

**All in the [Heavenly] Family:
A Mormon Covenantal Theology**

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Before launching into the topic of covenants in Mormon theology, there is an important caveat I must mention – not just for my paper, but for all of the other papers dealing with Mormon “doctrine” or beliefs: it is difficult to pin down a unified, systematized, official, Mormon doctrine regarding many subjects.¹ To complicate matters further, different doctrines have different degrees of importance in Mormon theology,² and at the same time each doctrine also exists in relation to other doctrines of greater or lesser importance. Determining Mormon doctrine is more than a process of identifying official statements of belief. Rather, it may be better described as an activity of creating coherent constellations from a variety of fixed points, such as statements made in canonical scripture, by contemporary church leaders, in official church publications (instruction manuals, hymns, etc.), and even statements made in Mormon rituals (both public and private). If you were to ask a group of Mormons to explain a particular doctrine and to provide scriptural support for their position, there is a good chance that they would cite several of the same passages, but it is also likely many additional scriptures would be cited which were unique to each respondent—passages that would have resonated more strongly than others based on their personal engagement with those writings. Thus, any of our expressions of Mormon “doctrine” during the next few days are necessarily idiosyncratic.

¹ For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Robert Millet, “What Do We Really Believe? Identifying Doctrinal Parameters within Mormonism” in *Discourses in Mormon Theology: Philosophical and Theological Possibilities* (Salt Lake City, UT: Kofford Books, 2007), pp. 265-281.

² See “Approaching Mormon Doctrine” posted on the church’s official website: <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/approaching-mormon-doctrine>

What follows is my own (necessarily idiosyncratic) presentation of the doctrine of covenants in Mormon theology. I will begin by providing a general definition of the term “covenant” found in current official church publications. I will then provide an example of how Mormon scripture engages with Hebrew Bible figures associated with covenants before discussing unique contributions in Mormon scripture to the idea of covenant. Shifting to covenant-making rituals, I will then provide a brief survey of covenants available to Mormons, with special emphasis on those covenants made within temples. Finally, I will look at a few of the ways in which these conceptualizations of covenant relate to Mormonism’s understanding of the nature and purposes of God. A common theme that runs through many of these areas of Mormon theology is this: covenants can serve to both create and affirm familial relationships between God and humanity.

The church instruction manual *Gospel Principles* is intended for use in weekly Sunday School classes where those investigating the church, the newly baptized, and those returning to church after a prolonged absence attend. Its purpose is to present religious subjects in a simple and straightforward manner so as to make theological subjects more accessible to those who may be less familiar with Mormon theology. In the chapter titled “The Lord’s Covenant People,” we read:

Within the gospel, a covenant means a sacred agreement or mutual promise between God and a person or a group of people. In making a covenant, God promises a blessing for obedience to particular commandments. He sets the terms of His covenants, and He reveals these terms to His prophets. If we choose to obey the terms of the covenant, we receive promised blessings. If we choose not to obey, He withholds the blessings, and in some instances a penalty also is given.³

In this publication, “covenant” is equated with a “sacred agreement or mutual promise” that either individuals or groups make with God. However, this passage is quick to point out that it is God

³ *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: Intellectual Reserve, 2011), p. 81. A very similar definition appears in the small reference book *True to the Faith*, geared toward Mormon youth. See “Covenant” in *True to the Faith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Intellectual Reserve, 2004), p. 44.

who spells out the terms of this “agreement” or “promise,” and it is God who enforces these terms (the receipt of a “blessing” or the administration of a “penalty”). This sort of legal metaphor for covenant is relatively common in public Mormon discourse, though it is by no means the only way of understanding the idea of covenant, even within Mormon scripture and in Mormon covenant-making rituals (as I will demonstrate below).

This *Gospel Principles* manual goes on to state that, throughout history, “God has...made special covenants with particular persons or groups. He made special covenants with Adam, Enoch, Noah, [and] the children of Israel...He [also] made a special covenant with Abraham and his descendants that blesses members of the Church and all nations of the earth today.”⁴ While God’s covenants with Adam and Enoch are primarily referenced in unique Mormon scripture and ritual, God’s covenants with Noah, the children of Israel, and Abraham are all mentioned explicitly in the Hebrew Bible.⁵

Of these figures, Abraham receives perhaps the greatest attention in Mormon scripture, especially in regards to the covenants God made with him. The passage that bears most directly on the nature of God’s covenant with Abraham is found in the Book of Abraham, a text claiming to be a first-person account from the patriarch Abraham,⁶ which expands upon God’s promises to Abraham found in Genesis 12. While the term “covenant” is not used in Genesis 12, these same promises from God appear in subsequent passages that explicitly connect these promises to a covenant with Abraham (e.g. Gen. 17:1-8), and thus for the Book of Abraham, this earlier passage

⁴ *Gospel Principles*, p. 83.

⁵ It is worth noting the lack of focus on God’s covenant regarding David’s kingship in Mormon Sunday School materials. David receives a good amount of attention in these (three separate lessons), but the focus here is on the moral lessons learned by David’s actions (both good and bad). See *Old Testament: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* (Salt Lake City, UT: Intellectual Reserve, 2001), pp. 101-122.

⁶ For more information on the Book of Abraham, see the church’s official essay “Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham” (<https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>).

(Gen. 12) can be seen as taking on the force of a covenant. Here are both passages, with the differences noted:

Genesis 12:1-3 (KJV)	Abraham 2:3, 9-11
<p>Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:</p> <p style="text-align: right;">And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.</p>	<p>Now the Lord had said unto me: Abraham, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee...And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee above measure, and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations; And I will bless them through thy name; <u>for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father;</u> And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee; and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed (that is, thy Priesthood), for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal.</p>

As you can see here, the language used to articulate God’s promises in Genesis 12 is given much greater specificity in Abraham 2 and the focus of these promises shifts from Abraham to those who would come after, including Abraham’s descendants and “the nations.” Here, Abraham’s posterity become the active agents (“thy seed after thee...shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations”) in creating a much larger posterity that transcends genetic offspring (“for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father”), a project that, as we will see later, aims to unite—or, more properly, re-unite—the entire human family.

The Book of Mormon—the eponymous American scripture that gave rise to the term “Mormonism”—is largely concerned with God’s covenant relationship with Israel and sees itself as another witness of God’s establishment of these covenants with Israel and beyond. The title page of the Book of Mormon states that one of its primary purposes is “to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.” In short, the main narrative of this book follows the extended family of the Israelite Lehi, who receives a prophetic call and is shown in vision the abominations occurring in Jerusalem and the city’s impending destruction by the Babylonians. He joins other prophetic voices in preaching repentance to those in the city (1 Nephi 1:4), but having been rejected, is warned by God in a dream to flee Jerusalem and escape into the surrounding wilderness.

Before God commands Lehi and his company to leave the land of Israel for a new “land of promise” (1 Nephi 2:20), Lehi obtains a collection of writings from the archive of a wealthy relative, which include the five books of Moses, a general history of the Jews up to the reign of king Zedekiah, and a number of written prophecies from a variety of authors (1 Nephi 5:10-13).

In this way, Lehi's company is able to preserve God's words to and covenants with God's chosen people in light of Jerusalem's impending destruction. Lehi's son and prophetic successor Nephi sees in a later vision that, following the destruction of Jerusalem, there emerges "a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel," presumably the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament (1 Nephi 13:23). He further learns in this vision that when this text "proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord," but some time thereafter, malicious agents remove "many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away" (1 Nephi 13:24, 26). However, this prophet is also shown that, through God's orchestration, additional records will come forth which will not only corroborate the aforementioned "record of the Jews," but will also restore knowledge of that which had been lost, including knowledge regarding covenants (1 Nephi 13:34-41).

The particular knowledge that was lost regarding these covenants is not made explicit, but in light of several passages from the Book of Mormon, other Mormon scripture, and statements by Mormon leaders, I would like to suggest that part of what Mormon scripture can contribute to discussions of God's covenants in the Judeo-Christian world is an emotionally invested, familial framework for entering into covenants with God and others. A good example of this sort of covenantal framework in the Book of Mormon occurs several hundred years after the aforementioned prophet Lehi and his company left Jerusalem, constructed a boat, and arrived in the Americas. This branch of God's covenant people produces a history that is replete with internecine conflict, but through which the hand of God is made manifest.

In this particular episode, a reformed priest named Alma delivers the following speech to a small congregation before their ritual immersion:

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 desire 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?⁷

The covenant here is framed not in legalistic or contractual language, but is expressed in primarily relational terms, establishing a community with a deep emotional investment in each other.

As the narrative continues, this covenant community is captured and enslaved by another group of their relatives. During their oppression they are faithful to their covenants, and as a result, God speaks to them in the following:

Lift up your heads and be of good comfort, for I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage. And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions.⁸

Not only does the text affirm God's acceptance here of the earlier covenant, but the language used to describe God's response to that covenant echoes the wording of the former—just as individuals previously covenanted to mourn, comfort, and bear one another's burdens within their community, God explicitly engages in one of those actions (namely, easing the people's burdens), indicating that here God is envisioned as part of this covenant community and, to some extent, shares in the community's covenantal obligations.

⁷ Mosiah 18:8-10

⁸ Mosiah 24:13-14

Another example in Mormon scripture that highlights this sort of deeply relational bond between those in a covenant community comes from Joseph Smith's reworking of the early chapters of Genesis, referred to as the book of Moses. Here, the tantalizing biblical account of Enoch who "walked with God" in Gen. 5:21-24 is expanded. This particular text records Enoch's call to preach repentance and establish a community wherein God could dwell. God calls this group "Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them" (Moses 7:18). Unlike the biblical account of God's "taking" Enoch by himself, in this work of Mormon scripture, the fraternal bonds formed between Enoch's community and with God (v. 16) ultimately leads to this "City of Holiness" and its entire population being "taken" into heaven together (vv. 19-21).

In contemporary Mormon practice, temples serve as a locus for creating such a heavenly community through the establishment of covenants through ritual.⁹ Within these temples, many of the covenant-making rituals in Mormonism are offered for the living,¹⁰ while the entire range of these rituals are performed vicariously on behalf of deceased ancestors in order to expand the scope of this covenant community into the past. The sequence of administering temple rituals serves as a useful way to survey the covenants that Mormons can enter into. Following baptism and its attendant covenant (addressed above), males are ordained to the priesthood, which is accompanied by an "oath and covenant."¹¹ Following the initiatory rituals of washing, anointing, and clothing

⁹ All of the following information about temple rituals and covenants is publicly available on the church's website.

¹⁰ The covenant-making rituals that must be performed for the living *before* entering the temple to participate in the remaining rituals are baptism and ordination to the priesthood.

¹¹ This is outlined in the Mormon book of scripture called the Doctrine and Covenants, a collection of writings by and revelations given to Joseph Smith and subsequent church presidents (for the section specifically dealing with the "oath and covenant" of the priesthood, see D&C 84:33-34).

in sacred garments,¹² the “endowment” ritual allows participants to enter into a number of different covenants with God, which are summarized in the following:

The [rituals associated with] the endowment embody certain obligations on the part of the individual, such as [a] covenant and promise to observe the law of strict virtue and chastity, to be charitable, benevolent, tolerant and pure; to devote both talent and material means to the spread of truth and the uplifting of the [human] race; to maintain devotion to the cause of truth... With the taking of each covenant and the assuming of each obligation a promised blessing is pronounced, contingent upon the faithful observance of the conditions.¹³

These rituals culminate in the covenant of temple marriage, wherein a wife and husband enter into a covenant with both God and each other. This ritual is referred to as a “sealing” ceremony, highlighting the symbolic unity created by this covenant-making ritual and the centrality of familial relationships in Mormon religious life and theology.¹⁴ This “sealing” ceremony and its attendant covenant is described as the “crowning blessing”¹⁵ of the temple and demonstrates that in Mormon theology, “covenants” in their most basic sense are seen as formalizing familial relationships rather than simply entering into legal contracts.¹⁶

This familial covenantal framework reinforces fundamental concepts in Mormon theology regarding God’s nature and relationship with humanity. The official church document titled “The

¹² “The ordinances of washing and anointing are referred to often in the temple as initiatory ordinances. It will be sufficient for our purposes to say only the following: Associated with the endowment are washings and anointings—mostly symbolic in nature, but promising definite, immediate blessings as well as future blessings. In connection with these ordinances, in the temple you will be officially clothed in the garment and promised marvelous blessings in connection with it. It is important that you listen carefully as these ordinances are administered and that you try to remember the blessings promised and the conditions upon which they will be realized.” *Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City, UT: Intellectual Reserve, 2002), p. 32.

¹³ *Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple*, p. 31.

¹⁴ This particular covenant is seen as being so potent that all children born to these parents afterward are automatically “sealed” to their parents. This is the only covenant in Mormon practice where the recipient does not directly make the choice to participate. Children of such parents are referred to as being “born in the covenant” on church records. For children born prior to the sealing ceremony or who are adopted by these parents, an additional ritual is performed inside the temple in order to complete a family’s “sealing.” Vicarious rituals are performed on behalf of one’s direct ancestors to allow for the possibility that this family’s “sealing” can extend into the past; hence the Mormon church’s emphasis on genealogical research.

¹⁵ *Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple*, p. 1.

¹⁶ Taken together, the entirety of the covenants entered into by Mormons are referred to as God’s “new and everlasting” covenant. See *Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple*, pp. 32-34.

Family: A Proclamation to the World” declares that “all human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”¹⁷ In the words of Brigham Young (Joseph Smith’s successor), God “organized the human family” before they were born, but now “they are all disorganized and in great confusion.”¹⁸ In light of these statements, we can see the establishment of covenants within Mormonism as facilitating the reuniting of God’s shattered and scattered family, within which God inhabits a parental—and thus, emotionally vulnerable—position.

This idea of God’s emotional investment in God’s family and God’s impulse to establish covenants with them is beautifully illustrated in Mormonism’s account of Enoch. When granted a heavenly vision of humanity immediately preceding the deluge, Enoch sees that “the God of heaven looked upon [these] people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains? ... How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?” To which, God responds:

¹⁷ The church’s official essay “Becoming Like God” states the following: “People of different faiths understand the parent-child relationship between God and humans in significantly different ways. Some understand the phrase ‘child of God’ as an honorary title reserved only for those who believe in God and accept His guidance as they might accept a father’s. Many see parent-child descriptions of God’s relationship to humanity as metaphors to express His love for His creations and their dependence on His sustenance and protection. Latter-day Saints see all people as children of God in a full and complete sense; they consider every person divine in origin, nature, and potential. Each has an eternal core and is ‘a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents.’ Each possesses seeds of divinity and must choose whether to live in harmony or tension with that divinity.”

(<https://www.lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god?lang=eng>). For a fuller discussion of this idea, along with an incredibly brief survey of biblical passages and early Christian writings that touch upon this subject, please see the aforementioned essay.

¹⁸ See Elden Jay Watson, ed., *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1846-1847* (Salt Lake City: J. Watson, 1971), p. 56.

Behold these thy brethren; they are the workmanship of mine own hands, and I gave unto them their knowledge, in the day I created them; and in the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency; And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood... behold, their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers; Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer? (Moses 7:28-37).

This familial framework for understanding God's covenants with humanity that appears in Mormon scripture and ritual both affirms the importance of biblical covenants and augments their significance and meaning. Mormon theology and practice promotes a sense of familial intimacy around the concept of covenants with God, while at the same time expanding the scope of that family to cosmic proportions and imbuing the image of God with a commensurate degree of loving vulnerability. This idea is both touching and powerful, and in many ways animates my own religious life as a Mormon and my academic life as a scholar of the Hebrew Bible.

To reiterate what I stated at the outset of my paper, this is not the only way in which Mormons view covenants as functioning within our theology. However, it is my best attempt at creating a coherent and meaningful doctrinal constellation from several different data points, many of which I was not able to touch upon in the interest of time (e.g. conceptualizations of priesthood play an incredibly significant role in Mormon theology regarding the covenants, as seen in the passage from the book of Abraham above). As wild as this constellation may be, it is my hope that the ideas mentioned here will serve as a starting point for a productive conversation about the role and significance of covenants in both Judaism and Mormonism.