greatly exceed human obligations, the blessings of deity significantly overshadow the efforts demanded (see Mosiah 2:21), even though a notion of reciprocity is always present. Something is demanded in return, as a covenant is essentially twosided; before anything else, it is a relation, the means by which God and man become reconciled in the atonement afforded to all by Jesus Christ.

A covenant is a special relationship with the Lord into which a person or a group may enter. The terms have been set by the Lord both for the rewards (blessings, salvation, exaltation) and the efforts demanded (obedience to rules and commandments). A covenant is fulfilled when people keep their promises and endure to the end in faith, with the Lord giving blessings during life, and salvation and exaltation upon completion.

A broken covenant results from a willful breach of promise, that is, transgression of commandments. By breaking this relationship, a person forfeits blessings. These can be restored in full only by repentance and reentering the covenant. Covenants comfort the righteous (Dan. 9:4) and lift the hearts of the oppressed (Ps. 74:20–21), but shame the unrepentant (Ezek. 16:60–63).

Latter-day Saints hold that the first personal covenants were made in PREMORTAL LIFE, later to be taken again on earth. In the sacred history of the earth, covenants have been made by God with Adam and Eve and with all the ancient patriarchs and prophets and their wives. For example, God made covenants of various kinds with Enoch; Abraham and Sarah; Moses; the kings of Israel and Judah, including David, Solomon, and Josiah (2 Chr. 34:29–32); and many of the prophets. Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament as a covenant establishing a personal relationship with his individual followers (Heb. 8:6), his blood replacing the old sacrificial “blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb. 13:20). Through Joseph Smith, the everlasting covenants were established anew (see NEW AND EVERLASTING COVENANT; D&C 1:15, 22; 22:1; 132).

For each respective group of covenant people, this meaningful relation with the deity is also an identity marker, singling out people or a group from among their peers. Often outward signs are used: circumcision (Gen. 17:2–14), the SABBATH DAY (Ex. 31:12–17), endogamy or prohibitions on marriage outside the group (Ezra 10:3), greetings (D&C 88:131–133), and dietary proscriptions, such as the food taboos of Leviticus or the latter-day health code of the WORD OF WISDOM (D&C 89).

Among Christian churches historically, the focus on making covenants has risen since the Reformation. In John Calvin’s Geneva the notion of covenant was crucial (Lillback, 1987), a tradition that was passed on to many Protestant denominations, including the Puritans (van Pohr, 1986). In early American ecclesiastical history, covenants were also crucial, and the New England Puritans clearly saw themselves as the covenant people of the Lord (Miller, 1966). This concept has remained important in American culture and is a vital and essential part of LDS religion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

WOUTER VAN BEEK

COVENANTS IN BIBLICAL TIMES

The idea of making and keeping covenants is essential to Latter-day Saints, who would readily agree “that the central message of the Bible is God’s covenant with men” (Bruce, p. 139). The “covenant theme pervades Old Testament teachings” and all scripture (Ludlow). A consistent and enduring pattern in God’s dealings with mankind from the beginning of the earth’s history down to present time is that sacred covenants are used to unite individuals to God and to each other.

Bringing extrabiblical revelations to bear on their understanding of biblical covenants, Latterday Saints consider the history of God’s dealings with mankind to be arranged according to DISPENSATIONS OF THE GOSPEL, in which the gospel (including the priesthood and all the necessary
ordinances) is bestowed by God upon man, and received by covenant. Each dispensation is preceded over by priesthood leaders who hold keys entitling them to put people under covenantal obligations that are bound in heaven as well as on earth. Thus, Moses (Deut. 29:10–15), Joshua (Josh. 24:14–28), and Peter (Matt. 16:19) were among those having authority to act on behalf of God in making and renewing binding covenants between God and his people.

God’s covenant relationship with mankind began with Adam and Eve. Texts in the Pearl of Great Price show that Adam and Eve were the first after the Fall to enter into a covenant relationship with God—through sacrifice, baptism (Moses 6:64–66), and receiving the priesthood and ordinances associated with the temple: “Thus all things were confirmed unto Adam, by an holy ordinance” (Moses 5:59; see also 4:4–5, 8, 10–12). Adam and Eve were promised a savior and were instructed to be obedient, to be repentant, and to do all things in the name of the Son of God (Moses 5:6–8).

Whereas the Bible first uses the term “covenant” in conjunction with Noah (Gen. 6:18; 9:9–17), its first use in other LDS scriptures is with Enoch (Moses 7:51; 8:2). Non-LDS Bible scholars (e.g., Fensham) usually arrange the principal biblical covenants into a fivefold sequence (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the New Testament covenant), but Latter-day Saints follow a sequence of seven main dispensations (Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ and his apostles, and Joseph Smith), and recognize those also of the brother of Jared, Lehi, and Alma in Book of Mormon history. Where non-LDS scholars explore both connections and distinctions between the covenants mentioned in the Bible (e.g., the patriarchal covenant of Abraham continued even when the covenant at Sinai was broken), Latter-day Saints see general uniformity of the principal covenant occurrences, all of them reflecting the same underlying principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Central as they are to subsequent biblical references to covenants (e.g., Ex. 2:24; Luke 1:72–73; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:13–14), the promises made explicit in the ABRAHAMIC COVENANT receive particular emphasis in LDS teachings (Ricks, 1985; Nyman). The BOOK OF ABRAHAM in the Pearl of Great Price adds to the understanding of the promises to Abraham and Sarah. To the promises of a land of inheritance (Gen. 15:18; 17:8; cf. Abr. 2:6) and of innumerable posterity (Gen. 15:5; 17:2–6; cf. Abr. 2:9; 3:14), the book of Abraham adds priesthood blessings (Abr. 1:3–4, 18) and the promise that Abraham’s seed will be the means whereby the gospel will be ministered throughout the earth so that all people might receive the gospel and obtain salvation (Abr. 2:10–11). Latter-day Saints believe that the power to give these ancient promises by way of covenant was reinstated on April 3, 1836, when Elijah, Elias, Moses, and other ancient prophets restored to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery the keys of “the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham, saying that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed” (D&C 110:12; 124:58; 132:30–31).

In biblical times, political and legal covenants were made in various ways. Religious covenants often drew upon these secular practices by way of analogy. For example, in the language of the Bible, one “cuts” a covenant, reminiscent of the legal procedure of cutting a small animal in a ceremony when solemnizing a contract or treaty (Gen. 15:10; Hillers, pp. 40–45).

The process of renewing covenants, individually and communally, was also an important part of religious life in biblical times. Just as individual Latter-day Saints “renew” their covenant of baptism by partaking of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, so there are scriptural instances of communal rites of covenant renewal (e.g., Deut. 31:10–13; Josh. 1:16–18). Covenant renewals are also found in the Book of Mormon, where Near Eastern (especially Hittite) analogues are evident (Ricks, 1984, 1990).

Despite such renewals, it is clear that the old covenant, or Mosaic law, was to be replaced by a new one, as Jeremiah prophesied (Jer. 31:31). Latter-day Saints believe that this prophecy was fulfilled in the New Testament (or, more exactly, the New Covenant). Christ “is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises” (Heb. 8:6). The recurring symbol of renewal in the new covenant is the sacrament, instituted at the Last Supper and centered in the commitment to remember Christ always, evoking the Passover imagery of the old covenant and the covenantal cry of the prophets to know God (Hosea 4:6).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Ricks, Stephen D. "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin’s Address (Mosiah 1–6)." BYU Studies 25 (Spring 1984):151–62.


GEORGE S. TATE

COWDERY, OLIVER

Oliver Cowdery (1806–1850) was next in authority to Joseph Smith in 1830 (D&C 21:10–12), and was a second witness of many critical events in the restoration of the gospel. As one of the three Book of Mormon Witnesses, Oliver Cowdery testified that an angel displayed the gold plates and that the voice of God proclaimed them correctly translated. He was with Joseph Smith when John the Baptist restored to them the Aaronic Priesthood and when Peter, James, and John ordained them to the Melchizedek Priesthood and the apostleship, and again during the momentous Kirtland Temple visions (D&C 110).

Oliver came from a New England family with strong traditions of patriotism, individuality, learning, and religion. He was born at Wells, Vermont, on October 3, 1806. His younger sister gave the only reliable information about his youth: "Oliver was brought up in Poultnery, Rutland County, Vermont, and when he arrived at the age of twenty, he went to the state of New York, where his older brothers were married and settled. . . . Oliver's occupation was clerking in a store until 1829, when he taught the district school in the town of Manchester" (Lucy Cowdery Young to Andrew Jenson, March 7, 1887, Church Archives).

While boarding with Joseph Smith's parents, he learned of their convictions about the ancient record that their son was again translating after Martin Harris had lost the manuscript in 1828. The young teacher prayed and received answers that Joseph Smith mentioned in a revelation (D&C 6:14–24). The Prophet's first history states the "Lord appeared unto . . . Oliver Cowdery and shewed unto him the plates in a vision and . . . what the Lord was about to do through me, his unworthy servant. Therefore he was desirous to come and write for me to translate" (PJS 1:10).

From April 7 through the end of June 1829, when they finished the translation, Joseph dictated while Oliver wrote, with "utmost gratitude" for the privilege (Messenger and Advocate 1:14). Oliver penned a letter then, expressing deep love for

Oliver Cowdery (1806–1850), scribe to Joseph Smith and witness of the Book of Mormon (1829), Second Elder of the Church (1830), and Assistant President of the Church (1834), editor, and lawyer. Cowdery was with Joseph Smith when the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods and keys were restored. After ten years of separation from the Church, he was rebaptized. He died at age forty-three, faithful to his testimony. Photograph, c. 1848, C. W. Carter Collection.