INTERPRETER

A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship

Volume 44 · 2021 · Pages 307 - 314

Understanding Covenants Anew: Using Ancient Thought to Enrich Modern Faith

Jeffrey Thayne

Offprint Series

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

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org. You may subscribe to this journal at InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription.

Understanding Covenants Anew: Using Ancient Thought to Enrich Modern Faith

Jeffrey Thayne

Review of Jennifer C. Lane, *Finding Christ in the Covenant Path: Ancient Insights for Modern Life*, (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University / Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020). 188 pages. Hardcover, $29.99.

Abstract: *In the first half of her book, Lane takes us on a tour of ancient worlds by introducing us to ancient words, such as* bĕrît *(covenant),* gā'al *(redemption),* pānîm *(presence of the Lord), and so forth, while deftly weaving linguistic and historical insights with personal narratives that ground these insights in the practical affairs of day-to-day living. In the second half of the book, Lane takes us on a tour of medieval art and images, centering on how art has been used to portray the Savior and His mission. Throughout the entire book, Lane centers the attention of the reader on Christ, inviting us to take upon ourselves His image and likeness and to more fully appreciate the images crafted of Him by artists of prior centuries.*

Fifteen years ago, as an undergraduate, I sat in class as a psychology professor at Brigham Young University — now a dear colleague and coauthor — demonstrated that the way some Latter-day Saints teach and understand the concept of *covenant* can be (at times) impoverished. We often treat covenants in transactional terms, he argued, as if they were a particular kind of contract. In the way some Latter-day Saints talk about covenants, we keep God's commandments in exchange for goods and services (like salvation).

This way of thinking about covenants can inadvertently shift how we think of core family relationships, since if we think of marriage as a kind of contract, we implicitly embrace an egoistic, instrumental understanding

of marriage. We come to treat the Other in our marriage as a means to an end, rather than as an end in and of itself. The same thing can happen when we understand our relationship with God in similar terms. We can start to see our relationship with the divine as a sort of vending machine, dispensing blessings to us with the right configuration of button-pushes (in this case, acts of devotion or obedience).

In that psychology course many years ago, Edwin Gantt opened my mind to a new way of thinking about covenants. And I have never seen that new understanding of covenants more expertly articulated than it is in the second chapter of *Finding Christ In the Covenant Path: Ancient Insights for Modern Life*, by Jennifer C. Lane. This book promises and delivers a host of insights from ancient sources and worldviews to aid our modern efforts to embrace and live the covenant path.

Lane undertakes to strengthen our faith and commitment by challenging some of our modern preconceptions in light of alternatives found in more ancient languages and ways of thinking. Like a fish in water, we often do not see the ways in which modern assumptions shape our thoughts and behaviors and especially our interpretations of scripture. Lane invites us to see the ways in which our faith and discipleship flow forth from their ancient roots and origins. Our most sacred texts come alive when we can read them while stepping into the worldview assumptions of those who wrote them (and for whom they were originally written).

In the first half of the book, Lane takes us on a tour of ancient worlds by introducing us to ancient words, such as *bĕrît* (covenant), *gā'al* (redemption), *pānîm* (presence of the Lord), and so forth, while deftly weaving these linguistic and historical insights with personal narratives that ground these insights in the practical affairs of day-to-day living. Each of these chapters yielded pages of personal and spiritual reflection as I journaled my own journey through these concepts and ideas. Above and below are just a small sampling of the sorts of reflections prompted by each and every page of Lane's book, which demonstrates the richness of her contributions.

A Relational Understanding of Covenants

Among a great many insights delivered in this masterful book, Lane makes a compelling case that making covenants with God is far less like entering into a contractual agreement and far more like being adopted into a family (with all this entails). "[I]n the ancient world," Lane explains, "making a covenant wasn't a matter of commerce. … Making a covenant in scriptural terms can best be understood as forming a new relationship" (8).

Lane further argues that *who we are* is bound up in our *relationships*. It is a habit in Western society to define ourselves by what is unchanging about us, that is, to see our core identity as wrapped up in what is fundamentally static and immovable about us. But I have argued on other occasions that in some ancient paradigms, who we are is bound up in what we *do* — and more particularly in our relationships with others around us.[1] I am my wife's husband, my father's son, my daughter's father. This also implies that who we most fundamentally are can change as our relationships with others change.

And as Lane deftly argues, "Covenants change who we are because they change our relationship with those around us and their relationship to us" (8). This is part of the symbolism of the "new name" that God has occasionally given to those with whom He covenants (Jacob -> Israel, Abram -> Abraham). Name changes also follow marriage and adoption. "We are in a new relationship," Lane explains, "and we are different than we are before. There is a new sense of family identity" (8–9).

Lane expertly connects these themes across the standard works, showing that this is precisely the sacred truth expressed by King Benjamin when he said, "Because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, His sons, and His daughters; for behold, this day He hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on His name; therefore, ye are born of Him and have become His sons and His daughters" (Mosiah 5:7). In this central connection, Lane places *Christ* at the center of this understanding of covenant.

Exploring further Lane's insight that covenants change our identity "because they change our relationship with those around us" (8), I would add that they change the nexus of enduring responsibilities we have for them. The part of me for which I'm most accountable to God is bound up in my responsibilities as a husband, father, son, and ministering brother. And *covenants* are what contour and bring divine life into these sacred relations. Covenants change our identity precisely because they change our most sacred duties and responsibilities.

Lane's treatment of these subjects in this book has invited me to reflect on how I can similarly put Christ at the center of how I understand and seek to fulfill those responsibilities. Even as I come to understand myself in terms of my covenant relations and the responsibilities set forth by those covenants, I recognize that it is only in and through Christ that

1. See Jeffrey L. Thayne and Edwin E. Gantt, *Who Is Truth? Reframing Our Questions for a Richer Faith* (Rexburg, ID: Verdand Press, 2019).

I can set forth to fulfill them with any degree of fidelity. It is Christ who changes us and fits us for the responsibilities He bestows upon us. (More on that shortly.)

Christ as Kinsman-Redeemer

Perhaps as evidence that our covenants with God are not *contractual* — as if by virtue of this covenant, God owes us goods and services (like divine protection) — is the fact that God allows His covenant people to be taken in bondage in various times and seasons. On a more personal level, He allows each of us to experience the depths of sorrow, temptation, isolation, and hardship. None of these is a sign that He has forsaken His promises to us, for His promise is not (and has never been) that we would be shielded from the pains, troubles, and captivities of mortality.

Rather, Lane explains, that divine promise is that when we do, He would be our *Redeemer*, acting as *gō'ēl*, our kinsmen-redeemer. In ancient Hebrew, this is a prescribed role whereby the eldest brother would seek out and set forth to redeem family members who had been enslaved or indebted. Through Christ, our *gō'ēl*, no matter how long we have dwelt in captivity, sojourned in the wilderness, or forgotten our heritage, God will eventually lead us back into our covenant identity as His children and chosen people. This is, for example, the promise He made to the early Nephite patriarchs — no matter how many generations they had lived in forgetful ignorance of God's promises, He would nonetheless remember the Lamanites and bring them back into covenant relationship.

And so it is in our own lives. Our covenants we have made (and which God has made with us) do not imply that we will not spend time in spiritual captivity. We all face occasions when sin — anything from addiction to pride — keeps hold of us despite our best efforts to shake off those bands. Christ promises to step into His role as "kinsman-redeemer," to claim us as His own and thus free us from the captivities of our Adversary. I especially found insight in Lane's comments here:

> We have to be willing to admit that we are in bondage to know that we need redemption. At the same time, until we trust that we have a Redeemer, it is almost impossible to break through the self-deceptions that comfort us into thinking either that what we are doing isn't a problem or that it's just the way we are and so there is nothing we can do about it. We have to face God and "acknowledge … that all his judgments are just" (Alma 12:15) and that we really have "sold [ourselves] for naught" (3 Nephi 20:38) in order to embrace the gift of

> Christ's redeeming power. We must admit that we are in captivity before we can look to our Redeemer for help. (32)

Reverential Worship and Moral Accountability

Lane also contrasts our modern, Western emphasis on personal autonomy and freedom against a more ancient understanding of God as the one to whom we bow down and serve. "The democratic urge to feel that we are our own boss," she explains, "can make it difficult to be in any relationships in which others tell us what to do. … Assumptions that no one has the right to command us will not help us navigate a divine relationship that precedes and transcends time and history" (39). Christ, she explains, is our Lord and King, with all that this implies — not by virtue of birth, but by virtue of the covenants we have made with Him.

And this means we are no longer our own masters. I'd like to add to Lane's insights here the fact that we often misunderstand agency as a sort of rational autonomy — the right to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong for us. But agency has a moral dimension to it: it is not merely *choice* but choice within the context of right and wrong. Absent a moral context, we are merely rational agents, not moral agents. It is our *moral* agency that God so heavily treasured in the premortal councils. He was far less concerned about abstract choice, as He was the potential for moral accountability.

The implications of this are staggering and under-explored. Moral accountability is the engine of personal transformation. Choosing between two morally neutral options (say, a red shirt or a blue shirt when dressing in the morning) does not effect a change in our very soul, but choosing between two morally freighted choices (speaking compassionately or resentfully to a friend) does precisely that. And this further implies that covenants *expand* our moral agency by making more of our everyday actions morally significant.

For example, perhaps drinking coffee is a morally neutral option for someone who has made none of the covenants we have, but it is a morally freighted option for Latter-day Saints. And as such, we have *expanded* the dimensions of our moral accountability and given ourselves more occasions for spiritual growth and development through the exercise of our moral agency, as we serve and heed the commands and directives of our Lord and King. The covenants we make in Holy Temples do this *writ large* — they circumscribe *all* aspects of our lives the vibrant color of moral potential and personal accountability.

Exploring Medieval Art

The second half of the book explores insights found in the study of medieval art. One example to illustrate: Lane describes a popular image of Christ referred to as *The Man of Sorrows*, which depicts Christ standing upright in a tomb but with visible wounds in His hands. In early examples, His eyes would be closed and His head bowed. Lane describes how this image portrayed both the suffering and resurrection of Christ, a man who has bought the world with His own blood and yet stands triumphant over death.

Lane uses this image to demonstrate that the Gospel sometimes centers on paradox and that what we often think of as "either/or" can instead be thought of as "both/and." As Latter-day Saints, we sometimes emphasize in our iconography the *resurrection* of Christ and His triumph over death, and underemphasize His prior death and suffering. (For example, we have a tradition of not using crosses in our places of worship.) In contrast, the imagery of *The Man of Sorrows* serves as an example of *both*.

Extending beyond what Lane herself says, I took this as an invitation to embrace what sometimes seems like paradox. We worship a man who died to redeem us but who also conquered death. We strive to live our covenants while acknowledging that *grace* is our path to salvation. We treat the teachings of prophets past as having tremendous weight while also embracing ongoing revelation. We strive to uphold and reinforce strong moral norms while modeling the love and compassion of our Savior. We emphasize the justice of God while at the same time leaning on His infinite mercy.

All of this came in my reflections on Lane's description of *The Man of Sorrows* and the way in which medieval artists thoughtfully conveyed worlds of meaning in their imagery of the Savior. Each chapter of the second half of the book led to similar explorations and reflections and with them a deeper appreciation of medieval art and imagery. I confess that before this book, I had little interest in medieval art, but I now feel nostalgia for art so rich with symbolism and meaning. Lane has brought to my attention an entirely new terrain that I am excited to explore.

Conclusion

Nothing more clearly illustrates the contributions of this book than the way every chapter centers the reader on the Savior Jesus Christ. In this, the book lives true to its name and to the purposes of the author, who shows a love for the Savior in every paragraph of the text. In her conclusion, Lane emphasizes the role of Christ in transforming us as people. She says,

> We cannot be where he is and stay where we are. We cannot become as he is and stay as we are. But the good news is that, thanks to Christ's ransom, the covenant path will take us there. Christ will take us there. That is the promise. That is *his* promise. … Our bondage lies in our hearts and minds. We do what we want, and so if we are not wanting what God wants, the problem is how to change what we want. Christ offers us a radical solution--to connect ourselves to him through covenant and to receive him through the ordinances, and then let his power and Spirit change our desires. (174–75)

The covenant path is a journey of *transformation*. It is a journey of change and redemption. We each embark on this journey with the expectation that the person who ends it will not be the same as the person who begins it. We take upon ourselves the name of Christ and in so doing take upon ourselves His image and His attributes. In the spirit of embracing paradox, with each step we are both returning *to* Him and walking *with* Him. I finished Lane's book understanding more fully how we can find Christ in both our destination *and* our journey.

Jeffrey Thayne *graduated from BYU with a bachelor's and master's degree in psychology. He completed his doctorate in Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences at Utah State University. He runs the popular Latter-day Saint Philosopher blog and spends time engaging in worldview apologetics (articulating and exploring the worldview assumptions that inform our faith). He currently resides in Rexburg, Idaho, with his wife and two children.*