



THE
Covenant
PATH

FINDING *the* TEMPLE *in*
the BOOK OF MORMON

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION:
A WISE PURPOSE



Every member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints knows how the Book of Mormon begins: “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents” (1 Nephi 1:1). This is the story of a family, led by their prophet father, Lehi, and documented by his prophet son, Nephi. It is a family history. They left Jerusalem six hundred years before Christ was born and traveled to the new world where they established a new civilization. After arriving in their promised land, Nephi was commanded of the Lord to start a record of his people, which Nephi did, engraving it on metal plates. This record was to be a secular history of his people (see 1 Nephi 9:2–4; 2 Nephi 5:33), although Nephi, in addition, included “the prophecies of my father; and also many of mine own prophecies” (1 Nephi 19:1).

Later, Nephi was commanded of God to write a second record of “the ministry and the prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them” (1 Nephi 19:3), and “things which are good in my sight, for the profit of thy people” (2 Nephi 5:30). This, he stated, was for a “wise purpose” known only to the Lord (see 1 Nephi 9:5–6; 19:3; Words of Mormon 1:7). Nephi’s second record was written on a set of metal plates smaller than the first and has therefore become known as the Small Plates of Nephi. They comprise the books of 1 Nephi through Omni in the Book of Mormon.

Of course, the primary wise purpose for Nephi’s second record was to prepare for the day when Joseph Smith’s translation of the first part of Nephi’s record would be lost. After the loss of the 116-page manuscript

translation from the Large Plates of Nephi, Joseph was told not to retranslate the text (see headings to D&C chapters 3 and 10). The Lord explained that evil people had modified the transcript and that Joseph should not repeat the work he had done: “For, behold, if you should bring forth the same words they will say that you have lied and that you have pretended to translate, but that you have contradicted yourself” (D&C 10:31). The Lord told Joseph to translate the separate, independent history of Nephi and his family instead, which was contained on the Small Plates of Nephi (see D&C 10:30, 41).

It is a marvel that the Lord foresaw this deception so many centuries earlier and had prepared for it by directing Nephi to engrave a second record that covered the same time period. This is truly a wise purpose for the existence of the Small Plates of Nephi. However, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has pointed out that the Lord had more than one wise purpose for preparing the Small Plates of Nephi. Chief among these purposes is the triad of witnesses given by Nephi, Jacob, and Isaiah regarding two important truths. Elder Holland stated, “After reading Nephi, Jacob, and Isaiah, we know two things in bold, powerful strokes—(1) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and (2) that God will keep his covenant promises with the remnants of the house of Israel. These two themes constitute the very purpose of the Book of Mormon.”

These two themes—testifying of Jesus Christ and testifying that God fulfills His covenant promises—are specified on the title page of the Book of Mormon. They not only constitute the purpose of the Book of Mormon, but they also are the two most prominent and repeated themes in the Small Plates of Nephi. The focus on Jesus Christ stands out from Lehi’s vision in chapter 1 of 1 Nephi, wherein “he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven” (1 Nephi 1:9), to Amaleki’s plea in the final verses of Omni to “come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel” (Omni 1:26). The focus on God’s covenant promises to Israel is equally prominent throughout the Small Plates.

Both themes are taught repeatedly in the words of Nephi and Jacob and in their quotations of Isaiah. Explaining one reason why he quoted Isaiah, Jacob declared, “I have read these things that ye might know concerning the covenants of the Lord that he has covenanted with all the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 9:1; emphasis added). Jacob then proceeded to give one of the most beautiful dissertations on the Atonement of Christ in all of recorded

scripture. He ended by stating, “How great are the covenants of the Lord, and how great his condescensions unto the children of men” (2 Nephi 9:53; emphasis added). After recording Jacob’s speech, Nephi added, “Behold, my soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers. . . . And my soul delighteth in proving unto my people that save Christ should come all men must perish” (2 Nephi 11:5–6; emphasis added).

If Christ and covenants are the primary themes of the Small Plates, is it possible that this portion of scripture might also contain direction on the specific covenants that God would have us enter into as we seek to come unto Christ?

As I have studied the Small Plates of Nephi, I have come to recognize that, underlying the two main themes of Christ and covenants, there is, indeed, a sacred pattern of subthemes that I believe outline the instructions and covenants that the Lord would have us commit to follow as we become, like the Nephites of old, a covenant people. I call these the covenant path themes of the Small Plates of Nephi. These covenant topics present themselves as subthemes within the Small Plates, one for each book, and they are the topics that will be discussed in subsequent chapters. They include the following:

1 Nephi:	Obedience and Sacrifice
2 Nephi:	The Gospel
Jacob:	Chastity
Enos:	Prayer
Jarom:	Family History Research
Omni (and King Benjamin):	Consecration

These topics outline a covenant path that we should follow as covenant children of God. Studying these subthemes in the sacred Small Plates portion of the Book of Mormon will help us incorporate the book’s primary themes of Christ and covenants into our lives and help us return to live eternally in God’s presence.

Nephi explained that the writings on his Small Plates were used to instruct his people, this being one of the wise purposes for which they were

prepared. He wrote,

And after I had made these [large] plates by way of commandment, I Nephi, received a commandment that the ministry and prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them, should be written upon these [small] plates; and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people, who should possess the land, and also for other wise purposes, which purposes are known unto the Lord. . . . Nevertheless, I do not write anything upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred. (1 Nephi 19:3, 6; emphasis added)

The key principles recorded in the Small Plates were foundational topics of instruction for the Nephite people, and they were considered sacred. King Benjamin verified this, stating, “And behold, also the plates of Nephi, which contain the records and sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true. . . . And now, my sons, I would that ye should remember to search them diligently, that ye may profit thereby” (Mosiah 1:6–7). Clearly, the spiritual leaders of the Nephites used the sacred teachings on the plates of Nephi to instruct and bless their people.

We will likewise be blessed if we will incorporate these covenant path teachings from the Small Plates of Nephi into our own lives. As with all scripture, the key principles and themes are not always presented as doctrinal sermons on those topics. Many are lessons from the life experiences of the people who lived them. Following the path outlined by these principles will help us to come unto Christ as a covenant people so that we can fulfill the promises of the Lord given unto the house of Israel.

A SACRED TEMPLE CONNECTION

Many endowed Latter-day Saints will recognize that the covenant path themes described above are reflected in the covenants, rites, and focus of the temple endowment. We do not often see or hear a list of the endowment covenants presented outside of the temple. They are considered sacred and, like the Lord said regarding the original name of the Melchizedek Priesthood, “out of respect or reverence” and “to avoid the too frequent repetition” (D&C 107:4), we do not often speak directly of these covenants and their association with the temple endowment. However, avoiding too frequent repetition does not mean they are never mentioned. Just as we know that the original name of the Melchizedek Priesthood is “the Holy

Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:3), so it is that several prophets and apostles have, on occasion, named some or all of the covenants we make in the temple endowment. In the April 2019 general conference, Elder David A. Bednar said,

We may discuss the basic purposes of and the doctrine and principles associated with temple ordinances and covenants. . . . Across the generations, . . . the doctrinal purposes of temple ordinances and covenants have been taught extensively by Church leaders. . . . Information . . . is available about following the Savior by receiving and honoring covenants to keep the law of obedience, the law of sacrifice, the law of the gospel, the law of chastity, and the law of consecration.

In addition, President Ezra Taft Benson gave the following description of the covenants of the temple endowment at a BYU devotional in 1977 while he was President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles:

Celestial laws, embodied in certain ordinances belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ, are complied with by voluntary covenants. The laws are spiritual. Thus, our Father in Heaven has ordained certain holy sanctuaries, called temples, in which these laws may be fully explained, the laws include the law of obedience and sacrifice, the law of the gospel, the law of chastity, and the law of consecration.

Numerous other Church leaders or Church-related publications have presented statements that specify one or more of the covenants of the temple endowment. Many are included in an appendix at the end of this chapter.

If the subthemes that have been proposed for the books of the Small Plates of Nephi truly exist therein—and this book will seek to demonstrate that they do—then the parallels between these subthemes and the temple covenants are striking. In fact, they are more than striking; they are remarkable. They are sacred and inspired. Their presence is a divine witness that the covenants of the temple are eternal, that the Book of Mormon is true, and that Joseph Smith was truly a prophet of God, for such an integration of the Book of Mormon and the temple endowment could only have been designed by God.

It should not come as a surprise that there would be a strong connection between temple worship and the scriptures. My wife and I once watched a movie that had a scene inside a Jewish synagogue where the congregants were preparing for worship. Into the hall walked the Rabbi, carrying a scroll,

the Torah. People reached out from the aisles and from the balcony above, trying to touch the holy scriptures as he walked by. They did this with great awe and respect for their holy word. The Rabbi moved through the aisle to the front of the sanctuary where there was an altar. He stood behind the altar, raised the scriptures high above his head, and then laid them respectfully on the altar.

When I saw that dramatic depiction, I knew the roots from whence it came. The scriptures are treated with similar attention and respect (albeit with much less drama) when we make covenants in our temples today. The covenants there are repeatedly characterized as being taught in the holy scriptures. The obvious lesson is that the Lord intends that we should use the scriptures to understand the temple and, in particular, to understand the covenants of the temple. The remainder of this book will attempt to do this through an analysis of the Small Plates of Nephi. However, in keeping with the sacredness of the temple, the proposed subthemes of each book will be discussed as principles and covenants, independent of direct references to temple ceremonies and instruction.

Sharing insights on these sacred covenant topics carries some risks. One of the great strengths of temple worship is that it is individual. By using the Holy Ghost as our personal guide for understanding the covenants of the temple, we receive customized insights to fit our individual circumstances and needs. Elder John A. Widtsoe said, “The endowment which was given by revelation can best be understood by revelation; and to those who seek most vigorously, with pure hearts, will the revelation be greatest.”

When the Lord appeared to the Nephites, He spent a full day teaching and ministering to them at the temple in Bountiful. Then He told them, “I perceive that ye are weak, that ye cannot understand all my words which I am commanded of the Father to speak unto you at this time. Therefore, go ye unto your homes, and ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father, in my name, that ye may understand, and prepare your minds for the morrow, and I come unto you again” (3 Nephi 17:2–3).

Benefits come from having to wrestle through the spirit to gain understanding and revelation directly from God. Spiritual growth is more permanent when we discover insights on our own. This cannot easily happen when everything is spoon-fed to us. Joseph Smith said, “The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and

solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.”

So we don't typically discuss the temple ceremonies and covenants outside of the temple. Rather, we are instructed to go to the temple often and think about what is taught. We should use our own “time and experience and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts” to discover the things of God. This requires us to develop our minds and strengthen our spirits so that we can understand the ways of God. The thing that separates man from animals is that we can reason. We have advanced brains and self-awareness and can develop our minds further. That is part of our potential to become like God. In the temple, our minds and spirits are stretched as we pray and think about the ceremonies and symbols presented therein.

However, the personal, revelatory experiences we seek inside the temple should be supplemented by scripture study outside of the temple. The scriptures will not only help us better understand the stories presented in the temple, but they will also help us better understand our temple covenants. For example, we can learn about obedience and sacrifice from stories in the Old Testament and from the great example recorded in the New Testament of Christ's obedience to His Father and of His great atoning sacrifice. And the gospel is taught so clearly throughout the entire Book of Mormon—especially in the teachings of Christ during his personal visit to the Nephites. Also, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul wrote frequently about the need to follow the law of chastity. And finally, there are specific instructions on the law of consecration in the Doctrine and Covenants. Indeed, all of the books of scripture are worthy of study as resources for understanding our temple covenants.

The Book of Mormon is an especially strong witness that God's ancient covenants continue with us today. In a compelling article on covenants, Elder Lance B. Wickman of the Seventy wrote the following:

The Book of Mormon provides an unparalleled perspective on covenants. . . . Indeed, one of the principal purposes of the Book of Mormon is to restore knowledge and understanding concerning God's covenants with man. The title page itself contains this statement by Moroni regarding the purposes of the book: “. . . 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” (emphasis added). . . . Thus, the Book of Mormon reestablishes truths associated with the sacred covenants of the Lord. Many of these truths we find reflected in the writings of Nephi. He delighted in the Lord’s covenant with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Elder Wickman supported his declaration with this statement by Nephi: “My soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers; yea, my soul delighteth in his grace, and in his justice, and power, and mercy in the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death” (2 Nephi 11:5).

It is clear that the entire Book of Mormon is a powerful witness of God’s covenants, and I propose that one of the wise purposes for which the Lord has given us the Small Plates of Nephi is to help us better understand and keep our temple covenants. In support of this purpose, each book of the Small Plates will be analyzed through the lens of its associated covenant path theme.

This analysis will reach a little beyond the Small Plates of Nephi to include, alongside the book of Omni, King Benjamin’s farewell address as recorded in Mosiah 1–6. This inclusion is explained in that chapter. Suffice it to say here that King Benjamin and Amaleki, the final author of the book of Omni, were contemporaries and that the works of both combine to establish the theme of consecration.

Many readers will recognize that prayer, the proposed theme of the book of Enos, is not among the list of temple covenants given in the earlier quotes and references. However, it is openly acknowledged in the Church that temple worship includes prayer circles , , and prayer rolls., Knowing this, and seeing prayer as the obvious theme of the book of Enos, it seems appropriate to include a discussion of prayer as part of the covenant path.

Also, family history research, the proposed theme of the book of Jarom, is another topic not included in the list of temple covenants. However, there is no question about the importance of family history research to temple work, so it can certainly be considered a covenant path theme. As will be shown, the book of Jarom has some things to teach us about this theme.

I hope that this study of the sacred pattern outlined by the Small Plates of Nephi will help all of us be more determined to stay on the covenant path. May we all follow the counsel of President Russell M. Nelson who encouraged, “To each member of the Church I say, keep on the covenant path. Your commitment to follow the Savior by making covenants with Him

and then keeping those covenants will open the door to every spiritual blessing and privilege available to men, women, and children everywhere.”

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