

Cutting Covenants

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“Cutting Covenants,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, The 38th Annual BYU Sidney B. Sperry Symposium (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009).

Covenants have always been a critical part of the gospel, meaning both the fulness of the gospel and the preparatory gospel that was part of the law of Moses (see D&C 84:26–27). The Bible Dictionary teaches, “The gospel is so arranged that principles and ordinances are received by covenant, placing the recipient under strong obligation and responsibility to honor the commitment.”^[1] The importance of covenants is emphasized by the fact that some form of the word *covenant* is found 555 times in the standard works, almost as often as *faith* (627 occurrences) or *repent* (628 occurrences).^[2] Indeed, the Lord has called the fulness of the gospel “the covenant” (D&C 39:11) and the “everlasting covenant” (D&C 66:2).

A covenant is an agreement between at least two parties. The English word *covenant* comes from the Latin *convenire*, meaning “to come together, agree.”^[3] Such an agreement can be between parties of equal standing, like many voluntary contracts in Western society today, or between parties of widely different standing, like God and man, where one party dictates the terms of the agreement and the other accepts them. In the scriptures, the term *covenant* sometimes refers to agreements between people, but more often denotes an agreement between God and his children. Latter-day Saints can better understand the Lord’s expectations of his people by studying how covenants were made anciently. We can benefit from knowing about ancient covenant making in at least three ways: (1) improved understanding of the scriptures, (2) increased appreciation of modern covenants, and (3) deepened personal commitment.

Hebrew Wording

In the Old Testament, the English phrase “make a covenant” is most often a translation of the Hebrew *kārat berît*, which literally means “cut a covenant.”^[4] The verb *kārat* means “cut off, cut down,”^[5] and the noun *berît* means “covenant,”^[6] similar in meaning to the words *pact*, *compact*, *treaty*, *alliance*, and *league*. While other Hebrew verbs are sometimes used with *berît*, such as *qûm* (“establish” or “confirm”) and *nātan* (“give”),^[7] *kārat* occurs ninety times in the Hebrew Bible in reference to making covenants.^[8] In a few of these instances, only *kārat* is found in the Hebrew text; the King James translators added “covenant” so the English text would make sense.^[9]

Why does biblical Hebrew regularly speak of “cutting” covenants? Certainly this idiomatic wording is used metaphorically in some cases, but more importantly it seems to reflect ancient covenant-making practices. In our day a contract often becomes legally binding when the parties sign a document detailing the terms of the agreement. In a similar way, ancient covenants often became binding by killing and

cutting an animal. This may sound foreign to us in modern society, but the phrases “cut a deal” and “strike a bargain” appear to have come into English from the wording of ancient covenant-making practices involving animal slaughter.^[10]

Two Old Testament examples give some detail about how a covenant was literally “cut.” The first involves Jehovah and Abram (about 1900 BC), and the second involves Zedekiah and the people of Judah (about 590 BC). In both of these accounts we read that at least one animal was killed, cut into two pieces, and that someone (or something) passed between the divided pieces (see Genesis 15:7–21; Jeremiah 34:8–22). Unfortunately for modern readers, these passages do not explain why the events occurred as they did or what they meant. Nevertheless, extrabiblical sources offer information to help us better understand these scriptural accounts. Therefore, to provide a context for analyzing the biblical passages, we will first briefly review extrabiblical covenant-making practices that involved killing and cutting animals.

Animal Slaughter in Extrabiblical Covenants

Over the last 150 years, many ancient extrabiblical texts have been discovered that help students of the Bible better understand its historical context and content.^[11] From these sources it is clear that covenant-making rituals were a common practice for hundreds of years among different cultures and societies who spoke many languages.^[12] To provide an overview of animal slaughter in these rites, selected examples will be grouped according to two time periods—the second and first millennia BC.^[13] These periods are approximately equivalent to the time from the birth of Abram to King David’s reign and from King David’s reign to the birth of Christ.^[14]

Second millennium BC covenants. Two of the earliest extrabiblical texts describing the slaughter of an animal to make a covenant are from the eighteenth century BC. In a letter found in the ancient city of Mari in modern Syria, Ibal-Il reported to King Zimri-Lim: “I went to Aslakka to ‘kill an ass’ between the Hanu and Idamaras. . . . I caused the foal of an ass to be slaughtered. I established peace between the Hanu and Idamaras.”^[15] The expression “kill an ass” apparently “means simply ‘make a treaty,’ which was solemnized by the sacrifice of a young ass.”^[16] In another text found in the ancient city of Alalakh in modern Turkey, we read that Abban “placed himself under oath” to give Alalakh to Iarimlim “and had cut the neck of a sheep,” saying, “If I take back that which I gave thee!”^[17] The implication is that Abban’s life would be cut off if he took the city back from Iarimlim.

Most of the other currently known examples of covenants made in the second millennium are Hittite treaties from the fourteenth to twelfth centuries BC, the majority of which are between a king and a vassal.^[18] Regarding the ratification ceremony of these treaties, apparently much variety existed, but it was “frequently associated with the sacrifice of an animal,” and it is generally assumed that after “the animal was killed, the vassal could expect the same fate if he violated his oath.”^[19] Because the texts of the treaties from this period “do not contain a verbal oath formula,” the animal sacrifice is thought to be “the *enactment* of the oath” such that “a verbal formula is unnecessary in the *text* of the treaty itself.”^[20]

First millennium BC covenants. Several extrabiblical texts describe covenants from the first millennium BC in which the cutting or killing of an animal represents what would happen to a vassal who violated his agreement with the king. This is evidenced by simile curses in the treaties where the offending vassal is

graphically identified as becoming “like” or “as” a slaughtered animal. From the eighth century BC Sefire inscription, we have a treaty between King Barga’yah and Matti’el that includes this statement: “[As] this calf is cut up, thus Matti’el and his nobles shall be cut up.”^[21] Note the slaughter of a calf as part of making the covenant and the curse—Matti’el and his associates will become as the cut-up calf if they break the agreement.

Also from the eighth century BC is a treaty between King Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati’ilu (possibly the same as Matti’el above). A part of this treaty reads:

This spring lamb has been brought from its fold not for sacrifice, not for a banquet, not for a purchase; . . . it has been brought to sanction the treaty between Ashurnirari and Mati’ilu. If Mati’ilu sins against (this) treaty made under oath by the gods, then, just as this spring lamb, brought from its fold, will not return to its fold. . . . Mati’ilu, together with his sons, daughters, officials, and the people of his land . . . will not return to his country, and not behold his country again. This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’ilu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati’ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, . . . the head of Mati’ilu be torn off.^[22] From the seventh century BC we have another Assyrian example in which King Esarhaddon sought to secure the throne for his sons through a treaty with his vassals. This treaty was made under oath and contains numerous simile curses, including the following: “Just as this ewe is cut open and the flesh of its young placed in its mouth, so may he . . . make you eat in your hunger the flesh of your brothers, your sons, and your daughters. Just as (these) yearlings and spring lambs, male and female, are cut open and their entrails are rolled around their feet, so may the entrails of your sons and daughters be rolled around your feet.”^[23] Again we see that animal slaughter represented the curse for violating a covenant during this period.^[24]

Evolution in covenant rituals. In analyzing extrabiblical second and first millennia BC covenants, scholars have identified differences that suggest evolution in the rituals. For example, it is thought that the slaughtered animal was both a ratifying sacrifice and symbolic of the curse for violating the covenant in the earlier texts, although only the latter is found in the later texts.^[25] Moreover, the second millennium texts “include not only curses (a litany of disasters and misfortunes to befall a disobedient vassal) but also blessings (a litany of benefits to befall a faithful vassal).”^[26] In contrast, the first millennium texts “contain only curses.”^[27] It appears there was evolution in the practices over time, and this should be considered as we now turn our attention to examine scriptural accounts of covenant cutting.

Jehovah and Abram

The first Old Testament example of cutting covenants comes from the middle part of Abram’s life (about 1900 BC). Jehovah had promised to give Abram and his seed certain lands forever, make his posterity innumerable, and cause the priesthood and the gospel to continue in his family in order to bless all nations (see Abraham 2:6, 9–11, 19; Genesis 12:7; 13:14–17). However, Abram had no children and was concerned that his steward would become his heir. When he expressed this, the Lord reaffirmed that he would give Abram a land forever and innumerable posterity (see Genesis 15:3–7). Abram “believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

Even though Abram trusted the Lord completely, he wanted some sort of confirmation of Jehovah's promise to him about the land. "And he said, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (Genesis 15:8). Jehovah responded, "Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon" (Genesis 15:9). Abram brought the various animals and slaughtered them. Next he "divided them in the midst [in half], and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not" (Genesis 15:10). Then Abram waited on the Lord, protecting the two rows of carcasses from scavenging birds of prey, and subsequently fell into "a deep sleep"^[28] during which he experienced "an horror of great darkness" (Genesis 15:12). After this, Jehovah revealed to Abram his posterity's future, including their bondage in Egypt, eventual deliverance, and return to Canaan (see Genesis 15:13–16). Finally, the experience culminated with God giving Abram a dramatic sign: "And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold *a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces*. In that same day the Lord made [or 'cut' in Hebrew] a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates" (Genesis 15:17–18; emphasis added).^[29]

Various aspects of Abram's experience have prompted much discussion among commentators.^[30] For example, why did the Lord instruct Abram to use three different animals, each three years old, and two birds? Were the slaughtered animals actually sacrificed or just cut in two? What did the divided animals symbolize? Were the two birds killed or left alive? Did the Lord actually swear an oath and take upon himself a curse? Did Abram swear an oath as part of the experience? Though the scriptural account does not provide answers to all these questions, an understanding of ancient covenant-making practices, coupled with modern revelation, can help us gain additional insight into Abram's experience.

From what we know of second millennium BC covenant rituals, it seems clear that Jehovah condescended to cut a covenant with Abram. Instead of a parity treaty or loyalty oath on Abram's part, God instructed Abram to slaughter three animals and divide them so he could demonstrate the absolute surety of his promises. Evidently, the smoking furnace and burning lamp represented God's presence, analogous to the cloud and pillar of fire that accompanied Israel later (see Exodus 13:21–22). Thus the implication is that the Lord passed between the divided animals and, in effect, swore an oath that he would lose his own life if he did not give Abram and his seed the land for an inheritance.^[31] This idea is supported by Jehovah's later revelation wherein he confirmed the same promise of land to Isaac, saying, "Unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father" (Genesis 26:3). Since God cannot swear by anything greater than his own life (see Hebrews 6:13), Jehovah's promise could not have been more sure. Certainly this was an extremely powerful message to Abram, a man who lived in various places in the ancient Near East and who must have been very familiar with covenant-cutting practices.

Given the prevalence of oath taking in the second millennium BC, we might wonder if Abram passed between the animal pieces and took an oath. However, there is nothing to suggest this in the text. We know the Lord gave Abram covenants that he promised to keep, but this does not necessarily mean Abram passed between the animals and swore an oath in Genesis 15. Rather, it is probably best to think of the account as a gracious act by God to confirm his promises, prompted by Abram's great faith. In support of this, the Apostle Paul cited Genesis 15:6 as evidence that Abram was justified by faith rather than works (see Romans 4:1–3).

Various proposals have been made relative to the animals Abram used and what they symbolized. Many have observed that the five different kinds of animals comprise all those that were later acceptable as sacrifices under the law of Moses.^[32] Some have thought that the animals were actually sacrificed (blood poured out, carcasses burned on an altar) as part of the covenant-making ritual in addition to being slaughtered and divided. Though later extrabiblical retellings of Abram's experience suggest the animals were sacrificed,^[33] there is no indication of this in the scriptural account and the normal sacrificial elements are notably absent. Lastly, most think the two birds were killed, though the text is not explicit.^[34]

One explanation of the symbolism in Genesis 15 is based on the Lord's revelation that Abram's posterity would become slaves in Egypt and later return to Canaan (see vv. 13–16). In other words, Abram's experience can be seen as a type of his posterity's future. In this approach, the smoking furnace and burning lamp represent God's presence, foreshadowing the cloud and pillar of fire during the Exodus (see Exodus 13:21–22). The five different animals, comprising all the clean animals for sacrifice under the law of Moses, are seen as the whole house of Israel. Since birds of prey are seen as unclean in the law of Moses (see Leviticus 11:13–19), they represent oppressive foreign nations. Thus the "rite pictures Abram's descendants, in the form of sacrificial animals, protected by the Abrahamic promises from attacks by foreigners, the birds of prey. After Abram's death, his 'falling asleep,' the Lord (the smoking pot and torch of fire) will walk among them."^[35] This seems to be a useful approach based on the existing biblical text.

Latter-day Saints have the benefit of modern revelation which can expand our understanding of Abram's covenant-cutting experience. The Joseph Smith Translation adds to the biblical account that the Lord revealed he would give Abram the land for an everlasting inheritance after his death by virtue of Christ's Resurrection. "And the Lord said, Though thou wast dead, yet am I not able to give it thee? And if thou shalt die, yet thou shalt possess it, for the day cometh, that the Son of Man shall live; but how can he live if he be not dead? he must first be quickened. And it came to pass, that Abram looked forth and saw the days of the Son of Man, and was glad, and his soul found rest" (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 15:10–12).^[36] In other words, the promise of land to Abram was not limited to Israel inheriting Canaan after the Exodus, but was also an individual promise to Abram that would be fulfilled in eternity. Furthermore, modern revelation teaches that the promise of an everlasting inheritance of land is a key part of the fulness of the gospel because it refers to inheriting the earth when it becomes a celestial kingdom (see D&C 38:17–20; 88:17–20).^[37] Thus it seems clear that Jehovah actually cut a gospel covenant with Abram.

Another way modern revelation can help us can gain additional insight into Abram's experience is to consider it a Temple text and compare it to our latter-day understanding of the plan of salvation.^[38] This can be seen by identifying parallels with Jacob's later experience at Bethel and ancient Israel's Tabernacle-Temple. First, at Bethel we understand that Jacob had a dream wherein he saw a ladder reaching to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it, and that he received from Jehovah the same promises Abram did in Genesis 15 (see Genesis 28:12–14). The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that Jacob's ladder had "three principle rounds" representing "the telestial, the terrestrial, and the celestial glories or kingdoms,"^[39] and Latter-day Saints understand modern Temples to be "all what Bethel was to Jacob."^[40] Clearly Jacob's experience at Bethel, which means "house of God" in Hebrew (see Genesis 28:19, footnote *a*), was a Temple experience. Second, we recognize that the ancient Tabernacle-Temple

exhibited three gradations of holiness, like Jacob's ladder, which Latter-day Saints understand to represent the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial levels.^[41] Now, if we apply the Temple connotations associated with Bethel and the ancient Tabernacle-Temple to Abram's experience, we could think of the three different animals in Genesis 15, each three years old, as representing three gradations of holiness, and thereby signifying the three degrees of glory. The two birds with their ability to fly can be seen as representing angels, like those Jacob saw at Bethel (see Genesis 28:12) and the cherubim on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies of the ancient Tabernacle-Temple (see Exodus 25:18, 22). God's passing between the animal pieces can be thought of as foreshadowing the high priest in ancient Israel and Christ, the great High Priest, who passed through the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial divisions of the ancient Tabernacle-Temple (see Hebrews 9). Putting all these ideas together, Genesis 15 could signify that by cutting covenants, God would bring Abram through the telestial, terrestrial, and celestial levels, back into his presence. Of course this approach to Genesis 15 goes well beyond the existing account, but it is consistent with what modern revelation tells us about Abram and should not seem too unusual when we remember that all things God has given to man typify Christ in some way (see 2 Nephi 11:4). In short, latter-day revelation helps us see how the covenant cutting in Genesis 15 can be viewed as a Temple text.

Zedekiah and the People of Judah

The second Old Testament example of covenant cutting we will consider concerns Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his people during the ministry of the prophet Jeremiah (about 590 BC). The time frame is shortly after Lehi's group left Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:4) and the city was besieged by the king of Babylon. Zedekiah wanted the Lord's help, so he caused his people to cut a covenant in which they would fulfill the law of Moses requirement to liberate their Hebrew slaves in the seventh year (see Exodus 21:2). Through Jeremiah, the Lord explained that he was pleased with the covenant they had cut in the Temple: "And ye were now turned, and had done right in my sight, in proclaiming liberty every man to his neighbour; and ye had made [cut] a covenant before me in the house which is called by my name" (Jeremiah 34:15). After the threat of Babylon appeared to pass, the people profaned the Lord's name and violated the covenant they had made by reenslaving their servants (see Jeremiah 34:16). In consequence, those who broke the covenant were cursed: "Therefore thus saith the Lord; Ye have not hearkened unto me, in proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother, and every man to his neighbour: behold, I proclaim a liberty for you, saith the Lord, to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine; and I will make you to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth" (Jeremiah 34:17). The next part of the curse is especially revealing as it relates to the covenant the people had cut. "And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant which they made [cut] before me, *I will make like the calf which they cut in two and passed between its parts*—the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land *who passed between the parts of the calf*" (Revised Standard Version, Jeremiah 34:18–19; emphasis added).^[42] Those who broke the covenant were to become as the cut-up calf, and animals would feed on their carcasses. "I will even give them into the hand of their enemies, and into the hand of them that seek their life: and their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth" (Jeremiah 34:20). The Lord explained that this severe punishment would occur because he would bring Babylon back to destroy Jerusalem. "Behold, I will command, saith the Lord, and cause them [the Babylonians] to return to this city; and they shall

fight against it, and take it, and burn it with fire: and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without an inhabitant” (Jeremiah 34:22). Sadly, not long after this prophecy was given, Babylon did destroy Judah, and these curses were fulfilled because of the people’s disobedience.

The account of Zedekiah and his people is an example of a covenant cut under the law of Moses that is consistent with extrabiblical covenants from the first millennium BC. An animal was slaughtered, cut into two, and the people passed between the divided pieces to ratify the covenant. The severe punishment Jehovah pronounced makes it clear that those who entered the covenant had taken upon themselves a self-curse. The text does not tell us if this was only implied by passing between the divided calf or if it was associated with a verbal oath. Considering extrabiblical covenant rituals from this period, it seems likely that an oath was verbalized as part of the ratification ceremony. Assuming this was the case, we can postulate how it might have happened. First, the person taking the covenant oath most likely raised his hand as part of the ritual. This is reflected in biblical Hebrew because the “raising of the hand accompanies the taking of an oath and therefore ‘to raise the hand’ means ‘to take an oath.’”^[43] Second, the individual probably repeated a phrase similar to self-curses in which a person said, “God so do to me, and more also,” signifying that the individual expected to be cursed if they did not live up to their oath. This self-curse formula is attested from the eleventh to the eighth centuries BC among Israelites (Eli, Saul, Jonathan, Abner, David, Solomon) and non-Israelites (Ruth, Jezebel, Ben-hadad)^[44] and seems to be linked to covenant-cutting oaths where the imagery of the divided animal was invoked as the consequence for violating the agreement. Thus it is not unreasonable to think that Zedekiah and others of his people passed between the slaughtered calf, raised their hands, and said something like, “God do so to us and more also if we keep not the terms of this covenant.”^[45] Regrettably, the people were not true to the covenant they had made and ended up suffering greatly. This graphically demonstrates how seriously the Lord views covenants his people make and the devastating consequences of violating those covenants.

Echoes of Covenant Cutting

Now that we have analyzed the two most prominent instances of covenant cutting in the Old Testament, we are in a position to consider various echoes of the practice.^[46] Here we will focus on a few examples related to gospel covenants in the Old Testament.

Circumcision. Some years after the events recorded in Genesis 15, Jehovah appeared to Abram, reaffirmed his promises to the patriarch, and changed his name to Abraham (see Genesis 17:1–8). “And God said to Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised, . . . and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you” (Genesis 17:9–11). Circumcision became the “token of the Abrahamic covenant” during Old Testament times and those who were circumcised “enjoyed the privileges and undertook the responsibilities of the covenant.”^[47] In other words, *circumcision was a gospel covenant given to Abraham* that continued as a requirement of the law of Moses until it was fulfilled. It has been suggested that the institution of circumcision with Abraham was “a ratification of the covenant” in Genesis 15 and that the “symbolic signification of circumcision is the same as that of the divided victims.”^[48] This association is supported by the fact that not being circumcised meant breaking the covenant and resulted in a severe “cutting”

penalty. The Lord said, “And the uncircumcised man child . . . shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14). Here the Hebrew verb for “cut off” is *kārat*, the same as for cutting a covenant, and reminds us of the self-curse for violating one’s promise. While circumcision is related to other things in the gospel,[49] it seems to echo the practice of cutting covenants and the promise of seed to Abraham. It appears that circumcision regularly reminded males of the covenant God had cut with Abraham and the consequences of failing to keep that covenant.

The Sinai covenant. Many times in the Hebrew Bible we read that the Lord cut a covenant with Israel at Sinai.[50] Significantly, echoes suggesting this was a literal covenant cutting are recorded in Exodus 24, before the Lord revoked the fulness of the gospel from Israel (compare Joseph Smith Translation, Exodus 34:1–2), thereby giving us *another example of gospel covenant cutting*. We read that Moses wrote down the Lord’s commandments, built an altar, and instructed that oxen be slaughtered for burnt and peace offerings (see Exodus 24:4–5). Then he took “*half of the blood, and put it in basons; and half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar.* And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient. *And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people,* and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made [cut] with you concerning all these words” (Exodus 24:6–8; emphasis added).

Since an intensive form of the Hebrew root *kpr* means “cover over”[51] and is often translated “make an atonement,”[52] the sprinkling of the people with the sacrificial blood seems to indicate they were “covered” with the blood of Christ and protected by his Atonement. In addition, the sprinkling of half of the blood on the altar and the other half on the people reminds us of the animals divided in half in Genesis 15.[53] It appears this was “a symbolic action in which the people were identified with the sacrificed animal, so that the fate of the latter is presented as the fate to be expected by the people if they violated their sacred promise (i.e., it is a form of self-curse).”[54] Therefore, the sacrificed animal can be seen as typifying Christ, who blesses the obedient by vicariously taking the curses of disobedience upon himself (that is, he becomes the sacrificed animal), and also typifying the disobedient, who will suffer the curses themselves (that is, they become the sacrificed animal). Thus the symbolism of the covenant ritual appears to have been twofold—blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. This idea is consistent with the many blessings and curses of the covenant recorded later (see especially Deuteronomy 28). Not surprisingly, one of these curses echoes the slaughtered animals: “And thy carcase shall be meat unto all fowls of the air, and unto the beasts of the earth” (Deuteronomy 28:26).[55]

It is noteworthy that the covenant curse came upon the generation of Israelites who were led out of Egypt. After these people had provoked the Lord numerous times (see Numbers 14:11, 22–23), Jehovah finally enforced the curses of the covenant by causing them to wander forty years in the wilderness so they would die there and not inherit the land he promised to Abram. The Lord said, “*Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness . . . Doubtless ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I swear to make you dwell therein. . . . And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness . . . and ye shall know my breach of promise. . . . I will surely do it unto all this evil congregation, that are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die*” (Numbers 14:29–30, 33–35; emphasis added).

The failure of the first generation of Israelites to keep their covenant with Jehovah may be related to an apparent renewal of the Sinai covenant when Israel finally entered Canaan. Shortly after entering the

promised land, Joshua fulfilled an earlier commandment of Moses's (see Deuteronomy 11:26–29; 27:12–13) that echoes elements of the covenant at Sinai and the covenant with Abram. Joshua built an altar, slaughtered animals for burnt and peace offerings, and wrote upon stones a copy of the law of Moses (see Joshua 8:30–32), reminding us of Moses's actions at Sinai (see Exodus 24:4–8). Then Joshua divided Israel in half and placed the ark of the covenant in the valley between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. Next, half of the priests declared the blessings of the law from Gerizim, and the other half of the priests declared the curses of the law from Ebal: “And all Israel, and their elders, and officers, and their judges, stood on this side the ark and on that side before the priests the Levites, . . . *half of them over against mount Gerizim, and half of them over against mount Ebal.* . . . And afterward *he read all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings,* according to all that is written in the book of the law” (Joshua 8:33–34; emphasis added). Animal sacrifices, division of the people into halves on opposing mountains, and the reading of the blessings and curses of the law all echo the covenant cutting that occurred at Sinai. The division of the people into halves also reminds us of the animals divided in half in Genesis 15 and reinforces the idea that the people were identified with the sacrificed animals if they violated the covenant. Thus, it appears the Lord wanted the Israelites who would actually inherit the promised land to effectively reenact what occurred at Sinai and renew their covenant with him.

A new covenant. The last echo of covenant cutting we will consider is the Lord's promise through the prophet Jeremiah that he would cut a new covenant with his people. “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make [cut] a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made [cut] with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (Jeremiah 31:31–32). Certainly Jesus sought to establish a new covenant with his people during his mortal ministry (see Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 12:24), but in reference to Jeremiah's prophecy, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “This covenant has never been established with the house of Israel, nor with the house of Judah, for it requires two parties to make a covenant, and those two parties must be agreed, or no covenant can be made. Christ, in the days of His flesh, proposed to make a covenant with them, but they rejected Him and His proposals, and in consequence thereof, they were broken off, and no covenant was made with them at that time.”^[56] From modern revelation and other teachings of the Prophet Joseph, we understand that the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy pertains to our dispensation.^[57] In other words, Jeremiah was prophesying of a time in the last days when the Lord would cut a new gospel covenant with Israel and Judah.

Since we know Jeremiah was familiar with literal covenant cutting (he was the prophet when Zedekiah and his people cut a covenant), we might wonder if his prophecy should be interpreted literally or figuratively. Even if Jeremiah's prophecy is only figurative, it may be useful to compare it to the dramatic event when the Jews will recognize Jesus Christ as their Messiah. The prophet Zechariah portrays this experience in an interesting way as part of the destruction of Jerusalem in the last days (see Zechariah 14:1–2). “And his [the Lord's] feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and *half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south.* And ye shall flee to the valley, . . . and the Lord my God shall come” (Zechariah 14:4–5; emphasis added). “And then shall the Jews look upon me and say: What are these wounds in thine hands and in thy feet? Then shall they know that I am the Lord; for I will say unto them: These wounds are the wounds with which I was wounded in the house of my friends. I am he who was

lifted up. I am Jesus that was crucified. I am the Son of God. And then shall they weep because of their iniquities; then shall they lament because they persecuted their king” (D&C 45:51–53). The coming of the Lord to the Mount of Olives and its division into halves could be seen as echoing the divided animals with Abram, the division of the sacrificial blood into halves at Sinai, the division of the Israelites into halves with Joshua, and the calf divided into halves with Zedekiah. The Savior’s showing of the marks of his atoning sacrifice to the Jews may be thought of as an echo of the sacrificed animals of covenant cutting and the imagery of Jehovah between the divided halves of the mountain might remind the Jews of when Jehovah passed between the animals Abram divided. Whether or not all these parallels are intended, it appears that through this experience the Jews will finally accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah and their God, suggesting it may be one part of the fulfillment of Jehovah’s promise to cut a new covenant with his people.

Application Today

The principles of covenant cutting shed light on many other scriptural passages. In addition to those already discussed, some scriptures to consider in light of covenant cutting include Jesus’s parable about eagles gathering to a carcass (see Matthew 24:28; Luke 17:37); the righteous covenants made by King Benjamin’s people (see Mosiah 2–6), the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (see Alma 24:17–19; Alma 53:11–17), and those associated with Moroni’s title of liberty (see Alma 46:19–22); the wicked covenants of secret combinations (see Alma 37:27–29; Helaman 6:21, 25–30; Ether 8:13–16; Moses 5:29–30, 49–50; 6:29); and the oath and covenant of the priesthood (see D&C 84:33–41; Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 14:25–31). If we are attuned to covenant-cutting ideas, we can improve our understanding of these and other scriptures.

Thinking of modern covenants in light of ancient covenants can help us better appreciate their significance. Though certain elements of covenant cutting are not practiced today, such as animal sacrifice (see 3 Nephi 9:19), the principles are still relevant. For instance, in modern Temples we enter into covenants that will bring us back into God’s presence (the endowment) and receive the promises made to Abraham (Temple marriage). The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that modern Temple ordinances are the restoration of “the ancient order of things,”^[58] suggesting these covenants may be better understood in light of ancient practices. If we are knowledgeable of ancient covenant making, we will not be confused by things that are ancient in nature and less familiar to us in modern society. As we see parallels between ancient and modern covenants, we will better appreciate the covenants that have been restored in our day.

Finally, perhaps the most important benefit of studying covenant cutting concerns our individual commitment. God does not change and expects the same complete commitment from his people today as he did anciently. Do we view gospel covenants today as seriously as we should? Do we need to deepen our commitment to keep our covenants? Just as was dramatized by ancient covenant cutting, we as Latter-day Saints should view keeping our covenants as more important than losing our own lives. “I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me” (D&C 98:14–15). If we keep our covenants with complete faithfulness, we will be found worthy to

receive the great blessings the Lord has promised us. If we do not, we will eventually find ourselves cut off from the blessings and protection of the covenant.

Summary

Covenants are a key aspect of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. The phrase “cut a covenant” reflects ancient practices where animals were slaughtered and cut up to ratify an agreement, graphically illustrating the curse for violating the covenant. Numerous examples or echoes of covenant cutting can be found in the scriptures, many of which are associated with the fulness of the gospel. We, as Latter-day Saints, can benefit from studying ancient covenant-cutting practices through improved scriptural understanding, increased appreciation of modern covenants, and deepened personal commitment to keep our covenants today as if our own lives depended on it.

Notes

[1] Bible Dictionary, s.v. “covenant.”

[2] According to a search of the English text of the scriptures in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *The Scriptures: CD-ROM Resource Edition 1.0* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, 2002).

[3] *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1998), s.v. “covenant.”

[4] Jacob Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 304.

[5] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 503.

[6] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 136.

[7] Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2003), 166.

[8] According to a search of the text of the Hebrew Bible in *The Scriptures: CD-ROM Resource Edition 1.0*.

[9] See how “covenant” is italicized (added by translators) in 1 Samuel 11:2; 20:16; 1 Kings 8:9; 2 Chronicles 5:10; Nehemiah 9:38; and Isaiah 57:8.

[10] See Bruce William Jones, “Cutting Deals and Striking Bargains,” *English Today* 12, no. 2 (1996): 35–40.

[11] See James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. with supplement (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1969), xix. Pritchard has conveniently compiled English translations of many extrabiblical texts related to the Old Testament into one volume. This source will be cited whenever possible since it is more accessible for most readers.

[12] See David Noel Friedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “covenant.”

[13] This approach is based on David Noel Friedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), s.v. “covenant.” In compiling this section, and in other areas of this paper, I have been aided by the references in Jones, “Cutting Deals and Striking Bargains” and David L. Peterson, “Covenant Ritual: A Traditio-Historical Perspective,” *Biblical Research* 22 (1977): 7–18.

[14] According to the dates in David R. Seely, “Chronology, Bible,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 192–95. Note that this paper is not intended to evaluate biblical chronology or the accuracy of textual dates but to use estimated dates to provide a framework for understanding the topic.

[15] Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 482.

[16] Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 482.

[17] Donald J. Wiseman, “Abban and Alalah,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 12, no. 4 (1958), 129; see also J. D. Douglas and N. Hillier, eds., *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 1 (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1980), s.v. “Alalah.”

[18] See Friedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “covenant.”

[19] Friedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “covenant.”

[20] Friedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “covenant”; emphasis in original.

[21] Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 660, brackets in original.

[22] Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 532.

[23] Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 539.

[24] For a brief discussion of Persian and Greek examples from the first millennium BC, see Jones, “Cutting Deals and Striking Bargains,” 37–38.

[25] See Moshe Weinfield, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90, no. 2 (1970), 184–203. Another view is that the development was sequential, from a ratifying sacrifice to a dramatized curse (see Peterson, “Covenant Ritual: A Traditio-Historical Perspective,” 7–18).

[26] Friedman, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 291.

[27] Friedman, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, 291.

[28] It appears this was divinely induced to prepare Abram for revelation, as suggested by the use of the Hebrew word *tardēmāh*, which is also used for when the Lord caused “a deep sleep” to come upon Adam so the Lord could create Eve (Genesis 2:21; see also Baker and Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament*, 1246).

[29] While God’s promises to Abram are found in prior revelations, this is the first time the King James Version says Jehovah “made a covenant” with Abram, and corresponds to the first occurrence of *kārat berît* in the Hebrew Bible. Earlier in the Joseph Smith Translation we read that God “made” a covenant with Enoch, Noah, and Abram (see Joseph Smith Translation Genesis 14:27; 9:11; 13:14), but since there is no indication these covenants were actually “cut,” Genesis 15 may be considered the first scriptural example of its kind.

[30] For example, see the bibliography and discussion in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 322–35.

[31] See Weinfield, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” 196. Some have argued that God would not have taken upon himself a curse since this was done by the inferior party in king-vassal loyalty oaths. However, this need not be problematic since Jehovah stipulated what should happen, and his willingness to condescend is found in many scriptures (see Isaiah 53:3–10; 1 Nephi 11:26–33; 19:8–10; Mosiah 3:5–7).

[32] For example, see Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 331.

[33] *Apocalypse of Abraham* (see chapter 15), Flavius Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 1, *The Pseudepigraphic Book of Jubilees* (see chapter 14), all add sacrificial elements in their retelling of Genesis 15 (see Christopher T. Begg, “Rereadings of the ‘Animal Rite’ of Genesis 15 in Early Jewish Narratives,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 50 [1988]: 36–46).

[34] The *Apocalypse of Abraham* suggests the birds were left alive to carry Abram to heaven (see James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* [New York: Doubleday, 1983], 1:696).

[35] Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 335.

[36] The wording here suggests Jesus referred to Abram’s experience in Genesis 15 when he said to the Jews, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad” (John 8:56).

[37] See also Church Educational System, *Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 71.

[38] I appreciate Robert J. Norman of the Church Educational System, who has taught about cutting covenants for many years, for introducing me to the idea of Genesis 15 as a Temple text and several aspects of the scriptural echoes discussed later.

[39] Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 305.

[40] Marion G. Romney, “Temples—The Gates to Heaven,” *Ensign*, March 1971, 16.

[41] See *Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel*, 155–56.

- [42] The Revised Standard Version is used here rather than the King James Version because it follows the proposed emendation of the Hebrew text noted in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (the Masoretic version of the Hebrew Bible often used by scholars). This emendation only changes a single Hebrew letter, but then reads that the covenant breakers will become *like* the cut-up calf.
- [43] Weingreen, *Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, 182. For a scriptural example, see Genesis 14:22–23. This practice continues today with the swearing in of government officials and witnesses who testify in court.
- [44] See Ruth 1:17; 1 Samuel 3:17; 14:44; 20:13; 25:22; 2 Samuel 3:35; 19:13; 1 Kings 2:23; 19:2; 20:10; 2 Kings 6:31.
- [45] Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley, eds., *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 557; see also George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible* 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 5:1058.
- [46] The idea of “echoes” is drawn from Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).
- [47] Bible Dictionary, s.v. “circumcision.”
- [48] Black, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, 191.
- [49] For example, Joseph Smith Translation Genesis 17:11 explains that circumcision was given to Abraham as a constant reminder that children are not accountable until they are eight years old.
- [50] These instances include while Israel was at Mount Sinai (see Exodus 24:8; 34:10, 27), when Israel was about to enter Canaan (see Deuteronomy 4:23; 5:2–3; 31:16), during the time of the kings (see 1 Kings 8:21; 2 Kings 17:15, 35, 38), and during the time of Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 11:10; 31:32; 34:13).
- [51] Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 497.
- [52] There are many examples of this, especially in Leviticus, such as chapters 4 (vv. 20, 26, 31, 35) 5 (vv. 6, 10, 13, 16, 18); 14 (vv. 18–21, 29, 31, 53); and 16 (vv. 6, 10–11, 16–18, 24, 30, 32–34).
- [53] This connection was first suggested to me by Peterson (see “Covenant Ritual: A Traditio-Historical Perspective,” 11).
- [54] Friedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “covenant.”
- [55] The awful nature of this curse seems in part related to the importance of having a proper burial (see Douglas, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Burial and Mourning”).
- [56] Smith, *Teachings*, 14–15.
- [57] Compare Jeremiah 31:31–34 with D&C 84:57, 98 and Smith, *Teachings*, 149.
- [58] Smith, *Teachings*, 237.