and Sarai’s names were very public witnesses of the covenant. It would have been difficult to miss a large, colorful rainbow in the sky or to not notice that Abram’s and Sarai’s names had been changed. In addition to changing their names, God established an additional outward sign or witness of the covenant, as is made clear in the New American Standard Bible of 2020 (NASB20) translation:

This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the *sign of the covenant* between Me and you. (Genesis 17:10–11 NASB20)

Unlike the rainbow during the days of Noah, or the changing of Abram’s and Sarai’s names, this second sign of the Abrahamic covenant required human effort in its fulfillment. Abraham and Sarah, along with their descendants, were required to circumcise every male child within the covenantal promise. Fulfilling this commandment signaled, or witnessed, that the parents of the child were faithful adherents to the covenant and that they desired the same for their descendants.

11. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

Sinai

After leaving Egypt and encamping around mount Sinai/Horeb, Moses was instructed by the Lord to tell the Israelites that if they “will indeed *obey My voice and keep My covenant*, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples” (Exodus 19:5 NASB20). As with the Abrahamic covenant, obedience to the Lord’s voice was the condition that the Lord required. The people’s vocal response witnessed their acceptance: “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” (Exodus 19:8 NASB20). In addition to this witness, the five books of Moses — also referred to as the Torah or Pentateuch — served as witnesses of this covenant (see Deuteronomy 4:13 and 31:24–26).

Moab

At the end of the 40 years in the wilderness, while the Israelites were in the land of Moab, God made another covenant with them (see Deuteronomy 29:1) that was distinct from the one made on Mount Sinai. Known as the Moab covenant, God conditionally promised the Israelites that he would make them prosperous and numerous in the land of their ancestors, Canaan. Two conditions were placed on the fulfillment of this covenant: 1) hearkening to the voice of the Lord by keeping his commandments and statutes and 2) turning to him with all one’s heart and soul (see Deuteronomy 30:1). In addition, two witnesses were provided with this covenant:

The Moab covenant is sealed with two “witnesses.” The command to Moses that he write down “this *song* ... in order that it may be a *witness* against the Israelites” (Deuteronomy 31:19, 21) intimates something like a stone or other sign that stands as a witness to the covenant. Further, Moses then writes down the *law* (Deuteronomy 31:24), and commands that it be a *witness* against the people, and that it be placed next to the ark of the covenant. He puts it in the care of the Levites who carry the ark. With this comes the command to assemble the people and read the law to them every seven years (Deuteronomy 31:9–13). The Moab covenant is thus tied intimately to the idea of a written law as something that is binding on the Israelites. The written law actually becomes the *witness* against the people.¹²

12. Rannfrid Irene Thelle, *Approaches to the “Chosen Place”: Accessing a Biblical Concept* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 113, emphasis added.

With this covenant, rather than providing affirmative witnesses, God provided two witnesses that the Israelites would reject his covenant as they had in the past: 1) the song of Moses (see Deuteronomy 32:1–43) and 2) the book of the law,¹³ which was to accompany the ark of the covenant (Deuteronomy 31:26). The song of Moses is essentially an indictment of Israel’s past and predicted unfaithfulness to the Lord’s commandments. After Moses was given the words of the song, he was commanded to read them aloud to the people, which he did (see Deuteronomy 32:44). Not only were the words of the song to be read to the people, but Moses was also charged to “teach it the children of Israel: put it in their mouths” (Deuteronomy 31:19). Through the learning and reciting of the words of the song, the Israelites, in a sense, became an additional witness of this covenant, and of their own lack of faithfulness to God and to his covenant.¹⁴

Transjordan Witness

Prior to crossing into the land of Canaan, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh chose to settle in the lands east of the Jordan river, otherwise known as Transjordan. During the rule of Joshua, the tribes in Canaan discovered that these Transjordanian tribes had “built an imposing altar there by the Jordan” (Joshua 22:10 NIV). Fearing that their fellow Israelites in Transjordan were in apostasy and that it would bring the wrath of God upon the other tribes, “the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered themselves together at Shiloh, to go up to war against them” (Joshua 22:12 NIV). The tribes in Canaan sent a delegation to the Transjordanian tribes to discover the reason for their apparent act of apostasy and to warn them that “if you rebel against the LORD today, He will be angry with the entire congregation of Israel tomorrow” (Joshua 22:18 NASB20). The Transjordanian tribes, however, reassured their fellow Israelites that their intentions were righteous; the altar that they had built was not an act of rebellion or apostasy. Rather, it was built to *witness* their commitment to God and the covenant:

13. ספר התורה (*sefer hatorah*) is probably best translated as *the book of instruction*.

14. In an apparent reference to the Moab covenant, Isaiah wrote, “The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,’ declares the LORD. ‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the LORD. ‘My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and *my words that I have put in your mouth* will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever,’ says the LORD” (Isaiah 59:20–21 NIV).

But that it may be a *witness* [עֵד *ed*] between us, and you, and our generations after us, that we might do the service of the LORD before him with our burnt offerings, and with our sacrifices, and with our peace offerings; that your children may not say to our children in time to come, Ye have no part in the LORD. . . . And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar *Ed* [עֵד *ed*]: for it shall be a *witness* between us that the LORD is God. (Joshua 22:27, 34)¹⁵

Shechem

In the final chapter of Joshua, we are presented with what may be called the Shechem covenant, even though it is actually a renewal of the Sinaitic and Moab covenants. Joshua, toward the end of his life, called the tribes together to the Israelite religious center at that time: “On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he reaffirmed for them decrees and laws” (Joshua 24:25 NIV). As with other covenants, Joshua identified two witnesses to this covenant: the Israelites themselves and a large stone:

So Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” . . . And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. Then Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, because it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us; so it shall be a witness against you, so that you do not deny your God.” (Joshua 24:22, 26–27 NASB20)

In addition to serving as a witness, the large stone set up by Joshua also served as a constant visual reminder to the people of their covenant promise to the Lord:

Joshua and the people *sealed their covenant* to serve the Lord by writing these words in the Book of the Law of God and by the erecting a large stone under an oak tree, the same tree

15. The name of the altar is not explicitly identified in the Masoretic text. However, Rashi wrote, “This is one of the shortened verses. One more word should have been added: And the sons of Rueben and sons of Gad called the altar *witness* [עֵד *ed*].” See “Rashi on Joshua 22:34:1,” *Sefaria* (website), https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Joshua.22.34.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

that Jacob had encountered when he came to Shechem. . . . The stone under the oak tree functioned as a legal reminder or *witness of the covenant* just entered into by the people. Now the stone and the people were *both witnesses*.¹⁶

Nehemiah

Following their return from exile in Babylon, and prior to fully rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, “the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads . . . and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers” (Nehemiah 9:1–2 NIV). That same day, the people entered into “a binding agreement [אמנה *amanah*], putting it in writing,” and their leaders, Levites and priests affixed their seals to it (Nehemiah 9:38 NIV). The rest of the people joined their leaders in this agreement to “bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the LORD our Lord” (Nehemiah 10:29 NIV).

The witness of this renewed covenant was a written document that was signed¹⁷ by 89 priests, Levites, and chief leaders of the people, with “Nehemiah the governor” first among the signers. Thomas Blanton compares this covenant renewal found in Nehemiah with a pattern of cyclic covenant renewal outlined in the book of Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy also attests to the observance of a periodic covenant renewal ceremony. According to Deut 31:9–13, every seventh year during the Festival of Booths, all of the people of Israel, including men, women, children, and even resident aliens, were to assemble for a covenant renewal ceremony in which the law was read aloud. In this way the stipulations of the covenant between YHWH and his people could be rehearsed and presumably, the people’s adherence to them reinforced.¹⁸

In addition, as an integral part of the covenant renewal process established by Moses, the Levites were instructed to recite to the Israelites

16. Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, H. Wayne House, eds., *NKJV Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 364, emphasis added.

17. From חתם (*chatham*) meaning to seal or set a seal upon.

18. Thomas R. Blanton IV, *Constructing a New Covenant: Discursive Strategies in the Damascus Document and Second Corinthians* (Tubingen, DE: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 33.

a list of curses that would befall them if they were to violate specific clauses of the covenantal agreement. Following each of the declarations, “all the people [were to] answer and say, Amen!” (Deuteronomy 27:15).¹⁹ These declarations of “amen” served as vocalized witnesses of the covenant renewal. The Nehemiah covenant follows this Deuteronomic pattern of covenant renewal.

Old Testament Covenants and Witnesses Summary

Witnesses represent integral components of every covenantal agreement in the Hebrew Bible (see Table 1). These witnesses were always public, highly visible declarations of God’s, or the people’s, intention to follow through with their covenantal promises.²⁰

Table 1. Covenants and Witnesses from the Hebrew Bible.²¹

Person/Place	Principal Scriptures	Witnesses
Noah	Genesis 9	1. Rainbow in the clouds
Abraham	Genesis 17	1. Change of names; 2. Circumcision
Sinai	Exodus 19	1. Heavens; 2. Earth; 3. Torah
Moab	Deuteronomy 30–31	1. Song of Moses; 2. Book of the Law (Torah)
Transjordan Witness	Joshua 22	1. Altar in Transjordan
Shechem	Joshua 24	1. Israelites themselves; 2. Stone pillar
Nehemiah	Nehemiah 9–10	1. Written and signed (sealed) document

19. Deuteronomy 27:15–26. אָמֵן (*amen*) is the root of the word אַמְנָה (*amanah*) as discussed in footnote 41. אָמֵן carries the connotation of *faithful* or *firm* in Hebrew.

20. Although it is unknown how public the ceremony of circumcision was in antiquity, according to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, “as early as the geonic time [roughly 600 AD to 1000 AD] the ceremony had been transferred from the house of the parents to the synagogue, where it took place after the service in the presence of the whole congregation.” See *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Circumcision,” <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4391-circumcision#anchor11>.

21. One reviewer commented that Passover could be considered a witness of the covenant. However, while Passover is called a feast (Luke 2:41), an ordinance (Exodus 12:43), and a memorial (Exodus 12:14, that is, a day to remember their deliverance from Egypt), it is never referred to as a covenant, witness, or sign of the covenant in any of our standard works. Following the biblical text, at the time that the Passover ordinance was instituted, the only covenants that had been recorded were the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants. Passover specifically memorializes the Israelites’ delivery from Egypt and cannot be understood to witness the covenant that the Lord made with the house of Israel on Mount Sinai since it preceded it, and covenantal witnesses always come after, or are coincident with the covenant itself.

Book of Mormon Covenants and Witnesses

A common theme in Biblical covenants is the idea that if the people fulfill their covenantal promises, or keep God's commandments, he will grant them prosperity in the land (cf. Deuteronomy 29:9, Joshua 1:7, 1 Kings 2:3). On the contrary, breaking the covenant would lead to a cursing on the land:

Israel's retention of the land was contingent upon her own compliance with the law of Moses. The grounds for the temporal reward was legal obedience. To paraphrase Scripture: "Do this and you, ancient Israel, will live and prosper in the land I have given you. Otherwise, I, the Lord your God, will bring a curse on the land."²²

These same covenantal promises found in the Hebrew Bible are referenced directly or indirectly more than 50 times²³ throughout the Book of Mormon, and they can be understood as the following cause and effect relationships:

- **Cause:** Keep the commandments. **Effect:** The people prosper in the land.
- **Cause:** Do not keep the commandments. **Effect:** The land is cursed/people are cut off from God's presence.

In addition to this generalized prosperity promise in the Book of Mormon, other covenants are mentioned that merit our attention.

Lehi

As with the first covenant in the Bible, the covenant with Noah, the initial covenant discussed in the Book of Mormon also appears to be unilateral and unconditional. After arriving in the promised land Lehi told his family:

22. Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective: Collected Essays and Book Reviews in Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 218.

23. I was able to identify 27 direct references to this promise of prosperity in the land. For example, "And inasmuch as ye shall *keep my commandments*, ye shall *prosper* and shall be led to a land of promise" (1 Nephi 2:20–21). In addition, I identified 28 indirect references. For example, "And insomuch as the children of Lehi have *kept his commandments* he hath blessed them and *prospered* them according to his word" (3 Nephi 5:22). On the contrary, "he leadeth away the righteous into precious lands, and the wicked he destroyeth and *curseth the land* unto them for their sakes" (1 Nephi 17:38).

Notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands, a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of my seed. Yea, the Lord hath consecrated this land unto me and to my children forever, and also all they which should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord. (2 Nephi 1:5)

While there do not appear to be any conditions placed on the fulfillment of this covenant, as previously discussed, prosperity in the land was a separate matter that required obedience to God's commandments. As a witness to the future fulfillment of this covenant, Nephi saw a vision in which his seed, mixed with the seed of his brothers, would continue to inhabit the land in the future, and that they would not be totally destroyed by the Gentiles:

Thou beholdest that the Gentiles which have gone forth out of captivity and have been lifted up by the power of God above all other nations upon the face of the land which is choice above all other lands, which is the land which the Lord God hath covenanted with thy father that his seed should have for the land of their inheritance, wherefore thou seest that the Lord God will not suffer that the Gentiles will utterly destroy the mixture of thy seed which is among thy brethren. Neither will he suffer that the Gentiles shall destroy the seed of thy brethren. (1 Nephi 13:30–31)²⁴

Benjamin

In his old age, King Benjamin preached a stirring sermon to the mixture of his people and the people of Zarahemla. Among other topics, his discourse touched on service to God, the plan of redemption, the atonement of Christ, repentance, and taking care of the poor. After King Benjamin finished speaking, the people responded by saying:

We are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will and to be obedient to his commandments in all things that he shall command us all the remainder of our days, that we may not bring upon ourselves a never-ending torment as

24. While this witness of the covenant with Lehi was given privately to only Nephi, his sharing the vision with us in his record made it a public witness.

has been spoken by the angel, that we may not drink out of the cup of the wrath of God. (Mosiah 5:5)

Paralleling the Nehemiah covenant, the people of King Benjamin promised to do God’s will and to be obedient to his commandments. In addition, one witness of the Benjamin covenant is strikingly similar to that of the Nehemiah covenant. In the latter, the principal leaders of the Israelites attached their names, or seals, to a written document as a witness of their acceptance of and commitment to the covenant. Likewise, with the Benjamin covenant, the king wrote down the names of all those who had entered into the covenant:

And now king Benjamin thought it was expedient, after having finished speaking to the people, that he should take the names of all those who had entered into a covenant with God to keep his commandments. (Mosiah 6:1)

King Benjamin also encouraged the people to take upon them the name of Christ: “Therefore I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives” (Mosiah 5:8). In other words, taking upon us the name of Christ is not an automatic consequence of entering into the gospel covenant, although being willing²⁵ to take upon us the name of Christ is an integral part of the making the covenantal agreement and of witnessing the covenant.

Anti-Nephi-Lehi

Many of the Lamanites embraced the gospel message and were converted to Christ through the preaching of the sons of Mosiah and their brethren. These converts entered into a unique covenant with God:

They took their swords and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood and they did bury them up deep in the earth. And this they did, it being in their view

25. *Willingness* is a key term in the covenantal agreement. When the people of king Benjamin entered into their covenant, they did so by expressing that they were “willing to enter into a covenant with our God” (Mosiah 5:5). See also Matthew L. Bowen, “‘My People Are Willing’: The Mention of Aminadab in the Narrative Context of Helaman 5–6,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 83–107, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/my-people-are-willing-the-mention-of-aminadab-in-the-narrative-context-of-helaman-5-6/>.

a testimony²⁶ to God and also to men that they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man's blood. And this they did, vouching and covenanting with God²⁷ that rather than shed the blood of their brethren, they would give up their own lives; and rather than take away from a brother, they would give unto him; and rather than spend their days in idleness, they would labor abundantly with their hands. (Alma 24:17–18)

Burying their swords as a witness of the covenant that they had made, these new converts vouched²⁸ to follow God's will. In their covenantal agreement, they identified three specific behaviors that they intended to permanently alter in order to realign themselves with the will of God. These behaviors are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Old and New Behaviors for the Anti-Nephi-Lehies.

Old Behavior	New Behavior
Shed the blood of their brethren	Give up their own lives
Take away from a brother	Give to a brother
Spend their days in idleness	Labor abundantly with their hands

With the Abrahamic covenant, the names of Abram and Sarai were changed as a witness of the covenant. Likewise, these converted Lamanites changed their communal name to Anti-Nephi-Lehi in order to distinguish themselves from the unconverted Lamanites (Alma 23:17). This change of name served as an additional witness of the covenant.

Moroni

When faced with Amalickiah's scheming to have himself crowned king over the Nephites, Moroni, the commander of the Nephite armies, ripped his clothes in anger. "And he took a piece thereof and wrote upon it: In memory of our God, our religion and freedom, and our peace, our wives and our children. And he fastened it upon the end of a pole," which

26. As previously noted, the Hebrew word *עֵד* (*ed*) can be translated as *witness* or *testimony*.

27. "And they would not take up arms; yea, they had entered into a covenant and they would not break it" (Alma 43:11).

28. "To bear witness; to give testimony or full attestation," Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. "Vouch," <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/vouch>.

he called the title of liberty (Alma 46:12). Moroni waved this ensign for all to see, and cried “with a loud voice”:

Behold, whosoever will maintain this title upon the land, let them come forth in the strength of the Lord and enter into a covenant that they will maintain their rights and their religion, that the Lord God may bless them. And it came to pass that when Moroni had proclaimed these words, behold, the people came running together with their armors girded about their loins, rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God. Or in other words, if they should transgress the commandments of God — or fall into transgression — and be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ, the Lord should rend them, even as they had rent their garments. Now this was the covenant which they made; and they cast their garments at the feet of Moroni, saying: We covenant with our God that we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression. Yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet, to be trodden under foot if we should fall into transgression. (Alma 46:19–22)

In this covenant, perhaps better described as a negative covenant, the people swore that if they were to “transgress the commandments of God” or “be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ” that God could rend them just as they had rent their garments as a token (sign or witness) of the covenant.²⁹ We also discover that Mormon used two epithets for the banner raised by Moroni:

And it came to pass also that he caused the title of liberty to be hoisted upon every tower which was in all the land which was possessed by the Nephites. And thus Moroni planted the standard of liberty among the Nephites. (Alma 46:36)

29. In this passage, Mormon appears to conflate the token, or sign, of the covenant with the covenant itself: “And it came to pass that when Moroni had proclaimed these words, behold, the people came running together with their armors girded about their loins, rending their garments in *token*, or as a *covenant*, that they would not forsake the Lord their God” (Alma 46:21). From this we can ascertain that Mormon closely correlated the witness of the covenant with the covenant itself, showing how closely these are linked with each other.

In addition to its English translation as sign, token, or mark, the Hebrew word אֹת (ot) can be appropriately translated as standard, ensign, or banner: “Your foes roared in the place where you met with us; they set up their standards [אותתם ototam] as signs [אותות otot]” (Psalm 74:4 NIV). So, Mormon’s title or standard of liberty serves as an additional witness of the covenant.

Stripling Soldiers³⁰

Following Amalickiah’s death at the hands of Teancum, Ammoron succeeded him as king of the Lamanites. Under his command, the Lamanite army conquered many Nephite cities and began to pose a serious threat to Nephite liberty. At this critical juncture, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies considered abandoning their covenant to not take up their weapons of war, but “they were overpowered by the persuasions of Helaman and his brethren” (Alma 53:14) to keep their covenant. However, concerning the sons of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies we read:

But behold, it came to pass they had many sons which had not entered into a covenant that they would not take their weapons of war to defend themselves against their enemies. Therefore they did assemble themselves together at this time, as many as were able to take up arms, and they called themselves Nephites. And they entered into a covenant to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, yea, to protect the land, unto the laying down of their lives; yea, even they covenanted that they never would give up their liberty, but they would fight in all cases to protect the Nephites and themselves from bondage. Now behold, there were two thousand of those young men which entered into this covenant and took their weapons of war to defend their country. (Alma 53:16–18)

It is interesting that the stripling soldier covenant stands in direct opposition to that of their parents, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. While they covenanted to never again take a human life, the stripling soldiers covenanted to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, even to the sacrificing of their own lives. We even find striking parallels between the witnesses of these covenants. The converted Lamanites “called their names Anti-Nephi-Lehies” (Alma 23:17) while their sons “called themselves

30. Mormon refers to these young men once as *stripling soldiers* (Alma 53:22) and once as *stripling Ammonites* (Alma 56:57), but never as stripling warriors. In fact, Mormon never refers to them as warriors at all.

Nephites” (Alma 53:16); each group witnessed the covenant by taking a new name. Also, while the Anti-Nephi-Lehies buried their weapons as a witness of their covenant, their sons took up their weapons to witness their covenant (see Table 3).

Table 3. The Covenant and Witnesses for the Stripling Soldiers.

	Anti-Nephi-Lehi	Stripling Soldier
Covenant	“they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man’s blood” (Alma 24:18)	“to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, yea, to protect the land unto the laying down of their lives” (Alma 53:17)
Witness 1	“they called their names Anti-Nephi-Lehies” (Alma 23:17)	“they called themselves Nephites” (Alma 53:16)
Witness 2	“they did bury [their weapons] deep in the earth” (Alma 24:17)	“took their weapons of war to defend their country” (Alma 53:18)

Book of Mormon Covenants and Witnesses Summary

As with the Hebrew Bible, the witnesses identified in the Book of Mormon represent public, highly visible declarations of the people’s intention to follow through with their covenantal promises, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Covenants and Witnesses from the Book of Mormon.

Person	Scriptures	Witnesses
Lehi	1 Nephi 13 and 2 Nephi 1	1. Nephi witnessed in vision that his father’s seed were not completely destroyed by the Gentiles.
Benjamin	Mosiah 5 and 6	1. Benjamin wrote the names of the people. 2. Gave them the name of Christ.
Anti-Nephi-Lehi	Alma 23	1. Change of name. 2. Burial of weapons of war.
Moroni	Alma 46	1. Tore their clothes. 2. Threw clothes at Moroni’s feet.
Stripling Soldier	Alma 53	1. Change of name. 2. Took weapons of war.

Baptism as a Witness of the Covenant

Rather than a covenant in its own right, the Book of Mormon repeatedly and clearly teaches that baptism is a witness of the gospel covenant.

Nephi, Son of Lehi

Nephi teaches that baptism by water witnesses that we are willing to take upon us the name of Christ *and* that we are willing to keep God’s commandments:

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God but with real intent, repenting of your sins, *witnessing* unto the Father that ye are *willing to take upon you the name of Christ by baptism*, yea, by following your Lord and Savior down into the water according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost. Yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel. But behold, my beloved brethren, thus came the voice of the Son unto me, saying: After that ye have repented of your sins and *witnessed unto the Father that ye are willing to keep my commandments by the baptism of water* and have received the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost and can speak with a new tongue — yea, even with the tongue of angels — and after this should deny me, it would have been better for you that ye had not known me. (2 Nephi 31:13–14)

In this passage Nephi plainly teaches that baptism is a witness of the gospel covenant to take upon us the name of Christ and to keep his commandments.

Waters of Mormon

Alma was converted to the gospel of Christ through the preaching of Abinadi, and he “repented of his sins and iniquities and went about privately among the people and began to teach the words of Abinadi” (Mosiah 18:1). We are told that Alma hid himself near the waters of Mormon, and that he taught the words of Abinadi to the people who gathered there to hear his preaching:

And it came to pass after many days there were a goodly number gathered together to the place of Mormon to hear the words of Alma; yea, all were gathered together that believed on his word to hear him. And he did teach them and did preach unto them repentance and redemption and faith on the Lord. And it came to pass that he said unto them: Behold, here is the waters of Mormon, for thus were they called. And now as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God and to be called his people and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light, yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn, yea, and comfort those that stand in

need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life — now I say unto you, if this be the desires of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you? (Mosiah 18:7–10)

Two key points arise from Alma’s preaching:

1. As with other covenants, willingness is a key factor at the waters of Mormon (verses 8 and 9).
2. The ordinance of baptism served as a witness of the people’s prior covenantal commitment to serve God and keep his commandments (verses 9 and 10).

When Alma baptized Helam, he restated that his baptism served as a public witness³¹ of his commitment to serve God: “Helam, I baptize thee, having authority from the Almighty God, as a testimony³² that ye have entered into a covenant to serve him until you are dead as to the mortal body” (Mosiah 18:13).

Speaking of the interplay between repentance and baptism, Noel Reynolds identified repentance as integral to the gospel covenant to obey God’s commandments, and baptism as the witness of that covenant:

Because repentance includes the covenant to obey the commandments of the Lord, it is tied closely to baptism in water as the public evidence or witness of that covenant. . . . We have seen that baptism is tightly linked to repentance because it serves as a public witness to the Father of the private, internal covenant the repentant sinner makes to turn from evil and keep all his commandments.³³

31. Webster defined *witness* as “Testimony; attestation of a fact or event.” Webster, *American Dictionary*, s.v. “witness,” <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/witness>.

32. Alma referred to baptism as a *witness* (verse 10) and as a *testimony* (verse 13) of the covenant. This is consistent with the Hebrew word **עֵד** (*ed*) meaning both witness and testimony (see Genesis 31:44).

33. Noel B. Reynolds, “The True Points of My Doctrine,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 39, 42, <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/>

This idea that baptism is a witness that the believer has already accepted the gospel covenant rather than as a marker of entry into that covenant does not diminish the importance of baptism. Baptism is an essential saving ordinance (see 2 Nephi 9:24), and is identified by Nephi, together with repentance, as the gate to the “strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:17). However, it is not scripturally correct to confound entry onto this path — repentance and baptism — with the gospel covenant itself. This point will be further clarified in the next section.

People of Limhi

During the reign of King Benjamin a group headed by Ammon, a native of Zarahemla, was sent to the land of Lehi-Nephi to find the people of Zeniff who had returned to the land of their first inheritance. Sadly, Ammon discovered the people in bondage to the Lamanites. However, this captivity, brought on by the wickedness of the people and their leaders, had also softened their hearts:

And they did humble themselves even in the depths of humility. And they did cry mightily to God, yea, even all the day long did they cry unto their God that he would deliver them out of their afflictions. (Mosiah 21:14)

When king Limhi, Zeniff’s grandson, learned that Ammon had come from Zarahemla he was overjoyed, seeing Ammon as a deliverer of his people. After Limhi related key parts of the people’s history to Ammon — the teachings of Abinadi, the conversion of Alma, the departure of Alma’s people from the land, and the subsequent bondage of his people — Mormon presents us with the following narrative:

Yea, [the people of Limhi] did mourn for [the people of Alma’s] departure, for they knew not whither they had fled. Now they would have gladly joined with them, for they themselves had entered into a covenant with God to serve him and keep his commandments. And now since the coming of Ammon, king Limhi had also entered into a covenant with God, and also many of his people, to serve him and keep his commandments. And it came to pass that king Limhi and many of his people was desirous to be baptized, but there was none in the land that had authority from God. And Ammon

declined doing this thing, considering himself an unworthy servant. Therefore they did not at that time form themselves into a church, waiting upon the Spirit of the Lord. Now they were desirous to become even as Alma and his brethren, which had fled into the wilderness. They were desirous to be baptized as a witness and a testimony that they were willing to serve God with all their hearts. Nevertheless they did prolong the time; and an account of their baptism shall be given hereafter. (Mosiiah 21:31–35)

As with Alma’s teachings at the waters of Mormon, several important points can be observed from this narrative:

1. Limhi and “many of his people” had already “entered into a covenant with God” without the ordinance of baptism (verses 31 and 32).
2. Identical to the waters of Mormon covenant, this covenant was two-fold in nature: to “serve [God] and keep his commandments” (verse 32).
3. The people of Limhi saw baptism as a necessary ordinance “to form themselves into a church,” but as unnecessary to enter into the gospel covenant (verse 34).
4. The people of Limhi viewed their future baptism “as a witness and a testimony” of the gospel covenant into which they had already entered (verse 35).

Limhi and his people entered into the covenant with God without the ordinance of baptism, and there is no indication in the text that Mormon considered their covenant to be any less valid than the covenant made by the people of Alma. In fact, Mormon’s narrative tone clearly frames their future baptism as a “witness and a testimony” of their prior covenant — their willingness to serve God “with all their hearts.”

Land of Gideon

Alma₂, the son of Alma, succeeded his father as the high priest of the church in Zarahemla, and continued to teach the same doctrinal idea as his father:

Come and fear not, and lay aside every sin which easily doth beset you, which doth bind you down to destruction. Yea, come and go forth, and show unto your God that ye are willing to repent of your sins and enter into a covenant with

him to keep his commandments, and witness it unto him this day by going into the waters of baptism. (Alma 7:15)³⁴

This covenant at Gideon bears impressive parallels with the other covenants that we have discussed from the Book of Mormon:

1. Willingness is a key feature of the covenant.
2. Keeping God’s commandments forms the core of the covenantal agreement.
3. As with Alma and the people of Limhi, the covenant at Gideon clearly identifies baptism as the witness of the covenant and not as the covenant itself.

In his preaching, Alma₂ admonished the people in Gideon to “enter into a covenant,” a clear indication that they had not as yet done so. However, we should avoid confusing the covenant (to keep God’s commandments) with the witness of that covenant (baptism). Even though the making and witnessing of the covenant may take place in close temporal proximity to each other, as probably occurred in Gideon, they are still separate, although interrelated, matters. For example, as a citizen of the United States I possess a passport issued by the US government. This passport serves as a witness, or evidence, of my US citizenship, but it is not synonymous with my citizenship; my citizenship stands independent from my passport, even though the two are closely associated.

Nephi₃, Son of Nephi₂

Nephi₃, the son of Nephi₂, teaches the same message, that baptism is a witness of the covenant rather than the covenant itself:

And Nephi did cry unto the people in the commencement of the thirty and third year; and he did preach unto them repentance and remission of sins. Now I would have you to remember also that there were none which were brought unto repentance who were not baptized with water. Therefore there were ordained of Nephi men unto this ministry, that all such as should come unto them should be *baptized with water*

34. “That word ‘willing’ is easy to gloss over, but its importance cannot be overstressed. Willingness to believe and willingness to act on that belief is, in fact, the only thing that we *can* offer to Christ.” Godfrey J. Ellis, “Experiential Knowledge and the Covenantal Relationship in Alma 7,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 51 (2022): 59, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/experiential-knowledge-and-the-covenantal-relationship-in-alma-7/>.

— and this as a witness and a testimony before God and unto the people that they had repented and received a remission of their sins. And there were many in the commencement of this year that were baptized unto repentance. (3 Nephi 7:23–26)

Nephi₃'s teaching — that baptism witnesses that an individual has repented and received a remission of sins — is in harmony with the New Living Translation's (NLT) rendering of Luke 3:3:

Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. (Luke 3:3 NLT)³⁵

According to Nephi₃, baptism by water witnesses or testifies that individuals have entered into the gospel covenant and have repented of and received a remission of their sins.

Baptism Summary

While the gospel covenant to keep God's commandments, and the witness of that covenant, baptism, can occur in close proximity to each other, as appears to be the case in Gideon, we must ask ourselves why we should wait, or encourage others to wait, until baptism to enter into the gospel covenant. Why not follow the example of the people of Limhi and enter into the covenant well in advance of our baptism? As a Church, this can have a direct application to our missionary efforts throughout the world. It is my belief that we should be encouraging those who are learning about the Church, studying its doctrines, and planning for formal membership within the Church to enter into the gospel covenant well in advance of their baptism, and to view their baptism for what it is — a public witness of entry into that covenant. With this revised mindset about baptism, individuals would be far better prepared to accept the responsibilities of covenant discipleship that are incumbent on all members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Baptism by water, with this understanding, can be seen as a ratification of the covenant into which the follower of Christ has already entered.

35. See also the NLT rendering of Mark 1:4.

Table 5. Baptism as a Witness of the Covenant.

Person/Place	Scriptures	Witness
Nephi, son of Lehi	2 Nephi 31:13–14	Baptism
Waters of Mormon	Mosiah 18	
People of Limhi	Mosiah 21	
Land of Gideon	Alma 7:15	
Nephi ₃ , son of Nephi ₂	3 Nephi 7:23–26	

Is Baptism a Covenant?

Two principal arguments can be made to assert that baptism is a covenant: 1) verbiage from Doctrine and Covenants section 22 and 2) an alleged quote from Joseph Smith that “BAPTISM is a covenant with God that we will do His will.”³⁶ Both arguments bear consideration.

Doctrine and Covenants section 22 has been interpreted traditionally to teach that baptism is a covenant. In fact, the current section heading, which is not part of the revelation itself, states, “Baptism is a new and everlasting covenant.” This idea is most likely derived from the wording in the first verse: “Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in *this thing*; and *this* is a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning” (D&C 22:1). Prior to this revelation, Joseph Smith had asked God if baptism in other churches needed to be performed again if those individuals wanted to unite themselves with the restored church. With this context in mind, many seem to believe that “this thing” and “this” in the verse refer to baptism, or perhaps better, rebaptism. However, issues arise with this traditional interpretation:

1. The terms “this thing” and “this” in the verse are not defined as the ordinance of baptism anywhere within the revelation itself nor in any extra-scriptural sources authored by Joseph Smith. In addition, since there are no identifiable antecedents for these terms their meanings remain ambiguous.
2. If we assume that “this thing” and “this” are metonyms for *baptism*, then we should be able to replace these terms with the word *baptism*. The result would be, “Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in *baptism*; and *baptism* is a new and an everlasting

36. George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888), 495. <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/life-joseph-smith-prophet>.

covenant, even that which was from the beginning.” This interpretation seems to identify baptism as a replacement for “all old covenants,” which would have included baptism itself, as if baptism were the pinnacle or totality of all other covenants.

A much more plausible interpretation is that “this thing” and “this” are references to the *gospel covenant* restored in its fullness in the latter days, including but not limited to the ordinance of baptism. With this revised interpretation the verse could read, “Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this restoration of the gospel covenant; and this restored gospel covenant is a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning.” In other words, the Lord made all things new by restoring the “new and everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning” in its fullness in the latter days. Baptism, as part of the restored gospel, would have been included as a witness of this new and everlasting covenant, but it would not have been the covenant itself. Restricting the interpretation of this verse to include only baptism significantly narrows and restricts our understanding of the new and everlasting covenant.

Second, at the very end of *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Alma P. Burton added a section entitled “Answers to Questions and Maxims of the Prophet.” In this section Burton included some sayings of Joseph Smith that he pulled directly from George Q. Cannon’s book *The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet*. I previously cited one of these “sayings”: “Baptism is a covenant with God that we will do his will.”³⁷

There are several issues with the attribution of this saying to Joseph Smith:

1. A thorough search of the Joseph Smith Papers (<https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/>) revealed no citations attributable to Joseph Smith related to the following search terms: *baptism is a covenant*, *baptismal covenant*, *covenant of baptism*, or *baptism as a covenant*. In fact, nothing available on the website can be reasonably construed to teach that baptism is a covenant.
2. George Q. Cannon arrived in Nauvoo with his father and his siblings³⁸ in the spring of 1843 at the age of 16. As the

37. Alma P. Burton, *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 214.

38. His mother died on the voyage from Liverpool.

nephew of John Taylor, Cannon was employed in the printing office of the *Times and Seasons*. When Joseph Smith died in June 1844, Cannon was 17 years old and had been in Nauvoo for one year. In addition, nothing that was printed during Cannon's tenure at the *Times and Seasons* taught that baptism was a covenant.

3. Cannon's book, *The Life of Joseph Smith, the Prophet*, was published in 1888, 44 years after the death of the prophet. It was written under adverse conditions while Cannon was imprisoned in the Utah Penitentiary for the practice of polygamy. Of this experience Cannon himself wrote, "In some respects this volume may be imperfect; the circumstances which surrounded its preparation were not favorable to the collection and arrangement of materials, but it is believed to be truthful and just."³⁹
4. Perhaps as an afterthought, sandwiched between the final chapter of his book and the appendix, Cannon included some "Anecdotes and Sayings of the Prophet," one of which was the claim that baptism is a covenant.

We must keep in mind that Cannon was a teenager when Joseph was martyred in 1844. Forty-four years later, as an inmate of the Utah Penitentiary and with less than adequate resources at his disposal, Cannon completed his book. As a man in his early sixties trying to recall memories from his teenage years, and with only a year's exposure to the prophet Joseph in Nauvoo, Cannon most certainly conflated and confused many of the teachings and sayings that he attributed to the prophet. How could it be otherwise? I am in my mid-sixties, and my father died suddenly and unexpectedly when I was 18 years old. Even having had the benefit of living with my father for all of those 18 years I can barely remember any specific words that he may have said or taught me, let alone remember any "anecdotes or sayings" that he may have spoken.

It is altogether possible, and even probable, that what Cannon heard Joseph teach is that *baptism is a witness of the covenant* rather than the covenant itself. The Book of Mormon clearly teaches that we are to covenant with God that we will do his will, and that baptism is a witness of that covenant.

39. Cannon, *The Life of Joseph Smith*, iii.

Washed in the Blood of the Lamb

The primary song *When I Am Baptized*, found in the *Children's Songbook*, includes the following stanza:

I know when I am baptized my wrongs are washed away,
And I can be forgiven and improve myself each day.⁴⁰

While the second line of this stanza presents a doctrine taught throughout the scriptures, the same cannot be said of the first line. The Book of Mormon and the New Testament clearly teach that our wrongs are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb rather than in the waters of baptism.

I say unto you: Ye will know at that day that ye cannot be saved; for there can no man be saved except his garments are washed white; yea, his garments must be purified until it is cleansed from all stain through the blood of him of whom it hath been spoken by our fathers which should come to redeem his people from their sins. (Alma 5:21)

Therefore they were called after this holy order and were sanctified; and their garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb. (Alma 13:11)

Behold, I say unto you: Nay, let us retain our swords that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren. For perhaps if we should stain our swords again, they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins. (Alma 24:13)

And no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom. Therefore nothing entereth into his rest save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood because of their faith and the repentance of all their sins and their faithfulness unto the end. (3 Nephi 27:19)

And then also cometh the Jerusalem of old; and the inhabitants thereof, blessed are they, for they have been washed in the blood of the Lamb; and they are they which were scattered and gathered in from the four quarters of the earth and from the north countries and are partakers of the fulfilling of the

40. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 103, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/music/text/childrens-songbook/when-i-am-baptized>.

covenant which God made with their father Abraham. (Ether 13:11)

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and *the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.* (1 John 1:7)

And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and *washed⁴¹ us from our sins in his own blood.* (Revelation 1:5)

And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have *washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.* (Revelation 7:14)

Admittedly, there are a few scriptural passages that can be interpreted to convey the idea that baptism by water conveys a remission of sins. However, careful analysis of these passages reveals that no such doctrine is taught in the scriptures. For example, the KJV translation of Luke 3:3 reads: “And [John] came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” While it can be inferred from this verse that the baptism of John brought “the remission of sins,” one could also argue from the English language wording of the passage that it is repentance, not baptism, that brings this remission. The NLT — a paraphrase rather than an actual translation — provides a very different nuanced understanding of this passage:

Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. (Luke 3:3 NLT)⁴²

According to the NLT’s interpretation, baptism does not wash away sins. Rather, baptism shows or witnesses that the individual has turned from sin and turned to God,⁴³ essential steps in the repentance

41. Most modern translations follow different mss and render this phrase as *freed us* or *released us*.

42. The NLT renders Mark 1:4 as follows: “This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven.”

43. This agrees with Christ’s words that the redeemed have “washed their garments in my blood because of their faith and the repentance of all their sins and

process.⁴⁴ This interpretation teaches that baptism is a sign of the individual's repentance and a witness of the covenant with God to keep his commandments.

Likewise, Article of Faith 4 has often been understood to teach that baptism by water brings the remission of sins based on the following clause: "baptism by immersion for the remission of sins." However, read in context, this clause can be properly understood to teach the same doctrine as Luke 3:3:

We believe that through the atonement of Christ all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel. We believe that these ordinances are 1st, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; 2d, Repentance; 3d, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; 4th, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.⁴⁵

According to this early rendering of Articles of Faith 3 and 4, salvation in the kingdom of God is reliant on the atonement of Christ and on our "obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel," including the following four "ordinances," now amended to read "principles and ordinances": faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Based on our discussion up to this point it appears that focusing on only one of those principles and ordinances, baptism for example, as the means by which sin is remitted is shortsighted and lacks a comprehensive understanding of how all of these gospel concepts work in unison with each other. It would be similar to focusing on the latter part of Article of Faith 3 that reads "all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel." This narrow reading would lead us to believe in a gospel of works and would ignore the very foundation upon which salvation completely relies, the atonement of Christ.

Adding to our understanding of the process surrounding the remission of sins, Nephi, the son of Lehi, taught:

Wherefore, do the things which I have told you I have seen that your Lord and your Redeemer should do; for, for this

their faithfulness unto the end" (3 Nephi 27:19).

44. See Loren and Tina Spendlove, "Turning to the Lord With the Whole Heart: The Doctrine of Repentance in the Bible and the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 20 (2016): 177–246, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/turning-to-the-lord-with-the-whole-heart-the-doctrine-of-repentance-in-the-bible-and-the-book-of-mormon/>.

45. *Times and Seasons*, 1 March 1842, p. 709, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-march-1842/7>.

cause have they been shown unto me, that ye might know the gate by which ye should enter. For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. (2 Nephi 31:17)

According to Nephi, remission of sins comes not by the baptism of water, but “by fire and by the Holy Ghost,” or as Nephi taught just prior to this passage, through the “baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 31:13).⁴⁶ In other words, following our manifestation of faith, sincere repentance, and baptism by water, the Spirit of God washes us in the blood of Christ resulting in the remission of sins.

Another verse that could be construed to teach that baptism by water results in the washing of our sins is Alma 7:14. It reads in part, “Therefore come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye may be washed from your sins.” However, as with all scripture, this passage must be studied in context:

Now I say unto you that ye must repent, and be born again; for the Spirit saith if ye are not born again ye cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven; therefore come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye may be washed from your sins, that ye may have faith on the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, who is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness. Yea, I say unto you come and fear not, and lay aside every sin, which easily doth beset you, which doth bind you down to destruction, yea, come and go forth, and show unto your God that ye are willing to repent of your sins and enter into a covenant with him to keep his commandments, and witness it unto him this day by going into the waters of baptism. (Alma 7:14–15)

In this sermon Alma₂ teaches that it is the Lamb of God who “taketh away the sins of the world, who is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness.” Alma₂ continues by admonishing us to be baptized as a witness that we “are willing to repent of [our] sins and enter into a covenant with [God] to keep his commandments.” From this passage

46. This concept agrees with Jesus’ teaching to Nicodemus that “except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). In other words, baptism by water alone is not sufficient to remit sin. Only when one is baptized “of fire and of the Holy Ghost” can the cleansing blood of the Lamb wash us from our sins.

we learn that the cleansing power of the blood of the Lamb is not coincident with the baptism of water but comes only as we demonstrate our willingness to repent and to fulfill the covenant by keeping God's commandments. In addition, we read:

And again we bear record — for we saw and heard, and this is the testimony of the gospel of Christ concerning them who shall come forth in the resurrection of the just — They are they who received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given — That by keeping the commandments they might be washed and cleansed from all their sins, and receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power. (D&C 76:50–52)

As this passage teaches, it is not through the act of baptism by water but “by keeping the commandments” that we are “washed and cleansed” from all our sins. It is by faithfully observing the gospel covenant to keep God's commandments that we can be washed clean in the blood of the Lamb through the “baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost.”

One additional scriptural passage could also be understood to teach that baptism by water alone washes away sin. Doctrine and Covenants section 39 was received for James Covell, a Methodist minister in western New York. In early 1831, Covell came to the prophet Joseph and declared that he had made a covenant to obey anything that God revealed through the prophet. This revelation reads in part:

But, behold, the days of thy deliverance are come, if thou wilt hearken to my voice, which saith unto thee: Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on my name, and you shall receive my Spirit, and a blessing so great as you never have known. (D&C 39:10)⁴⁷

As a Methodist minister, Covell would have been very familiar with the conversion of Saul in the book of Acts. Following his miraculous

47. The original unpunctuated, handwritten revelation reads: “arise & be baptized & wash away your sins calling on my name & you shall receive my spirit & a blessing so great as you never have known.” Revelation, 5 January 1831 [D&C 39], p. 59, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-5-january-1831-dc-39/2>.

vision of the risen Christ, Saul's sight was restored by "one Ananias, a devout man according to the law" (Acts 22:12). Ananias counseled Saul:

The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard. (Acts 22:14–15)

Ananias further admonished Saul: "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). It seems clear that the revelation to Covell was meant to parallel the message and language of this passage from the KJV translation of the book of Acts. However, many modern translations of this verse provide a different understanding of the words of Ananias in Acts 22:16. For example, the NASB20 reads, "Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins by calling on His name." Likewise, the NLT reads, "What are you waiting for? Get up and be baptized. Have your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord." In both of these modern translations it is not baptism that washes away sins. Rather, both appear to link having one's sins washed away with calling on the name of Christ. In fact, nearly all modern translations interpret this verse with this refined understanding.

Commenting on the meaning of this verse from the book of Acts, Matthew Poole, a 17th century English theologian, wrote:

Wash away thy sins; as washing causeth the spots to disappear, and to be as if they had not been, Isa 1:18; so does pardoning mercy, or remission of sins, which accompanieth baptism, as in the due receiver, Mt 3:11, 1 Pe 3:21,22. Where true faith is, together with the profession of it by baptism, there is salvation promised, Mr 16:16. In the mean while it is not the water, (for that only signifies), but it is the blood of Christ, which is thereby signified, that cleanseth us from our sins, as 1 Jo 1:7. Yet sacraments are not empty and deceitful signs; but God accompanieth his own ordinances with his power from on high, and makes them effectual for those great things for which he instituted and appointed them.⁴⁸

48. Matthew Poole, "Acts 22:16," *Annotations Upon the Holy Bible: Daniel to Acts*, emphasis added, <https://www.grace-ebooks.com/library/Matthew%20Poole/Vol%203%20Annotations%20Upon%20The%20Holy%20Bible%20Dan-Act.pdf>.

Likewise, John Gill, an 18th century English Baptist pastor, commented:

“And wash away thy sins”; or “be washed from thy sins”; not that it is in the power of man to cleanse himself from his sins... nor is there any such efficacy in baptism as to remove the filth of sin; persons may submit unto it, and yet be as Simon Magus was, in the gall of bitterness, and bond of iniquity; but the ordinance of baptism, may be, and sometimes is, a means of leading the faith of God’s children to the blood of Christ, which cleanses from all sin.⁴⁹

From the various Book of Mormon and New Testament passages that have been cited in this section, it seems clear that it is the blood of the Lamb that washes us from our sins, not baptism by water. Rather than washing us from our sins, a more suitable metaphor for baptism by water was offered by the apostle Paul: “Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:12). Paul also wrote: “Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). According to Paul, when we are baptized by water it is symbolic of the burial and resurrection of Christ. And just as Christ died and was raised from the tomb, we also “should walk in newness of life” when we follow the example of Christ in being baptized by water.

As previously cited, baptism by water as a symbol of Christ’s death is not only found in the writings of Paul, but is also taught in the Doctrine and Covenants:

They are they who received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given. (D&C 76:51)

In this section it has been demonstrated that the remission of sins can be described as coming through various means: the blood of the Lamb of God (1 John 1:7), baptism by water (Article of Faith 4), fire and the Holy Ghost (2 Nephi 31:17), keeping the commandments (D&C

49. John Gill, *Exposition of the New Testament* (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 2:358, emphasis added.

76:50–52), and calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 22:16). As one reviewer pointed out, these passages can be seen as *merisms*, figures of speech in which one or more parts of the whole refer to the whole itself. With this improved understanding, it would be profitable to understand the remission of sins in a more holistic way:

- totally reliant on the atonement of Christ;
- following the manifestation of our faith;
- granted after we have sincerely repented of our sins;
- subsequent to, rather than coincident with, baptism by water;
- through the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and,
- by enduring to the end through the keeping of the commandments.

Sacrament as a Witness of the Covenant

While no new covenants are introduced during the ordinance of the sacrament, it does provide us with a powerful opportunity to publicly witness our willingness to fulfill the gospel covenant into which we have previously entered. The sacramental prayer of the bread, which is the most inclusive in scope, reads:

O God the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son Jesus Christ to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it, that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God the Eternal Father, that they are willing to take upon them the name of thy Son and always remember him and keep his commandments which he hath given them, that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. Amen. (Moroni 4:3).

As we join in the sacramental prayers and participate in the ordinance of the sacrament, we do so in remembrance of the Son of God, and witness that we will always remember him. As N. T. Wright observed, “Our remembering often turns into nostalgia or recrimination; God’s remembering turns into action.”⁵⁰ As discussed earlier, this practice of divine remembering is not a passive, mental activity. Rather, divine remembering (from the verb זָכַר, *zakhar*) requires action. Following God’s example, our remembering needs to align with this pattern of

50. N. T. Wright, *For All God’s Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 70.

divine remembering.⁵¹ In that sense, when we partake of the sacrament, we witness our willingness to always remember Christ by taking his name upon us and keeping his commandments, core elements in the gospel covenant. Perhaps this is why the three individual elements that we witness when we partake of the bread — to take upon us the name of Christ, to always remember him, and to keep his commandments — are reduced to just one element when we symbolically drink the blood of Christ: to always remember him (see Moroni 5:2). As we witness our willingness to always remember Christ, we need to keep in mind that this act also includes taking upon us his name and keeping his commandments. This is what is meant by *divine remembering* — active and faithful covenant compliance.

Exodus 20:7 reads in part, “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.” As a youth, I was taught to believe that this meant that I was not to use God’s name flippantly or with disrespect. Although this meaning is often assigned to this passage, it is not what the Hebrew actually conveys. The Hebrew, and a literal translation for this passage, follow:

לא תשא את־שם־יהוה אלהיך לשוא⁵²
 Not carry/bear name of Yahweh your God falsely/deceitfully⁵³

As can be observed from the literal translation, this commandment is not really about speaking the name of God improperly. Rather, it is about carrying or taking his name upon us with false intent, or deceitfully. When we voluntarily take upon us the name of Christ as part of the gospel covenant, we also promise to keep his commandments. When we break those commandments, we also break our commitment to bear the name of Yahweh, or the name of Christ.⁵⁴ Agur, the son of Jakeh, wrote:

Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before
 I die: Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither

51. “This covenant to remember Christ always, to take the name of Christ upon himself, and to keep all of Christ’s commandments, is part of this process of turning and coming — and therefore a crucial element of repentance. This is the covenant that is witnessed to God and all the world by the convert through the baptism of water.” Reynolds, “The True Points of My Doctrine,” 38.

52. For the sake of the English translation I have reversed the order of the Hebrew phrase.

53. The Hebrew word שוא (*shave*) carries the connotation of *worthlessness, lying, or deceitfulness*.

54. In Doctrine and Covenants 136:21 we read, “Keep yourselves from evil to take the name of the Lord in vain.”

poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.
(Proverbs 30:7–9)

In this passage we are informed that Agur, the ostensible author of this proverb, desired that the Lord neither bless him with wealth nor suffer him to be poor. He feared that if he were wealthy, he would turn away from God, and he worried that if he were poor, he would rob and that by doing so he would “take the name of [his] God in vain.” While the KJV translations of Exodus 20:7 and Proverbs 30:9 are nearly identical, the Hebrew is quite different in both verses. As previously discussed, Exodus 20:7 teaches that we are not to take upon us the name of God deceitfully. On the other hand, the passage in Proverbs can be understood as teaching that we are not to do violence to God’s name. The Hebrew for the last part of verse 9 reads, “וּתְפַשְׁתִּי שֵׁם אֱלֹהֵי” (*ve’tafasti shem elohai*). The verb used in this phrase (תִּפַּשׁ *tafas*) does not mean just to take, but generally to take violently. As such, the author of this proverb utilizes a verbal pun to express his fear that if is poor he will rob, a violent act, and also “violently take” God’s name. This same verb is used when Potiphar’s wife “caught (וַתִּתְפַּסְהוּ *va’titpesahu*)” Joseph by his garment (Genesis 39:12). Likewise, when Moses discovered that the Israelites had made a golden calf, he “took hold (וַאֲתַפֵּס *va’etpos*)” of the two tablets and “smashed them to pieces” in front of the people (Deuteronomy 9:17 NASB20). Finally, following his contest with the priests of Baal, Elijah told the people to “‘seize (תִּפְשׁוּ *tifshu*) the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.’ So they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slaughtered them there” (1 Kings 18:40 NASB20).

As Agur, the likely author of this proverb, notes, when we violate the commandments of God, we, in essence, do violence to his name. It is not our name, but his, that we bring into disrepute. As other English translations of this proverb render the phrase, we *profane* (NASB20), *demean* (NET), or *dishonor* (NIV) God’s name. In other words, taking upon us the name of Christ is not a light matter. As we participate in the ordinance of the sacrament and express our *willingness* to take upon us the name of Christ, it becomes incumbent on all followers of Christ to understand the seriousness of this act. But this willingness must not be expressed only during the sacrament; rather, it needs to be a daily act. We need to renew daily the gospel covenant by actively demonstrating our willingness to “take upon [us] the name of thy Son and always remember him and keep his commandments.”

When Christ appeared to the Nephites, he commanded his disciples, “For whoso eateth and drinketh my flesh and blood unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to his soul. Therefore if ye know that a man is unworthy to eat and drink of my flesh and blood, ye shall forbid him” (3 Nephi 18:29). It is likely that Jesus gave this commandment to his disciples as an act of mercy, as a means of preventing wayward followers from perjuring themselves, to preclude them from becoming false witnesses of the covenant. Likewise, Moroni₂ wrote:

See that ye are not baptized unworthily. See that ye partake not of the sacrament of Christ unworthily. But see that ye do all things in worthiness and do it in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. And if ye do this and endure to the end, ye will in no wise be cast out. (Mormon 9:29)

Since baptism and participation in the sacrament both serve as witnesses of the covenant, unworthy participation in either turns us into false witnesses. This, of course, violates Jesus’ command: “Thou shalt not bear false witness” (Matthew 19:18).

Conclusion

Israel’s story can be seen as a chronicle of a loving, compassionate father who must constantly work with his children to bring them back to the gospel path:

Yet the LORD *testified* [יעד *ya’ad*] against Israel, and against Judah, by all the prophets, and by all the seers, saying, *Turn ye from your evil ways, and keep my commandments and my statutes*, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets. Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the LORD their God. And *they rejected his statutes, and his covenant* [בריתו *brito*] that he made with their fathers, and *his testimonies* [עדותיו *edotav*, perhaps better rendered as *his witnesses*] which he *testified* [העיד *he’id*, or *witnessed*] against them. (2 Kings 17:13–15)

Not only is Israel guilty of turning away from God, it is also guilty of abandoning the covenant to keep his commandments. In addition, Israel has rejected the many witnesses that God has provided. In essence, Israel is guilty of repeatedly taking upon itself the name of God in vain (cf. Exodus 20:7). Jeremiah, a prophet in Judah during the time of Lehi,

warned the people that unless they repented, they would be destroyed and taken captive, suffering the same fate as the kingdom of Israel. Sadly, the people of Judah did not heed his words:

And though the Lord has sent all his servants the prophets to you again and again, you have not listened or paid any attention. They said, “Turn now, each of you, from your evil ways and your evil practices, and you can stay in the land the LORD gave to you and your ancestors for ever and ever.”
(Jeremiah 25:4–5 NIV)

Jeremiah accused his hearers of being repeat covenant breakers, a claim that was all too true. In essence, his message was that if the people would turn from their evil ways and comply with their covenantal agreement to keep God’s commandments they would prosper in the land, a familiar theme in the Book of Mormon as well.

As modern Israel, it is incumbent on all members of the Church to fully live the gospel covenant to keep⁵⁵ God’s commandments. And just as important, we need to appropriately witness to God and to others that we are sincere and honest covenant keepers. We witness this when we are baptized, and we renew this witness when we worthily partake of the sacrament. Also, as Alma admonished his flock at the waters of Mormon, we are “to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things and in all places that ye may be in even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God” (Mosiah 18:9). Or, as Jesus taught his disciples, “Therefore let your light so shine before this people, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (3 Nephi 12:16, cf. Matthew 5:16). While covenanting with God is important and necessary for our salvation, consistently and faithfully witnessing the gospel covenant to keep God’s commandments will qualify us to be “washed in the blood of the Lamb” (Ether 13:11).

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55. The Hebrew word for *keep* is שמר (*shamar*). This verb most accurately carries the connotation of *guard, take care of, or watch over as watchmen* (שמורים *shomrim*).

